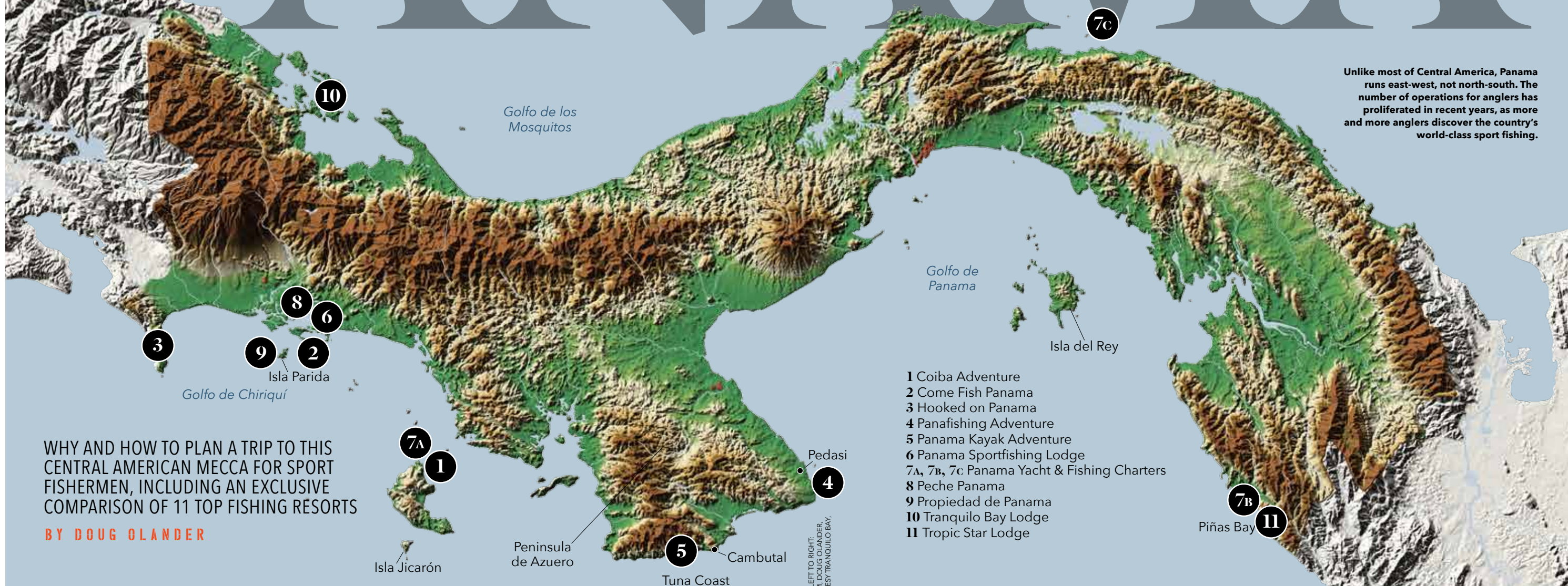


PANAMA



Unlike most of Central America, Panama runs east-west, not north-south. The number of operations for anglers has proliferated in recent years, as more and more anglers discover the country's world-class sport fishing.

WHY AND HOW TO PLAN A TRIP TO THIS CENTRAL AMERICAN MECCA FOR SPORT FISHERMEN, INCLUDING AN EXCLUSIVE COMPARISON OF 11 TOP FISHING RESORTS

BY DOUG OLANDER

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ARIDCEAN / SHUTTERSTOCK (MAP); INSETS, LEFT TO RIGHT: JASON ARNOLD / JASONARNOLDPHOTO.COM, DOUG OLANDER, © CARLOS JASSO / REUTERS / CORBIS, COURTESY TRANQUILLO BAY, ROB SHERMAN

MOST SERIOUS SALTWATER ANGLERS IN THE UNITED STATES (AND BEYOND) PROBABLY FALL INTO ONE OF THREE CATEGORIES: THOSE WHO MIGHT DREAM OF FISHING PANAMA, THOSE PLANNING TO FISH PANAMA FOR THE FIRST TIME, AND THOSE WHO ARE MAKING ARRANGEMENTS TO GO BACK AGAIN. WHEN IT COMES TO FISHING TRIPS IN PANAMA, I HAVE TO PLEAD MEA CULPA MANY TIMES OVER; THAT EXPERIENCE ALLOWS ME TO FEEL CONFIDENT SAYING THAT WITHOUT QUESTION, PANAMA HAS BECOME ONE OF THE WORLD'S VERY TOP DESTINATIONS FOR SALTWATER FISHERMEN.

