

# INTO THE TEETH OF ~ EL NIÑO

THE *BLUEWATER* READERS' TRIP TO PANAMA

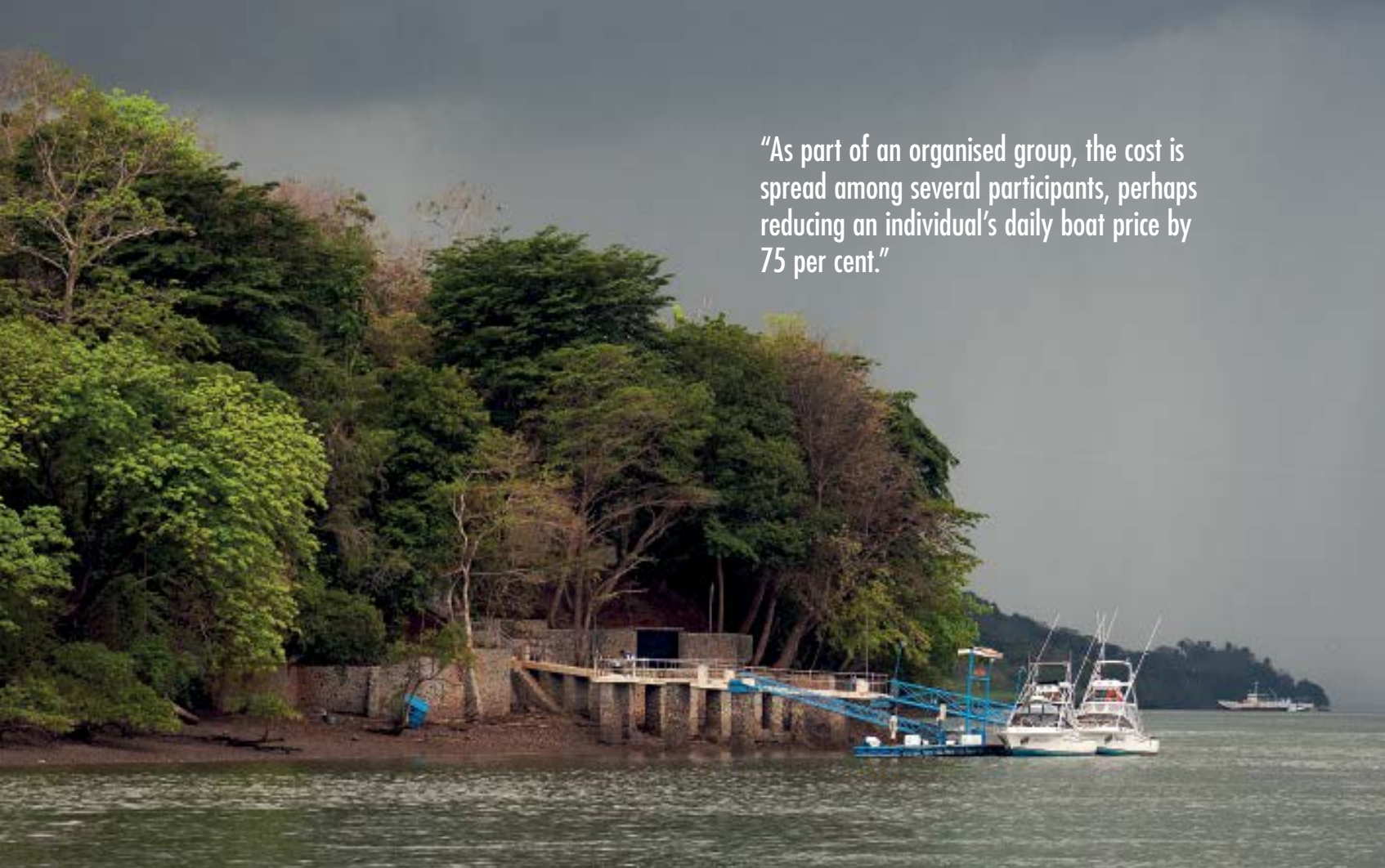
AUTHOR: **TIM SIMPSON** PHOTOGRAPHY: **TIM SIMPSON, TRISH LANG**

In May this year, 13 adventurous anglers set off for the Panama Big Game Fishing Club, chasing some of the world's largest yellowfin tuna, blue and black marlin, plus exotic dream-fish like huge cubera snapper and roosterfish, but what they discovered was an adversary even *more* challenging, as Tim Simpson reports.

