

# TROLLING FOR DESTINY

by Riley Love, MD.

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DESTINY HAUNTS THE MINDS OF MEN. LONG HAS THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE WORLD FOCUSED ON THE MAYAN CONCEPT OF DESTINY, BUT NEVER MORE THAN IN 2012. LEGENDS AND MYTHS ARE EASILY DISMISSED IN THE AGE OF SCIENCE, BUT THAT SAME DISCIPLINE MAKES IT HARD TO ARGUE AGAINST NUMBERS AND WE COME TO END OF THE "LONG COUNT." THIS IS THE END OF DAYS FROM 3114 B.C.E. ON THE MAYAN CALENDAR AND IT'S TIME TO RESET THE UNIVERSE FOR THE NEXT PLUNGE AHEAD.



Ancient Tulum watches... and waits.



Clockwise from above: Chad's big dolphin scored big points. Hunter love with the winner. Baggin' talks for braggin' rights.

**N**olo contendere and on to the next good story, you say? But it happened here before. Just a stone's throw from where you'd knock back a cold one on the beach is the Chixulub crater. This is where the world ended, some 65 million years ago with a meteor blast of such magnitude that it produced the twilight of the age of dinosaurs.

So, the weight of such destiny was lent even more gravity by coincidence. This was the tenth anniversary of our yearly fishing tournament. Massive kismet would be our companion for the 2012 contest in the land of the ancient Mayans. Burdened by the extra load of fate, the wheels of the big jetliner screeched noticeably louder as they touched down on the asphalt runway in the Yucatan peninsula. We were lucky they didn't charge us for an extra bag.

Like most good offshore fishing destinations in our hemisphere, there is an

active ocean current. So many parts of the Caribbean are somewhat "dead" for pelagic sport species because they are outside the realm of these ocean highways with the commerce and up dwellings they produce.

The Yucatan Current flows northward through the Straits of Yucatan, between the peninsula and Cuba. The effects are most prominent in the spring and summer, before the arrival of the northern winds in the fall. Like the Mayans, we were to confront natural forces and be students of the calendar. Springtime brought the best chance for the triple play of blue marlin, white marlin, and sailfish... the trifecta of the bills.

Kukulcan was among the greatest of the Mayan creator gods. He would become the basis for Quetzalcoatl, the great feathered serpent deity of the Aztecs to the north. He was the wind, born from the ocean and taught early people how to fish.

After the animals were created, Kukulcan and the other gods of the ele-

ments decided to create men. First they tried to use mud but the men they made could not speak or reason. Next they carved men out of wood. But these individuals had no wisdom and could not worship. They were banned to the forest where their faces became crushed and they turned into monkeys. Lastly they made modern people out of maize (corn) and they were at last pleased with them because they could build and speak the names of the gods.

Motoring down the coast on the first morning from Playa del Carmen to fish out of Puerto Aventuras, I reflected how ironically accurate were the legends of the Mayans. Here indeed were men of corn... both distilled with sour mash and brewed with hops. Even back at the front end of this "Long Count" of days, there must have been men who felt the same. That is, when the sun rose it was time to fish, bandages and hair o' the dog were needed and rehab was for quitters. We hit the docks and diesel engines roared to life, the tournament was on.

It's amazing how much the coastline had changed since I fished here 35 years ago. There were always some habitations along the coastline for those wanting to go native and for the divers. The Great Mayan Reef extends along the shore from Isla Mujeres at its north end down past Belize to Honduras. It's a world-class destination in many ways. But now white roofs of time-shares and resorts became ever closer together, obscuring what used to be a continuous line of green forest.

This veneer of civilization is thin, make no mistake. The jungle could retake all of this in no time. At night there are still sounds from the hidden heart of this place that are deeper than the rumbles of the jaguars and as mysterious as the crystalline clear cenotes, which the Mayans thought were entrances to the underworld. In farmhouses and villages, the Mayan people still speak their native tongue, seeming to await some divine signal to return to their great stone temples. It wouldn't really take much, not much

