

THE NEW FRONTIER

Matt Harris travelled to Guatemala and pitted his skills against the Ferrari of the oceans, the magnificent sailfish.

Fly fishing is changing. Thirty years ago, big fish - I'm talking about *really* big fish, like Pacific sailfish, bluefin tuna and even marlin - were simply not compatible with fly fishing. If you told a bluewater sportsboat captain that you wanted to fly-fish for any of these classic big game trophies, you'd be laughed off the boat.

Forget your spindly fly rods and your daft bits of fluff - catching these leviathans was regarded as "serious business" and meant trolling around the ocean for long hours with a mob of lures trailing behind the boat. I've done this stuff and believe me, its stultifyingly dull.

When you *do* finally hook up, your lure or bait is almost always a long way back from the transom. The fish is allowed to run on a relatively light drag, and any ensuing acrobatics take place somewhat closer to the horizon than the boat. Tragically, this allows you only a tantalising, long-range glimpse of all the spectacular aerial mayhem these creatures are so famed for. ➔

One of the most amazing shows in fishing: a 'lit-up' Pacific sailfish erupting from the surface a short distance away from the boat

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You are often strapped into a chair, the rod effectively bolted to the boat, and the fight becomes a primitive tug-of-war, the fish out there in the wide blue yonder and you at the other end, armed with a broom-handle and pulling for all you're worth, until you or the fish – or the tackle – gives way.

For all the machismo, there is precious little skill involved on the part of the angler. It is the skipper of the boat who locates the fish, puts the lures in front of them and moves them at the right speed to induce a take. At the risk of putting a few big, brawny noses out of joint, I reckon a monkey – or at least a gorilla – could reel them in...

In the early 70s, a handful of pioneering Americans, sated with catching hatfuls of huge tarpon on the Florida flats, started to peer over the drop-off and into the deep blue waters of the oceans, looking for even wilder kicks. They started to push the envelope, catching 100lb+ striped marlin as well as large numbers of yellowfin tuna and big dorado on 20lb class tippets. But this was rarified stuff, and most big game charters were simply not interested in fly fishing.

One lodge however – Fins and Feathers, now known as Casa Vieja – saw the possibilities. Sitting on Guatemala's Pacific Coast, Casa Vieja has direct access to the most prolific sailfish waters in the world, backed up by good quantities of small to medium sized blue marlin.

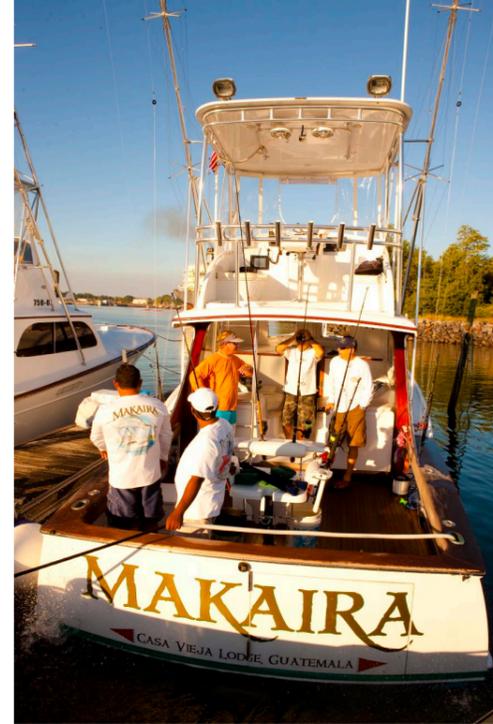
In 1994, Jake Jordan, one of the original and legendary Florida flats-fishing pioneers, started to run a Sailfish Fly School at Casa Vieja, where he would teach regular anglers and even complete novices how to catch sailfish on the fly. As in any other form of fishing,

“... your first up-close glimpse of this stunning saltwater predator will in all probability take your breath away.”

a profusion of targets offered the opportunity to experiment and to learn. Jake, working in tandem with Jim Turner and his captains and staff at Casa Vieja, has honed every aspect of fly fishing for these big brutes, and between them, they have now elevated the technique to a near-science.

