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PANAMA-Abundance of Fish

by Jeff Currier

The word panama means ‘abundance of fish’, but to most of us, Panama is a small country nestled at the bottom of Central America next to Costa Rica. It is home of the Panama Canal, but in recent years more popular for the extraditing of Manuel Noriega. Bordered by the Caribbean Sea of the Atlantic Ocean on the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south, and rich with freshwater rivers and lakes, Panama is one of the top angling regions in the world. However, due to the popularity of Costa Rica, Panama is seldom traveled and even less fished.

Prior to my first trip to Panama, I was like other Central American fly fishermen. I had fished extensively throughout the ever popular Belize and Costa Rica, but never even considered Panama. It wasn’t until one sub-zero Saturday morning in January when Flip Pallot’s “Walkers Cay Chronicles” featured Panama, that I took an interest.

Flip Pallot was at Tropic Star Lodge on Piñas Bay, Panama, fly fishing for Pacific Sailfish. The sailfishing was spectacular as they teased a number of fish to the boat, but it was the scenery that struck me. The rolling seas with free jumping sailfish, huge schools of tuna, dolphin, bonito, and even snappers were within a mile of the shoreline, which in itself, was a spectacular lush green mountainous view.

Tropic Star Lodge is about thirty miles from the border of Columbia in a region known as the Darién Gap, one of the world’s unspoiled tropical wilderness areas. It is this impenetrable rainforest that has kept roads from connecting North and South America for over a century. The lodge is only reachable by plane or boat.

At the time, my wife (Granny) and I were planning a spring vacation to Costa Rica, using up two free plane tickets, but deep inside I wanted to try something different. “Wow!” I exclaimed, “what a place! Sure would like to go there.”

“Aren’t the tickets good for anywhere in Central America?” Granny asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Than let’s go,” she said.

It was that simple, and on Monday morning I began to research with a phone call to Mike Fitzgerald Jr. of Frontiers International. Mike is truly the guru of worldwide fly fishing. “Hi Mike, it’s Currier, I was wondering about the chances of getting into Tropic Star this Spring?” I asked.

“Ha! Jeff, they get booked up a couple years in advance. It’s considered to be one of the finest blue water fisheries in the world and it’s nearly impossible to get a spot. In fact, it’s a favorite

place of my father and I have yet to even go. Coincidentally though, I have the place booked for a week in May and there are two slots available, but it's not cheap," Mike replied. "What's not cheap?" I asked.

"\$3500, and Jeff, even I don't get deals here," Mike replied.

That ended that conversation fast, but not a trip to Panama. I arranged our two free plane tickets for Panama City and began to plan the trip anyway. I've always liked adventure, and surely it would be found here.

Almost three months later, Granny and I, along with the Berlitz Spanish Dictionary, found ourselves in a Pension in the heart of downtown Panama City. It was just after dark and we were quickly warned it was unsafe to leave our dreary little room until day break. The room had one small barred window that must of faced the noisiest street in Panama City. Cars were zipping by at mock speeds, honking as they went.

When day break finally came, Granny and I hit the streets to explore our new environment. We were scheduled to spend nearly a month in Panama and planned to spend several days in the city arranging our trip. Deep inside me, visions of casting flies to sailfish at Pinas Bay loomed. Somehow, now that I was so close, I was going to get there.

The first place we stopped was the domestic airport. We quickly learned that, because of the small size of Panama, air travel would be cheap, averaging \$25-\$50 a flight. We could see just about all of Panama during a month. Naturally my thoughts went to the airstrip that Tropic Star Lodge guests are flown in on. According to a map of Panama, there are two towns near Piñas Bay, Piñas, on the Bay itself, and Jaque within ten miles. After a little research I found that two planes a week went to the town of Jaque. Surely I thought that if Jaque actually made the map and had air service, that there must be some civilization.

Without further investigation, Granny and I just assumed we would find a place to stay when we got there and went ahead and booked a flight to Jaque. It was for that morning at 10:00 A.M.. It didn't give us much time so we taxied back to our dark room, stuffed everything in our backpacks, and returned to the airport.

When we got to the airport, we found that the flight was running about two hours late. There was only one other person waiting. His luggage consisted of an old microwave box full of miscellaneous supplies. I broke out my dictionary and attempted a conversation to ask about Jaque, Piñas Bay, and even the fishing, but my pronunciation was so bad that it was as if he spoke something other than Spanish (I found out later that many of the people of Jaque did speak something different).

When our plane finally arrived, I was surprised at how small it was. It was barely large enough for three of us, but somehow we crammed our backpacks and the other man's torn up microwave box in and took off. Once we were well on our way, the pilot turned around with a very perplexed look and asked Granny and I, "Adonde va, (where are you going)?"

Even with my rotten Spanish skills, I knew what he asked and responded, "Pescando (fishing)."