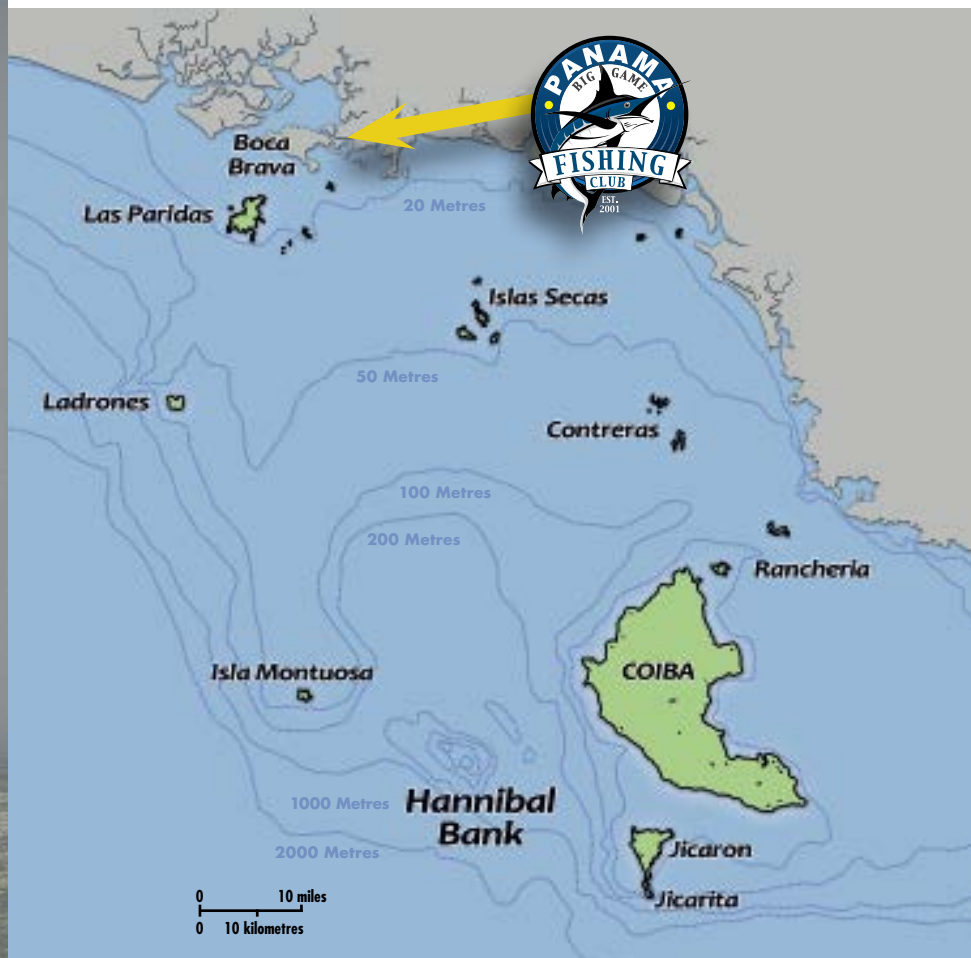


Trish Lang and Keith Vallabh with part of the first day's catch, kept for the feast back at the Club that evening.





“As part of an organised group, the cost is spread among several participants, perhaps reducing an individual’s daily boat price by 75 per cent.”



**Above:** The dock of the Panama Big Game Fishing Club on the island of Boca Brava. Although tropical showers sometimes threatened in the evening, rarely did it actually rain.

