

# Out beyond the Osa Peninsula

**Large sailfish,  
blue marlin and big  
roosterfish await you in  
Golfito, a small angler's hideaway  
on the edge of the Pacific Ocean.**

*Julien Lajournade*



## Costa Rica

**While trolling for sailfish, it is not unusual to be visited by a blue marlin! On a light 30lb rod, the lucky angler can expect a spectacular fight and great sport!**



In the southwest of Costa Rica, near the border with Panama, the landscape has not changed since the great navigators first came across the area in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Behind beaches swept by the swell of the Pacific Ocean, small mountains thick with jungle form a barrier to the clouds. Groups of jewel-coloured macaws wheel from tree to tree, uttering their harsh cries, while squadrons of pelicans glide just above the waves... The only thing missing from this picture is a jaguar chasing down a peccary on the beach!

The law of the jungle also applies underwater, where the spectacular roosterfish rub shoulders with Pacific jack crevalle, snappers, snook and saltwater crocodiles, some of which grow to enormous sizes.

The Osa Peninsula is Costa Rica's ecological posterchild. One of Central America's most biodiverse regions, it is a refuge for many species that have seen their habitat shrink dramatically, and in some cases disappear altogether. Within the 50,000 hectares of the Corcovado National Park, tapirs,



Double-strikes from sailfish are not uncommon off Golfito. Sometimes you can have 3 or 4 sails chasing the teaser at the same time!

peccaries, giant anteaters and five species of big cats, as well as the fierce harpy eagle, that hunter of monkeys and sloths, find a measure of protection from both poachers and real estate investors. This is the backdrop for the fishing excursions that set out from the peaceful village of Golfito.

### Nestled in the gulf

Golfito could have been called Puerto Escondido, the "hidden port", or the "port of pirates". This small gulf offers discreet shelter from the ocean. You have to get quite close to the coast to spot the channel that connects the great Golfo

Dulce, a kind of tropical fjord 200m deep (in which commercial fishing is prohibited) to the "Small Gulf", or Golfito, whose eponymous village was founded on a strip of land separating the lagoon from the mountains. Yves and Bernadette Harlepp arrived here from France 13 years ago and have transformed a village house into a guesthouse for fishermen. Having moved around a fair bit to Mali, Ivory Coast, Reunion Island, Mayotte and French Guiana (where Yves worked as a guide for those seeking big tarpon), they selected a quiet and fishy place and now live there nine months a year. ➤



Anthony the mate is rigging ballyhoo with circle hooks, the no.1 natural bait for sailfish.

Stand-up fishing is the rule for billfishing off Golfito. This small blue marlin has not admitted defeat yet and continues jumping until the last second.







Sailfish or pez vela are generally of a good size in Golfo where specimens weighing close to 200lb's have been caught in the past! The mates release them automatically as they are a protected species in Costa Rica.

➤ At Golfo, the sea is usually completely calm during the billfish season. The prevailing north-east winds are deflected by the Cordillera de Talamanca, whose highest peak, the Chirripò, rises to 3800m. "I've never had a fisherman get sea-sick so far", says Yves Harlepp with satisfaction.

Protected as it is from the wind, the climate here is humid with very high temperatures. We quickly learn to appreciate the air conditioning in our rooms and the shade of the big T-top on the boat. Strictly speaking, Golfo is not a tourist area. Granted, there are a few hotels and two or three

restaurant-bar-karaoke clubs, but apart from fishing, surfing, hiking and bird-watching, there is not much to do in the area. Golfo is primarily a sport fishing destination and is a particular favourite among French fishermen. During my trip, I met two who had come back for the third consecutive year – a good sign! Like many of the fishermen who come here, they appreciate the warm welcome offered by Yves, a former Bluefin tuna pro fisherman from Martigues, a city near Marseille – who is quite a character! – and the meticulous organisation of his wife Bernadette. They know they will be in good hands during their fishing trip.

## Golfo Dulce, a giant fishpond sheltered from commercial fishing

As soon as they disembarked from the plane, on the first day of their trip, Christian and his son Sébastien caught and released nine sailfish! It was their fifth trip to Golfo, and they hold the record for the number of roosterfish caught and released over the course of a single outing – a whopping 58 roosters! Each one was caught by slow trolling live sardines mounted on circle



A bonito or a baby yellowfin tuna rigged with a circle hook is the favourite bait of the skippers when fishing for marlin.

