

Down Panama Way A Sportfishing Adventure with the West Coast Fishing Club

by Dale Wills

How could a diehard marlin fisherman *not* like an area called “El Explosivos,” known for producing big blacks? First, you travel by air some 60 miles from Panama City to a string of secluded islands deep in the Pacific called the Las Perlas (the same picturesque islands where *Survivor: Panama* was filmed). Upon arrival, you’re greeted by a 160-foot mothership staffed by an eager to please crew of professionals. Three gameboats await. This is not fiction but rather a way of life for the West Coast Fishing Club.



I recently had the pleasure of checking out the operation, which is under the command of General Manager Elliott Stark. I was invited as a member of the industry media and just couldn't pass up the invite—I really enjoy Panama and have had some good trips down there in the past. Let me start off by saying that if you like to fish, inshore or offshore, then you need to check out the West Coast Fishing Club. It doesn't matter if you're a boat owner, captain, mate or angler, you're just about guaranteed to have the time of your life.

I flew into Panama City after a short 2½ hour flight from Miami, Florida where I was met at the airport and dropped off at the Hard Rock Hotel for the night. The following morning I headed to the airport with

Ellen Peel from the Billfish Foundation, her husband Dr. Russell Nelson and Raymond Douglas of King Sailfish Mounts. We all piled into a commuter plane and departed for the Las Perlas Islands, each of us excited about the trip ahead. Thirty minutes later we were on final approach to the airstrip on Isla San Jose, the largest of the Perlas. Elliott Stark greeted us as we loaded our luggage into the back of his John Deere mule ATV. It reminded me of the 1980s TV show *Fantasy Island*, except that Elliott is about three times as tall as Tattoo. All we needed was Mr. Roark in a white suit and Panama hat to wish us well on the next leg of our journey. We rode down a rocky path through the island scrub, stopping on a wide sandy beach where a large outboard panga



(L -R) Dr. Russell Nelson, Elliott Stark, TBF President Ellen Peel, Capt. Nelson Castillo and mate Andres Mosquera.



The 160-foot mothership, *Pacific Provider*, is the heart of the operation.



A cold glass of Champagne awaits your arrival.



An 80-pound broomtail grouper caught on our ride in after spotting bait crashing in 50 feet of water. Angler Russ Nelson is in the center.



King Sailfish Mounts President Raymond Douglas battles a black marlin at the Perlas Islands.

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waited. We kicked off our shoes, loaded up and headed for the 160-foot mothership *Pacific Provider*, riding comfortably at anchor in the distance.

Getting to this point didn't seem like an arduous task; in fact, every step was carefully planned well in advance. When we arrived on the mothership, the crew took over (or should I say, catered to our every whim). After an introductory tour of the boat and a quick safety check, Elliott said we had about thirty minutes to get ready: he already had a boat standing by to take us inshore fishing for the rest of the afternoon.

Two 40-foot Gamefishermen were moored about 100 yards off in the distance and the 37-foot Strike boat was already idling on the hip of the mothership, ready to go. We left Isla San Jose in our wake as we went in search of roosterfish, which would be my first. The scenery was spectacular as I heaved a topwater popping plug close to the rocky island edges from the bow, catching several different species of big jacks and a nice houndfish. Unfortunately the roosters never showed—I will have to keep fishing for that one. I also appreciated the perfectly balanced rod and reel combination we used for casting the heavy poppers—a lesser outfit would have worn out just about any angler in less than 10 minutes. The high quality of the tackle was readily apparent wherever we looked.