**Below:** From the cabins and dining room of the Panama Big Game Fishing Club, the view over the surrounding jungle and waterway was spectacular as the sun set behind the far hills to the west.

A major fishing trip, particularly one to a famous hotspot on the far side of the world, generates a burning glow of excitement within you. So it was with our *BlueWater* Readers’ Trip to Panama in May this year. After a full year of ever-rising fervour, when I finally took my seat on a Boeing Jumbo bound for New Zealand – the first leg of my journey – I was sizzling with pent-up anticipation. Beside me was my partner and avid angler, Trish Lang, who joined the team as one of the fishing participants, as well as assisting me as co-host for the trip.

Travelling from Australia to Panama takes two days of flying. This is an adventure in itself, and provides fascinating glimpses of other countries along the route. Although draining, such a trek is a small price to pay for the thrill of landing in a faraway land with a different landscape, different people, different culture, different foods – and some of the best gamefishing on the planet.

Panama can be reached via a number of different flight routes. Most participants flew from Australia to Los Angeles before a second or third stop in other parts of the USA, prior to their flight to Panama. A popular route involved a stopover in Florida, perhaps visiting the sensational Florida Keys, or Cuba, or the Bahamas for an additional fishing adventure while over in that part of the world. One participant flew in via Santiago in Chile, which he said was quite an eye-opener.

Our first stop was Auckland, New Zealand, where we met Keith Vallabh at the airport. Keith also fished last year’s Panama Readers’ Trip and had enjoyed it so much he’d backed-up for more. After a stopover in LA, the three of us arrived in Panama City at 8am on our second day, meeting our prearranged chaperone and finding fellow angler Robert Sippl waiting for us at the airport information desk.

#### ADVANTAGES OF GROUP TRAVEL

Fishing as part of an organised party offers many cost savings and logistical advantages over making arrangements yourself. The *BlueWater* Readers’ Trips tap into connections with the best charter captains around the world, and with the resources of the magazine we’re able to fine-tune trips to coincide with the best times at the very best locations. With arrangements all handled by the organising team, participants are relieved of all the tedious planning and logistics. Dream-trip adventures become as easy as registering your interest, paying the fee and then turning up at the airport. Also, by pooling a group of like-minded, adventurous anglers together, great friendships are kindled and all participants benefit from sharing the substantial cost savings of a large group booking.

Fishing away from home usually requires chartering a boat and crew. This is an expensive exercise for a solo angler, whereas by fishing as part of an organised group, the cost is spread among several participants, perhaps reducing an individual’s daily boat price by 75 per cent. Shared accommodation (usually optional) will also significantly reduce the cost of a trip, as will sharing airport transfers and so on.

#### PANAMA CITY

Panama City was just another stopover, but we had the morning free before another flight to the city of David, where we would meet our transport to our island home. This gave us time for a tour of the historic waterfront, with a little gift-shopping for local crafts, followed by lunch at the nearby Panama Canal, with its nearly completed, larger second entrance soon to be opened.

On a viewing balcony overlooking ships progressing through the original Canal locks, we enjoyed a magnificent smorgasbord while meeting up with the other participants in the first of our two week-long Readers’ Trips.

Tom Lee, another of last year’s participants returning for more, together with fishing buddies Darryl Leong and Martin Goldberg, had travelled from Sydney. Another group comprising international business colleagues Norman Haupt, Perry Theophanous, Lars Stomberg,

Ian Bateman and Eddie Smith had flown from the far corners of the globe to assemble for a holiday in Cuba before continuing on to meet us in Panama.

New friendships had been initiated by the end of lunch, and as we bundled back into the mini-vans for transfer to the domestic airport, there was a buzz of excitement as we all looked forward to a cocktail and a well-earnt soak in the infinity pool at the Panama Big Game Fishing Club that evening.