Together, they started to develop methods that meant catching sailfish on fly was a relative snap. Not only that, their new methods meant that sailfish could be reliably hooked and landed in double-quick time, even by newcomers.

As an illustration, in just one day, Jim Turner caught 53 sailfish to his own fly rod – a remarkable



tribute to the quantum leaps in tackle, rigging and fighting techniques.

This winter, Jake invited me to fish with him and his guests, Judy, Keefer, Rich, Jerry and Mark – all great company. Casa Vieja is a stunning lodge – one of the best I've ever visited – and every evening was a blur of cold beers, excellent seafood and a million laughs. However, the real fun was to be had out on the ocean.

Arriving a day early, I got the low-down in a one-to-one with Jake, as he ran through every detail of the techniques involved in hooking and playing billfish on fly.

First the tackle: forget your delicate 4wt and gossamer leader for winkling trout out of your local chalkstream – Jake favours a formidable 14–17wt Temple Forks Bluewater rod coupled with Jack Charlton's peerless Mako 9700 reel, loaded with around 700m of gelspun backing.

He loads that up with a 550gr Rio Leviathan sinking shooting head – a line he helped develop – and whips on a fluorescent orange dacron loop at either end, using waxed rigging floss. The running line is replaced with 80ft of 50lb hi-viz yellow mono – a key part of the set-up, it acts as a 'shock absorber', protecting the 20lb class tippet.

The leader is made up of 8–9ft of 80lb leader butt, with a class tippet of 16lb or 20lb mono, attached with a bimini twist, and a 100lb shock tippet of no more than 12in long.

The fly is invariably one of Cam Sigler's 'bubble-head' big game tube flies in pink and



Preparing the teasers; and (right) a hookless balyhoo bait which is used to keep a following sailfish interested

white and is rigged with two Gamakatsu 6/0 Octopus hooks.

So, we're all kitted up – how does it work? First the bad news: There IS trolling involved. The boat drags a spread of teasers around the ocean, until one or more fish lock onto them, just like regular old-style sailfishing.

Thankfully, the good news is that Guatemala's Pacific waters are stiff with sailfish. The national government has a 100 per cent no-kill policy, and between December and April, the sailfish are everywhere. Casa Vieja boats raise an average of 20 sailfish a day, and if you've got good company and a few cold beers – as I had – the wait won't feel overly long.

Once the teasers come under attack, the mates leap into action. While the angler drops the fly overboard and allows the 25ft or so of carefully coiled fly line to follow it, the mates retrieve the spread of teasers NOT being assaulted in a blur, and then concentrate on bringing the fish up to the back of the boat, casting a hookless balyhoo bait (*below*) with a spinning rod if the fish leaves the original teaser.

Now the magic starts to happen: suddenly, right there, in the crystal blue waters of the Pacific, you are looking at 8ft and more of magnificent Pacific sailfish. Most likely, your quarry is lit up in a rainbow of impossible neon colours as it tries to get a fix on the erratically skipping balyhoo that it has lined up for lunch. The boat is thrown out of gear, the teasing bait is snatched away, and the angler, wedged into the far right corner of the transom, water-loads the fly into a backcast. There's real skill involved here – the trick is to pitch the fly to the side and



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behind the fish, whilst ensuring that the line is not fouled-up around the back of the reel. It is key that the fly is taken by the fish going AWAY from the boat, so that it is hooked in the scissors, much like a salmon.

Watching this huge creature turning on the fly and nailing it at close quarters is astonishingly exhilarating, but try to keep your wits about you. The moment the fish turns away, follow Jake's advice. The reel has been carefully set to deliver exactly 6lb of drag, and the simple action of the fish travelling away from the still-moving boat should set the hook. Feel free to jab the rod straight backwards if the fish doesn't set off immediately, but do NOT raise the rod.

Once you're tight to the fish, stand by for one of the most amazing shows in fishing. If you're lucky, the enraged fish, shot through with an electric palette of purples, blues and greens, will launch straight into the air - 100lb and more of twisting, thrashing rage careering into the wide Pacific skies.

