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SPECIAL 2005

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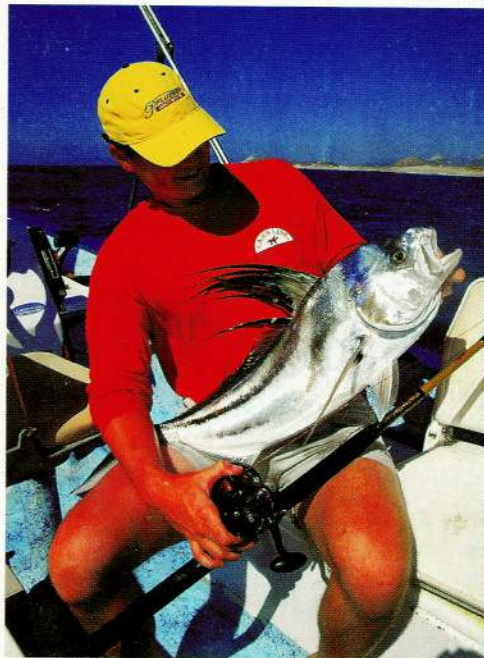
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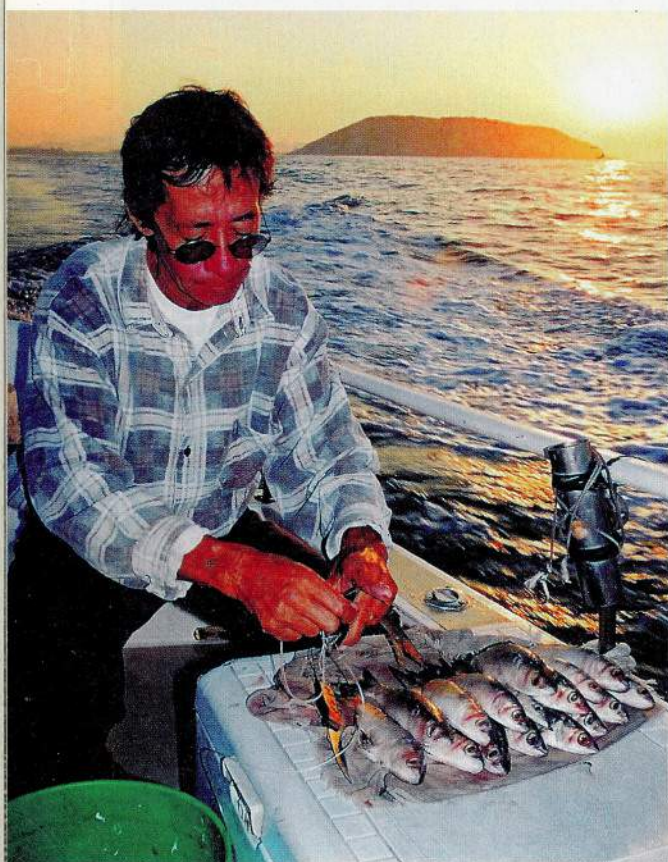
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BELOW, A DECKHAND RIGGING LOTS OF BAIT FOR A DAY OF FISHING ABOARD AN ARIES FLEET SPORTFISHER; BRIGHT COLORED JIGS ARE AN EXCELLENT WAY TO ENTICE A SAILFISH TO STRIKE IN THE CALM WATERS OFF MAZATLAN; MARINA EL CID IS A WELL-PROTECTED HARBOR THAT PROVIDES AN EASY GATEWAY TO THE FISHING GROUNDS; AND A PACIFIC SAILFISH DANCING HIS WAY ACROSS THE OCEAN.

Mazatlan was originally settled by the Spaniards back in 1531 and became a major port and fishing village on the Pacific coast. In 1603 pirates began dominating the waters around Mazatlan to capture galleons filled with gold and silver that was mined in the nearby mountains. During the Mexican-American war, the US army marched down the coast and closed the port and the French bombarded the port in 1864, during their conquest. After things settled down, Mazatlan established itself as homeport to one of the largest yellowfin tuna and shrimp fishing fleets in the world.

The fish-filled waters of the Pacific ocean gently pounds the white sandy beaches of Mazatlan while just a few miles off shore anglers are reeling in striped, blue and black marlin, swordfish, acrobatic Pacific sailfish, yellowfin tuna, dorado and wahoo. For decades the port of Mazatlan has been home to sportfishers that would head out to the fishing grounds with visiting anglers who would be dropped off at the docks after short taxicab rides from local resorts. The old fishing village of Mazatlan is still an active place early in the morning and again in the afternoon when anglers return with their catch.



*From sailfish to swordfish Mazatlan has it all.
Follow our guide to Aztec fishing heaven*

Feature and Photography by Jim Niemiec

In the old days, big game anglers would test their angling skills in the calm waters off Mazatlan and often return to the wooden docks with sailfish and marlin tied to the transom or bow of a sportfisher and unload the billfish, not to eat, but rather to hang up for a trophy photo in front of tourists that would show up at the docks as the boats returned from a day at sea. Unfortunately, the killing of thousands of sailfish a year by commercial long-liners and sportfishermen was devastating to the fishery and anglers began heading to other Mexican mainland fishing spots farther south or across to Cabo and the East Cape region.