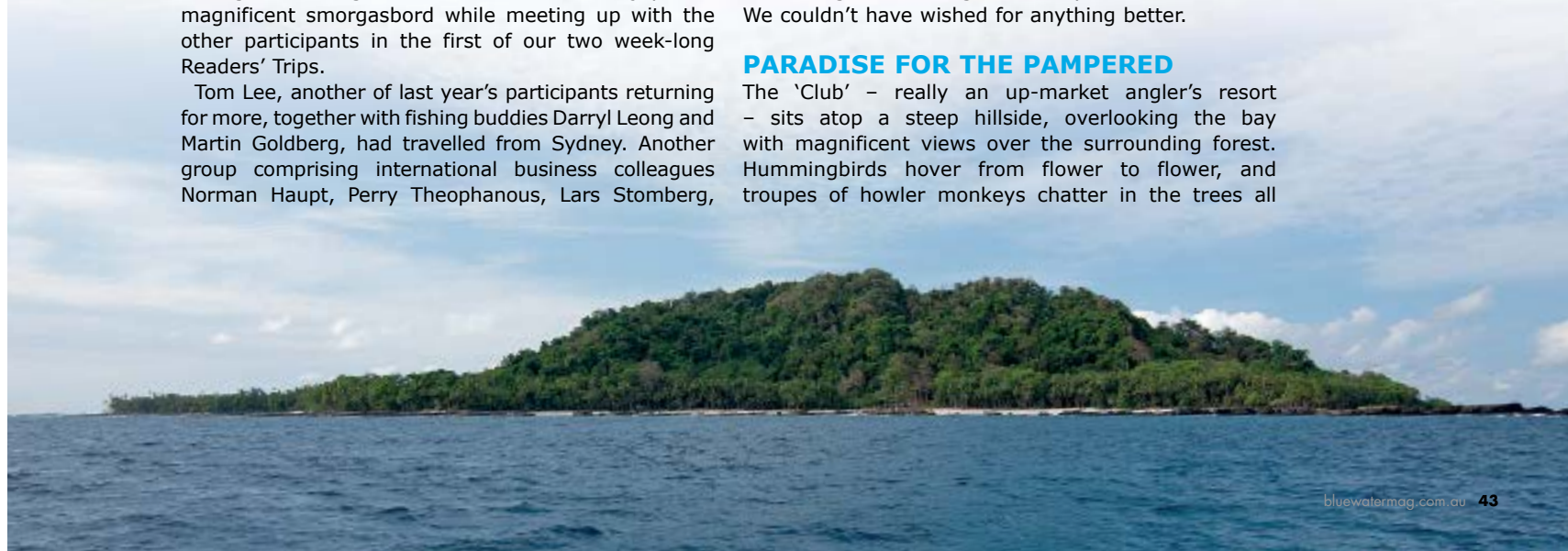
A one-hour flight landed us in David, in the province of Chiriqui, near the Costa Rica border, where another pair of mini-buses met us and drove the remaining hour to the waterfront of Boca Chica on the Pacific coast. As the sun set and an orange glow filtered through the wooded countryside, we transferred our luggage to an outboard-powered longboat for the final leg across the waterway to the island of Boca Brava. There on the dock of the Panama Big Game Fishing Club was manager John Pearce, along with his welcoming staff waiting with a tray of chilled cocktails. We couldn’t have wished for anything better.

#### PARADISE FOR THE PAMPERED

The ‘Club’ – really an up-market angler’s resort – sits atop a steep hillside, overlooking the bay with magnificent views over the surrounding forest. Hummingbirds hover from flower to flower, and troupes of howler monkeys chatter in the trees all

**Above:** Howler monkeys were frequent visitors to the trees surrounding the Club.

**Below:** Montuosa Island lies around 70km offshore, near the edge of the continental shelf drop-off, bathing it in nutrient-rich, ocean-current upwellings. Its waters teem with life, from reef-dwellers and massive schools of skipjack, to marlin and tuna.







