



Guatemala Is An Angler's Paradise

By John Brownlee ([/writer/206930](#))

Photography by Richard Gibson



Best Bet for Billfish

Anglers in the know head to Guatemala, where in just a short time Casa Vieja Lodge has made a name for itself in the sportfishing world.

Offshore fishing lodges tend to come and go, especially in the third world. Many factors contribute to this attrition rate, not the least of which being the fickle ways of Mother Nature and the fish themselves. Ocean currents change, El Niños and La Niñas appear and recede, and weather patterns in general wreak havoc on our sport.

Factor in rising travel costs, shifts in angler attitudes and preferences, and the tremendous difficulty inherent in running any operation smoothly and profitably in the more remote regions of the world, and you get a sort of perfect storm, businesswise. I often wonder how anyone makes it work over the long term. Of course, many don't, but a handful of resourceful people have figured it out.



(/sites/default/files/pictures/1607/02-sailfishing-1024w.jpg)Creating a New Destination

Miami resident Jim Turner started Casa Vieja Lodge in Guatemala in the mid 2000s after experiencing the awesome billfishing off that country's Pacific coast while fishing from the original Fins and Feathers Lodge, founded by Tim Choate in the early '90s. Turner's lodge began with what its name implies; an old house, located in San Jose.

My first trip to Casa Vieja came not long after it opened, and Guatemala still had something of a frontier feel to it in those days. Tales of spectacular sailfish action with unbelievable numbers of fish filtered back to the States with anglers who had visited Fins and Feathers, as did stories of wild parties and after-hours extracurricular activities. This sounded like my kind of place.

But from the beginning, Casa Vieja catered to a somewhat more sedate clientele, those more interested in hard-core fishing than anything else. As Choate had done previously, Turner assembled a group of classic sportfishing boats; a Merritt, a Rybovich, a Daytona, a Knowles, and a Gamefisherman made up the backbone of the fleet. Add to the difficulty in running a third-world business the additional hardship of maintaining a fleet of aging wooden boats, and you begin to get the picture of the level of commitment such an undertaking requires.



(/sites/default/files/pictures/1607/03-fishing-1024w.jpg)Marlin Attack

On my first trip to the lodge, I fished with Capt. Chris Sheeder on the 37-foot Merritt *Release*. After running offshore out of the marina located within the combined port and naval base known as Puerto Quetzal, Sheeder and his crew set up a standard bait-and-switch spread in which hookless teasers get pulled behind the boat, as rods of various sizes wait in the cockpit with different-size baits. This allows you to match the tackle to the fish that rises, either a sailfish or a marlin, the latter of which require stouter gear.

About 20 minutes into our morning, the mates shouted "Mar-leen!" in unison, as they spotted a large, dark shadow beneath the prop wash. I grabbed a 50-pound-class rod with a small rigged tuna on the end of the leader and pitched the bait over the transom. The big blue marlin made a pass at a teaser, then vanished, and for a moment we all thought she was gone. But as quickly as she had disappeared, she came crashing up through the wake and ate my bait, barely 10 feet away from where I stood.

Now, in my approaching dotage, I may forget my own name, but I'll bet I never forget that bite. The marlin crashed violently on the tuna from the left side and I swear she was looking right into my eyes the whole time. She engulfed the bait and made a violent turn that created a huge hole in the water as she headed down; then she reversed course and made a spectacular leap about 40 feet back. The whole thing took maybe 20 seconds tops, but it's burned into my memory forever.

The fish dogged me deep after that, but we finally got the release after about 30 minutes of intense effort, and Sheeder and I agreed that the fish easily weighed between 500 and 600 pounds. After the release we went on to catch and release 23 sailfish, a “slow” day by some accounts, but incredible in my book.



(/sites/default/files/pictures/1607/05-fishing-boats-1024w.jpg)Perfecting a Specialty

I've enjoyed many more great days fishing with Sheeder, who came to Guatemala through Hawaii, where he learned his trade. Sheeder's brother Mike also charts out of Casa Vieja and is an excellent skipper, but it's Chris who specializes in fly fishing for sailfish. There's no better place to catch a Pacific sail on fly than Guatemala, and Sheeder has perfected the technique.

In fact, he has honed his skill to the point where his clients have now caught and released more than 5,000 billfish on fly, a milestone he reached in 2013. He's working on the next 5,000 now, even as several top captains in Guatemala have reached 20,000 and even 30,000 releases on conventional tackle. Of course, no discussion of Guatemalan billfishing would be complete without mention of the Best Day Ever.

In March of 2006, Capt. Ronnie Hamlin trolled along aboard *Captain Hook* when he saw numerous black objects floating in the water. It took him a few moments to realize that he was looking at hundreds of sailfish sunning with their dorsal fins extended. He quickly maneuvered the boat into position, and for the next several hours, his anglers caught and released sailfish in doubles, triples, and even quads. At the end of the day, they had released 124 sailfish on conventional gear, a record that stands to this day.

