

First Bill



A bluewater rookie guns for Guatemala's abundant sailfish.



T

hirty-seven volcanoes rise from the Guatemalan landscape. During an average three days of angling out of Guatemala's Casa Vieja lodge, in Puerto San José, a guest might expect to raise twice that number of sailfish. To be clear, the fishing isn't always that good; sometimes it's better. Much better.

by Crai Bower
Photographs by Pat Ford

Legendary Captain Chris Sheeder once brought 57 sailfish to his boat in a single outing. He'd raised 186 that day. The day before I'd arrived in March, Sheeder's boat raised 43, hooking 24. Lured by these giddy numbers, I was eager to test myself against one of the world's fastest fish, armed only with a rod and fly.

A surreal landscape, including those volcanoes, greets me before my four-hour flight from L.A. has even landed in Guatemala City. From my window seat I see Volcán de Fuego steaming beside quiet Agua and the simmering Pacaya. Guatemala's social history equals its combustible geologic features. I was amazed how many friends warned me

off a visit when I mentioned my planned itinerary to Casa Vieja Lodge and, later, Lake Atitlán and Antigua.

"I backpacked there once, but probably wouldn't do so again," one seasoned traveler stated, echoing several others. Turns out he'd visited in the mid-80s, during the country's civil war, a conflict that ended via a peace accord in 1997.

"Guatemala is Guatemala's worst enemy," Captain Sheeder explains, when I ask why, given the insane sailfish numbers, there isn't a beeline of anglers to San José. "Our neighbor countries have spent millions to advertise they're 'as safe as Canada,' but Guatemala is just as safe, except nobody knows it." Of course, this

misconception also means more fish for those of us in the know.

The Casa Vieja shuttle transports guests directly from the Guatemala City airport to the friendly confines of owner Dave Salazar's well-established resort. A former captain at Fins and Feathers, Miami-based Salazar has revived this convivial campus, comprised of two wings of rooms that surround a pool and an open-air, grass-roofed restaurant and bar. The design encourages impromptu socializing among guests who partake in Zacapa Rum and Gallo Lager while discussing those impressive catch rates and, on this particular March afternoon, Boston's tenth winter blizzard.

Talk of snowfall melts within the cloudless, 85-degree evening as appetizers are placed poolside and orders delivered for more local rum and beer. The captains routinely return for dinner, joining their clients or assembling together at a large table. I settle in with Sheeder to preview the next day's action and, because I can't resist, I listen to a few tantalizing stories from the storied water he's fished six days a week for 13 years.

Similar tales drew Sheeder here from Costa Rica. "We'd catch five to seven sailfish a day in Costa Rica, but clients kept telling me about the 30 fish they caught last season in Guatemala. I would think, 'Why did you come here, then?' which led to my asking myself, 'Why am I not there?' So I moved."

Sheeder, who began fishing as a child in Honolulu, earning his captain's license when he turned 21, has never looked back. Why would he? He recorded his 5,000th sailfish on the fly at the start of this season. Casa Vieja clients don't emigrate either; I was told that 70 percent are repeat bookings and the vast majority of new guests book via word of mouth.

"The best sales pitch I can give you is that this destination is for every level of fisherman," Sheeder says. "The novice



Outrageous fishing, indeed: Make the cast, get a hookup, and the aerial display begins.

can learn quickly because there are so many fish. The experts can take their shots on light tackle or however they want to catch the fish.”

Why do the fish remain longer here than in other places? (A fish tagged this year by Sheeder on April 5 was recaptured by his boat on April 25!) The prevailing theory is that strong offshore winds generated by two huge, parallel valleys that abut the ocean shove the surface water, creating circulating currents that provide the ideal habitat for schooling sailfish.

A FISHING LODGE QUIETS early, as dawn departures mandate curfews more typical for a kid in grammar school than captains whose reputations for “socializing” often match their ability to raise fish. I follow Sheeder’s lead and return to my room, set my alarm for 5:30 and hope, if not pray, for my own big day on the Pacific.

The day dawns clear, the Pacific Ocean calm as we depart the port to run 40 miles out in search of sails. Casa Vieja sends five boats out this morning, including *Makaira* and *Release*, respectively a 1961 Rybovich and 1961 Merritt, the latter actually built by the great Buddy Merritt. Along with the *Spindrift*, *Finest Kind* and Captain Sheeder’s *Rum Line*, the Casa Vieja launch makes up more than half the fleet sailing from port, the relatively light pressure another reason for the outrageous fishing here.

According to Sheeder, Guatemala’s reputation as the sailfish capital of the world is no idle boast. A recent study used satellite tracking to demonstrate that, while migratory sailfish remain in a feeding area for an average of five days throughout most Central American waters, they stay an average of 15 days off the coast of San José.