Why should that be so? A few reasons come to mind (most applying to the Pacific, though outstanding fishing is available on the country's Caribbean coast as well).

GREAT VARIETY

Notching marks for marlin, sailfish, yellowfin tuna, roosterfish and cubera snapper in one trip (or day!) is not only feasible but common. Add to the list wahoo, mahi, bluefin trevally, snook (and increasingly Atlantic tarpon migrants), broomtail grouper, amberjack and almaco, and quite a few more.

TROPHY FISH

An awful lot of those "fish of a lifetime" have been taken along Panama's coast, from marlin over 500 pounds to 200-plus-pound yellowfin tuna and roosters 70 pounds and more. A check of the IGFA record book shows Panama with multiple records for a number of game-fish species, including mahi (11 records), black marlin (four), roosterfish (six), rainbow runner (nine), Pacific sailfish (12), mullet snapper (16), Pacific cubera snapper (14), Pacific snook (four) and many others.

PRODUCTIVE COASTAL WATERS, ISLANDS AND SEAMOUNTS

Big-game pelagic enthusiasts enjoy some of the world's most consistent action around renowned seamounts like Hannibal and Zane Grey banks. The waters around islands such as Coiba, Jicarón, Montuosa, Secas and Las Perlas are well known for action from wahoo, trevallies, snappers, sierra and more. Fishing along the country's coastline offers action from riverine estuaries to blue water offshore. Many areas offer shots at pelagics surprisingly close to shore — such as the lower Azuero Peninsula, known for good reason as the "Tuna Coast."

CALM WATERS

While the Pacific isn't always flat, of many trips here, I've never had one blown out, and on a majority of days, the ocean has been calm.

EASE OF ENTRY AND ACCESS

Panama's Tocumen Airport is Central America's busiest and largest, the only one with two active runways. Getting to Panama City isn't a crazy-long flight from most of the United States (from south Florida, it's a mere three hours and change). The country is served by Air Canada, Air France,

American, Copa, Delta, KLM, Lufthansa, United and others. No visa is required for U.S. citizens.

Another convenience for those planning to fish Panama is manifested in this feature: It has a wealth of great coastal resorts that cater mostly or exclusively to sport fishermen. Anglers can choose from various locations on both coasts and from a range of prices and styles (land-based, floating barges, large motherships).

Pretty much all of the 11 operations listed below are geared up to target anything and everything, whether anglers are after big pelagics or nearshore game fish.

So the decision isn't whether or not to go to Panama: If you're all about memorable action, you'll go. The real decision is which of many resorts will best fit your needs and finances, and toward that end, *Sport Fishing's* unique comparative guide should help.

Catch 'em up!
(Lodges are listed alphabetically.)

1

COIBA ADVENTURE

coibadventure.com
800-800-0907

This is the only resort that operates on Coiba Island, and it has done so since 1998, giving it unique immediate access to the Gulf of Chiriquí's most renowned spots. Owner/skipper Tom Yust has been guiding in these waters since 1991.



COURTESY COIBA ADVENTURE (THIS PAGE, 2); COURTESY COME FISH PANAMA (OPPOSITE TOP); JASON ARNOLD / JASONARNOLDPHOTO.COM (OPPOSITE BOTTOM)

FROM PANAMA CITY: A chartered one-hour flight takes anglers directly to Coiba Island.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Two cabins, up to eight guests; typically one group of four at a time.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: Bertram 31 with twin 240 diesels, and a 22-foot Mako with 225 Suzuki (for both offshore and nearshore).

TACKLE: Conventional — Shimano Tiagras (chair rods) and Penn and Shimano 50s with heavy braid for big bottomfish, and Talicas on Terez rods with light braid; spinning — Shimano and Penn reels in various sizes with braid.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: Coiba Island, Hannibal Bank, and Montuosa and Jicarita islands.

DISTANCE TO FISH: Nearly all areas are within a five- to 60-minute run of camp.

SEASON: Open year-round, but June through December the preferred period.

