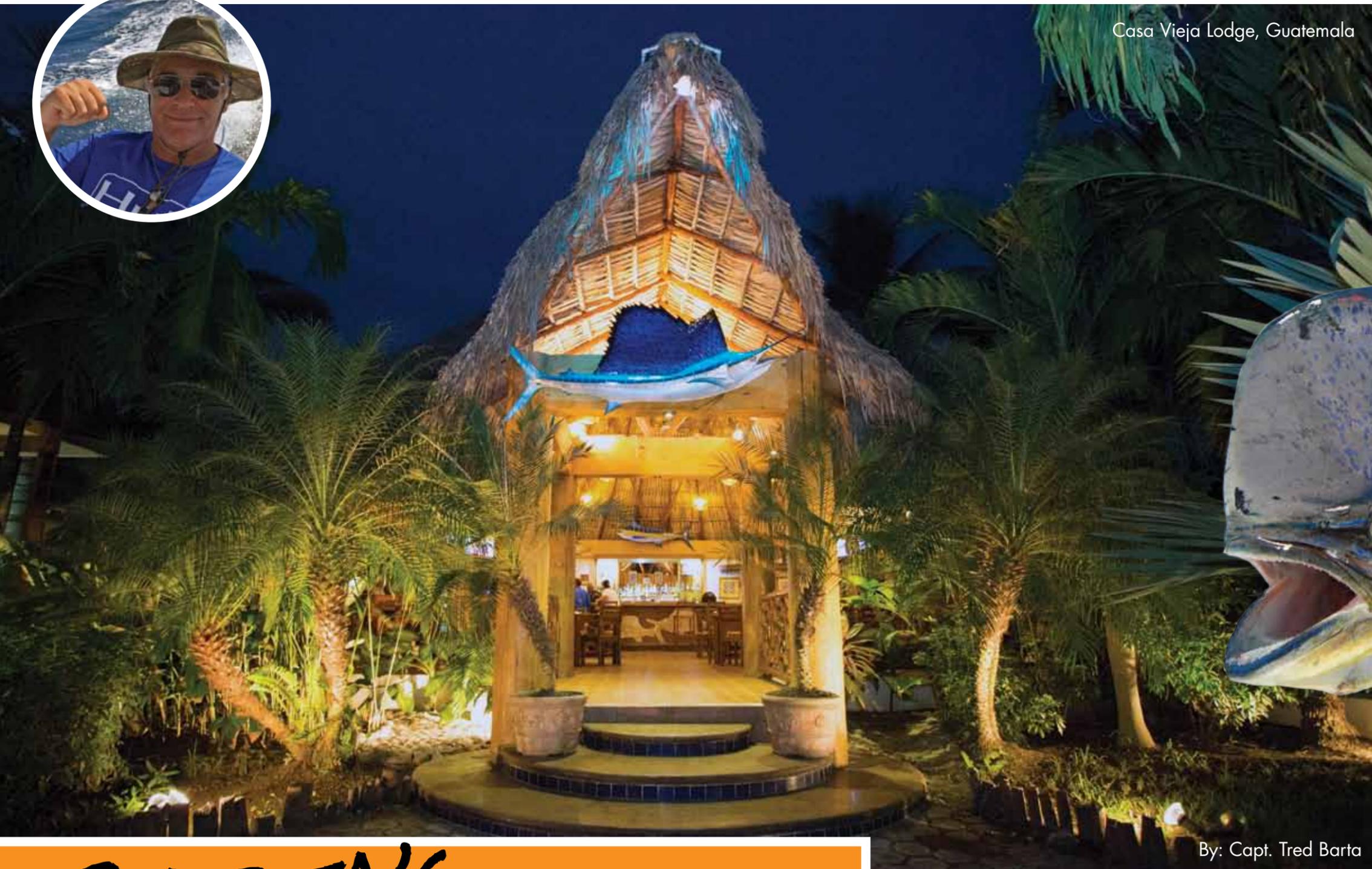




Casa Vieja Lodge, Guatemala



Capt. David Salazar with a nice Guatemalan bull dolphin.