Through the efforts of many conservation minded anglers, cooperation of the Mexican fleet owners, the Billfish Foundation, International Game Fish Tournaments, World Billfish Series and dedicated captains, there is now a positive attitude around all the marinas for sportfishers proudly flying a red and white "tag and release" flag as they come into the mouth of one of Mazatlan's two harbors. Working together, in the best interest of the this blue water fishery, these groups have turned things around and again Mazatlan is well on its way to making a full recovery and being once again a destination that supports a huge population of spikebills and other game fish. "Gaining international



MAZATLAN'S MAGIC



Clockwise from above: Marina El Cid; a sailfish being revived just before releasing the fish; Jack Crevalle are caught from pangas along the beaches of Mazatlan. Here, Geronimo Cevallos, general manager of Marina El Cid, holds up a 20-pound jack prior to its release; pulling on a marlin; flags indicating that billfishing off Mazatlan is coming back strong due to the conservation "catch, tag and release" program; and a marlin out of water.

recognition for implementing the catch-and-release concept of fishing has greatly enhanced the attitude that anglers have towards Mazatlan and making this resort destination among the most ideal places in world to practice the sport of big game fishing," said Geronimo Cevallos of El Cid Resorts.

A typical fishing day starts off with sweet rolls, coffee and fresh squeezed orange juice served dockside as the sun rises. Packaged lunches are available at most all resorts and should be ordered the day before the trip, while cold drinks and ice are traditionally put on as passengers board fully equipped sport-fishers. It's a very short run to the bright blue fish holding waters out of either Marina El Cid or the old fishing village, as the deckhand will keep busy rigging bait and checking tackle on

the way out of the harbor. Captains' keen eyes are always focused on the ocean's calm surface in hopes of spotting a tailing, sleeping, feeding or jumping billfish. Often an angler can be hooked up to a leaping marlin or sailfish within sight of the many hotels along the beach.

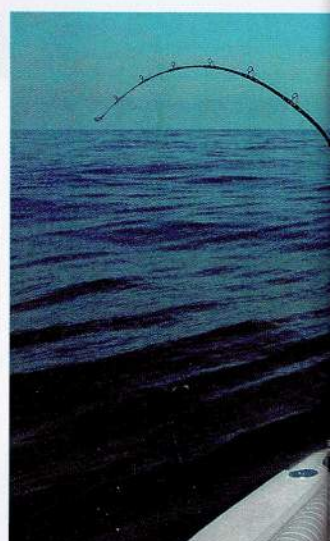
Large schools of tuna, dorado and wahoo concentrate around huge balls of bait as they migrate through the warm waters along the coast of mainland Mexico. This ocean is filled with sea life. Not only will anglers spot splashing schools of feeding tuna and other pelagics with birds circling overhead, these semi-tropical seas are also home to turtles, dolphin and giant whales.

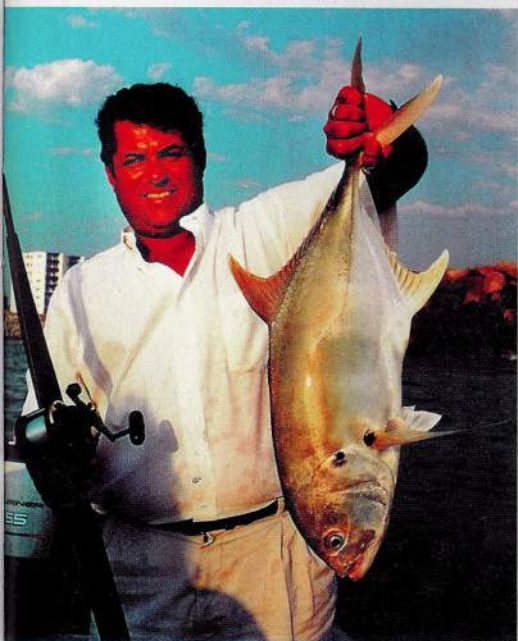
To provide insight into just how productive fishing off Mazatlan can be the following events took place during a single day

aboard the charter boat Aries II, captained by Victor Togo on a warm November day.

The azure seas were flat calm as the sport-fisher cleared Deer Island on a heading to a set of shark buoys that had been attracting big bull dorado. The boat made a turn to starboard and the captain yelled down from the flying bridge, "Pez Vela, there are three sailfish and they are sleeping. You can just see the top of their sails, hook on a live bait and be ready to cast when I stop the boat!"