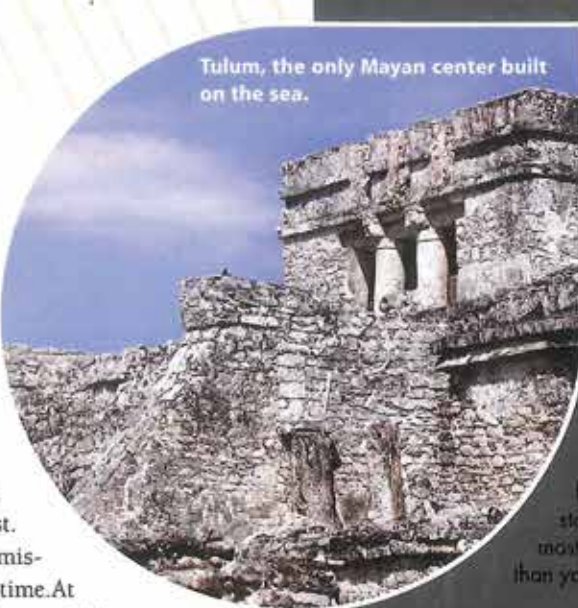
**"WHEN THE SUN ROSE IT WAS TIME TO FISH, BANDAGES AND HAIR O' THE DOG WERE NEEDED AND REHAB WAS FOR QUITTERS. WE HIT THE DOCKS AND DIESEL ENGINES ROARED TO LIFE, THE TOURNAMENT WAS ON."**

at all to reset things as they were.

It's great to get the baits wet right outside the harbor mouth. The depth falls off from 70 to 700 feet with a few turns of the propellers. There is a great trough just offshore which here is called the Straits of Cancun. The captains work this north to south, which is where we were headed. The technique was typical teasers, some plastics and then circle-hooked ballyhoo. The rigs varied from 20 to 50 pounds, with the mates favoring 6 feet of Bimini twist joined to 20 feet of 400-pound mono. They loved multi-colored squid skirts and heads on the 'hoo. The boats carried two mates and they stayed busy. If one color of skirt didn't produce in a short while, it would be changed out for another that looked luckier.

There has always been something brilliant about the sunlight in the Yucatan. It seems to scintillate, giving objects a white-yellow glow. On this first day we became sport for Kinich Ahau, the sun god. Sweat poured early on an especially hot morning as he had his fun with those who had been bold at the tequila bar the night before. The reports from the boats were good on the radio. There were sailfish, white marlin and dorado coming aboard... in all boats but ours. We bounded across the waves, spreading fresh baits and bouncing our teasers. But only the laughter of Kinich Ahau filled our cockpit.

All morning I had hoped we would troll far enough south to encounter one of my favorite destinations, the ancient temple of Tulum. There are places we encounter in our travels that stay in our dreams and this was one of them.



Tulum, the only Mayan center built on the sea.

## NEED TO KNOW

### GETTING THERE

Cancun is one of the most accessible destinations in Mexico, with direct flights from Miami, Ft. Lauderdale, Atlanta, Houston, Charlotte, and many other cities. With most flights under four hours, Cancun is closer than you think.

### THEY DO IT ALL

Captain Rick's is excellent for fishing offshore on the Riviera Maya. Boats range from 23' to battlewagons. They've been in business over 20 years and have a well-oiled machine.

### PLACE TO LAY YOUR HEAD

Gran Porto Real in Playa del Carmen. Fantastic rates inclusive of all food and drink. It has its own beach and is only steps from Fifth Avenue, Playa's hotspot. Exceptional rooms and service. Great for the whole family!



**destination:**  
a place that fate predetermined you were supposed to be.

If you love to fish and dream about doing it in faraway places, you have a lot of company. For many the obstacles can keep them from their quest, such as cost, time, and distance to travel. The Yucatan qualifies as a destination for everyone. It costs less than a similar trip to Florida and there is a lot of fishing to do.



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It was the only structure the Mayans had built on the sea. The main structure, named "El Castillo," or castle by the Spanish, was dedicated to Kukulkan and it was here that Mayan legend says a deity fell to earth. The old astronomers would watch for the emergence of Venus in the east, a sign from Kukulkan of renewal and a signal for planting crops. The Mayan story relates that Tulum was connected to the other great temples of their world by the Cuxan san, or "sky road."

Pilgrims would travel here to be healed of sickness by Itzanna whose sign was an inverted hand on the temple's wall. If Hunter, my son and tournament fishing partner, had been born in the Mayan era, we would have likely sojourned here. As a small child he had suffered a brain tumor requiring radiation therapy. Instead of Tulum, our pilgrimage had taken us to St. Jude's in Memphis.

The old ruins were mesmerizing there on the cliff, basking in the late afternoon sun. It was the end of the day and time to head in when there was that singular sound all fishermen know... the sound of an outrigger clip pulling open.

"SNAP!"

"LEFT OUTRIGGGGGGER!" The blue marlin erupted into the air as the 20-weight rig jumped into my hand. How could this not be a joke of the gods hooking up such a fish in the last minute of an empty day? At 200 pounds it was an average size for these waters and we counted coup on his noggin as we unhooked him at the transom. We were the last boat in, flying the only blue flag as Kinich Ahau disappeared over the horizon, laughing his ass off.