"Baitfish flew in all directions as torpedos tore frothing scars in the surface."

around. Owner Mark Charman has created a spectacular destination where every comfort is well looked after. Modern air-conditioned cabins equipped with Wi-Fi Internet, an incredible entertainment system, delightful beds and heavenly showers provided sanctuary for the few hours' sleep before each day's dawn-to-dusk assault on the fishing grounds far offshore.

In the dining room – festooned with inspiring fibreglass casts of a broadbill swordfish, enormous cubera snapper and a locally caught yellowfin tuna of nearly 180kg – Chef Eric did his absolute best to ensure we all put on another clothing size before we departed. His three-course meals involved a multitude of different mouth-watering ways to prepare fresh tuna, and his pineapple crumble with homemade ice-cream was enough to make us want to stay forever.

### TO THE FISHING GROUNDS

The two back-to-back Readers' Trips had been arranged to coincide with the peak of the region's annual run of huge yellowfin tuna. Each year, yellowfin of massive proportions are caught off Panama, with fish of 100kg a somewhat regular occurrence. Situated just to the north of the equator, Panama is also rich with blue and black marlin year-round – particularly blacks – although the peak season for these is earlier or later in the year.

You'll also find a multitude of tropical sportfish, from jack crevalle (a large trevally) and Pacific



sierra mackerel, to dolphinfish and wahoo. The local specialties, found on the reefs and around the wash edges of the offshore islands, are the spectacular roosterfish and the brutally tough cubera snapper, both of which grow to more than 40kg.

The region's inshore waters are heavily silted and have been largely depleted by netting, but the islands and seamounts far offshore are too distant for most commercial endeavours. These hotspots remain unspoilt oases where the great gamefish riding the ocean currents amass to feed on the baitfish, themselves aggregating to feed in the plankton-rich upwellings.

It is a long run from the Panama Big Game Fishing Club to the outer islands of Montuosa or Coiba, or the Hannibal Bank seamount that rises from depths of 1000m to an oval crest with two peaks just 40m below the surface. Reaching these grounds involves a 50 nautical mile (more than 90km) trip each way, but the journey is remarkably pleasant. Panama seems blessed with consistently perfect sea conditions – an almost insignificant swell with no surface chop. With negligible wind it can become hot and steamy, but for Aussies, the rare experience of travelling far out to sea on a glass-calm ocean more than compensates.

Mark has kitted his fleet of 10m gameboats with vinyl beanbags and these make an exquisitely comfortable, wrap-around lounge where anglers can sleep during the two-hour trip out or back from the grounds. Alternately, as Trish and I did every day, you can drag



The beautiful, jungle-covered island of Coiba, where big cubera snapper and roosterfish rule the washes.

your beanbag to the bow of the boat and watch the procession of sea life race by as you speed offshore past an abundance of turtles, sea snakes, jellyfish, flying fish and dolphins.

While enjoying one of Eric's breakfast creations at dawn on the morning of our first fishing day, Darryl said, "I was so excited last night that I couldn't sleep. I had butterflies like I used to have as a kid the night before a fishing trip with Dad". We scampered down the steep staircase to the dock, then divided into teams on three boats before setting off for Montuosa Island.

At the island we trolled for black skipjack tuna until the six tuna tubes across the stern of each boat were filled. With serious livebaits taken care of, two of the boats then headed south-east towards Hannibal Bank, where the captains expected to see our first big yellowfin. However, the boat with Tom, Darryl and Martin set off in a different direction. Their deckie, affectionately known as 'Hollywood' (as he's featured in so many fishing shows and photographs), had been involved in the capture of 998 marlin, so he and his captain were itching to add another two to the tally. They knew a special bank to the west of Montuosa where they had a feeling they would find one. Sure enough, within the hour, while the rest of us were still travelling east, Martin hooked-up and soon tagged a beautiful black marlin of around 180kg.