A nice striped marlin caught and released near one of the FAD's showing the size of bait matched to the quarry.



Thick jungle covers the Osa Peninsula which is home to the Corcovado national Park where the secretive jaguar still lives.



hooks, with a rod equipped with a Penn baitrunner; a radical technique for roosterfish. The fish are numerous here and catching a dozen "pez gallo" from 5 to 12 kilos in a single day is pretty standard. During their week-long trip in February, Christian captured and released his most beautiful *pez gallo* yet, a 30-kilo specimen taken with a 50 lb Penn livebait rod. The fight to get it on-board for a quick photo will be yet another amazing memory for them to take home to Switzerland!

In Golfo, you hardly ever go fishing without livebait. Skippers are fortunate enough to have an almost permanent stock of *sardinias* in the Golfo Dulce. These are used for both roosterfish and yellowfin tuna. Sabiki bait fishing rods are set up every morning with the aim of stringing together the largest number of sardines possible. Blue runners, good solid baitfish that are a favourite among the larger fish we seek, are often caught alongside the sardines. When you have caught both, then you can choose between coastal fishing starting at the mouth of the Golfo Dulce, half an hour away from Golfo by boat, or chasing sailfish in the dark purple waters ten or fifteen miles further offshore.

## Punta Matapalo

At the mouth of the Golfo Dulce, a huge rock rises out of the water, offering a perch to gannets and boobies. This is the famous rock of Matapalo, the only visible part of a rocky submarine plateau whose peaks break up the ocean currents as they enter the gulf. The area

## Popping and jigging

Golfo is not a destination for popping fanatics. However, it is always useful to have a 30/50 lb spinning rod ready in the boat for a few sessions along the beaches and around submerged rocks, and to seize on opportunities: maybe a fish frenzy, a fish that is following the fish that's just been hooked, or the situation in which your mates throw a handful of live baitfish over an undersea outcrop, prompting roosterfish and jacks to rise to the surface and attack any lure! Take along an 8 foot 50lb rod and some 12 to 15 cm poppers for roosters and jacks. Slow jigging in 40 to 80 m of water is particularly effective with snappers, amberjacks and trevallies. The real key to success, however, is the use of livebait, which allows you to catch roosterfish weighing over 30 kilos and even 40 if you're the lucky angler of the week!

Casting poppers along the sandy beaches in search of roosterfish.



Pacific jack crevalle caught with a Halco Roosta 160.



A Yo-Zuri Sashimi fooled this nice rooster





# Costa Rica

➤ is fished almost every day in season, yet still regularly yields large roosterfish. Divers have also come face to face with impressive cuberas, broomtail groupers and big sharks here. Huge schools of smaller fish more or less permanently patrol the plankton-rich surface currents that swirl around the rock – the perfect larder for cubera! You also occasionally see schools of milkfish filtering the current for plankton. Fly-fishermen take note!

Just before my stay at Yves's place, one of his guests caught a 27kg cubera snapper with a popper next to the rock. This said, popping fans will need to keep in mind that livebait fishing is much more effective than using surface lures here. However, you can successfully cast for roosterfish and jacks along the

Fishing near the famous Matapalo rock at the entrance of the Golfo Dulce, a hotspot for monster roosterfish!



**Catching roosterfish is virtually guaranteed in Golfito. They are mainly caught with live sardines and all released after a quick photo. During their stay, most anglers like to spend 3 days fishing the offshore blue water and 3 days inshore to catch this mighty and beautiful fish.**



beaches with a popper, a pencil or a Ranger lure. Another technique involves throwing handfuls of live sardines above barren-looking rocky outcrops, only for the water to suddenly burst into life! Five sardines can prompt a dazzling explosion of fish including "pargo" or cubera snapper, big roosters and even amberjacks! You need to react very fast, especially as the sight of a 30-kilo roosterfish ploughing the surface within ten metres of your boat can make you lose your head and mess up the easiest of casts!

## In the Blue Water

The waters of the Osa Peninsula are rich, thanks in part to the mangroves of the Sierpe and Terraba Rivers to the north (30,000 ha of which are protected forest) and those of the Golfo Dulce in the south. These act as immense bait nurseries for coastal predators, pelagic fish and cetaceans. The sailfish are well fed and rarely thin here: it's not unusual to catch a "pez vela" weighing 50 kilos, and they can on occasion weigh much more than that. They are mainly caught trolling dead ballyhoo during the dry season, between December and April. During this period, the weather is perfect (with occasional showers in the late afternoon), the sea is flat and you can see the fish's sail carving up the surface from hundreds of metres away.