RATES: For five days of fishing and six nights, \$5,150 for four anglers. This includes VIP airport expediting, private twin-prop airplane, all meals, open bar, park fees and licenses, and daily laundry.

COMMENTS: The Coiba National Park includes more than 30 uninhabited islands protected from commercial harvest; their location makes access difficult for many other sport-fishing boats.



2

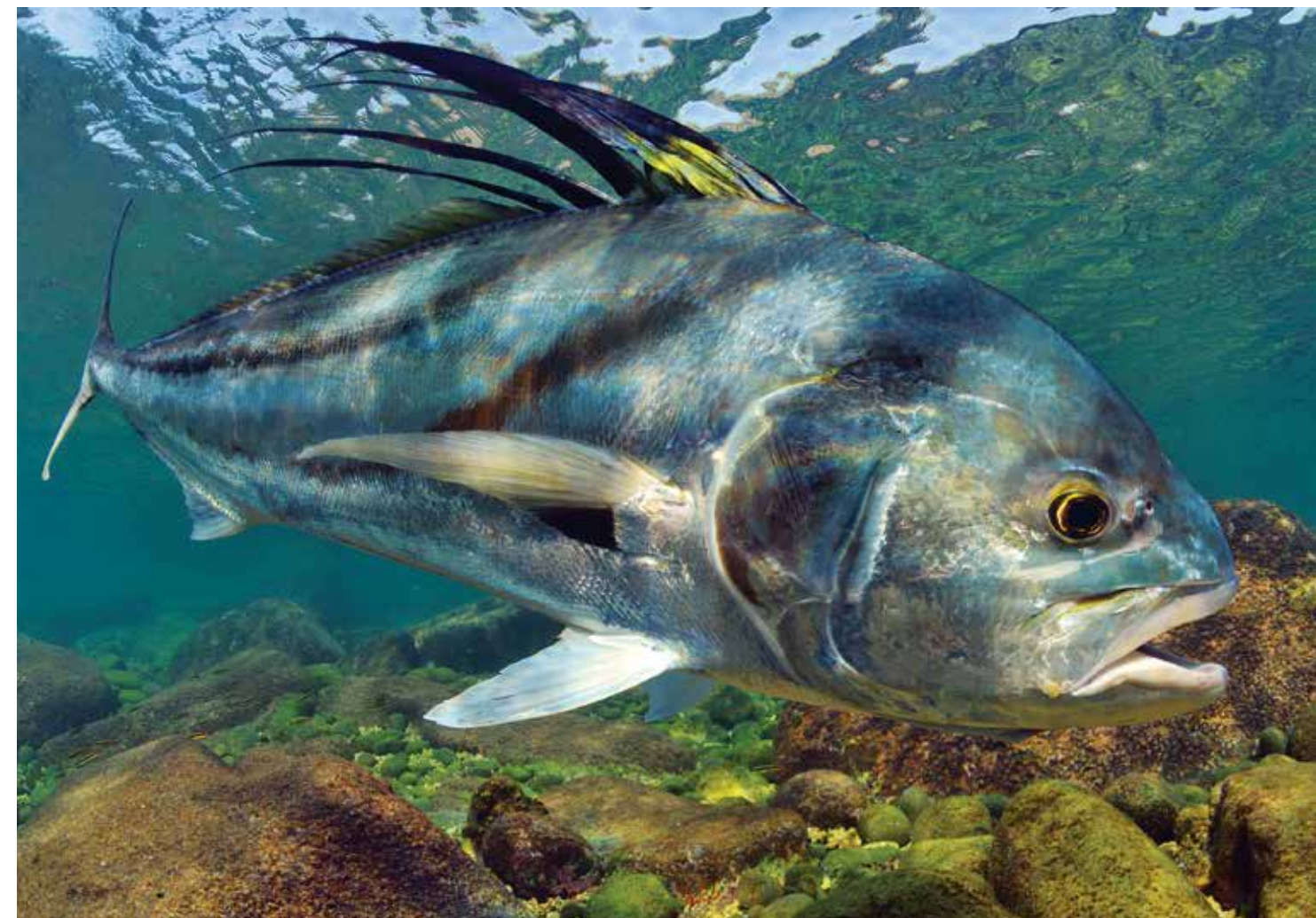
COME FISH PANAMA

comefishpanama.com
888-497-4311

Come Fish Panama is located at Boca Chica, near David, less than 50 miles east of Panama's border with Costa Rica. Its first year of operation was 2009. Contact Kerry Leggett, owner, captain and avid angler.