And all this happens right in front of you, at point-blank range, and every inch of this psychedelic flying machine can be seen right up close. Utterly astonishing, believe me, but pay attention to the drill or the whole thing will be very short-lived.

Jam the rod tip into the water, to avoid a tip-wrap, and just allow the fish to do its thing. The fluorescent dacron loops now come into play, allowing you - and more importantly the skipper - to know where the fish is during the

rare moments that it is in the water rather than in the air. The skipper should keep you close to the fish by backing the boat down, and this is crucial - the further the fish is from you, the less pressure you can apply, due to the stretch in the line.

Despite everything you've ever done with a fishing rod - don't bend it. Instead, simply point it straight at the fish. Jake believes that bending the rod simply tires the angler, not the fish, and instead he counsels to let the heavy, consistent reel drag do the job, with the shock-absorbing running line protecting your tippet. Bring the rod-butt up to your solar plexus, and when the fish comes to a stop, simply rock back, retrieve line and repeat until the fish runs again. If the fish runs at you, put that rod tip back in the water - again to avoid a tip-wrap - and reel as fast as you can.

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If you follow the drill, these big creatures can be subdued in remarkably short order, their insane acrobatics quickly burning up their reserves of stamina.

If you do everything right, this majestic creature will soon be yours, and your first up-close glimpse of this stunning saltwater predator will in all probability take your breath away.

Once all is ready, the guides will hoist your first fish aboard for an ultra-fast photocall, and occasionally an extra large fish may also merit some very rapid onboard pictures, but the rest of the fish are unhooked in the water and all are returned in double-quick time. Grab a cold beer and savour the moment - few fishing experiences can compare with a sailfish on fly.

Now you've graduated and are ready for something *really* serious. The waters around Casa Vieja are so thick with sailfish that there's barely room for anything else, but occasionally - if you're VERY lucky - you may run into a blue marlin. Rightly revered as the ultimate sports-fish, they're unbelievably strong and fast, and of course, absurdly big - and they're here in numbers.

Even allowing for the ground-breaking

Contacts

Jake Jordan runs his Sailfish School at Casa Vieja every month from December to April. For more information visit:

www.jakejordan.com/home.html

Casa Vieja is without doubt the best place to tangle with a sailfish on fly anywhere in the world. They will supply and rig all the kit, all you have to do is turn up. For more information, check out:

www.casaviejalodge.com

Despite the sad death of Jack Charlton, his lovely wife Judy and the Mako Team are continuing to produce what I consider to be absolutely the best fly reels available anywhere.

www.makoreels.com



techniques developed at Casa Vieja, a really big blue marlin is too much for any fly tackle yet conceived, but the good news is that typically, in Guatemalan waters, blues are relatively small - 200 to 500lb. These fish are a quantum leap from sailfish - Jake describes them as being ten times as tough per pound - but, with the new advances in techniques, it CAN be done.

The Casa Vieja boats always have one rod aboard rigged for marlin, with the reel crucially set at just 1lb of drag rather than the 6lb employed for sails, so that the leader survives the initial express train run for which these fish are so rightly famous.

Jake related to me how he lost well over 100 blue marlin on fly before the advances in tackle and techniques allowed him to boat one. "What went wrong?" I asked. Jake grinned over his beer and answered succinctly: "Everything."

Now, finally, he's starting to work things out. In January 2011, fishing aboard Mike Sheeder's boat, *Intensity*, Jake brought a blue marlin to the transom that Mike and his extremely experienced crew reckoned to have been well over 400lb. A fish of this size and power on fly would have been unthinkable only a few years ago, but now it is a genuine reality.

I didn't get a shot at a marlin during my visit, and had to content myself with a particularly whopping sailfish that danced across the water and fought like the devil - no small consolation!

That tussle *will* come, and I cannot wait. I'll be heading back to Guatemala just as soon as I can, to wade my way through the 'chore' of a million high flying sails in hope of crossing swords with *Makaira* - the mighty blue marlin - on the new frontier.

If you think your nerves can handle it, I strongly recommend you do the same.