By: Capt. Tred Barta

BARTA'S biased as hell TRAVEL LOG

By now, most of you know who I am. After spending close to four decades in blue water, you might say—by a long shot—this is not my first rodeo. During my life as captain, mate, and angler, I have fulfilled bucket list after bucket list.

The title of this travel log says it all: “Biased As Hell.” My favorite place to fish in the entire world is Casa Vieja Lodge. There isn’t another place I know of where the billfishing is more consistent, the service more excellent, the native people more friendly, or the captains and boats finer anywhere in the world.

Now that you all know exactly where this article is going, it’s my desire to give you a step-by-step travel log from beginning to end.

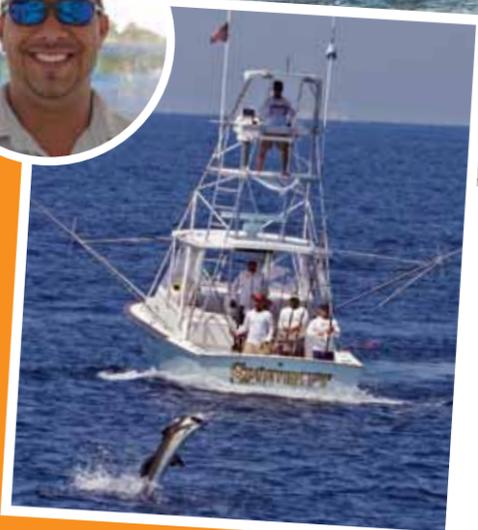
My fishing companion on this trip is my friend, Donna De

Weil, of Islamorada, Florida and Beaufort, North Carolina.

The airlines offer non-stop flights from Miami to GUA airport in Guatemala City. I often bring my own specialized rods in 2, 4, and 8 pound, in a bazooka extending fishing rod case. The flight takes less than three hours from Miami and it’s apparent from the moment you land that the people of Guatemala welcome tourism. Going through customs has never been an issue.

La Aurora Airport is quaint, small, very efficient and incredibly clean. The marble floors from debark to the customs area absolutely gleam. Once you take your first step outside the terminal, Casa Vieja Lodge’s brand-new custom vans literally sweep you off the tarmac and whisk you down to Port San Jose.

You can see active volcanos in the background and the farm-



land between Guatemala City and the lodge. To me, it is truly beautiful. Often, you can see the harvesting of sugar cane. They burn the fields just prior. The entire landscape is punctuated by red-hot flames in the distance, smoke, and colorfully dressed harvesters chopping at the roots with machetes. It's quite a sight.

After an hour-and-a-half drive down to sea level, you reach the thriving port of San Jose. Here, pangas heading toward the ocean are dwarfed by cruise ships and million-dollar sportfishing boats. On the east side, 20 or more commercial shrimp boats all raft together. The stark contrast of cultures makes for an extremely interesting canvas of life.

Arriving at Casa Vieja Lodge, the gates open and you're met by the staff, under the leadership of David and Kristen Salazar, the lodge owners. The staff presents you with refreshing drinks of every description. The message is abundantly clear that they are here to make your trip unforgettable.

As you settle into the immaculate, quaint rooms at the lodge (there are 19), it is obvious care has been taken at every turn. The sheets and bedspread are folded to military perfection. The towel basket and vanity areas rival five-star hotels. You feel at home immediately.

Most guests go for a swim wherein drinks and appetizers of shrimp, chicken, mahi, tuna, and tropical fruits are served at poolside. My favorite spot is to sit under the waterfall.

Donna and I put our rods together so we are ready to fish, finishing off Bimini twists and wind-on leaders for the day to come. In my wheelchair, I'm usually tired from traveling and quickly fall asleep awaiting dinner.

Dinner is served under the large cabana. This is one of the most beautiful structures I've ever seen. I kid you not, the name of the fan is The Big Ass Fan and its monstrous blades create a gentle breeze on the hottest of evenings.

As you finish your drinks at the bar and mingle with the anglers who are spending their last day at the lodge, you meet your captain for the upcoming adventure and the excitement is electric. It's what I call "anticipation steak."

