

THE GUATEMALA CHRONICLE

The Making of a Billfish Mecca

BY MIKE MAZUR

As Capt. Chris Sheeder quartered *Rum Line* into the choppy Pacific swells that warm April morning, I focused on my plan. If a sailfish appeared in the spread, I'd take it. If by chance a marlin showed, I'd relinquish it to my host and fishing partner, Jake Jordan. After all, he was a bit more experienced with the brutes.

I started telling Jordan my idea, but before I could finish, a chorus of hollering rang down from the bridge. You guessed it: *Marlin! Marlin! Marlin!*

Without thinking (and completely ditching my plan), I flew to the transom, grabbed the 16-weight and tossed the profile fly into the wash. Sheeder popped the boat in neutral, and upon command, I heaved a cast into the clear water right where the teaser had been yanked.

ITALIAN ES



It was a good cast, and I held my breath. Bumped the fly. Waited. Nothing.

Just like that, the fish vanished. I never saw it. It was a blue, the mates said. A 300-pounder. I looked at Jordan and shrugged with a smile.

While this story may not have a glorious ending, it serves notice just the same: If you're looking for billfish on the fly, Guatemala is the place to go. Ask around. You'll get few arguments. The sailfish? They're relatively easy. Catching five to 10 in a day is not unusual. And in recent years, no fishery the world over has produced more blue marlin on fly gear than this one.

Yet anglers have been fishing this little Central American country for only about 20 years. In that short span, Guatemala has played a pivotal role in shaping and perfecting the modern big-game fly techniques of today. Here's how that came to be.

The Beginnings

Guatemala is special for three simple reasons: its year-round abundance of billfish, its benign seas and a who's-who roster of captains and mates. Credit God for the first two. Credit Tim Choate for the last one.

It was Choate, an eccentric American businessman and conservationist, who put Guatemala on the sport-fishing map. He operated a fleet of some of the most successful boats in Costa Rica throughout the 1980s and the early '90s, when he was

GUATEMALA'S SAILS SWA ALL YEAR LONG. WITH SO MANY OPPOR AND CREWS EVOLVED THEIR TECHNIQ

The calm waters off Guatemala's Pacific coast are the perfect backdrop for a jumping sailfish.



invited to fish Guatemala by businessman and respected angler Hugo Mayorga.

"Most of the boats were old pangas with tiller outboards," Choate recalls. "I thought, 'This is a step backward.' But shortly thereafter, I decided to move the operation. The fishing was just that good."

Choate was no stranger to phenomenal billfishing. The man co-founded The Billfish Foundation and had traveled the world. But he was the quintessential adventurer. And he was growing weary of Costa Rica's reluctance to quell a sailfish longlining problem.

So in October 1993, he sent two of his ringer captains, John LaGrone and Bud Gramer, northward aboard the famed sport-fisher *Magic*, past Nicaragua and El Salvador and into Guatemala's largest port, Quetzal, at the seaside village of San Jose.

"I thought Tim was joking when we first started talking about going to Guatemala," remembers LaGrone. "The place was in a civil war!"

Yet there they were. And though Guatemala was indeed in the end stages of a long and bloody political struggle, the San Jose area had been relatively devoid of fighting. "I remember the rebels would sometimes blow up transformers, and we would lose power for a few days," says Gramer, "but we never really saw any soldiers or anything like that."

It did make for an adventurous day-to-day existence, however, and LaGrone says that knowing how to get things done was just as important in those early days as knowing where to fish.

Boats were kept at the small Marina El Capitan and traversed through a sketchy inlet to reach the fishing grounds. And then

there was the hustle and bustle on land. “I remember standing in these government lines just trying to get things worked out,” says LaGrone. “But everybody helped you, and it made it kind of an interesting and fun adventure.”

Before long, Capt. Luis “Cuban Louie” Alcalde brought the *Classic*, a 31 Bertram, to Guatemala. Then came the *Intensity*, a 37-foot Gamefisherman. And in rolled more of the world’s top skippers. Ross “Flash” Clark arrived in Guatemala, as did the legendary Ron Hamlin. Choate orchestrated it all. And then he

IN THE CALM, COBALT BLUE WATERS OPPORTUNITIES DAY AFTER DAY, CAPTAINS EVOLVE – AND THEIR SKILLS GOT BETTER.

put his men to work.

“We were doing a lot of comparative fishing between the two countries,” he says. “We compared the results on a daily, monthly and annual basis. The fishing was much better in Guatemala. So we decided to build a hotel.”

Fins ‘n Feathers opened in 1995, ushering in the beginnings of first-rate accommodations in the country. The idea was simple: classic boats, good cigars, rum, brandy, excellent food and camaraderie.