The braggin' rights carried through to late at night when the Milky Way rose brightly over the ocean. The old legends focused deeply upon this mystic road across the sky, which was walked by dead souls into the next world. It forms the "World Tree," the basic structure for the Mayan's ceaselessly complicated uni-

verse. The Milky Way was perfectly aligned south to north across the heavens when the last "Long Count" began.

There is much to ponder in these myths. After a day on the water, the night air turned our minds to meditating upon these matters with Acan, the Mayan equivalent of the Greek deity Dionysus. Through the ages men have studied great questions long into the night, their minds inspired to lofty heights by this god of the grape and grain. The short, easy name of this one is a tribute to the foresight of the ancients.

The next morning a dark line of storm cells moving in from the Atlantic served notice that the sun god had taken the day off and our fate would be handled by his ol' buddy Chaac, the principle of precipitation. This elemental god possessed a lightning axe with which he beat thunder and rain from the clouds. No pale, northern faces would burn red this day, but some did turn a little green. Some great fish were landed. Hunter caught a sailfish and we were two thirds of the way to a team billfish grand slam. Tulum peered down from its prominence, solemn gray in the rain, counting the centuries as they passed in the river of time.

Day three of the tournament started belatedly. The afternoon bite had far outweighed the morning's, so we planned to take advantage of fishing late. The point spread was thinner than a politician's promise, and was anybody's prize to reach out and seize.

The fish cooperated with all but our team once again. They stayed away in droves, like they owed me money. It was the end of the last day.

We spotted two frigate birds, a mated pair soaring high above the waves and veered in their direction. They peered about searching for signs in the quiet sea, like us they found nothing and followed our boat.

My son stood on the back deck, hopeful and ready. Ten years ago he wouldn't have been able to handle the rod by himself but he gave his all to our days of fishing. The tumor of his childhood had come like a thief into our lives, robbing us of so much. There had been no victorious dashes into the end zone or trot around the base paths to applause from the stands. These days on the water were our victory laps, our best days in the sun. Father and son had become fishermen, had done it well sometimes, had done it with heart, always. He stood outlined against the declining sun.

The Mayan god of fish was a demon. He was great and black in the shape of a shark. He

devoured those men who fell from their boats but also might bestow the blessing of a grand catch. How long had it been since his name was spoken here on this realm of ocean?

If an ancient deity was to sleep for a millennium waiting for a moment to awake, where would he choose? Perhaps where the fires from the temples would light the sky but the sea descended a thousand feet below... which was right where we were. Chac Uayab Xoc, old demon, were you there? The ocean was deep and purple blue. The frigate birds soared together behind us, effortlessly and unconcerned. I allowed my mouth to form the words but no sound came forth, Chac Uayab Xoc.

The entire universe shuddered as a movie jumping up and down on the screen, its film off track. I shook my head to clear my vision. What the hell was that, did we hit a big wave? Couldn't hear any Grateful Dead music flashing back. No one else seemed to notice. It was the end of the day and we were out of time.

I said the words now, loud and clear, "Chac Uayab Xoc!"

Everything that existed jolted suddenly and then time simply stopped. Droplets of water from a wave breaking at the side of the boat hung suspended in the air before me, dead still. I was frozen motionless as was everyone and everything around me. Still I was aware of what I was seeing. From the periphery of vision I watched the frigate birds, which unlike all else continued their natural motion in time, banking and soaring. They peered at me and then turned their heads toward the land, and then I saw it all.

It was a vision of the world as it once had been in the days of the great Mayan empire. The temples were no longer gray stone but painted white, blue, yellow and red. They were illustrated with murals, the stories of heroes and supernatural beings. Banners unfurled in the breeze and smoke from their fires hung in a white layer above the jungle.

Musicians played on harps, marimbas and drums. Priests in feathered robes and lofty headdresses sang as armies assembled and warriors, painted and robed, rowed their war canoes with such mighty arms that the water turned white as it furled from their prows. They chanted verse in cadences, which enchanted the gods. Mayan destiny was playing out in front of my eyes, military campaigns were launched, won and lost. Political movements, great leaders rose and became forgotten, generations of families unspooled across history in their thread of life. Time remained fast at anchor.

A bass note sounded from the depths beneath us, vibrating the bones in my lower legs. A huge shadow, long and black ascended from the deep and passed ominously beneath our stationary boat. Quietly, it faded again back into the profound blue below. The frigate birds veered up suddenly and became fixed on a target behind us in the water; they tucked their wings and shot downward like arrows.