'Going fishing' always triggers a conversation and this day was no different. The pilot began to ramble on at lightening speed and showed how poorly I paid attention in high school Spanish class. Surely though, he was talking about the great fishing at Piñas Bay and just by reading his body language I answered yes and no and smiled back at him at the right times. I did such a good job that later that day Granny even commented on how good my Spanish was.

The flight turned into a two-hour roller coaster ride. We ran into some huge thunderheads and made some very interesting maneuvers to avoid the heart of them. Toward the end of the flight the pilot flew literally 300 feet above the ocean and a 1/2 mile or so from the coastline. He was navigating by sight. Although it was a rainy, grey day, the Pacific was glassy calm, and to my own disbelief, I could see the glimmering sides of fish below me. "My God Granny! Look! See the sparkling commotion on the water? Those are huge schools of fish!" I exclaimed. Just when she was about to question my statement it became obvious they were fish. A Pacific Sailfish free-jumped three times. "Look!" she shouted.

At last, Piñas Bay came into view, and low and behold came Tropic Star Lodge, nestled in the back of the bay. It was a spectacular sight. An awesome lodge, located in one of the worlds most desolate places. I knew now that we were only minutes from the landing strip in Jaque and began to carefully study the terrain we were to be dropped off in.

As the plane began to land, a chill ran up my spine. We had taken a sharp turn inland and traveled for five minutes. Five minutes by plane meant to me that it was a long walk back to the ocean, and on top of that, there was no civilization in sight. What kind of awful mess had I gotten us into? I wondered if we should just stay on the plane and return to Panama City, but realized that I would regret that for the rest of my life. We must go for it I thought, and go for it we did.

The plane came to a screeching halt after it touched down onto a very muddy air strip. Rain was pouring down and it was obvious that the pilot was anxious to unload us and get out while he could. There were a few folks standing in the rain acting as if they as never seen a plane before. One woman was prepared to board while the others were awaiting the arrival of the man that flew in with us. It appeared that he was from here, and was probably gone for quite some time by the reception he was given. Plop! Out went both our backpacks and the man's box of stuff, and in went the woman and her burlap bag, which was full of fruit. The pilot exposed himself for a mere five seconds before scrambling back into his cockpit. Off they went.

As the plane took off up the runway, Granny looked a bit distressed. We were both drenched to the bone. Our backpacks and everything in them were soaked, and we were stranded in the jungle for minimum of four days, that was if the scheduled plane was even going to return.

With anger and fear in her voice, "Now what?" she asked, as she looked around, "there's nothing here!"

"There's got to be something. Those people just headed off in that direction. Let's go," I replied. Sure enough there was a trail, and just as we headed toward it a dark figure appeared. It was a man pushing a wheel barrel and headed directly toward us. As he approached, he muttered something in some unknown language. All we knew was that was a friendly tone and we were praying that he was there to help. He wanted us to load our soaking backpacks in his wheel barrel and follow him into the forest. Granny handed hers over immediately while I was reluctant and kept wearing it.

The torrential rain continued to fall as we sloshed along for about ten minutes down a winding path, occasionally passing by some of the most primitive housing imaginable. We then came to a river bank in which a long boat called a kiyuka, made from a hollowed out tree awaited. Surprisingly, it was propelled by a decent looking outboard motor run by a boatman. There was already a woman on board. She had herself completely wrapped up in old plastic trash bags hunkering down from the rain. The wheel barrel man loaded our packs into the boat and we stepped on board. Suddenly, an armed official appeared out of nowhere demanding something of us. Frustrated that we did not understand him, he motioned us to him with his arms, and we went. Now what, I thought.

“Pasaporte, pasaporte!” he demanded.

Granny and I each handed over our passports equipped with our required tourist cards. I hoped this is all he wanted. After a good hard look at our documents he handed them back to us and we again boarded the boat.

“Do you have any idea where we are going?”, asked Granny.

“Well honey . . . , not really. I’m hoping that we didn’t just walk through Jaque, and that now we are headed there, but something tells me I’m dreaming,” I replied.

Down river we went. At least we were headed toward the ocean where the fish were flourishing, I thought. As we motored along downstream the rain subsided, and soon a ray of sun light, combined with the breeze from the motion of the boat, dried out our light tarponwear clothing. The scenery we had witnessed that cold January day months before on Walkers Cay Chronicles was now before us, and although our future was unknown, I felt a sense of security.

That’s just about when the uncertainty hit again. We approached the river mouth, and it appeared as if we were ocean bound. The problem I noticed was that the river current, colliding with the huge gentle waves of the Pacific ocean was creating some 40-foot waves that even the finest of surfers would not think of beckoning with. Surely I thought we were going to pull over to shore at the last moment. I then looked back at the boatman only to see him climbing into a hefty bag rain suit he had pieced together with duck tape.

