

# Big-game hunter

Deep-water fishing off the coast of Costa Rica is exhausting but exhilarating. By **Jamie Lafferty**

**I**t's 1991 and I am shivering on the deck of a small fishing boat that's bobbing around in the Firth of Clyde. We are knee-deep in mackerel, fish so stupid they are hooked by nothing more than fluorescent tape; fish so weak that even I, an eight-year-old, can pull up three at a time on the line.

My father and brother are on board too, all of us merrily murdering the morning away, catching more mackerel than my mother will know what to do with, and even one or two rare cod.

We don't need to cast the line, we simply drop it overboard, wait for the familiar tug, haul up the unfortunate fish, then quickly try to brain it before it thrashes around too much. It's all terribly predictable, but free of cynicism and full of blood lust, it keeps us children entertained for hours.

My father drops his line into the cold water for the hundredth time when suddenly the line becomes impossibly heavy. The tension is unreal, he has to quickly adjust his footing. There's something down there... The fight with the leviathan is brief: dad makes a little progress and it stays on the line for about 30 seconds before snapping the line and disappearing. Perhaps it was a conger eel, perhaps it was a harbour seal or – as my brother and I prefer to think – perhaps it was Nessie on a rare sojourn south.

In the intervening years of fishing in waters around the British Isles, that was by far the most dramatic thing that ever happened to me. For the most part, my time was spent in drizzle, timidly impaling translucent worms on hooks, with no more chance of catching fish than the worms had of growing hands and freeing themselves.

All of which seems like a world away as we bounce across the sparkling waves of the Pacific Ocean, heading 20 miles off Costa Rica's coast. We're racing away from the Zancudo Lodge in the picturesque Golfoito Bay, en route to some rich big game fishing waters, but we've already been out for an hour. I didn't tell Javier Chavarria, the boat's captain and local fishing legend, that in catching a nine-inch blue runner earlier I was probably beating my personal best. The small fish, along with about seven of its kin and a handful of herring, is only on board to be used as live bait for something much bigger.

In these temperate waters there is a healthy population of the world's most sought-after game fish, including yellowfin tuna, dorados, sailfish and the infamous blue marlins. I say infamous because the world record for landing one of these beasts stands at over 1200lb – nearly 550kg.

After the best part of two hours at sea, Katy, my partner, spots a commotion on the ocean. A large pod of spinner dolphins are hurling themselves from the water in apparent acrobatic glee. Chavarria is at least as happy as we are at their arrival. Along with the birds overhead, they are a sure sign that beneath the waves there is a massacre taking place.

The Costa Rican moves the boat ahead of the crowd and gives me instructions while threading a line through the eye sockets of one of the blue runners. Amazingly, the wee thing is still full of life as I drop it into the water and let the line out. Between the little fish trying to flee and the weight, the line makes steady progress, before suddenly speeding up.

"There you go, you've got a fish on there," says Chavarria casually. I move to lift the rod, but can't because the line is snagged.

"Move round to the bow of the boat," he says, not realising the mistake. Meanwhile, the line just gets heavier. I want to cry out, to point out the error – I seem to have hooked a car. Then the car starts its engine and begins to drive away from the boat. The line unravels further, forced out despite being locked.

Stumbling, panicking, I try to steady myself by sitting back into a half-crouched position. There is an apocalyptic amount of swearing. "Round to the front," I'm told again, but it feels like gravity has been amplified.

After five minutes I'm sure I won't be able to last. Words of defeat start to form in my brain and I get ready to ask for the line to be cut. Chavarria realises I've had enough and mercifully doles out a heavy duty fish fighting belt in which to root the pole. This stops me stabbing myself in the gut, but doesn't ease the weight. Another minute or two later and I'm gently guided to a chair on the bow of the boat and Chavarria attaches a harness, now making me a strained link in a chain between the boat and My Enemy.



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**A catch and release policy protects numbers of billfish, including marlin and swordfish**

PHOTOGRAPH: PHOTOLIBRARY.COM

"Real men stand up," Gregg Muffson, owner of the Zancudo Lodge had told me just before I left the mainland. Instead I think of Ernest Shackleton's famous quip: "Better to be a live donkey than a dead lion."

Sitting down gives me a chance to breathe and to try to mop the torrent of sweat from my brow, while also allowing me to notice just how much Katy is laughing at my misfortune. This scene plays out for another 20 minutes or so, me and My Enemy, both tiring in the morning sun. I'm told to reel in as much line as I can between waves, rather than stick to a fair fight and, another 10 minutes later, I'm told that there's a flash of sliver somewhere near the surface.