Time abruptly took hold again and I caught the breaking wave full in the face like a slap from the gods for my impertinence. The Mayan vision had disappeared. It was the 2012 Yucatan coastline as it always was. I shook my head trying to get a certain fix on reality. "SNAP!" "RIGHT OUTRIGGGGER!" Hunter was ready and the rod sprang into his hands. There would be only one way to play this. The jagged post in the middle of the deck was all that was left of the fighting chair that had broken the day before.

"WHITE MARLIN!" Lurching back towards Hunter, intending to help, another revelation was taking shape. This was his time and he shook all efforts of assistance. Standing alone, he was the product of all we had done since those first frail attempts so long ago. His feet negotiated the pitching deck, his focus on his rod angle and line retrieve balancing the pull of the fish and the set of his drag a matter of unwavering concentration. Like a dance, a joining of physical industry and art, it was many, many things. It was... beautiful. Oddly, a choking sound rose up in my throat.

"You okay, Dad?" "Yeah son, I'm fine... real fine."

We got our slam and won the tournament with the white marlin on the last afternoon. Funny thing... I've seen a lot of fish with a short bill before but never one quite like this, which came to a unique conical point as if it had been fashioned on purpose.

Fifty years of destination fishing, and still there is an uncertainty of how to embrace the last moments before leaving someplace wonderful. Walking on the beach early before the ride up to the airport in Cancun, I became mesmerized by two frigate birds just overhead. They crafted fine alterations in position with intricate moves of their wings and tails, which would write a whole aviation textbook on rudders and flaps. A voice, initially distant, now clearer, brought me back to standing at the water's edge.

It was a girl's voice, lilting and high, singing in the Mayan language. I couldn't understand the words, but the song seemed very old. She walked forthcoming along the strand, a slen-

der wisp of youth with the classic Mayan beauty of high cheekbones and aquiline nose. Her smile created its own light and her feet never seem to quite touch down on the sand. I asked of her name.

"In your language I would be called Carmen."

The frigate birds soared vertically on a strong updraft. They turned sharply and started their morning flight south towards the old temple of Tulum. And so another age must pass before the earth will shake and chasms of flame spew forth molten rock and dead souls upon the land. Still must we wait for the mighty feathered serpent to fly from the north, his wings darkening the sky and the Mayans to walk back from the forests into their holy places once again. For me, it was time to plan the next fishing trip. **G**

motionless, helpless, inducing a fish to strike it.

Trolling plugs is a great technique to locate fish when scattered about in a large area. It also works well with children and novice anglers; if they can hold a rod, they can catch a fish. This applies to the inshore bays, passes, and Gulf of Mexico. That #8 olive saltwater X-Rap is my go-to lure for trolling. Simply let out about half the line, close the bail, and drive the boat around at just a bit above idle speed. Sometimes working the rod tip will elicit more strikes. One trick that serves me well is to troll in the passes. The traditional method is to drift with the current and cast jigs, plugs, or spoons. Once the drift is complete, the boat idles back up and the drift is repeated. As you idle back to the start, why not drag a plug behind? Many mornings I catch more Spanish mackerel this way, as they prefer fast-moving bait.

Casting and trolling plugs in the inshore Gulf of Mexico is an extremely effective technique in the spring and again in the fall when pelagic species move through. A large Yo-Zuri 3D will produce some very nice king mackerel and large Spanish mackerel. Look for birds and bait schools on the surface and troll around the edges of the bait, not right through the middle. The inshore reefs off of Lido Key hold a lot of fish and are very reliable producers.

Sight casting to "breaking" fish is terrific sport. Spanish mackerel and false albacore (bonita, little tunny) will often be seen tearing up schools of helpless baitfish on the surface. The Spanish will stay up on top longer and not move as much as the false albacore. The albies can also be very fussy; you may need to scale down the offering and go lighter on the leader. With either species, ease into position and cast into the fish or troll around the edge of them and be prepared to hear your drag scream! Anglers can also employ the same tactics from the beach to catch Spanish mackerel.

In the cooler months snook migrate up into creeks, canals, and rivers. Phillippi Creek, Bowles Creek, Hudson Bayou and the residential canals all hold fish. The Manatee, Braden, and Myakka Rivers are all productive winter spots. The fish are scattered and plugs allow an angler to cover a lot of water efficiently and thoroughly. Black/gold is an excellent color combination in the tannin-stained water, as are bright patterns such as firetiger. If you venture far enough upstream, don't be surprised if a nice largemouth bass intercepts your offering meant for a snook! **G**



MARGUESAS VIA MOTHERSHIP

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We left on one of those rare February days between cold fronts, windless and warm.