Ordering dinner is simple, as the menu gives you only one entre choice. When the food comes out of the kitchen, you quickly understand why. The food is nothing short of spectacular. Donna is a world-class cook, in my opinion, and when she says WOW, it means only one thing to me... job well done!

However, if you choose to have something that isn't on the menu, the answer is almost always

yes. What I find amusing is that by the second day, everyone asks what's for dinner, but the staff keeps it a secret until you get off the fishing boat.

If you're smart, and most anglers are, it is off to sleep right after dinner. At 6 a.m. you are awoken by a gentle knock on the door and before you know it, the aroma of fresh Guatemalan coffee is wafting across your room. A traditional Guatemalan breakfast is served, as well as American dishes, from 6 to 10 a.m. in a dining hall punctuated by magnificent photos of angler's catches.

Then, you're off to Marina Pez Vela, which is less than a mile away. As you arrive at the marina, it's an absolute flurry of activity. Locals are carrying large bags of ice on their backs and the crews are getting everything ready. This is where you board your vessel for the day of fishing, which will mean running between 12 and 50 miles, depending on water conditions.

Let me stop the travel log and tell you about the captains, mates, and the boats.

There is nowhere else in the world where you can find classic boats for a true classic adventure. At Casa Vieja Lodge, you are invited back in time to fish aboard the finest vessels of an era past. Rybovich, Whiticar, Gamefisherman, Merritt, and Billy Knowles. These are manufacturer's names that represent the holy grail of our sport. So, not only are you fishing with the greatest captains in the world, but you are also fishing on some of the greatest boats in the world, each of which have been exquisitely renovated at astronomical costs.



The Casa Vieja Lodge serves up post-fish-fighting relaxation at its finest.



In Guatemala, due to the fine work of retired captain Ronnie Hamlin and many others, only circle hooks may be used in billfishing and all billfish must be released. If you bring a dead billfish to the dock, a \$5,000 penalty will be immediately imposed. And believe me, the \$5,000 will be collected.

In Guatemala, you are not allowed to fish subsurface teasers such as dredge bars, as the fishing is so spectacular, it has been ruled too effective for the fishery.

Above, from top down:

Capt. David Salazar of the *Finest Kind*, Capt. Jason Brice of the *Makaira*, and Capt. Nicho Alvarenga of the *Spindrift*.



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Casa Vieja side trips

Most fishing packages at Casa Vieja consist of three fishing days, but my favorite is to have four, interrupted by what I call a "tourist day" of sightseeing. Here are some of Donna's favorite side trips taken from the lodge.

Antigua – The road to Antigua is nothing short of spectacular. Three volcanos surround the city and puff their activeness. The scenery is so breathtaking that it seems surreal. The city of 43,000 has cobblestone streets and Spanish Baroque architecture. Antigua is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. There are many things to see and do there, but some highlights include the San Francisco Church built in the 1500s, San Domingo Monastery, arch of Santa Catalina, Jade Factory and Museum, and Central Park, which is surrounded by the Palace of the Captain Generals, City Hall, San Jose Cathedral, and Archbishop's Palace. There are also local museums with centuries of treasures. Visiting the local craft markets is a must. I've bought local crafts and jade jewelry to remind me of our wonderful time.

San Jose – San Jose is only 8 or 10 minutes from the lodge. It has one of the largest outdoor/indoor trade markets, where literally everything one needs can be purchased. From local spices to all kinds of clothing and leatherwork, kitchen supplies, and decorative crafts incorporating everything that comes from the sea and from the forest. The outdoor fair turns into a fruit, vegetable, and meat market and then goes under roof to a maze of shops. It's absolutely intriguing to see where the locals buy their food and daily needs.

One of the rivers in San Jose travels far inland where beautiful homes dot its banks. Locals trap small fish and crabs and kids dive for shells to sell at the market. CVL can arrange for a naturalist to go on the trip with you. It's fun learning the names of the local lizards and fruit hanging over the waterway. We tried fruits we'd never seen or heard of before!



We would fish aboard the 40-foot Whiticar Finest Kind, with the owner Capt. David Salazar. David has been in Guatemala since 1998, so he's very familiar with the fishing.

