



Photo courtesy of Jessica Haydahl.

## WEST COAST FISHING CLUB: PANAMA

by Russell Nelson



Broomtail Grouper. Photo courtesy of Dale Wills, *In The Bite*.

Two hours after sipping Monday morning coffee in Panama City, I'm hooked up to a 30-pound mullet snapper that slammed surface bait in 60 feet of water off the southern Las Perlas Islands. Moments after that beauty was in the fish box, we're on to an 80-pound broomtail grouper that makes the snapper look like bait. I know I'm going to love this trip.

In December, I was delighted to join Dale Wills, publisher of *In the Bite* magazine, Raymond "Doug" Douglas of King Sailfish Mounts and TBF President Ellen Peel for 5 days aboard the West

Coast Fishing Club's (WCFC) mothership the *Pacific Provider*. Delighted indeed! After a short flight from the city, we were met by Elliott Stark, the lanky Texan and manager of the operation, who drove us to the waiting boats for the trip to the mothership where we were met by smiling faces and glasses of champagne. We were introduced to the staff and shown to our very well appointed staterooms before heading out on a Strike 37 Walk Around for the rest of the day fishing. WCFC has 2 Strike 37s as well as two 40' Gamefisherman. With excellent local captains and mates, the four boats offer versatile fishing opportunities; the Strike provided nice walk around access and was ideal for pitching lures and baits around the rocky shorelines of the many small islands in the Perlas chain. The inshore action was good and the concentrations of snapper, grouper, roosterfish, jacks and even dorado close to the shore were impressive. The larger Gamefisherman ran great and was very comfortable with an air-conditioned salon.

The WCFC is an experienced provider of fishing opportunities with three exquisite lodges in North Canada, 50 miles south of Alaska, in addition to their two-year-old Panama operation. Eventually, a custom built lodge will offer rooms for

guests on Isla del Rey. But until that time, a stay aboard the exceptional mothership the *Pacific Provider*, anchored in a sheltered bay nearby, is an experience any traveling angler can embrace with enthusiasm. The ship sleeps 12 in 6 fashionable staterooms with all facilities, including large flat screen TVs. The *Pacific Provider* offers everything needed to rest the weary bones after a long day of hauling in big, really big fish. And while fishing is the reason for coming, guests will lack for nothing in the way of superb service, luxurious accommodations, an open bar and the best of food and wine. The operation has been featured in the Robb Report (June 2012 Collection) and numerous sportfishing magazines.

Typically the day starts with a hearty made-to-order breakfast shortly after 6:00 a.m. that can either be eaten at the dining table on board or packed along on the fishing boats. Breakfast is followed by 10 hours of primetime fishing. Each day we found a great lunch and coolers full of drinks aboard the boats.

Stark runs a smooth operation as the manager and fishing director. Offshore days are usually taken aboard one of the custom built Gamefisherman equipped with all the latest tackle, air conditioned salons and teak decks. The boats run



Photos courtesy of Jessica Haydahl.

fast, smooth and provide a great platform for chasing the big black and blue marlin, sailfish, tunas and dorado that are thick in the waters off the Perlas. A quick 30-mile run puts anglers in 3,000 feet of water on the edge of the continental shelf, and the famed Hannibal Bank is accessible from Las Perlas. (In the late spring, the entire operation moves to the seldom-fished waters surrounding Coiba Island).

Arriving back on the mothership about dusk, the staff provides drinks and appetizers in hand. Alexandra Kordic, Assistant General Manager is the extremely capable hospitality manager – a job she accomplishes with grace and a grand sense of humor. Every client's needs are met with casual elegance. Dinners by Executive Chef Claudio Urbano (there are three chefs on board) are an event in themselves - white tablecloth dining that resembles a fine urban restaurant more than the typical fishing lodge fare. There is a spacious main lounge with bar inside the *Pacific Provider*, plus a large outdoor bar only to be topped off with a comfortable seating area on the top deck for comfortable post-dinner resting and chatting with fellow guests. The star gazing at night is unbelievable from up top.

If anglers tire of the choice between inshore and offshore fishing trips, kayaks and light tackle spinning gear are available for exploring nearby rivers and lagoons in pursuit of snook. Inshore and offshore fishing was excellent during our 5-day stay. We caught and released black marlin up to 500 pounds, sailfish and tunas in our three days of fishing. The dorado were so thick that we found ourselves frantically snatching baits away from 50-pound fish to stay in the game for marlin.

To say the *Pacific Provider* experience is recommended is an understatement; it is great in all categories! Elliott knows his fishing and gives his all to put anglers on the kind of fishing adventure they usually only see on TV. Alexandra and her staff set the tone for evenings of relaxation and ease between the frantic days of fishing. The entire WCFC experience is first rate, first class and guaranteed to put a big smile on the faces of the most serious big game anglers. The meals are diverse and often rely on the freshest of fish brought home by clients, as well as lobster, shrimp and oysters harvested locally, though Texan Tom Shumate was well accommodated with great steak and a birthday cake on our trip.

The all inclusive package includes VIP tour guides who meet guests in Panama City upon arrival in the airport and whisk them swiftly through immigration, all transportation to and from hotels, the roundtrip flight to Las Perlas, fishing with first class tackle aboard any of the four sports fishers with captain and mate (one speaks English), double occupancy stateroom, all meals and open bar. In all, a “bucket list” experience fishing the rich waters of Panama.

“This was the first hard core fishing trip I’ve been on that felt like it was conducted from a 5 star hotel,” noted Ellen Peel on our flight back to the mainland, “and I am coming back!” Peel caught her largest black marlin ever on this trip. Visit [www.WestCoastFishigClub.com](http://www.WestCoastFishigClub.com) to reserve your trip soon.



Nelson, Stake, Peel and crew celebrating Ellen's black marlin release. Photo courtesy of Dale Wills, *In the Bite*.

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