Then there was the fishing.

“I was going to give it a year,” remembers Gramer. “But after that first year, I said, ‘I’ve got to see another year!’ It was the only place in the world I’ve experienced with that class of fishing all year round.”

As it turned out, Gramer stayed in Guatemala for nine years. Hamlin remains there to this day.

A Sailfish Wonderland

While sailfishing was outstanding at times in Costa Rica (and throughout Central America, for that matter), it was seasonal in many regions. But the early explorers of Guatemala did not find this to be the case in these new waters.

That’s because of the Equatorial Counter Current, says Mark Sosin, who fished the country in these early days. A significant west-to-east flow, it dictates where the bulk of the sails gather, depending on where it hits along the coast.

“In Costa Rica, for example, the fish were up north in the summer out of Flamingo Bay and off the southern coast in the winter in the Golfo Dulce area,” says



If you keep a sailfish near the surface, you can best it in no time. If it sounds on you, get ready for a heated battle.

Sosin, who credits the late Jim Paddock for this discovery. “But for some reason Guatemala did not seem to be affected.”

Indeed, Guatemala’s sails swam the calm, cobalt blue waters all year long. And their numbers were staggering at times. With so many opportunities day after day, captains and crews began to evolve the techniques brought from Costa Rica — and their skills got better and better.

“There was a large learning curve going on,” says Gramer. “Within that first year, 1995, we went from catching one or two a day to averaging four or five. We were trying all kinds of different flies and rigs. Most importantly, we were learning.”

Sometimes they even learned by mistake. Billfish flies at the time were tied on size 6/0 or 7/0 hooks, already significantly smaller than the giant poppers crews used in the late ’80s and early ’90s in Costa Rica. But they were about to get even smaller.

Gramer remembers when he had a client who wanted to fish 8-pound tippet. So he and his mate, Nicho Alvarenga (now one of Casa Vieja’s top captains), tied up tandem-hook billfish flies with 3/0 and 4/0 hooks, normally reserved for catching bait. It was highly experimental, but it netted decent results. Still, they didn’t think much of it until their next charter, when a problem arose.

“We ran out of flies,” chuckles Gramer. “Nicho told me all we had were these little flies we’d used before. I said, ‘Put ’em out there — we’ll have to use them until we can tie some bigger rigs.’ But, man, we hooked almost every fish that bit on those little flies! The small hooks were key.”

The evolution went beyond hooks — and it always stemmed from ingenuity and making due with what was on hand. Gramer tells of how he and LaGrone, in



[FFSW TIPPET]

Take a Billfish Class

IF YOU’RE NEW TO BILLFISHING on the long rod or are simply looking to go with a pro, consider one of Jake Jordan’s billfish schools. Jordan has been running his schools out of Guatemala since the beginning, in 1995, and he’s hosted them for years now at the exclusive Casa Vieja Lodge. They’re held from December through mid-April and can be tailored for one to four anglers. Packages include three days of instructed fishing, lodgings, meals and ground transportation.

After school is out, chances are you’ll want a mount of your first or 100th sailfish. To have it made ethically, visit kingsailfishmounts.com.

■ jakejordan.com; 252-444-3308



Left and opposite: Billfish come in all sizes and colors. Below: In Guatemala, most takers are sails, but don't be surprised if an eager blue marlin makes an appearance.

fishery even further.

“Each day that a boat would break a release record, no matter the time of day, you'd call it quits and come in and celebrate with champagne,” remembers Jordan. “We kept really detailed records, and everybody had fun and worked hard at it.”

Early on, LaGrone held the record with 14 in a day. Then Gramer's boat had a 16-fish day. Famed angler and Guatemala regular Nick Smith had a 23-fish day aboard his boat *Old Reliable*, but not long after, another angler caught 27.

Things continued like this for some time as the recreational fishery gained more and more notoriety. But a new era was about to take shape.

The Modern (Marlin) Era

Choate's decision in 2004 to close Fins 'n Feathers and leave Guatemala came as something of a surprise — but it wasn't long after when one of Choate's earliest clients, Jim Turner, purchased two of his boats, the *Intensity* and the *Pelagian*, and began construction of a new operation.