FROM PANAMA CITY: A 45-minute flight to David (from Tocumen or Albrook airports) or a 6 1/2-hour drive. From David, Come Fish Panama arranges the

ABOVE: Cala Mia Lodge, one of three lodges used by Come Fish Panama. **BELOW:** All Pacific fishing resorts hold the promise of catching the iconic roosterfish, which finds great habitat all along the country's coastline.



short ride to one of the lodges it uses.

ACCOMMODATIONS: 20 rooms in total; 28 guests maximum.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: 39-foot custom walkaround sport-fisher, 31-foot Pursuit center-console with twin Yamaha 225s, 31-foot Eduardoño center-console with twin Yamaha 225s, and 29-foot Pursuit center-console with twin Yamaha 225s.

TACKLE: Reels — Stella, Saragosa, Tiagra, Torsa, Tranx and others; Rods — Shimano, Ocean Tackle International (OTI) for popping and jigging, and Seeker marlin and tuna rods.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: The Gulf of Chiriquí, including Hannibal Bank and the gulf's many islands, plus estuaries west of Boca Chica.

DISTANCE TO FISH: Most inshore/nearshore fishing is a run of 5 to 30 miles; the best offshore fishing is 35 to 55 miles from the lodges.

SEASON: Open December through August.

RATES: For five full days of fishing and six nights at Toucan Island Lodge, \$3,933 per person for two anglers per boat, or \$2,531 per person for four anglers per boat. That includes ground transfer from David Airport to the lodge and all meals.

COMMENTS: Come Fish Panama arranges for clients to stay at any of three different lodges.

3

HOOKED ON PANAMA

hookedonpanama.com
888-733-5368

Aqua Adventures' Hooked on Panama is the westernmost of all operations listed, located on the small peninsula that separates Costa Rica from Panama. The lodge opened in 2005. Contact Fred Stephens, U.S. reservations manager.

FROM PANAMA CITY: Fly to David, and then it's a two-hour drive to the lodge.

ACCOMMODATIONS: 12 double-occupancy ocean-view bungalows for up to 24 guests.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: Three 35-foot DeepSport boats with 12-foot beam and twin turbo-diesel engines.

TACKLE: Shimano conventionals with 30- to 80-pound mono for trolling, live-baiting; Shimano



ABOVE: One of the most common of large groupers off Panama, the broomtail readily strikes metal jigs. **LEFT:** Hooked on Panama's lodge is located on the remote western fringes of Pacific Panama.



spinners for popping. (Reel models not specified.)

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: Nearshore, most often around Punta Barica and Islas Ladrões.

DISTANCE TO FISH: Typically five to 20 miles to fish coast and out to Ladrões; offshore trolling can begin within 10 miles of the lodge.

SEASON: Open all year. (Late November through April best for billfish; April through August for yellowfin.)

RATES: For five days of fishing and six nights, \$4,620 or \$5,250 (depending upon season) per person for two anglers per boat, or \$2,986 or \$3,430 for four anglers per boat. Rates include ground transfer from David, all meals and open bar. Optional "VIP" rates also include customs service at airport, all in-country transportation including regional flights, and hotel in Panama City.

COMMENTS: The beachfront lodge sits amid a large grove of tropical trees in a parklike setting.

4

PANAFISHING ADVENTURES

panafishing.com
011-507-6498-1503

The Panafishing lodge, open since 2006, is near Pedasi on the Azuero Peninsula. Contact Pierre-Andre Demauge, the owner.

FROM PANAMA CITY: Fly (Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays only) to Pedasi in 45 minutes, or arrange with the lodge for a five-hour van ride.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Four rooms accommodating up to 11 guests in total.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: Two 25-foot Caribe Pro center-consoles with twin Suzuki 70s, and two 26-foot Twin Vee center-console cats with twin Suzuki 140s.

TACKLE: Many anglers bring gear, but the resort offers

COURTESY HOOKED ON PANAMA (OPPOSITE), DOUG OLANDER (ABOVE), COURTESY PANAFISHING ADVENTURE (TOP RIGHT)



Panafishing Adventures' lodge is located near Pedasi. It's a five-minute drive to the sandy beach on the southwestern fringes of the Gulf of Panama.

