



VOLCANO NEAR-PUERTO
QUETZAL, GUATEMALA.



PACIFIC SAIL: NOT A
FIVE-WEIGHT FISH.

Pocket Protectors

Chasing sails in Guatemala BY BRIAN IRWIN

IZTAPA, GUATEMALA, is a pleasant little vortex with gated communities and snook-filled canals. Its industrial harbor, Puerto Quetzal, serves as the gateway to a stretch of Pacific bluewater known colloquially as “The Pocket.” Stretching more than 30 nautical miles and reaching depths of more than 4,000 feet, The Pocket houses the planet’s most productive sailfishery. Capt. Chris “Kiwi” van Leeuwen knows this well. He left the shores of Lake Rotorua near his home in New Zealand to take a one-year gig at IGFA Hall of Famer Tim Choate’s Fins n’ Feathers lodge in 2002. Fifteen years later, he and his wife, Liz, now own and operate Iztapa’s Sailfish Oasis Lodge. “It was the sheer number of fish that got me,” van Leeuwen says. “For billfish on the fly, there’s just nothing like it. We didn’t pioneer it here, but the volume of fish has allowed us to refine flyfishing techniques and improve hook-ups.” Today, The Pocket is the easygoing captain’s backyard. Its deepwater canyon begins its descent about eight miles offshore, where powerful east-to-west currents eventually rebound off the coast of El Salvador. The resulting natural eddy is the

ultimate fish trap, corralling the bait that attracts pelagic fish. Depending on the state of the fishery during any given year, anglers on van Leeuwen’s 40-foot sportfisher, the *Allure II*, can expect to raise 15 to 20 billfish in a day; sailfish averaging 80 pounds, blue marlin pushing 200 pounds. Those “raises” typically result in 8 to 10 releases. Fish are teased into “the spread”—the deftly managed water at the stern of the boat, where van Leeuwen and his deck mates troll four hookless lures: one from the bridge, three from the lower deck. When billfish home in on the teasers, the engine is cut. Then you have about ten seconds—enough for about two casts—to procure a strike. We fished a 5/0 Cam Sigler tube fly with a popper head. The flies are designed to go un-swallowed, which aids in the goal of a harm-free release. Catch and release wasn’t always the standard for Guatemala’s offshore fishery. Before shuttering his operation in 2005, Choate was busy petitioning for the regs that currently make killing billfish illegal. Prior to that, in the early ‘90s, the Guatemalan government laid out “decrees” to restrict harvest. According to Nelson Ehrhardt, scientific director of the Central American Billfish Association, and a professor in marine ecosystems at the University of Miami, the laws didn’t go far enough. “The decrees basically said sailfish shouldn’t be landed, but

this isn’t a law in the sense of how laws in the U.S. are upheld,” he says. “These decrees change at the will of the current government, which isn’t a good system for maintaining the long-term sustainability of a fishery. And enforcement is a whole other problem.” Misinformation is another. While Guatemala’s Pacific coast may be the richest sailfish habitat on earth, it may not be as densely populated as people believe. The Pocket’s prosperity relies on its variable currents. “Upwelling pushes poorly oxygenated water toward the surface,” Ehrhardt says. “Pelagics run from this, congregating in the upper 50 meters of the water column, giving the impression that the fishery is richer than it actually is.” In reality, the association estimates that during the past 50 years, sailfish numbers have dwindled by as much as 90 percent. Both local harvest and commercial bycatch are the biggest concerns. “I’ve gotta be honest, some of the local commercial guys still kill billfish,” van Leeuwen says. “But things have improved. We just need better enforcement.” Despite these ongoing threats, Guatemala’s Pacific sailfishery remains destination-worthy. The region continues to produce various records, including the single-day, fly-caught record of 57 boated sails. “There’s plenty of prey for these pelagics from November through April,” Ehrhardt says. “That’s when we start

seeing extraordinary catch rates, sometimes exceeding 100 raises a day.” During my two days aboard *Allure II* we raised 29 sailfish, plus a 200-pound blue marlin. Of those raised fish, seven made it to the boat and were released. The average sailfish weighed 80 pounds; the fish were estimated to be between six and eight years of age. While billfishing is a game played with not-so-supple 14- to 16-weight rods (a bit less of a finesse sport than bonefishing), it’s still insanely fun. The strike is electric, triggering an instant endorphin rush. And experiencing the acceleration of the ocean’s fastest fish (sails have been clocked at nearly 70 mph) leaves a lasting impression. Fifty miles at sea, *Allure II* chugged along the expanse of endless azure. As the boat pitched and rolled, my wife Lori stood patiently, rod in hand. From the bridge, van Leeuwen shouted, “Fish in the spread!” Two strips of her fly and her rod bent as a sailfish went airborne. When it finally came boatside, I entered the water to snap a few shots. The mate gently slid the fish toward me by its nose, then released it. Its sail slowly waved, its tones shifted to a deep cobalt, and together we glided through the water for a few precious seconds, before it disappeared back into the cavernous depths of The Pocket. 🐟