

Digging deep for Costa Rican oddities

Jigging the Golfo Dulce depths brings returns of grouper, snapper, African pompano... as well as a host of other strange-looking fish. Better yet, it's within sight of shore

By Todd Staley
Crocodile Bay, Costa Rica

This is the time of year the rain forest shows its stuff on the southern Pacific coast. More than 20 percent of the annual rainfall comes in October. The Papagayo winds in Nicaragua have yet to blow, but when they do some time this month, the sailfish population will push to the south.

Until the main body of sailfish arrive, marlin and dorado will be the primary targets for offshore anglers looking to troll. Anyone that fishes for marlin knows the Pacific is a big ocean, and locating fish is a matter of covering water and eliminating options. That means anglers have two choices; go hunting (for marlin) or go fishing (for other species).

A patient angler will generally get his marlin. It might be like sitting in a tree stand all day waiting for that one big buck to walk by, but patience is typically rewarded in Costa Rica. And odds favor that the marlin will be substantial.

For those that aren't up for the hunt, they might want to go fishing instead. What I mean by that is, if action is more important than trophy, stay closer to shore this time of year and get in on the terrific bottom fishing.

Thirty years ago when I was dropping baits for grouper in the Middle Grounds off the West Coast of Florida, if someone told me one day I would be jigging with a fairly light spinning rod in 400 feet of water for grouper and snapper, I would have thought they were crazy. And if they told me I could see people walking on the beach while I was doing it, I'd have called for the straight jacket. But that's exactly what you can expect in southern Costa Rica.

Bottom fishing in Costa Rica doesn't mean a run offshore. To the contrary, a mile offshore will put you in water deeper than you care to fish almost anywhere on the Pacific side.

Fortunately, I live on one of four tropical fjords in the world. The depth of the entrance to the 30-mile long Golfo Dulce is around 150 feet. It then gets deeper the farther up the bay you go and has a hole up at the end of the bay that drops to 900 feet.

Here as in many parts of the world, deep jigging has become one of the most successful ways to fool deep-water predators. There is a reason the military puts jigs in survival kits, that's because almost anything that swims will eat one.

Costa Rica's volcanic terrain runs not only to the coast, but also forms some

very interesting structures underwater as well. And the deeper you go, the more the menu changes.

Cory Craig from Tropic Fins charters is a guy who came down to Costa Rica on a fishing vacation, and within a couple years was building a house and charter business at the same time. He has studied the inshore fishing well and is not afraid to try new methods.

When Craig's charter landed a 60-plus pound roosterfish using a moonfish for bait, live moonfish became the hot offering, and everyone switched over to targeting roosterfish with these baits. Now Craig has taken his progressive methods into the bottom fishing realm.

As far as deep jigging goes, the first hundred feet or so of water bring a variety of snappers, including the famous cubera, African pompano, broomtail grouper, roosterfish, amberjack, bonito and tuna. That's a large variety of hard-fighting and good-eating fish that can be caught within sight of shore.

Dropping deeper than 150 feet of water is like venturing in the twilight zone, where there's the potential to bring up fish you have never seen before. The Pacific red snapper is a good example of a species that won't be found in less than 200 feet of water, and like the American red snapper, this fish is great table fare.

Gulf Coney, a strange but tasty grouper, will hit a jig in 400 feet of water. There are other grouper-type fishes that I have no idea what they are, and can't find them in books, but we catch them on a regular basis when deep dropping. Tilefish, rose threadfin bass and congria are other weird members of the deep-water

clan that make the trip back to the dock and the dinner table.

All this great deep dropping action happens inside the Golfo Dulce, a short run from the dock, so if the offshore seas are rough or you want to break up a week of marling fishing and change out to a

more action oriented trip, you just have to shorten the distance of your excursion.

Depending on weather, your decision to opt for action or a short at a trophy, and your patience level, this time of year make the choice: Do you want to go hunting or

fishing. In the Southern Pacific peninsula of Costa Rica, we can offer both.

Todd Staley has spent the last 18 years in the sportfishing business in Costa Rica, running fishing operations on both the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.



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