When Casa Vieja Lodge opened two years later, it was immediately apparent that the Hemingway aura that Choate had envisioned and laid out would be preserved, and today Casa Vieja ranks as good a fly-fishing operation as any in the world.



an effort to craft smaller flies, discovered that, by using the head of a certain-size medicine bottle as a pattern, they could cut perfect-size popper heads from computer foam. Then there was the time that he and Hamlin created a crude tube fly — using a bar straw and a nail. Doing so prevented the fly

AN INCREDIBLE BITE GOT UNDER WAY IN EARLY MARCH 2006, LASTING FOR A COUPLE OF WEEKS AND PEAKING ON MARCH 14, WHEN TURNER, FISHING WITH SHEEDER ABOARD THE RELEASE, CAUGHT 54 SAILS ON FLY IN ONE DAY.

from sliding up the line, a common problem that led to many broken tippets in the early days.

“A lot of stuff happened by accident,” Gramer says. “But you had a lot of chances and missed a lot of fish and got to see a lot of bites. That was the main thing — getting to see the bites. It helped us understand what to do next. So we'd say, ‘Well, maybe we'll try this.’ And some things worked, and some things didn't.”

As a result, daily sailfish releases grew more numerous by the week — and a distinct sense of friendly competition developed among the crews in Guatemala, propelling the

Once the lodge was established, it didn't take long for Turner to flex his muscles a bit with the fly rod.

An incredible bite got under way in early March 2006, lasting for a couple of weeks and peaking on March 14, when Turner, fishing with Sheeder aboard the *Release*, caught 54 sails in one day. Three more sails were taken by another angler in their boat, for a total of 57.

“We had 30 by 9 a.m.,” recalls Turner. “They were coming up six at a time. The fish were so aggressive. We just let the bridge teaser dangle in the water, and fish were snapping at



it. It was just one of those days.”

Capt. Brad Philipps caught 51 on fly that same day, while Hamlin’s boat — fishing bait with four anglers — tallied 124 sails. Smith got word of the hot bite and made a beeline from his home in Palm Beach, Florida. In five days during the latter (and slower) stretch of the bite, his *Old Reliable* caught 133 sails and a blue marlin on fly.

“It was great billfishing, but we missed the best of it!” Smith snarls. “I always thought 35 would be about the max you could ever get if you had a good daylong bite and a good angler, but their numbers were just astounding.”

While Guatemala hasn’t seen a concentration of sails quite that good since, it’s only a matter of time. One thing that has blossomed in the past five years is the blue marlin fishery. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 20 to 40 blues have been taken each year on fly during that stretch, Philipps estimates, making this fishery arguably the best on the planet for that species on the long rod. What’s more, the fish are fairly large, averaging 200 to 300 pounds. Granders have been taken here on conventional gear.

“But the best thing is that the fish stay on the surface,” says Philipps, who marks May through October as prime time for blues. “There’s very little oxygen below 50 feet here. That’s a huge advantage for a fly-angler, as it gives you a chance at catching a 300-plus-pounder. Plus it’s good for the fish.”

Both Philipps and Smith have had two-marlin days — and they each lost a third blue right at the boat.

“These fish are not going in the record books because we’re not killing them,” says Jordan, “but we’re catching them just the same.”

In fact, in January, as this issue of *FFSW* went to press, Jordan picked off where he and I left off that April morning — but this time *he* was holding the rod. Fishing aboard *Intensity* with Capt. Mike Sheeder (Chris Sheeder’s brother), he caught a blue

[GETTING THERE, DOING THAT]

If you’re serious about billfishing in Guatemala, two places stand out. Casa Vieja Lodge is the pre-eminent lodge for fly-anglers, operating one of the world’s top charter fleets, with an all-star roster of captains and classic boats. Less than a mile from Marina Pez Vela, it is convenient, and the lodge itself can accommodate up to 35 guests. The food is excellent, the rooms are perfectly comfortable, and the pool and gym are refreshing after a long day on the water. The service at Casa Vieja is impeccable.



■ casaviejalodge.com; 800-882-4665

Boats:

- **Captain Hook** — 40-foot Whiticar, Capt. Ron Hamlin
- **Rum Line** — 40-foot Gamefisherman, Capt. Chris Sheeder
- **Intensity** — 37-foot Gamefisherman, Capt. Mike Sheeder
- **Makaira** — 37-foot Rybovich, Capt. Jason Brice
- **Spindrift** — 38-foot Stolper, Capt. Nicho Alvarenga
- **Release** — 37-foot Merritt, Capt. Chico Alvarenga

Capt. Brad Philipps’ Billfish Inn is another good option for traveling fly-anglers. While not the size and scope of Casa Vieja, it is a comfy operation, and Philipps ranks as another of the area’s best captains.

■ guatbilladv.com; 512-535-1751

marlin on fly that they estimated at well over 400 pounds. It was the fish of his lifetime.

As I began writing a congratulatory e-mail to my friend, it suddenly dawned on me — just another asterisk in the short but incredible fly-fishing history of Guatemala. 