

# THE PEARLS OF PANAMA

BY RILEY LOVE, M.D.



One of the many "Pearls" that reside in the Gulf of Panama.



These islands are known as the "The Pearls," *Las Islas Perlas*. There is much to contemplate about this from my vantage point, soaking in the Jacuzzi on the upper deck of the big steel ship. Around me, jagged edges of earth's crust erupt through the surface to create this archipelago of islands, some covered with their own microcosm of rainforest.

All of the Pacific coast of the Americas, from Alaska to Chile are rugged escarpment, volcanic and severe where they meet the water's edge. Here in Panama there is an especially wild and naked aspect to the coastline, as if the blood is still running hot from the days the land and sea first wed.

Traveling to Panama, one is steeped in

its history, as lusty as its beauty. Steeping as well in the roiling warmth of the Jacuzzi, over my shoulder only a short distance is the site where Vasco Nunez de Balboa arrived as the first European to "discover" what he would call the "Southern Ocean" in 1513. One should recall that the Isthmus of Panama runs west to east, so that he traveled directly from the north across the mountains of its interior. The first settlement he founded on arrival was called *Panama*, a Cueva Indian word meaning "an abundance of fish."

Ferdinand Magellan would eventually name this ocean "Pacific" in 1520 when he entered its balmy climes from the Antarctic tempests of the straits at the tip of South America, which bear his

name today.

Balboa was well remembered during this day of fishing. The cooler was stocked with crimson and gold cans of beer upon which was a likeness of his image, an army of Balboas. There is a social principal that if you give a man a fish, you will feed him for a day. But if you teach a man to fish...he will sit in a boat and drink a lot of beer. There were many fewer Balboas in the ranks at the end of the day.

My ruminations are given pause by an impeccably mannered young lady who wishes to refill my glass with pina colada. All the crew aboard this vessel seem quite prejudiced against a drink glass containing any air molecules. I give the issue some debate but in the end, am

swayed by the irrefutable logic that sailing ships are indeed not built to sit at anchor in the harbor and glasses are not made to sit empty upon the table...so off she trundles to the bar below for another round. Returning to Balboa, I recall that he was beheaded by a governor who was reportedly his father-in-law. This causes a shudder even in the warmth of the Jacuzzi, a physiological oxymoron and cause for yet another refill of the glass.

A keen eye will recall some history of this floating hotel to the reader. Fans of the television series *Deadliest Catch*, will make out the lines of the 160-foot *Pacific Provider* as a crab fisherman from the show's first season. She is now renamed and re-outfitted with more superstructure for luxury staterooms, inside and

outside bars and a dining room. Solid steel, she is extremely heavy and stable. Blunt of prow, she has the hydrodynamics of Newt Gingrich in a speedo and when her locomotive-class diesels have her underway, burns 6 gallons per minute. I will stop short of estimating the fuel consumption of the former Speaker of the House.

West Coast Fishing Club, owners of five-star fishing lodges in Northern Canada has her anchored in *Las Perlas*, swaying at anchor and working on her sun tan in much more pacific waters than the Bering Sea. No more crabs for her. They are in the process of building a lodge here. What the drawings show will be absolutely gorgeous. I'll look forward to wax-





This former *Deadliest Catch* star has been renovated into a floating hotel.

ing philosophical again in their infinity pool. The chef on board just finished six years in a European culinary academy. If you are wondering if it shows in the cuisine...oh yes, yes, yes. It's been 50 years now that I've been destination fishing and I've been in some pretty rough spots. But this isn't one of them.

WCFC tends to do all things first class. This includes the equipment. We fished during the day on brand new 37-foot *Strikers*. They matched new Shimano Tigras 50Ws with Talus rods. They stayed in step with the same manufacturer's gear with 20-pound outfits as well, color coordinating the mono on the reels for each test class. The rigs include 6 feet of Bimini twist double lined above a snap swivel with 20 feet of 400-pound mono leader on the 50s.

