

Guatemala will reel you in

By Brian Irwin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

A sailfish is a marvelous creature. Emblazoned with deep azure tones and shimmering sides of silver, it's one of the most brilliant piscatorial gifts from the sea. I've been trying to catch one for years without luck. Despite my failed prior attempts, my wife, Lori, and I sought to try once again in the densely inhabited deep blue waters off the coast of Guatemala, considered by most to be the strongest fishery for these pelagics on earth.

Guatemala has grasped the curiosity of anglers and non-anglers alike. It's a wealth of deep cultural offerings, stunning architecture, and of course, billfish. We headed from Guatemala City to the sleepy hamlet of Iztapa, on the Pacific Coast. There, we stayed at a lodge that caters specifically to fishermen and women, Sailfish Oasis.

Sailfish Oasis, which sits in a gated community, is a safe haven for you and your appetite, where you'll be served local fare at a swim-up tiki bar and a handful of grass-roofed cabanas. Each day, we headed out 6 in the morning to board the Allure II, a 40-foot fishing yacht captained by Chris van Leeuwen, a 48-year-old Kiwi expatriate, father of two, and one of the most revered sailfish guides in the business.

Allure II is a robust ship, which van Leeuwen piloted 45 miles out to sea, following a deep canyon on the ocean floor by sonar, looking for depths in the thousands, baitfish, and, of course, marlin and sailfish. We towed hookless lures, which attract billfish into "the spread," an apron of whitewash generated from the boat's powerful propellers. When the fish rose, we'd stand ready, fly fishing rod in hand, and fire a heavy fly, with white and pink marabou feathers, to the fish's spear-shaped bill. We found that with proper presentation, they'd eat.

When you set the hook into a sailfish, line peels from your reel at breakneck speed. The fish invariably rocketed out of the water, thrashing their

heads in no uncertain terms, in an attempt to free themselves. Not long after, if we were careful, we'd have them at the boatside for a few snapshots and a safe release. Billfish are a protected lot, and all of our fish were released unharmed.

Out of 25 bites, we were able to bring seven fish to our boat over two days. That's a pretty low number, van Leeuwen said. But I found these days to exceed all my expectations, generating memories that have replayed in my dreams since my return. A bucket-list item fulfilled.

But Guatemala isn't all fly fishing. After our experience in Iztapa, we ambled inland to the colonial town of Antigua, once the capital of all of Central America. Antigua rests in a bowl of verdant forest surrounded by volcanoes. The most active of these was Volcan de Fuego ("volcano of fire"), which belled plumes of ash during our visit. At night, lava would ooze from its summit, lending legitimacy to rooftop cafes with names like Lava.

We rested at Casa Santo Domingo, a former monastery with colonial ruins and crypts, on a property that has since been turned into the only five-star lodging in Central America. The resort doubles as a museum, with unguarded 16th century sculptures resting on pillars right outside of suites. An opulent spa made for the ultimate way to rest one's arm after days of playing tug-of-war with sailfish.

By day, Antigua is a cultural candy store. Cathedrals, parks, and fountains surround open air textile markets. There's plenty of street music and even more coffee. By night, Antigua shows its other side. It is cosmopolitan, with modern cafes and bars, fine dining, and a relatively safe street setting for pedestrians, despite the abundance of rickshaws.

On our last night in Antigua, we ate and danced and eventually settled into Café No Se (Café I Don't Know). There, amid candles and political bumper stickers, I leaned on the door to a walk-in refrigerator. It eased open and led to another room with a ratty



PHOTOS BY BRIAN IRWIN

Above: An angler holds up a Guatemalan sailfish, caught on a fly rod. Left: The spa at Casa Santa Domingo in Antigua.



bar. This bar, a quazi speakeasy, sells only one thing: Illegal Mezcal liquor, so named as it used to be bootleg liquor. I had a couple of drinks. I slept well.

On the flight home, my wife was pecking at her laptop. I asked what she was planning. "Guatemala. Next year. With the kids." I already knew the answer, but I still asked why.

"Because it will change their lives. Just like it did ours."

If you go...

Sailfish Oasis offers packages with transfers and food included. All fishing gear is provided. Rates from \$2,245 for a three-night visit. www.sailfishoasis.com. In Antigua, try Casa Santo Domingo. From \$182 per night. www.casasantodomingo.com.

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