Seconds later, Javier leans over the side and drives a hook through the fish's head to get him on board. Katy takes a picture. I collapse back into the chair and look at My Enemy.

At almost four feet long, the yellowfin tuna bleeds like a hog and kicks like a mule. It weighs somewhere in the region of 70lb – more than 30kg – and, wounds and all, still fancies a fight. Even when Chavarria has dragged it into a cooler bag, disembowelled it and replaced its innards with ice, it's thrashing around so much it sounds like a helicopter taking off. William Wallace went quieter than this.

"That's tuna fishing," says Chavarria, triumphant.

"There's quite a lot of blood," I pant.

"Well, better to have a messy boat than a clean one."

There's barely a chance to recover from the ordeal before I'm told to put the line back in. This time, a brilliant gold and green dorado leaps from the water, my hook in its mouth. It puts up plenty of fight too, but compared with the leaden tuna, it comes in fairly easily, shimmering different colours as we bring it on board.

Katy passes me a well-earned beer from the cooler, after which I try to take some pictures of the ever-joyful dolphins. Unfortunately my biceps, such as they are, have gone into spasm and I can barely raise the camera.

We move into quieter waters, changing tactics and releasing six enormous lures to trawl for something even bigger than the tuna. Chavarria's own fishing record stands at an incredible 768lb (350kg), a monstrous blue marlin that took almost five hours to land. By the end, the marlin was dead, Chavarria was exhausted, and a large number of villagers were delighted at the free food. The death wasn't planned – Zancudo Lodge has helped to introduce and enforce a catch-and-release policy in

the area for all billfish (sailfish, marlins, swordfish – anything with a protruding beak) but in such a titanic duel, with such a large fish, death through exhaustion is usually the only outcome, for one side or the other.

As I'm listening to all this, one of the lures begins to spin out again. Chavarria quickly drops out more live bait and hands me the rod. I flick the reel, get ready for the pain, and then just watch in wonder as a gigantic sailfish, glimmering silver in the afternoon sun, jumps majestically out of the ocean. The moment it splashes back into the water, the line has gone loose, the bait discarded. Not all fish are uncomfortable out of water.

Thankfully, things quieten down after that and a couple of hours later we turn for

home, catching and releasing a roosterfish (an odd-looking creature that has a cyber-punk mohawk for a dorsal fin) en route. When we get back to the lodge, the staff and owners greet us with excitement. It's impossible not to feel a bit proud, too. At least until I watch them butcher My Enemy, and see him suffer the final indignity of having his remains cast into the water, only for crocodiles to emerge from the depths and snatch them away.

That night, a boisterous but affable group of Californian surfers, also staying at the lodge, toast our catch as we all sit down for sashimi and tuna steaks. One fish is easily enough to feed 10 of us – and it's perhaps the best steak I've had, of any type, seasoned with salt, pepper and just a pinch of victory. ■

## LATE DEALS

Ebookers ([www.ebookers.com](http://www.ebookers.com)) has seven nights in **Cyprus** from £405 pp. Price includes B&B in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 31.

Jet 2 Holidays ([www.Jet2holidays.com](http://www.Jet2holidays.com), 0800 408 5599) has seven nights in the **Algarve** from £370 pp. Price includes self-catering accommodation in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 25.

Direct Holidays ([www.directholidays.co.uk](http://www.directholidays.co.uk), 0844 879 8173) has seven nights in **Zante** from £280 pp. Price includes B&B in a two-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 29.

Thomas Cook ([www.thomascook.com](http://www.thomascook.com), 0844 412 5970) has seven nights in **Majorca** from £430 pp. Price includes half-board in a four-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 30.

Airtours ([www.airtours.co.uk](http://www.airtours.co.uk), 0844 871 6636) has seven nights in **Lanzarote** from £484 pp. Price includes all-inclusive accommodation at a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing August 25.

Sunset ([www.sunsetholidays.co.uk](http://www.sunsetholidays.co.uk), 0844 412 5970) has seven nights in **Turkey** from £304 pp. Price includes B&B in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow departing September 1.

### TRAVEL NOTES

#### FOR GAME FISHING

The Zancudo Lodge is tucked away in a very private part of the Golfoito Bay. The lodge's raison d'être is big game fishing, with a large number of boats and suitable equipment for catches

of all sizes, on-shore and off. During recovery days, there are a number of eco tours on offer, as well as activities like surfing. Contact Frontiers Travel to arrange travel from the UK. Visit [www.frontierstrvl.co.uk](http://www.frontierstrvl.co.uk).

#### GETTING THERE

KLM fly from London Gatwick to San Jose, Costa Rica, from £750 every day. United Airlines flights from Glasgow, via New York, start at £855.