These rigs have a dual life. A glance at the underwater topography map will explain much to the reader. The islands perch upon a plateau which gives way to a drop off, falling away more than a mile into the blue. At the drop the *modus operandi* is trolling for ocean pelagics, sailfish, dorado, tuna, but most especially,

the black marlin.

Three out of four marlins hooked up here are blacks, averaging about 350 pounds. Most of the others are blues and the very rare stripey. Not far to the west and north, in Costa Rica, three-fourths of the marlin are blues and average about 250 pounds.

On the first day at about noon we hit a bite on the drop, hooking up two blacks within 10 minutes of each other. The first was an average fish of around 350. He said adios after a few well-choreographed jumps and took off for Hawaii, but the second fish of about 700 pounds was landed to the boat.

Drop-offs are targeted as fish concentrators everywhere but are especially important along the Pacific coast of Central America. The reason the fishing is better here than in other areas, such as the Caribbean, is because of the transportation belt of the equatorial counter current.

Coriolis forces, generated by the earth's rotation form the Peruvian current, which sweeps colder, more oxygenated water westward from Antarctica in

the southern Pacific. There is a symmetrical flow in the northern hemisphere as well. Above and below the equator, from about 5 to 10 degrees, current flows back eastward toward the coast of Central America conveying cooler, less saline, more oxygenated and nutrient-rich water. The western Pacific is largely covered by a warm, poorly oxygenated blanket. But, when weather pushes the surface water away nearer the coast or the current meets underwater structure, the cooler water flowing eastward forms upwellings. This brings the building blocks of the food chain and a pathway for the big ocean pelagic species.

The method used for the marlin were plastics at a typical 8-knot troll and outrigger spread with teasers. But the other technique practiced here is livies. The currency across Europe, from Portugal to Greece is the Euro. In both Panama and the U.S. it's the dollar. Out here, the common currency is the live bonito. Every boat you'll see in these waters, from Montousa, Hannibal Bank and all points east are equipped with tuna tubes. These little tuny are too mania-

cal to live in a livewell so are kept in stir with water pumped across their gills until it's their turn to volunteer for service to the cause.

This brings us to the second life of the fishing tackle. Referring again to the topography map, what appears to be a large plain is actually a Disney World of inshore fishing. Hundreds of square miles of underwater escarpments and holes provide almost limitless opportunities to target the other *dramatis personae* of the second act of our performance. The captains of WCFC try to hit at least one new spot everyday. They use the same rigs but end them with a 20/0 circle hook bridled to a live bonito or jack. These are slow-trolled on surface and with a downrigger so the baits can shake their moneymakers in front of the bruisers who inhabit these rocky haunts. They are trophy-grade snappers that snap up whole bonito like lollipops and amberjack the size of NCAA defensive backs. If you were following this along and thinking the rods and reels were too heavy for inshore fishing, I invite you to try pulling an 80-pound amberjack out of his crib with anything you'd like. These Panamians made the tough guy Shimano 50's *scraeeeeeeem* for their mamas in Japan. You could catch a case of smoke inhalation just standing nearby.

Over many years of fishing in Panama, exploring sandy beaches and rocky coves with slowly retrieved Yo-Zuri crystal minnows or similar baits, has produced an array of snapper species, roosterfish, robalo and blue trevally. The captains here haven't even had time to try those areas yet. We did use some topwater poppers on spin-casting rods, a technique which has become exceedingly popular in Panama over the last decade. It's a lot of fun around the spectacular rocks that jutted from the depths and for the schools of yellowfin tuna, which busted baits on the surface inshore.

The third world is changing rapidly. I first fished this area in the 1980s at Club Pacifico on Coiba Island. It was a penal colony then; where you wound up if you were on the downs instead of ups with Manuel Noriega, then the dictator... I



### PEARLS OF PANAMA

Balboa was lured like a fish across the rugged interior of the isthmus by tales of gold and jewels he'd heard from the natives he had met. This was why he traveled out to these islands in 1513. He named them "The Pearls" because of the lovely gems harvested by the aboriginals here. There are a few larger islands harboring some development today and then a lot of islets and just plain rocks, about 130 in all.