### TUNA BLITZ

The other boats never made it to Hannibal Bank either. As we rounded Montuosa and headed out into deeper waters we soon spotted diving birds and large packs of dolphins spread over a broad area. As we eased in closer, the water erupted around us as a school of yellowfin blitzed through a spray of 15cm blue runners. Baitfish flew in all directions as torpedos tore frothing scars in the surface.

On our boat, Trish and I scrambled for cameras as Keith and Robert plucked live blue runners from the bait tank and dropped them into the wake while our captain positioned us just ahead of the dolphins. In this part of the world, dolphins are used as an indicator for



**Above:** Tom Lee and his team used high-quality micro-jigging outfits to devastating effect on the reef-dwellers around Montuosa Island.

**Below:** After a long day of fishing it was delightful to soak in the pool each evening, relaxing and swigging from a tall glass of iced cocktail while Club manager John Pearce and his staff brought trays of hors d'oeuvres while the sun set behind us.







'Hollywood' the deckie unhooks a black skipjack for Ross Simpson in the shallows of Montuosa Island. These were kept alive in the tuna-tubes along the boat's transom, and made perfect livebaits for everything from big roosterfish and cubera snapper to huge yellowfin and marlin.

yellowfin. Large numbers of dolphins frequently follow the tuna schools waiting for the yellowfin to round-up a school of baitfish in the depths and then herd them to the surface, where they are pinned as a baitball and easier to catch. When the tuna attack begins, the dolphins and birds join in for their share of the spoils. Sure enough, Keith and Robert were soon hooked-up in what became a frenzied blur of tuna, dolphins, screaming reels and screaming anglers over a two-hour period. The school moved fast, so the captain was continually calling for the baits to be wound in so he could race to the front of the dolphins and reposition us for the next melee.

The tuna fed ravenously and it was quite incredible to see so many crashing all around us. These yellowfin weren't huge, but at 30 to 40kg they were fast fun, and after catching three each, the two boys were quite happy for Trish to step in and catch one herself. Fishing nearby, Norman, Perry, Lars, Ian and Eddie also got into the action, landing similar tuna up to 40kg. Several of the yellowfin were caught on poppers, cast on spinning outfits while standing in a stainless-steel casting cage at the bow. This added another whole level of excitement, as to watch a large tuna barreling through a glass-calm surface to inhale your popper is a heart-stopping thrill that can choke the breath from your lungs. Of course, you've then got the challenge of landing a very serious fish on a long casting outfit! Keith, Robert and Norman caught excellent tuna on poppers, although when right-handed guys were forced to use left-handed spin reels there were some especially testing battles, some of which we really thought the fish were going to win.

That evening at the daily 'debriefing' with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres in the pool, Tom was beaming with elation, commenting that the action was so mind-blowing, he'd enjoyed this one day more than his entire week the year before!

THE BITE OF EL NIÑO

The following morning we set out with big expectations, but the ocean had changed. Although a few birds and dolphins worked the waters off Montuosa, the tuna were harder to find. Our three boats did catch a few yellowfin over the following week, but it wasn't the same. Conversation was sometimes difficult with the boat crews, as their primary language is Spanish, however, our captain spoke sufficiently good English to convey that the water had become unusually warm. His temperature gauge showed a sea-surface reading of around 30°C, which is at the upper limit of yellowfin tolerance. This led to a suspicion that the migratory tuna had simply followed the slightly cooler water out of the area.



This tied-in with the fact that Central America is currently in the grip of an unusually strong El Niño, delivering water temperatures much warmer than usual. Even as far north as California, anglers have been experiencing tropical species into areas well beyond their usual reach. In the hope that cooler currents would return the tuna, some of our teams persisted on the offshore grounds, while others switched to alternate options like jigging the reefs or fishing the washes with livebaits and poppers for roosterfish and cubera snapper. These species also proved unusually difficult to find, and we suspected that everything was largely shut-down and resting in the cool of the depths. Even so, we fished hard and chipped away with occasional results. Tom, Darryl and Martin had brought top-quality micro-jigging outfits with them, and these proved deadly on reef species from amberjack to cubera snapper. They also used their small jigs to devastating effect beside a large tree that we found floating far offshore. Around it was a massive school of juvenile tuna in several species. While drifting beside the log we spun-up black skipjack, frigate mackerel and the smallest yellowfin tuna we'd ever seen, some only 15cm long. Later in the week, on his last day of fishing, Darryl hooked a huge yellowfin, believed to be around 100kg, but after it dragged him around the cockpit for 15 minutes the hook pulled free.