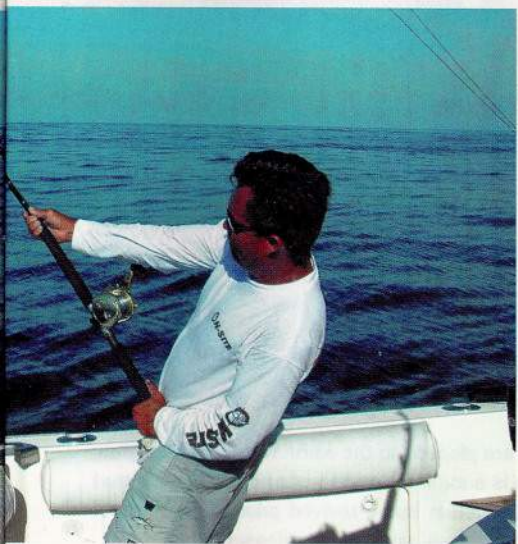
The water was so clear that you could see the dark back and fins of all three sailfish under the water. The bait splashed in front of the leading sail and he attacked it while the other two sailfish just swam around. My wife Toni cast a second bait and it got bit and a third live bait was dropped back by the





deckhand that resulted in a "triple header." We were all fishing medium light Daiwa tackle and 40-pound Trilene Big Game line and the captain did an outstanding job of keeping the sportfisher at the right angles to make fighting the leaping sailfish easier on the anglers. In short intervals all three sailfish were caught and released. We hadn't even been outside the Marina El Cid harbor for more than 30 minutes.

Water conditions were perfect so marlin lures were dropped back as the captain steered his yacht in the direction of the buoys. Only five minutes had passed when the line popped out of the outrigger and a striped marlin was hooked on an E.A.L. lure. The spikebill weighed in the 175-pound class as it was brought to leader and released. Not too bad of a start for any day of fishing.



Captain Togo spotted diving terns and wheeled his boat around as two sailfish came up on the jigs. Dropping back live baits we hooked both fish which were quickly released. Still heading in the direction of the buoys two more tailers were spotted by the deckhand and one fish climbed on a Zukar lure before a live bait could be dropped back. This fish was also quickly released and it wasn't a half-hour more when a double jig strike produced 2 more released sailfish. Seven billfish released and we hadn't even reached the fishing grounds.

The day went on to produce as many yellowfin tuna as one would want to pull on and the shark buoys held a number of big dorado, but only one was interested in biting and it weighed 42 pounds. The *Aries II* was back at the dock at 2 p.m. with outriggers filled with red and white "tag and release" billfish and assorted small game fish flags indicating one fantastic day of fishing off Mazatlan.

Anglers have the option of bringing their own fishing tackle on board a sportfisher or using tackle provided by the charter boat. Most of the tackle that is available in Mexico is on the heavy side to ensure that a fish is not lost. It would be this writer's suggestion that if you have your own big game tackle, take it with you and fish it. It's much more sporting to drop back a live bait to a lit up marlin or sailfish on medium class standup tackle than it is to sit in a fighting chair and winch in a billfish on the heavier gear carried on most sportfishers.

If you are taking your own tackle down to Mexico make sure to include a mix of big marlin lures in a variety of colors. One of the hottest lures on the market is the new E.A.L. lure made by Seven-strand that sends off electronic impulses duplicating sounds made by a baitfish. A selection of tuna feathers, leader material and hooks for fishing both live and rigged bait should round out your tackle needs.

As for rods and reels to bring along on a trip out of Mazatlan there are so many fine products on the market today that it really doesn't matter as to one particular manufacturer, they all fish about the same. This writer's standard rod caddy would include a couple of 60-pound-class trolling rods with roller guides, at least one drop-back 40-pound-class rod for stand-up, live baiting a marlin and a couple of medium action rods for trolling feathers through schools of tuna or dorado. Reels and line should be matched to the rods that will be fished, but make sure there is new line on the reels and that drags are in good working condition.

The summer and early fall months are peak times of the year to fish for a wide variety of fish off Mazatlan. Swordfish begin showing up when the water just starts to warm in late March, striped marlin arrive in May and sailfish move into nearby waters during the summer months and hang around



Counterclockwise from top: bull dorado are plentiful in the warm waters of Mazatlan; a trip to the central market in Mazatlan is a must for anglers staying at resorts that offer in-room cooking amenities; this sailfish is being revived prior to its release; and the author holds up a small Pacific sailfish, which was released alive.

through December along with tuna, dorado and wahoo. Big game anglers hoping to hook into a monster blue or black marlin should plan on booking a trip between July and October when the sea temperatures rise up into the high seventies and often even up into the low eighties.

If you plan on eating fresh fish at the resort or flying fish back home when you leave Mazatlan let the captain know as soon as the fish comes on board. The deckhand will fillet the fish, bag it and put it on ice to keep it fresh. Most all resorts have chefs that will prepare a great evening meal that is very reasonably priced or you can ask to have your catch frozen. Most airlines will not allow Styrofoam coolers to be used as checked baggage so make sure that you bring along a sturdy Coleman or Igloo ice chest. Some airlines don't want there to be any ice in the cooler and suggest dry ice, which is very hard to find anywhere in Mexico. It would be this angler's suggestion to make sure the fish is totally frozen before it goes into the cooler to reduce any chances of it thawing.

Getting to Mazatlan from any U.S. airport is easy as many airlines make direct flights to this growing fishing resort area. Off-season airline rates often are available during the peak fishing periods so shop around for the best fares. **WO**

» *Author Jim Niemiec lives in Tustin, California, and frequently fishes exotic locations around the world.*