It is standard at Casa Vieja to have two mates. Jose and Carlos are fantastic mates. Having brought my own ultra-light tackle rods, I was delighted to see that the night before, the crew had the outfits completely assembled.

One thing you will discover about the Guatemalan people is that they are quick to

help anyone in need. There, getting on and off the boat in my wheelchair is basically a non-event, as people seem to come from everywhere to help.

DAY 1

On day one, we ran 32-nautical miles to a temperature break found by another CVL boat the day before. Usually on the way out I help with the rigging of baits, but on this particular day, I rested in the air-conditioned salon. Donna, who loves outdoor nature photography almost as much as fish-



Capt. Chico Alvarenga
of the Release



ing, always chooses to spend her travel time on the bridge.

As we headed offshore, I paused to watch the other fleet boats leave the inlet. It's like a classic-boat show, captained by the who's who in the billfish world. I always think to myself how nice it is just to be in the company of our sport's greats.

The predominant bait used is circle-rigged ballyhoo for sailfish and game fish, and a shotgun-rigged mackerel for blue, black, and striped marlin. The fact remains that I've never seen a prettier bait box than those of the Guatemalan crews. Baits are rigged fresh every day and lined up with precision.

Most boats fish with 30-pound-test rigs for sailfish and 50- to 80-pound rigs for blue marlin. The normal set up is two long-rigger baits with hooks, with your short riggers and flat-line baits as hookless teasers. However, they are totally flexible to fish any method you want. For example, you could troll all lures, all lures with hooks, all baits with hooks, a combination of hookless teasers and baits, or my preference, trolling all hookless teasers with no baits in the water. I fish exclusively 12-pound test for recreational sailfish and 2-, 4-, 6-, and 8-pound test in my light-tackle efforts.

The greatest thrill is to witness the ballet of bait-and-switch, as the crew brings a sailfish right to the doorstep of the transom, allowing you to present a ballyhoo and circle hook on an absolutely lit-up fish.

The crew's coordination, while bringing multiple sails to the transom using bridge teasers and cockpit teasers, is something to behold. The greatest thing about bait-and-switch is that it incorporates every person on the boat in the effort of finally presenting a hooked bait.

Day one found me in the worst position imaginable. A right long-rigger teaser raised a sail. I was still lying on the salon sofa trying to get up. I struggled to see the action, as Donna dropped back on the first sailfish of the day. A perfect hook up! The sailfish went utterly berserk. Donna did a great job with the first fish and a perfect catch and release in only 12 minutes.

As I settled into my place on the right transom in my wheelchair with an entire day before me, Donna and I began our routine of practicing several drop backs to imaginary fish in different locations in the wake. Although many captains have made fun of my practice sessions, it has resulted in a lot of flags flying at the end of the day.

About 20 minutes later, we raised a triple-header on sails and before we knew it, the crew had manipulated all three fish right to the transom. Donna picked the first fish off a pink squid daisy chain. With her fish airborne, I dropped back to the second fish and ended up in a non-hookup. I was quickly handed a second rod on which I came tight right away. Our double header danced across the Pacific Ocean and we were both having an amazing time. The next four hours found us with 10 released sails on 13 bites.

Time for lunch. The choice was fresh mahi, chicken, or hamburger cooked on a grill by one of the mates in the salon. There is nothing like a fresh cooked meal when fishing. During the course of the day you are served fresh fruit and cheese. I'm a big fan of the local pineapples.

Around 1:30 in the afternoon, David Salazar and I decided to dance with the light tackle. I would attempt to catch one on



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2-pound line! I found it incredible that despite the thousands of sailfish David Salazar has caught, he had never successfully landed a sailfish on 2-pound test.

Having previously shot several TV shows for The Best and Worst of Tred Barta with Capt. Chris Sheeder aboard the Rum Line, and catching fish on 2-, 4-, and 8-pound test, I knew it could take all day to get the right fish and the right luck required.

At 2:30, a sailfish showed up on the right cockpit teaser. The sail was aggressive and lit up like a Christmas tree. He was absolutely an eater. The technique I've developed on 2-pound test is that after we have baited the fish successfully off the transom, we back the boat up literally on top of the fish, trying to get the shortest hook up we can on the thread-like line.