Shimano Stella and Saragosa reels with Smith or Black Hole rods for popping and jigging. Reels are spooled with 50-, 65- and 80-pound Jerry Brown braid.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: Up and down the eastern and southern coasts of the Azuero Peninsula, including river mouths, submerged and emergent rock piles and wrecks, and blue water (typically near the coast) when yellowfin are on.

DISTANCE TO FISH: For coastal game fish, anywhere from five minutes to two hours in either direction. For tuna, usually 10 to 30 miles.

SEASON: Open October through July. (January through May best for topwater action and feeding frenzies nearshore; summer and fall similar, but better odds for yellowfin offshore.)

RATES: For five days of fishing and six nights, \$2,620 per person for two anglers per boat, or \$1,920 for three anglers per boat, including all meals. Special rate for anglers flying in from the United States.

COMMENTS: Panafishing specializes in jigging and popping. A lot of very big roosters are taken in the area, and of course there's the aptly named Tuna Coast just to the south. A lack of other fishing resorts or large marinas in the area keeps competition minimal.

5

PANAMA KAYAK ADVENTURE

panamakayakadventure.com
011-507-6322-2855

The name tells the story of this operation, which began in 2013. The wilderness camp has been carved out of the remote jungle wilderness in the heart of the Tuna Coast on the lower Azuero Peninsula. Contact Pascal Artieda, owner/operator and kayak-angling fanatic.

FROM PANAMA CITY: Artieda will arrange a van for the five-hour drive to Cambutal, the end of the road at the bottom of the peninsula, where a panga will meet you for the one-hour ride to the camp.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Four new bungalows that sleep two each.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: Seven Hobie kayaks (four Outbacks, two Pro Anglers, one Revolution) and two super pangas (23- and 27-foot).

TACKLE: Most bring their own favorite gear,

“AN AWFUL LOT OF THOSE “FISH OF A LIFETIME” HAVE BEEN TAKEN ALONG PANAMA’S COAST, FROM MARLIN OVER 500 POUNDS TO 200-PLUS-POUND YELLOWFIN TUNA AND ROOSTERS 70 POUNDS AND MORE.”



ABOVE: Much of the year, Panama's Tuna Coast offers ideal conditions for kayak-fishing enthusiasts. **RIGHT:** New for 2015, Pascal Artieda's bungalows replace tents for kayak anglers on Panama's "wild coast."



but Shimano Saragosa outfits are available with 60-pound braid for rental at \$25 per day. **PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS:** The Tuna Coast in the vicinity of the camp, both along the rocks and farther out for both coastal and blue-water game fish. **DISTANCE TO FISH:** From right in front of the camp to several miles up, down or away from the coast. Tuna are often caught within a half-mile of shore. Sometimes Artieda will "mother-skiff" anglers and kayaks to more distant areas using the pangas; in any case, a skiff remains in proximity of kayakers when on the water.

SEASON: December through June. **RATES:** For five days of fishing and six nights, \$1,990 per person for two kayak anglers assigned to a skiff, or \$1,600 for three anglers, including all meals. Charge for round-trip van transportation from the Panama City airport is \$350 per person. **COMMENTS:** A unique chance to experience some of the country's most exciting fishing and some of its most remote coastal jungle wilderness at a bargain price. Most of the effort involves slow-trolling live bait, casting poppers and working jigs.

6

PANAMA SPORTFISHING LODGE

panamasportfishinglodge.com

843-816-7663

Located at Boca Chica on the Gulf of Chiriquí, the lodge opened its doors in 2008. Contact owner John de la Cruz.

FROM PANAMA CITY: Fly to David, where hotel staff will drive you to the nearby marina, where a boat will take you fishing or to the lodge first.

ACCOMMODATIONS: 14 double rooms can accommodate 28 guests.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: Nine boats: a variety of center-consoles, expresses and convertibles from 29 to 34 feet.

TACKLE: For trolling, live-baiting, or jigging and popping, Shimano reels: Tiagras, Torsas, and Trinidades and Stellas. Rods are Shimano, OTI and Black Hole.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: The Gulf of Chiriquí including Hannibal Bank, Coiba Island and the gulf's many other islands.

DISTANCE TO FISH: 15 to 60 miles from the lodge.

SEASON: Open year-round.

RATES: For five days of fishing and six nights, \$4,895 per person for two anglers, or \$2,995 per person for a group of four.

