

I know what you're thinking, but it's not true. With such great numbers of bass in the lake, you might suppose it would be easy to hook them up with virtually any technique. Actually the El Salto fish seem quite sensitive to multiple factors. Clearly they seem to prefer a slow speed to the action of soft baits. They are quite finicky about color, strongly discriminating toward darks and reds. They certainly seem to like magnum-sized lizards very much and by far it seems they want the Senko style more than other similar types of worms. During our father-son tournament in early June, the only top water action was in the early morning. This did produce some fish over eight pounds.

**Top Gun.** This watermelon red magnum lizard was the standout bait when rigged Texas style. It outproduced all other soft bodies by a wide margin and fished better Texas style than when Carolina rigged. Shad-mimicking, deep-diving plugs really produced in some spots, with 18 foot deep-divers being the best

**IT** sounded like a fiesta (the Spanish word for party) in the plane's cabin. The beverage cart had just been stowed in preparation for landing, and proper grammar was noticeably backsliding as the volume of the trash talkin' amped up a few decibels while the Boeing 757's noisy wing flaps came down and the pilot lined up the runway for arrival at Mazatlan airport, Mexico.

It looked like a fiesta as the melodic Pacific surf pounded a white-rimmed edge onto the aquamarine blue sea as our party of anglers now barreled down the highway in air-conditioned vans, passing fields of blue agave cactus grown to make tequila.

It even tasted like a fiesta when we waltzed into the El Salto Lodge and were handed frozen Margaritas and taquitos at the door. But when the big dogs came off their leashes and hustled our gear down to the lake for some late afternoon fishing on the first day and those outboard motors came alive, you just knew the party was truly on then.

The introduction of Florida strain black bass (*Micropterus salmoides floridanus*) into warm water impoundments has revolutionized fishing destination travel in North America. In the mountains of western Mexico, it was the need for irrigation water that originally established a couple of dozen lakes starting back in the 1940's. Years later now, most all have been populated with large-mouth bass, usually Florida strain that have grown to hefty sizes in the sultry climate. This is a chain of glistening jewels for fishermen seeking an experience which surpasses literally all northern waters. Without a true winter, there are multiple spawns and shad and tilapia are abundant food sources for growing bass which can add two pounds per year. These are waters of triple digit catches per day and repeated shots at trophies over ten pounds.

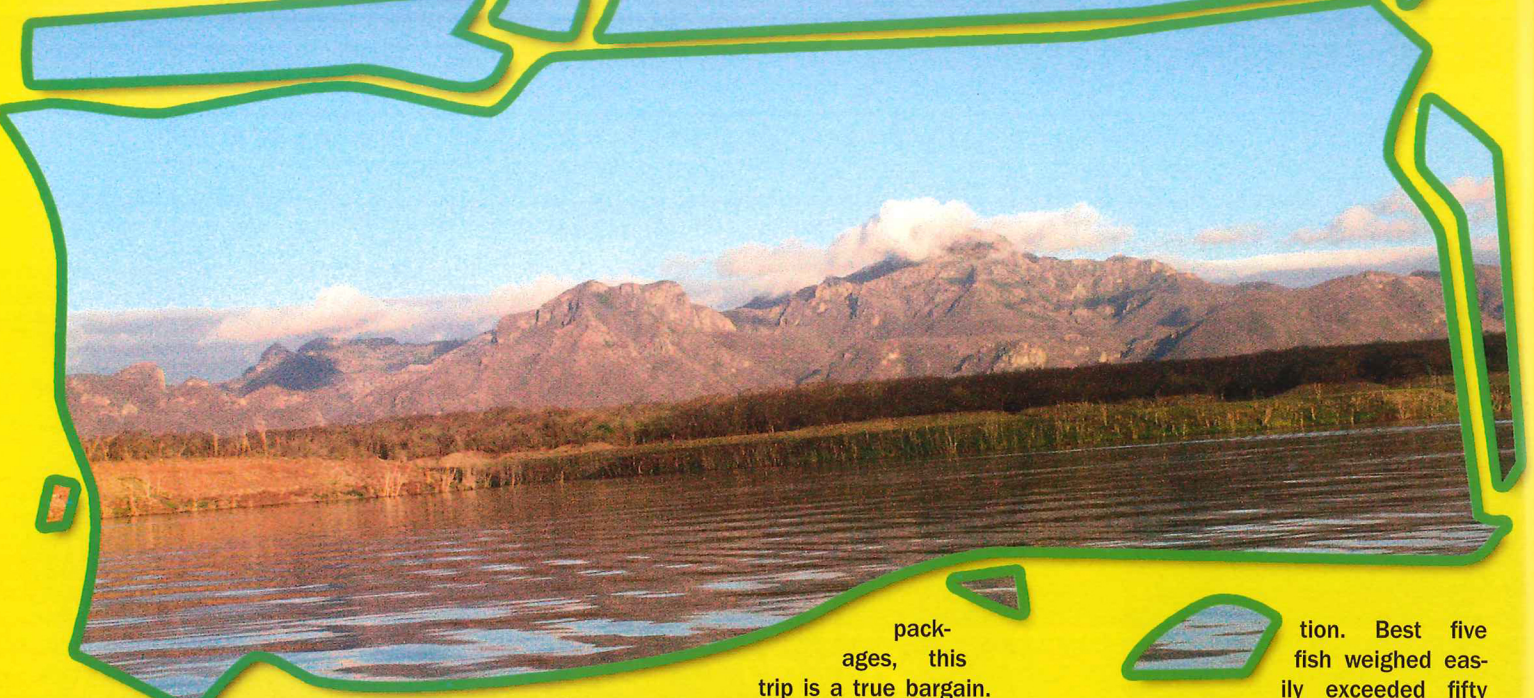
Over time, many of these lakes will cycle through peak years of excellent productivity and periods of grossly dimin-