What's more, that very same day, Sheeder and Turner were fly fishing aboard *Release* a few miles away and experienced similar action, catching and releasing 57 sails on fly, an astonishing accomplishment. The bite stayed strong for almost two weeks, and in a three-day period, Hamlin and his crew released more than 300 fish. Stories of 50, 60, and even 70 releases aren't uncommon in this part of the world, and although you can never count on it, you have a better shot at such amazing numbers here than anywhere else on most days.



(/sites/default/files/pictures/1607/04-fishing-crew-1024h.jpg)New Options

The consistently strong bite makes Guatemala a great place to try your skills with new tackle that you may not be used to, such as fly gear, or perhaps ultra-light line classes. We did the latter a few years ago with our buddy Capt. Jason Brice, aboard the classic Rybovich *Makaira*. We'd had a great day catching and releasing several dozen sailfish with Capt. Nicho Alvarenga on 20-pound, but that evening at the Casa Vieja bar, Brice talked us into trying it on very light line.

It didn't take much convincing, seeing as how my wife Poppy is an avid angler who fishes almost exclusively with 6-pound-test, albeit usually for much smaller quarry. We headed out with Brice the next morning and started our day with 12-pound. We each caught a fish right off the bat and then switched to 8-pound. Poppy hooked a fish that went into a serious series of acrobatic leaps and tail-walks, straining the thin line to the max. But Brice maneuvered the old Rybovich aggressively in pursuit of the fish, never letting it get much more than about 30 feet from the transom.

In short order we had our release, quite a feat. Poppy went on to catch two fish on 6-pound, and never broke one off. It takes a deft hand to stay attached to a fish weighing a hundred pounds or more while using such light line, but that's what makes it fun. We were contemplating a reduction to 4-pound-test when a marlin suddenly popped up among the teasers.

Poppy instinctively reached for the heavy marlin rod, but Brice shouted from the bridge to throw the 6-pound at it and whatever happened would happen, so that's just what she did. A striped marlin had risen from the depths, and Poppy dropped back the rigged ballyhoo repeatedly as the striper slashed at the bait again and again, but kept missing it. Our hearts pounded as we watched the fish's repeated attempts to feed itself, and then suddenly, it was gone. The encounter ended as quickly as it began, and though she didn't hook it, we all agreed that sometimes the ones you don't catch make as big an impression as the ones you do.

More than Sails in the Sunset

I've returned to the Casa Vieja Lodge every year since 2006 and have come to know and love much more about Guatemala than just its great billfishing. As most urban centers in Central America are, Guatemala City is a fascinating cultural melting pot, with extremes of great wealth and crushing poverty. But the city, which almost 2.5 million people call home, has a captivating rhythm with many great bars, restaurants, and hotels. It's a mistake to look at the city as a place to fly in and out of.

Then there's the ancient city of Antigua, with 16th century architecture and cobblestone streets nestled at the base of two active volcanoes. Antigua serves as a major tourist destination, but it's a must-see on any trip, and an easy side or day trip from the lodge. Guatemala specializes in mining high-quality jade, and many fine stores in Antigua sell stunning creations made from that beautiful stone.

Antigua also offers tours of ancient ruins, horse-drawn carriage rides, and many wonderful restaurants and hotels, including the Casa Santo Domingo, a 16th century monastery converted into a 128-room hotel complete with a museum and a fine restaurant of its own.

Change of Leadership

In 2012, David and Kristen Salazar bought Casa Vieja Lodge, and they have continued the investment in the property begun by Turner. There's an all-new restaurant and bar with a suite of new guest rooms complementing those in the original old house. The Salazars are encouraging family trips to the lodge, with ladies and kids welcome to join Dad on a fishing excursion.

Guatemala offers a mixture of modern and indigenous cultures combined with the most consistent sailfish bite in the world. In most other well-known sailfish destinations, there are seasonal peaks as the fish migrate through the area. But Guatemala seems to be one place where the fish simply stay year-round. This has to be due to some still poorly understood combination of currents and bait concentrations, but whatever the reason, we know the fish are there, and that's good enough for me.

It's almost overkill to mention how consistent the marlin action can be as well. While definitely not as numerous as the sails, blue, black, and striped marlin show up regularly in the spreads, with blues being by far the most common of the three. And while no one goes to Guatemala to target them, the dolphin fishing is off the chain much of the year as well.

This is significant because the Casa Vieja crews cook hot lunches aboard their boats every day for their clients, and a fresh mahi sandwich made from a fish caught only minutes earlier adds a special touch to an already spectacular experience. Casa Vieja Lodge features a high standard of service, but that's what separates it from many other lodges, and it's just one more reason why I eagerly anticipate my next visit.

Casa Vieja Lodge, 800-882-4665; www.casaviejalodge.com (<http://goo.gl/Af1OpR>)

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Four of us raised and released 93 sailfish in three days a few years back, which was almost as amazing as their margaritas !!

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