“Oh shit! I screamed. Hold on tight Granny!” Granny didn’t need to be told that, for she doesn’t even know how to swim. It was truly a white- knuckler for her. Off we went, attacking the first wave, which was only a 20-footer. Straight up at full throttle.

“Oh my God! Screamed Granny, We’re gonna flip!”.

I agreed totally, but just when it looked like it was over, the boatman made one of the finest maneuvers I have ever seen with any motorized craft. He pivoted sharply to the left just before the wave broke, and surfed it. Then, when the opportunity allowed, we jetted over the top of the wave and at full throttle attacked the next one.

“Awesome!” I exclaimed, and gave the boatman a thumbs up.

It took us nearly an hour to safely exit the river mouth. It was the ride of our lives. The boatman was so good that after the second or third wave, I knew we would only get splashed, and we were used to getting wet. Now I wondered which direction the boat would turn. A left meant we

were headed to the mystery town of Jaque. A right could only mean one thing, Tropic Star. We went right.

The whole puzzle began to piece together in my mind. No gringos in their right mind had ever just flown into the Darien Gap to fish on their own. Every tourist that had ever been to that air strip was a guest of Tropic Star Lodge. Even though it was not the usual arrival day, the natives of Jaque assumed we were guests of the lodge.

As we cruised along toward Piñas Bay, the sun was low in the sky. I wondered, here's one of the most renowned lodges in the world, booked up years in advance, and here come two drowned rats with almost no money, to crash the place. What would the management think? But soon my concern for what they would think was erased out by the spectacular setting. Enormous schools of tuna crashed baitfish before my eyes, while sailfish leaped randomly along the rocky shoreline. For the first time in my entire life I felt as though I was seeing an area that was entirely undisturbed by man. No matter what happened next, nothing could make me regret this day.

When we arrived at Tropic Stars beach, most of the fishing boats were returning from a day fishing. These were big boats, and our kiyuka was dwarfed by them. Each boat was pulling up to this magnificent dock and dropping off its guests. Every boat displayed the number of sailfish caught and released by hanging a small white flag. No boat had less than ten flopping in the light breeze and several had thirty to forty. This area truly had some of the worlds finest fishing.

When we hopped out of the kiyuka, the boatman handed us our packs, pushed his boat off the beach and took off. That's strange I thought, we don't need to pay or tip the man. Just about then, a tall woman peered down off the dock at us and then at the departing boatman. She began to shout. Her voice projected like some famous speaker and it was obvious that she was extremely unhappy about something. We hoped it wasn't us. At first it was all in Spanish and was directed toward the boatman. Now we knew why he was in such a hurry to leave. Then it was toward us, first in Spanish until she identified us as Americans, then, without missing a beat, in English. "What are you doing here!? This is a private lodge! No one walks on my beach unless they are a guest! No one just shows up here!!!" she hollered.

On and on she went, until finally she began to run out of steam. About that time Granny was making a b-line straight toward her with desperation in her eyes.

"You need to help us. My husband got me into this whole mess. If you want to send us back to Panama City, fine, we'll go, just don't send us back to Jaque!" she begged.

The woman was totally flabbergasted, "Well! What are you doing here in the first place!? What . . . what in the world . . . , oh never mind. Follow me," she said in a distressed voice.

Off we went, following her along a cement walkway toward the main lodge.

"We're in. We're cool! Did you see how many sailfish they caught today? This is going to be unreal!" I whispered.

When we got to the lodge, she had the three of us sit at a table. Her name was Eleanore and she was the manager of the lodge. Although she was now calm, deep inside she was absolutely livid that we there.

“So, tell me, how did you find Tropic Star and why Tropic Star?” she asked. “There are certainly much easier lodges to get too in Central America.”

“Eleanore, blame Flip Pallot. We were set on going to Costa Rica, when one cold morning in January, Walkers Cay Chronicles featured Tropic Star Lodge. I made up my mind then,” I said.

Shocked, and surely thinking I was insane, Eleanore said, “Oh.”

For some strange reason, Eleanore respected my need to fish Piñas Bay. She set us up in a beautiful room and arranged us three days of fishing with a superb captain and very pleasant mate. We landed numerous fish from sails to dolphin, (I lost the tip to my 14-weight on the first sail I hooked, that’s another long story) but she definitely didn’t give the services away. We spent more money on those three days of fishing than ever before. Much more than we could really afford, however we now look back on those three days of fishing as some of the finest we ever had, and can’t put a price tag on that.

We could have easily left Panama after our short stay at Tropic Star fully satisfied, but we remained there for three more weeks as planned. We experienced many more adventurous times, fortunately for me the most adventurous was because of Granny. During that time we visited the Cuna Indians in the San Blas Islands, toured the Panama Canal, and even climbed Volcán Barú, the highest mountain of Panama. Naturally we fished more as well. The canal itself provided excellent top water action for peacock bass, and we found many waters abundant with snook and tarpon. To Granny and me, Panama means, ‘Abundance of fish, in paradise’.