**DESTINATION: LAKE EL SALTO, MEXICO**

# FIESTA TIME

**BY RILEY LOVE**





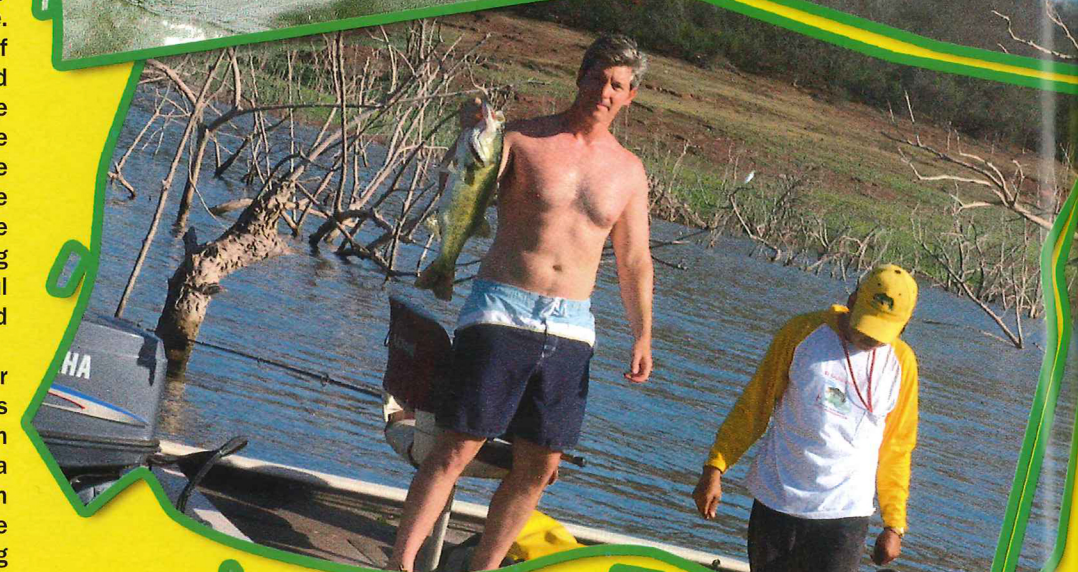
ished bass populations. This cyclicality is often due to large water usage for irrigation needs and therefore drops in lake levels during spawning times. Therefore it is always important to gauge any lake's current bass production versus its long-term reputation. Currently, for a combination of size and numbers of bass, Lake El Salto is one place that's tough to beat for sustained performance. In recent years, it reliably produces over 500 bass per season which exceed the scale's ten pound mark.