We fish Cam Sigler’s tube flies with popper heads, in pink-and-white. It’s no surprise sailfish charge up at the prospect of a meal, considering the metabolism required to swim at estimated speeds of 40 to 60 miles per hour. Sailfish are fast, indeed, and Sheeder says they’ll eat pretty much anything when ramped up, but that doesn’t diminish the importance of a solid cast to get a fly in front of one.

Then a sailfish must hit the fly laterally, so your hookset sweeps across the jaw. Sailfish, which range from 90 to 150 pounds, rise quickly after the

hookset, often tail-walking for several meters. The initial jump usually takes place very close to the boat, the perfect studio for our Instagram world.

“We troll and implement a bait-and-switch method,” the captain says. “Stationary chumming or even live-baiting doesn’t work as well here, nor is it nearly as exciting. We also fish in accordance with IGFA rules, so our leader is 20-pound-test or less.”

Sheeder explains that even clients who arrive thinking about the enormous bait-and-tackle totals (his boats have



hooked more than 20,000 sailfish on conventional gear), they rarely return to bait after experiencing sails on the fly.

“It is far and away the most spectacular way to catch them. I have so many clients who I’ve converted. They ask about it, and I tell them if you try it you are not going to want to go back, the closeness of the bite, the fact that all the intricate details need to work, the group effort that contributes to putting a fly in the water and catching a sailfish. The bite and first jumps happen directly behind the boat. The action is addictive.”

We arrive in the desired area, mates toss teasers into the water, and a black streak emerges less than five minutes later, the captain calling out its location

**Yes, the leaps are close (left).
As are the volcanoes (above).**

from above as I snatch the rod and await instruction.

My anxiety rivals memories of taking a penalty shot in college hockey or a penalty kick in soccer. I'm hopeful that, unlike that latter responsibility, I don't boot my fly over the bar. Everyone's yelling at me, first to hold, then to cast. I lay out my line in a decent spot and the quarry cooperates. Then the sail disappears, ripping the line from the spool, and leaps into the air, the first of six tailwalks. An anticipatory calm replaces the pre-cast frenzy, and I have a moment to realize that, 20 minutes into a forearm-numbing bout, I've actually hooked a 100-plus-pound billfish on the fly.

Thirty minutes on, my fight with that beast is a contest that I don't want to end. Sure, my arms ache and my lower back sings, but Balanchine's best ballets don't compare to a sailfish's glistening *échappé sauté* across the wake.

Our day's outing yields fewer opportunities than Sheeder managed the day before. Though excellent for most other sailfish fisheries, talk of a slow day pervades the radio as we travel back to port. Later, there's inevitable talk about the holy grail of bluewater sportfishing, the blue marlin. Casa Vieja Lodge averages just over 20 marlin a year, and a few of these giants are caught on the fly.

"It's simply the most spectacular sight in sportfishing, the ultimate display of grace and power," Sheeder opines, as we settle into a steak dinner beneath the restaurant's grass roof. "When it explodes behind the boat you're in shock. You watch this beast come in and feel the size and strength chasing, then you have to perform, present the fly and make the cast watching this fish push all the water around. To see a 400-pound fish engulf a fly creates, shall we say, a heightened sense of adrenaline. And then it takes

between 45 minutes and 90 minutes to get a marlin to subdue to fly tackle."

Guatemala sportfishing faces a summer offseason, but it's due more to client vacation commitments and the winter's drive to warmer climes than a lack of fish during the warm months. Sheeder says the fish are always here, and increasing numbers of his clients are asking for his boat from June to September. But the most desired season runs from October to April, some years into June.

Much is made of billfish angling's impurities—the teasers, the use of bait to draw the fish near—yet I think of none of these as I impatiently await the next

command to cast into the spread. This is no toss into a stocked pond; I've learned my aim must be precise, my set exact and the play patient and focused.

I'll lose more than I'll hook today, my weakness at the set as critical as when I last cast for steelhead in British Columbia. But the weather's calm, the horizon clear, and the world's largest population of billfish is circling just a few feet off the stern. ✎

Crai Bower has credits in all the major Northwest-based magazines. He lives in Seattle, Washington. You can find more of Bower's work at www.floatingstreamwriting.net



The Details...

Casa Vieja Lodge: (rates vary by season and number in party) 800-882-4665; www.casaviejalodge.com

Season: Year round, though busiest from October through April

Lodging: Enclosed, with onsite restaurant and pool to accommodate 38 guests, double occupancy

"Fish and Stay" Packages: All-inclusive, including tackle, bait, etc. Prices vary by season and group size; \$4,140 per person for 4 nights/ 3 days, double occupancy

Area Info:

Lake Atitlán Tourism www.atitlan.com

San Rafael Hotel www.thesanrafaelhotel.com

Meson Panza Verde www.panzaverde.com

Casa Santo Domingo www.casasantodomingo.com.gt

Guatemala Tourism www.visitguatemala.com