WEEK TWO – TO THE WASHES

While most of the party headed home, Robert and Norman stayed on with Trish and I for the second week. We were also joined by Ross and Michelle Simpson (no relation), who flew in from their sheep station in outback NSW. For several days the tuna continued to prove difficult, although Ross and Norman landed their biggest-ever tuna, and we heard of at least one yellowfin around 100kg caught by a pro fisherman trolling live skipjack on Hannibal Bank. There is always hope! While we waited for reports of the tuna returning, we spend several days exploring the outer island washes, hoping for a roosterfish or cubera. All aboard the one boat, two or three anglers would troll live blue runners from the stern, while one or two of us would stand at the bow casting large Halco 'Rooster Poppers' into the washes ahead of the boat. Throwing the large lures was relentless work, particularly in the hot, steamy conditions, but the promise of those exotic species kept motivation high. Close to one of the island washes, Robert hooked a large cubera on a trolled skipjack, but after a brief though dogged fight, the hook pulled free. The following morning, back at the island washes, Ross caught a beautiful roosterfish on a live blue runner. Once unhooked and released, Ross sat down and exclaimed, "Wow! That was fantastic. I'm still shaking. I need a beer!" It was 9am.



Above: Magnificent roosterfish were one of the exotic attractions that appealed most to the participants, particularly when having a day off from the yellowfin.

Above left: Ross Simpson was thrilled with his roosterfish, posing with it briefly before it was returned to the waters of Coiba Island.

Left: The spectacularly jagged Ladrone Islands are one of several island groups near the Panama Big Game Fishing Club producing gamefish like cubera snapper and roosterfish.

"Back at the island washes, Ross caught a beautiful roosterfish on a live blue runner."





Norman Haupt was very pleased with his African pompano, caught on a popper at Coiba Island.

FREE-JUMPING MARLIN

The next day we returned to Hannibal Bank, hoping the tuna had reappeared. Trolling live skipjack tuna and blue runners, we had two strikes, but neither hooked-up. At one stage we had a black marlin of perhaps 200kg repeatedly jump close beside us, although we hadn't hooked it and there were no other boats on the seamount!

With the week drawing to a close, and with Robert still desperate to catch his first roosterfish, we asked our captain to make the even longer run to fish the renowned washes and beaches of Coiba Island. This was a beautiful location; just being there was reward enough – catching fish was merely a bonus. Spectacular, jagged black rocks rose from the whitewater, backed by towering hillsides of lush jungle greenery. Huge trees jutted precariously overhead as we followed the contours, their roots clinging to vertical rock bluffs while frigate birds circled in the thermals high above. We covered a lot of ground, towing livebaits and casting, ever casting, hoping for the evasive roosters.

Rounding a headland, we drew close to a sandy beach with a creek-mouth cutting across it at one end. Our captain said it was a prime spot for roosters and also snook as they patrolled the beach hunting mullet or other prey species washed out of the creek each falling tide.

Norman and I were on the bow casting poppers as we neared the creek entrance and spotted a small, deep smudge of reef isolated by the surrounding sand. Norman skilfully landed his popper over the reef and

before his second sweep of the rod-tip the popper was slammed hard. *At last!* we thought, as he reared back with his drag screaming. We were sure this was our prized roosterfish. But as the deep, gleaming silver body emerged from the green soup, we discovered a tropical treat of an entirely different species. It was a magnificent African pompano.