It's possible for two fishermen to release a dozen sailfish during a single day out, provided they manage to secure the circle hook! We caught fewer sails on certain days because we spent a lot of time trying to reel in a 100 kilo+ blue marlin with a 30lb rod! We did not see any mahi-mahi last February, but according to Yves, their winter migration mostly takes place during December and January. Whenever a piece of floating wood is spotted, a popper or stickbait will usually guarantee you some action. Also, if the boat comes across a school of dolphin

Drifting with live baits near submerged rocks is often rewarded with beautiful sportfish like this amberjack that could not resist a blue runner (a species of small jack) rigged with a circle hook.



that are busy feeding, the captain will try to manoeuvre the boat in order to have you cast a lure or a live sardine in their path because very often, yellowfin tuna will patrol the water below the dolphin, offering anglers a real workout! Tuna weighing over 80 kilos are hooked every season on spinning gear, but not all are brought aboard...

## The Gringo's FADs

One day, accomplished skippers Irving, Steve and Jerry told Yves Harlepp that a rich American "gringo" had had fish aggregation devices (FADs) placed off the coast, and that they were attracting a lot of small tuna and blue marlin. Rumour was that he has released up to fifteen good size blue marlin in one day...

"Hogwash!" thought Yves. But, his curiosity piqued, he went to see one of the buoys placed 40 nautical miles off Matapalo. The marlin were there in abundance! Having caught baby tuna on site, he rigged them up live on circle hooks and got ten marlin bites over four hours of fishing and released five fish. It was true... but it took too long for his 28' boats to reach the FADs, making it impossible for visiting fishermen to make the trip on a regular basis. So, Yves set about building a larger and faster boat, a 38' centre-console powered by two Suzuki 300HP engines, which was first launched in March 2015. This beautiful vessel can cruise at 35 knots with two mates and four fishermen in superb comfort, and can even quicken the pace to 50 knots should a tuna frenzy

be spotted en route! It is still a long ride to the FAD's but it's worth it if you're after blue marlin!

The operators of *Costa Rica Pêche Passion* have gained a good reputation among French anglers. Many of the Harlepp's customers are regulars (and in some cases have stayed with them since the 1990s, when Yves was a recognized tarpon guide in French Guiana). Certain guests even book their next stay before leaving Golfito, as I saw five people do during my trip! The reasonably priced guest house, the Harlepp's warm welcome, Chef Elio's cuisine, the friendly and well-trained boat crews, the flat sea and the reliable fishing... all of this guarantees the value for money of their operation in Golfito. ♦

Pacific jack crevalle (*Caranx caninus*), a common catch and a strong adversary on light tackle.



Cubera snapper caught near Matapalo Rock with a Sébile Splasher popper





## COSTA RICA - PÊCHE PASSION



Yves and Bernadette Harlepp's guest house is located in the quiet village of Golfito, on the Pacific coast an hour's drive from the Panamanian border. A 50-minute flight aboard a 15-seater plane connects Golfito to San José, Costa Rica's capital, every day. The guest house is a five-minute drive from the airfield and another five-minute drive away from the marina. It can accommodate 10

people from November to May. Guests eat breakfast and dinner together, family style. Chef Elio's cuisine is excellent and is served with good Chilean wines, so don't expect to lose any weight! If you prefer, Bernadette can find you a very nice hotel a few minutes away by taxi from the marina.

The Harlepp's fleet includes two 28' boats with twin 140HP engines, with enough space for two or three fishermen, and a 38' boat with twin 300HP engines that can take up to four anglers. Equipment and bait are provided. The boats are well suited to the variety of fishing that this region offers, and are fully equipped with safety kit, fishing gear and coolers full of fruit, drinks, and delicious packed lunches. Golfito is a destination for early birds: the boats leave the marina at 6:30am and come back in at 4:30pm. After a quick shower, you'll find yourself reliving the day's fishing stories, or those of yesteryear, with a good rum in hand!

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Dinner at the guest house.



Yves and Bernadette Harlepp, the friendly owners.



Mate Anthony.



Irving and Jerry aboard the 38' centre console, a perfect vessel for the long and fast runs offshore to the FADs.



Captain Steve.



Deep jungle around Golfito, home to an amazing number of beautiful birds.



One of the two 28' centre consoles.



The powerfully motored 38' boat built in 2015.