As I came tight with less than a half-pound of drag, the great sail went airborne, literally going end over end. Black smoke billowed from the Finest Kind as the captain poured on the coals in reverse. Less than three minutes later in an extremely daring maneuver, David charged forward on the line as I reeled like hell. Out of the water popped the leader and we found ourselves releasing a sailfish on 2-pound test.

After a lot of hugging, high fiving, and victory sharing, we returned to fishing bait-and-switch on 12-pound line. The chances of landing a sail on 2 pound the first time out of the box was highly unusual. As day one came to an end, we'd gone 15 for 21 on sailfish. It was a great day! The ride in gave me time to reflect on Guatemala fishing at Casa Vieja Lodge.

In just over a year, Donna De Weil, while fishing with others and myself, has gone from a rank amateur to releasing 98 sails. She's learned more about billfishing and the sport in general in this time period than most people learn in 20 years. Nowhere in the world is the learning curve faster than at Casa Vieja. The crews are cooperative and they love to teach. There is no yelling or screaming if a mistake is made or a fish is lost. According to Donna and many others like her, the environment and the opportunity is like nowhere else.

This is a perfect place for your family and your children to learn the sport. There are even kid-size rods available at the lodge, which are perfect for kids between 5 and 9 years old.

After a delightful swim in the lodge pool, most guests enjoy pool-side drinks and appetizers. It's truly an angler's tropical paradise.

DAY 2

Reports from the prior night revealed that several spinner dolphin were spotted offshore. I discussed with David the opportunity of going 45 miles offshore in search of the dolphin and hopefully targeting the yellowfin tuna that love to feed alongside them.

After rigging several tuna rigs, mostly cedar plugs, and ballyhoo with blue and white islanders, the 45-mile run gave me a chance to

rest on the sofa again. As the engines slowed, I knew from the crew's reaction we'd found the dolphin. This time, however, I would not be caught on the sofa and rolled to my spot before the action began.

We entered the acre-size parade of spinner dolphin working to the northeast, as the sound of Donna's Nikon rapidly clicked away. Trolling two cedar plugs on flat lines and two long ballyhoo rigs on our first pass resulted in a four banger of nice yellowfin. All were between 20 and 70 pounds and before we knew it, we'd caught 12 nice tuna. There was no doubt about it; the next night's dinner would be our catch! It also meant fresh tuna on the water, and that afternoon's appetizers would be yellowfin sushi.

Moving back toward shore, we ended the day going 19 for 25 on sailfish. Many of the boats inshore of us had racked up numbers in the 20s and 30s. It's not unusual for CVL to have over 120 releases in a single day and up to 200 releases in three days of fishing. Some have caught over 70 on the fly in a single day.

OTHER TARGETS

As we headed in, I thought about the blue marlin fishery at Casa Vieja. You can usually expect one shot at a blue marlin every three days of fishing at the lodge. There are many times during the year when you can consistently raise three to five marlin per day. On my best day of blue marlin fishing with Capt. Chris Sheeder, we caught three blue marlin, with two on 16-pound test, and another on 50 pound the next day.

All boats at Casa Vieja are fully equipped for catching billfish on the fly. Many of the captains have written books on the subject and developed techniques that are used around the world. If you've never caught a sailfish on the fly, it is time for you to do so.

Mahi-mahi are not targeted at Casa Vieja. A couple of years ago I witnessed the largest school of mahi in my career. There must have been 300 fish in all. Most clients would rather fish for billfish than a mahi-mahi, but usually one or two are taken for lunch.

In conclusion, I specifically named this article "Biased As Hell" because I truly feel Casa Vieja Lodge offers the greatest blue water experience available in the world today. Casa Vieja has the best fishing, best captains, best boats, the best accommodations, and the best service of anywhere I've been. It's a friendly lodge that feels like home away from home. If you go more than once, the lodge will become a fabric of your life. It's a place that beckons you back, year after year. I personally love the lodge and the people who run it, and you won't find a better champion of this great place. By the way, if you want me to go with you and teach you the ways of light-tackle fishing, I will probably say YES. 🍷



Capt. Chris Sheeder of the Rum Line

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