COMMENTS: Recently the lodge introduced a mothership option that sleeps eight and offers anglers multiday trips to Coiba and the outer Gulf of Chiriquí.

7

PANAMA YACHT & FISHING CHARTERS

panamayachtandfishingcharters.com

011-507-6780-3346

The country's newest fishing operation (since 2014) is also its most diverse, with a mothership that fishes both Pacific and Atlantic coasts of Panama. Contact manager Hennie Marais.

FROM PANAMA CITY: Varies depending upon where anglers will be meeting the mothership.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Five guest cabins on the mothership and two more on a 66-foot sport-fisher can sleep 10 to 12 anglers in total.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: 98-foot Knight & Carver yacht (the mothership), accompanied by a 66-foot Buddy Davis, a 37-foot Strike walkaround and a 17-foot skiff.

TACKLE: "Full range for spinning and trolling," primarily Shimano and some Penn gear.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: Las Perlas Islands



and Coiba in the Pacific; Bocas Del Toro and the San Blas in the Atlantic, depending upon time of year.

DISTANCE TO FISH: Highly variable depending upon where the mothership is anchored and what anglers are targeting. Very generally, likely to be from 5 to 20 miles.

SEASON: Trips can be booked year-round.

RATES: For six days of fishing and seven nights, \$7,088 per person for a group of 10 anglers (using both the Buddy Davis and Strike), or \$7,550 per person for a group of four anglers (using only the Strike).

COMMENTS: One of Panama's high-end fishing options and certainly the most flexible. In 2015, PYFC also became a Guy Harvey Outpost operation.

8

PÊCHE PANAMA

pechepanama.com

This lodge, smaller and more intimate than most, has been operating since 2008 in Boca Chica. Contact owner Olivier Charpentier.

FROM PANAMA CITY: As with other Boca Chica resorts, most visitors fly in to David, though a few prefer the 6 1/2-hour drive.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Three rooms for up to six anglers.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: One 28- and one 26-foot Caribe Pro center-console with twin Suzuki 140s and 115s.

TACKLE: 50- and 80-pound-class trolling outfits; Shimano Stellas and Saragosas with 80-pound braid for popping and jigging.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: Primarily islands in the upper Chiriquí (including Secas, Ladrões, Parida) for roosters and cubera, and Hannibal Bank and Montuosa Island for billfish and tuna.

DISTANCE TO FISH: 20 to 60 miles.

SEASON: Open December through June.

RATES: For five days of fishing and six nights, \$3,200 for two anglers (does not include rental spinning tackle, if needed).

LEFT: PYFC's mothership puts anglers into the heart of great action off either the Atlantic or Pacific coasts. **BELOW:** Behemoth dorado prowls the blue waters off Panama.



DOUG OLANDER (TOP), COURTESY PANAMA KAYAK ADVENTURE (LEFT), COURTESY PYFC (OPPOSITE TOP), ADRIANE E. GRAY (OPPOSITE BOTTOM)



ABOVE: While giant black marlin patrol the country's Pacific coast, Piñas Bay offers the best shot. **BELOW:** Room with a view of the Gulf of Chiriquí from Propiedad de Paradise Lodge on Isla Parida.

9

PROPIEDAD DE PARADISE LODGE

fishpanamatoday.com
866-245-1492

Propiedad de Paradise has a proximity advantage: Its location, on Isla Parida in the Gulf of Chiriquí, shortens the run to Hannibal, Coiba and Montuosa. It's operated here since 2006. Contact Shane Jarvis, skipper and co-owner.

FROM PANAMA CITY: As with other area resorts, most anglers fly in to David; from the marina there, it's an hour to Isla Parida by boat.

ACCOMMODATIONS: The lodge uses a guesthouse



COMMENTS: Adventurous anglers should see Pêche Panama's website for the option to stay at and fish from the lodge's base camp on Montuosa Island, in the heart of some of Panama's wildest big-fish waters — a long run from most land-based lodges.

with two bedrooms, each with four beds.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: A 33-foot World Cat with twin Suzuki 300s, and a 25-foot Seacraft center-console equipped with twin Suzuki 140s.

TACKLE: Shimano conventionals — Tiagra 50s and 80s and Talicas; spinning — Saragosas with Terez rods.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: The entire Gulf of Chiriquí.