Even with the Vikings shallow draft we had to enter the east cut on the top of the tide. The channel into Mooney Harbor anchorage on the south side is deeper, but is used by commercial lobster and yellowtail boats for sheltered overnight mooring.

Navigating past a PVC pipe – the only channel marker – we slipped through the shallow pass with the barest swirl of mud and anchored just inside the tree line. Even in winter it is best to select an anchorage with an eye to prevailing breeze... The mosquitoes in Marquesas can be murder.

It was early afternoon when we dropped the hook in nine feet of water and launched the self-propelled angling team off in search of "The Prince of the Flats." Permit are found on all sides of the islands and will crowd the bay, as well. On warm days in late winter, the large females push into the shallows to feed and bask in the sun's rays, hastening the development of their incubating eggs.

On these rare, still days, tails wave across the flats and channel edges and black singular fins rise straight out of nowhere, pointing, pivoting as the 30-plus-pound fish feed in inches of water. Permit swimming with half their eyes exposed buck the tide, burrowing into the sand and mud for crabs, using the water flow to sweep vision blocking silt clouds away, so necessary in the Marquesas. This is shark city.

Ten-foot bulls, spinners, lemons and the occasional tiger shark prowl these waters eager to bring a short end to the battle between man and fish. Sucking their bellies in, they'll follow the sounds of struggle onto the shallowest flat.

During the spring tarpon run you can add the great hammerhead to the list – big hammerheads, sometime 18 feet in length, homing in on the leaping silver kings, ready to sever a 100-plus-pound fish with one head-shaking bite.

While the permit expedition paddles off to the west, Jim and I set out to catch bait, one of our favorite things. Pilchards or fingerling mullet are what we seek and it doesn't take long to find them. When it comes to bait, Marquesas is the bomb.

Diving pelicans - normally a constant - were not to be found on this early afternoon. Instead they were roosting in the trees, watching the water below, fat and full. As Jim motored the skiff along the shore, the surface flashed with the shimmer of a silver school—pilchards or white bait, "tarpon candy." One throw with a 10-foot net and our well was brimming.

While Jim cleared the drain-clogging weeds, I cast a Bagley mullet at the mouth of a small creek flowing into the channel. The second twitch of the plug brought a rise and a swirl. Snook, I think. They are found here in numbers at times, but are hard to fool in the clear water.

We offloaded our living treasure and I headed out to find our wandering kayakers, toward the setting sun. It was crucial to locate the pair before dark. The duo floated high on an Atlantic side flat. Dave was landing a fish, a 15-pound permit... Mission accomplished.

The last of the sun sank as we eased up to the mothership. On one side, a very large barracuda hung, head out of water, hooked on a spinner. Jim emerged from the cabin with a pair of cable crimps.

"Just look astern." He responded to the puzzled looks from our boarding party. Fins cut the still water behind the boat. Lured to the smell of barracuda, topsail shaped dorsals cleaved the dimly lit surface like a cartoonist rendering, surrounding castaways on a deserted island.

"I've busted off three and am not going to lose another," Jim proclaimed and began to crimp a shark rig for his 50-wide Penn. In the twilight he easily hooked three more sharks, all large spinners. Their aerial displays delivered an electrifying happy-hour show.

While Jim was busy sharking, I spotted something working the creek mouth, the same spot I cast to earlier in the afternoon. Grabbing a spinning rod off the skiff, I mounted one of the Kayaks and paddled quietly for the dark shore. On the second cast a sharp tug preceded an explosion of water as a large snook shook his wide-mouth head.

This will beat hamburger, I dared dream as the fish headed for the mangrove roots, a common move for this species. The 15-pound braid could turn the linesider, but with added pressure, the kayak scooted along making stopping the fish impossible. Just as dinner seemed lost I found the bottom with my foot, anchoring the plastic craft.

We dined on snook sushi, snook ceviche, and pan-fried snook that evening. It felt good to be a

PLUGGIN' PRIMER



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They cast into the thick bait schools near Big Pass and burned the baits back as fast as they could turn the reel handle. Needless to say, the strikes were explosive!

Plugs also catch a lot of speckled trout, often times fooling larger than average sized fish. Topwater baits are an excellent choice for fishing very shallow water early and late in the day. In late summer, shallow bars on the edge of grass flats load up with bait, which in turn attracts gamefish. Add in a high tide at first light and the result is an excellent situation to catch a nice fish on topwater.

Suspending plugs such as the MirrOlure are deadly on speckled trout fished over the deeper grass, in 4 to 8 feet of water. They also fool mackerel, bluefish, jacks, and other species. These baits do not have a lip, therefore they do not "dive." Instead, they are cast out and allowed to sink for several seconds, then twitched sharply. The lure just hangs there



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