El Salto covers approximately 25,000 acres at an altitude of just over 500 feet in the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range. The lake was built in the 1980's and opened for fishing around 1990. Weather is mild with a yearly temperature average of 82 degrees. The rainy season runs from July to October. Compared to other Mexican lakes, the convenience factor is huge. El Salto is just ninety minutes by car from the airport to the lake. There are several lodges on the lake. All of them provide adequate fishing boats and guides for guests, as well as comfortable lodging and food. There is plenty of game for the sportsman who wants to combine hunting with his fishing. It is just off the Pacific coast for easy access to offshore and inshore saltwater fishing, scuba diving or just plain beaching it. This is beautiful terrain and offers excellent hiking and bird watching opportunities.

We selected the El Salto Lodge for our yearly father-son tournament. Siguis Benitez is the manager. He has been on the lake since it was built and Siguis is a tremendously accommodating gentleman with whom to do business. Compared side by side with most international fishing

packages, this trip is a true bargain. It is an ideal venue for putting on a small private fishing tournament - a Mexican bass fiesta.

The best single day by members of our group was by my brother Mike, fishing with his sons who boated 220 bass. Personally, my son Hunter and I had our best day with 165. This was within the context of trying for quality fish not just numbers. Every good fish was weighed for the point system so piscatorial fiction was reserved for dinner conversation.



tion. Best five fish weighed easily exceeded fifty pounds.

Long - Mexico or more ingly, Old Mexico is the land of many boyhood travels with my father. Around us, the exposed layers of rock strata in the rugged mountain escarpments silently revealed the geological history of this realm. It is a kingdom of ancient pyramid builders who worshipped gods in the form of feathered serpents; a people who still keep many secrets.

It is so quiet out on the water. I can hear the individual wing beats in a squadron of cormorants two hundred yards away and the solitary bell on a distant Brahman cow, gravid with calf nearly a mile in the distance.

It's this quiet because the largest friggin' large-mouth I've ever



The eye of the fisherman is like no other. Where most observers would see cattle grazing and countryside, the angler would note ledges, brush and similar underwater structure when the lake's level ascends to higher banks. The local guides can find the fish literally throughout the year at a wide range of ever-changing water levels. Falling water levels can reveal much, including this tomb of a local native from a century ago.

hooked just broke off right under the boat and I'm beyond speechless. I had already landed an eleven pounder earlier, but this was a whole different kind of animal. She was insanely strong and headed down, down, down like a monster Key West grouper making a streak for a coral reef. My 17 lb test fluorocarbon line snapped like a gunshot had been fired, and then I'd detected a second, subtle yet horrible noise. It sounded like... a sneer. Mortified, humbled, scathed; all of the above was I, my face felt warm and reddened. The largest El Salto bass weighed to date was over eighteen pounds and the largest ever recorded anywhere in history was just a notch over twenty five. Hmm? Just how lunky could the lunkiest lunker be, lunkin' around down in the depths of this lake?

There is an unmistakable essence to the strike of a big black bass. It is the unadulterated aggressiveness, the fish truly

giving its all to the moment. Afterward, you know much about the nature of this species and the finest of these moments are really gratifying. This last one had been stunning, and I still marvel over it.

Rolling back down the dusty mountain highway, back toward Mazatlan, the fiesta's over all too soon. I feel accused and accursed by the stares of sloe-eyed Brahman cattle for missing the biggest bass I've hooked in this hemisphere. Its memory reigns preeminent above so many other fish over a fifty year experience. Fortunately, the sight of the blue agave cactus which gives such solace to those of us it touches, is uplifting. Tonight the distillation of this cactus will clear the mind and spark the spirit, like an angel's kiss blown down from some brightly-lit botanical heaven. Then it will be time to plot my comeback. No, I'm not finished with the big bass waiting beneath the smooth surface of Lake El Salto. BW

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