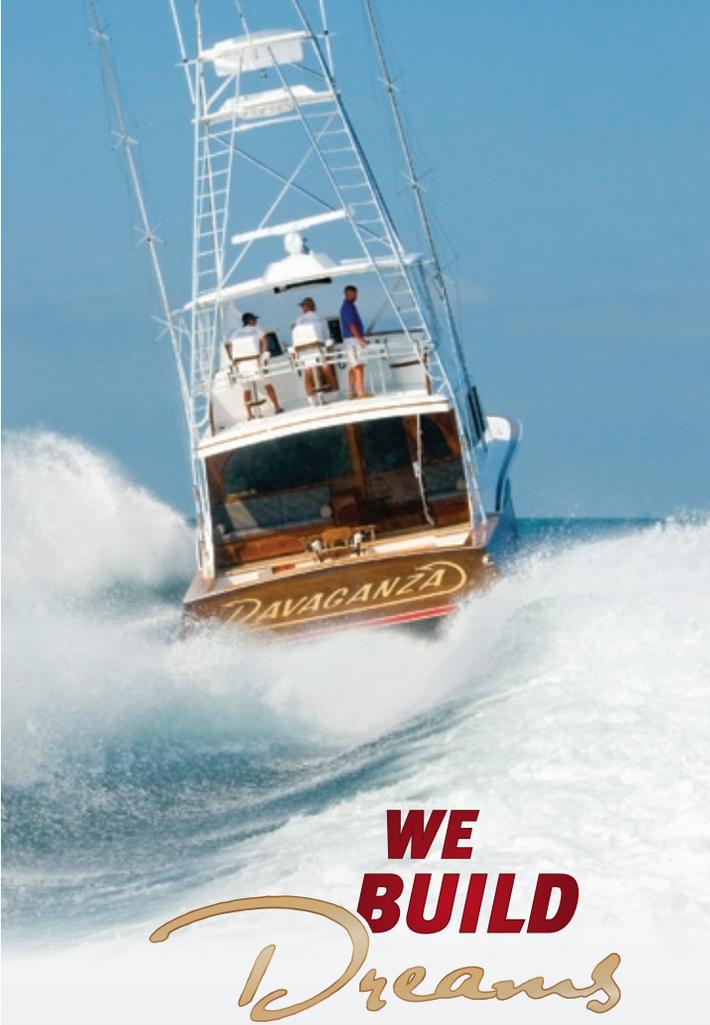
On our ride back to the mothership, we stopped on a deep hump just outside the Perlas which was teeming with live bonitos frantically frothing about on the surface. We dropped a live bonito down and within minutes the result was a huge 80-pound broomtail grouper for Russell Nelson. Fresh grouper made the dinner menu that night. Upon our return to the mothership each afternoon, we relaxed over cocktails as the staff once again anticipated our every move. Plopped down in the spacious salon, we checked the electronic world with our various devices via the ship's onboard

satellite communication system. Five-course dinners are served at 7:00 p.m. each evening in the dining room and to say the meals are gourmet would be a significant understatement. Don't plan on losing any weight on this trip.

The remaining three days sped by all too quickly. Each morning we watched the sun rise from the cockpit of the gameboats as we ran to the marlin grounds roughly 20 miles away. Each day was a combination of trolling and live bait fishing with bonitos and each day brought on a unique vibe and the opportunity to fish with some great new friends that I would not otherwise have had the chance. On the second day, I accompanied King Sailfish Mount's Raymond Douglas and encountered one of the largest black marlin I have ever seen. The huge marlin actually freejumped 100 yards behind our spread in the whitewater from our wake. Raymond yelled, "That was a thousand-pounder!" Coming from a guy who mounts these things on a regular basis, I agreed to take his word for it—it was an absolutely enormous fish. As we recovered from the shock, I fired out a live bonito from the tuna tube. Minutes later my line went slack and I reeled up slowly, anticipating a suddenly screaming reel. The next thing we see is my bonito swimming just inches from the huge marlin, whose lit-up pectoral fin was as long as my arm. The marlin faded and the bonito continued to swim in rapid figure-eights around the boat, no doubt lucky to be alive. It was disappointing, but wow what a fish, the likes of which I can only hope to release one day.

On the final day I fished with The Billfish Foundation's Ellen Peel, Dr. Russell Nelson and Elliott Stark. Peel showed off her angling prowess from the bucket harness as she wrangled the biggest black of the trip. Her unrelenting angling determination during the battle paid off as she was able to let go the big marlin, but not before a little drama. As the marlin effortlessly peeled line from the Tiagra 50W, the battle was just seconds from being lost due to the very nature of TBF's worldwide mission to protect billfish from overfishing. We were backing down hard on the marlin but a commercial longline drifted in like a roadblock—one more long run by the marlin and Ellen's recreational line would have been cut by the commercial fisherman's longline. It was a close call but the TBF president successfully released her fish of a lifetime without interference from the commercial gear.

Here are just a few thoughts in closing. The staff really makes this a great adventure, from remembering your favorite cocktails in the afternoon to having your coffee ready when you wake up in the morning. Every captain and mate I fished with was courteous, friendly, hard-working and English-speaking. The tackle was not budget-conscious charter stuff but well-maintained top of the line gear, just like you'd find on your own boat. And the trip's planning was immaculate, with transfers and arrangements all set from the time I stepped off the flight from Miami until my departure. Future plans for the West Coast Fishing Club call for a first-class resort to open on Isla San Jose in the Perlas Islands but no matter if it's land- or sea-based, it truly is the fishing experience of a lifetime. I'm already saving up to return with my family next year. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me by email, dwills@inthebite.com.



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