Following Balboa was Gaspar de Morales. The local Indian leader tried to buy his favor with a basket of pearls but only succeeded in igniting his greed. Morales killed 20 of the islands' chieftains, giving them to his dogs to tear to pieces. The natives were completely exterminated over the next two years. Subsequently, the Spaniards would import African slaves to harvest the pearls.

It was an African slave who found the most famous pearl from the islands, the 56-carat "La Peregrina," meaning pilgrim or wanderer. It won her freedom and was taken hence to Spain. It was worn by Phillip II, the King of Spain and given as a gift upon his betrothal to Mary I (Bloody Mary) of England. The pearl would be exchanged by the winds of history across various monarchs of Europe, appearing in oil paintings of their portraiture which survive today. It was lost and rediscovered more than once. Finally it was stolen from Spain by the Bonapartes traveling to France and England where it was purchased in 1969 by the actor Richard Burton for his wife Elizabeth Taylor. After her death, it was sold at auction at Christie's in New York on December 11, 2011 for \$11.8 million, by far a world record for any pearl ever sold.

mean president. There weren't any European chefs slingin' hash for the few fishermen venturing here, or in Costa Rica or Guatemala in those days. Despite the economic downturn around the globe, the country prospers. The Panama Canal is adding a third set of locks that will double its capacity. They'll be ready by 2014. This will impact the ports of our Eastern seaport quickly with even more imports from Asia. Panama City is sprouting new skyscrapers for business and condo-style living space at a non-stop pace. It maintains its reputation as the "Money Laundering Capital of the

World." I love that town.

One new development is of interest. For the first time since the isthmus of Central America filled the sea between the mountains with land three million years ago, tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*) swim in these waters. The tarpon seem to have migrated through the canal and have been breeding in the Pacific since the mid-90s. They haven't seen them in the Pearls yet, but they have been caught as far north as Costa Rica. Welcome to the party *Megalops*; pass the sardines and bring on the fun.

It's not even Saturday and I've been



bathing in the Jacuzzi for a very long time. It's not the massage by the jets that keep me at anchor, but the view of the nearby islands and the ocean extending over the blue horizon. Moments of

reflection such as this do not come frequently enough in our busy lives.

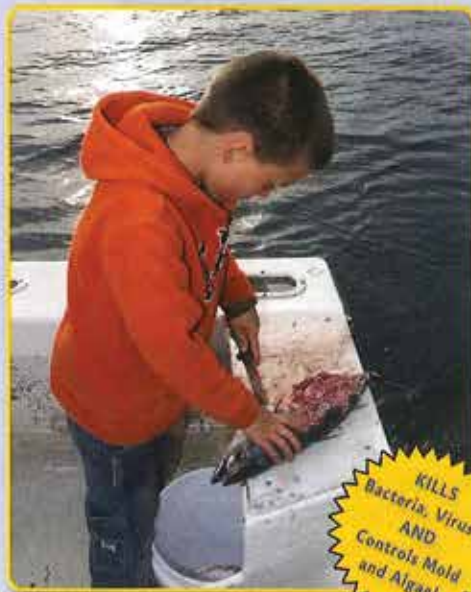
There is a powerful internal link; this is why we all stare at the ocean. We still yearn to drift away, to feel the natural

pull of the current. Although our kind walked away from the water long ago, we still have our deepest connection with the fishes, our ancestors, and with the sea. I actually think that all fishermen experience this in quiet moments when they let their inner stillness hold forth. When our time is done and our dust settles into the earth, our water will flow back into the sea and we will be with the fishes again at last.

Perhaps that nice young lady can bring one more drink from the bar and I can drift a little further now, inviting the voices of the spirits of this place from long ago. I might commune with Balboa, carrying his head and hear his tale of discovery from 500 years ago. Perhaps the whispers of the murdered chieftains would be heard again. Most of all, I would like to hear stories from the ancient fishermen who plied these waters. I'd really like to hear the one about the day they had when they decided to name this place Panama. 🇵🇦

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