DISTANCE TO FISH: From in front of the lodge to Islas Ladrones (15 miles) to Hannibal Bank and Isla Montuosa (approximately 40 miles).

SEASON: Open year-round.

RATES: For five days of fishing and six nights, \$6,525 per person for two anglers, or \$3,995 for four anglers. Includes all meals, daily laundry, an open bar and high-speed Internet. (VIP packages also available that include two nights in Panama City hotel with all transfers, VIP airport service and in-country flights.)

COMMENTS: PDP Lodge works with only one group at a time.

10

TRANQUILO BAY ECO ADVENTURE LODGE

tranquilobay.com
719-589-6952

One of the few lodges catering to anglers who want to sample Panama's productive Caribbean coast, Tranquilo Bay is the largest resort in the pristine Bocas del Toro. It's been operating since 2005.

ADRIANE GRAY (TOP); PROPIEDAD DE PARADISE LODGE (BOTTOM); COURTESY TRANQUILO BAY ECO ADVENTURE LODGE (OPPOSITE CENTER); COURTESY TROPIC STAR LODGE (OPPOSITE BOTTOM)



Contact Jim or Renee Kimball or Jay Viola, owners/operators.

FROM PANAMA CITY: A 50-minute flight to Isla Colón followed by a short boat ride to the lodge.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Six cabanas for up to 12 guests.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: One 25-foot SeaVee center-console with Yamaha 200, and one 25-foot Caribe center-console with Yamaha 200.

TACKLE: Abu Garcia 5500 baitcasters with St. Croix rods (15-pound line), and Shimano Tekotas for offshore (30-pound line).

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: The mouth of the Changuinola and Sixaola rivers for tarpon and snook.

DISTANCE TO FISH: About an hour run.

SEASON: May through June, September through October.

RATES: For five days of fishing and six nights, \$2,750 per person for two anglers, or \$2,215 per person for four anglers, including meals, beer, rum and wine.

COMMENTS: Minimal fishing pressure in the region; owners built their impressive resort themselves.

11

TROPIC STAR LODGE

tropicstar.com
800-682-3424

If any one lodge seems synonymous with "Panama fishing," it's Tropic Star, located since 1963 on the edge of the Darien jungle, about 30 miles from Panama's eastern border, near Piñas Bay. Contact Bonnie in the United States or fishing director Albert Battoo in Panama.

FROM PANAMA CITY: An hour flight from Albrook, Panama City's domestic airport, to Piñas Bay, and then a short boat ride to the lodge.

ACCOMMODATIONS: Four two-room cabins, a house with eight rooms, and a three-bedroom "Palace." In total, 38 guests can be accommodated.

SPORT-FISHING FLEET: 16 Bertram 31s with twin diesels.

TACKLE: Shimano — Tiagra 30s and 50s; Tyrnos with 16- to 20-pound mono; Spheros spinners with 65-braid for popping near the coast.

PRIMARY FISHING GROUNDS: Adjacent coast and blue waters offshore, which include famed Zane Grey Bank, where large black marlin and yellowfin tuna come to feed.

DISTANCE TO FISH: Typically 6 to 20 miles.

SEASON: December through September.

RATES: For six days and seven nights, \$4,420 to \$7,595 per person for two anglers (per boat) depending upon time of year, or \$3,160 to \$5,500 per person for four anglers (per boat). Includes all meals but not a \$600 transfer fee for ground transfers, VIP service at Tocumen Airport and in-country flights.

COMMENTS: Tropic Star prides itself on being a world-class resort, widely renowned and multiple-award-winning. It offers a long list of amenities (see its website). Many big names have shown up on its guest list (e.g., John Wayne, Fuzzy Zoeller, Guy Harvey).



FAR LEFT: Tranquilo Bay Lodge sits tucked into Panama's Caribbean jungle. **LEFT:** An aerial view of famed Tropic Star Lodge.

“**NOTCHING MARKS FOR MARLIN, SAILFISH, YELLOWFIN TUNA, ROOSTERFISH AND CUBERA SNAPPER IN ONE TRIP IS NOT ONLY FEASIBLE BUT COMMON.**”

ED. NOTE: Information from the Panama Big Game Fishing Club (panamabiggamefishingclub.com) was not received in time for inclusion in this feature; however, it is yet another great option for those planning fishing travel to the country. 🇵🇸