Over dinner that night, we learnt that local boats had caught lots of mid-sized yellowfin near the Ladrões Islands, to the west. Plans were reassessed and a new strategy devised for our final day. Lodge manager John Pearce joined us for a fish, so we split the team into two boats, which would head in different directions to cover a wide spread of ocean and options.

NEW TACTICS

Robert was still keen to catch his roosterfish, while Trish and I were primarily focused on a really huge yellowfin, with roosters a welcome back-up. Our strategy was to take a tuna-tube load of live skipjack out to Hannibal Bank – our best chance for a giant – and then continue on to Coiba if that didn't produce. Meanwhile, John, Ross and Norman headed west to the Ladrões with a tank full of live blue runners.

Once again we had Hannibal Bank to ourselves. Robert and I sat at the transom cradling our outfits with one arm while the fingers of the other hand gripped the line, monitoring the steady, throbbing tailbeat of our live tuna. Our hearts were in our mouths as we waited with excruciating anticipation for the monsters to pounce.

Robert's skipjack grew agitated. He stood alert and ready. Then the line ripped from his fingers and the reel whirled as the bait was inhaled and the beast sped off. Was this the yellowfin of our dreams? The answer came as another 200kg black marlin tore through the surface, leaping repeatedly towards the boat, its silver flank and enormous tail glistening in the sun as it hung in the air only metres from our stunned faces. Then the bait and hook fell free. Things went quiet after that, so at midday we made the call to head to Coiba.

FINAL CRESCENDO

Once there, we headed straight for the beach with the creek entrance. I cast a barramundi-sized stickbait to represent a small mullet, while Trish and Robert trolled live blue runners from the stern. The hours ticked by...

Many times I cast my lure into the tiny shorebreak peeling along the beach, then twitched it seductively back through the shallow green waters to where I stood on the bowsprit. Finally they appeared. Two crested smudges, side by side and more than a metre in length, materialised just centimetres behind my lure, stalking, studying, watching each twitch as – with heart racing – I held my breath and twitched again, painfully conscious of the fact that with every snap I was fast running out

of retrieve space. It was over within heartbeats, but those seconds, that sight, had stretched time for me. That moment – the sight of those huge roosters right on the tail of my lure, just a tail-flick from striking – had justified the past week of casting.

As they peeled away and ducked beneath the boat, I screamed to warn the team in the cockpit. Sure enough, both of their livebaits freaked as the roosters must have checked them out too, but even *they* escaped unmolested.

With fishing time rapidly running out, Robert's livebait panicked as some unseen predator checked it out, although it was Trish's livebait that got hit. After a brief pause she wound tight and eased the circle hook into place. Although small, our second roosterfish of the trip was a special occasion, and it was soon led alongside, photographed and then quickly released.

As we turned for home we toasted our thrills and acknowledged the adventure we'd enjoyed in magnificent surroundings. Even though there were goals yet to be achieved, we agreed this was actually a good thing – it ensured a need to return.

Back at the dock we met the other team, which had fared considerably better, enjoying a wide-open yellowfin bite that kept them frantic for hours. Tuna were busting bait wherever they looked, they said, and livebaits or trolled lures were smashed as soon as they hit the water. Although they were not the giants we had hoped for, Panama had proved once again that it certainly can deliver the goods.

The team was elated. Ross and Norman had never experienced tuna anything like the melee they saw that day. I'm sure they and their friends are reliving it still in animated tales of the big adventure. 🐟

“Several yellowfin were caught on poppers while standing in a casting cage at the bow.”

**Inset left:** With often flat-calm sea conditions, when schools of yellowfin were blitzing baitfish at the surface, which they often were, top-water lures like this Halco 'Rooster Popper' could be cast into the melee and proved deadly effective.

**Below:** Norman Haupt stood in the casting cage at the bow of the boat to cast his popper into a school of yellowfin, resulting in another beautiful tuna and more delicious meals ahead.



“Norman skilfully landed his popper over a magnificent African pompano.”