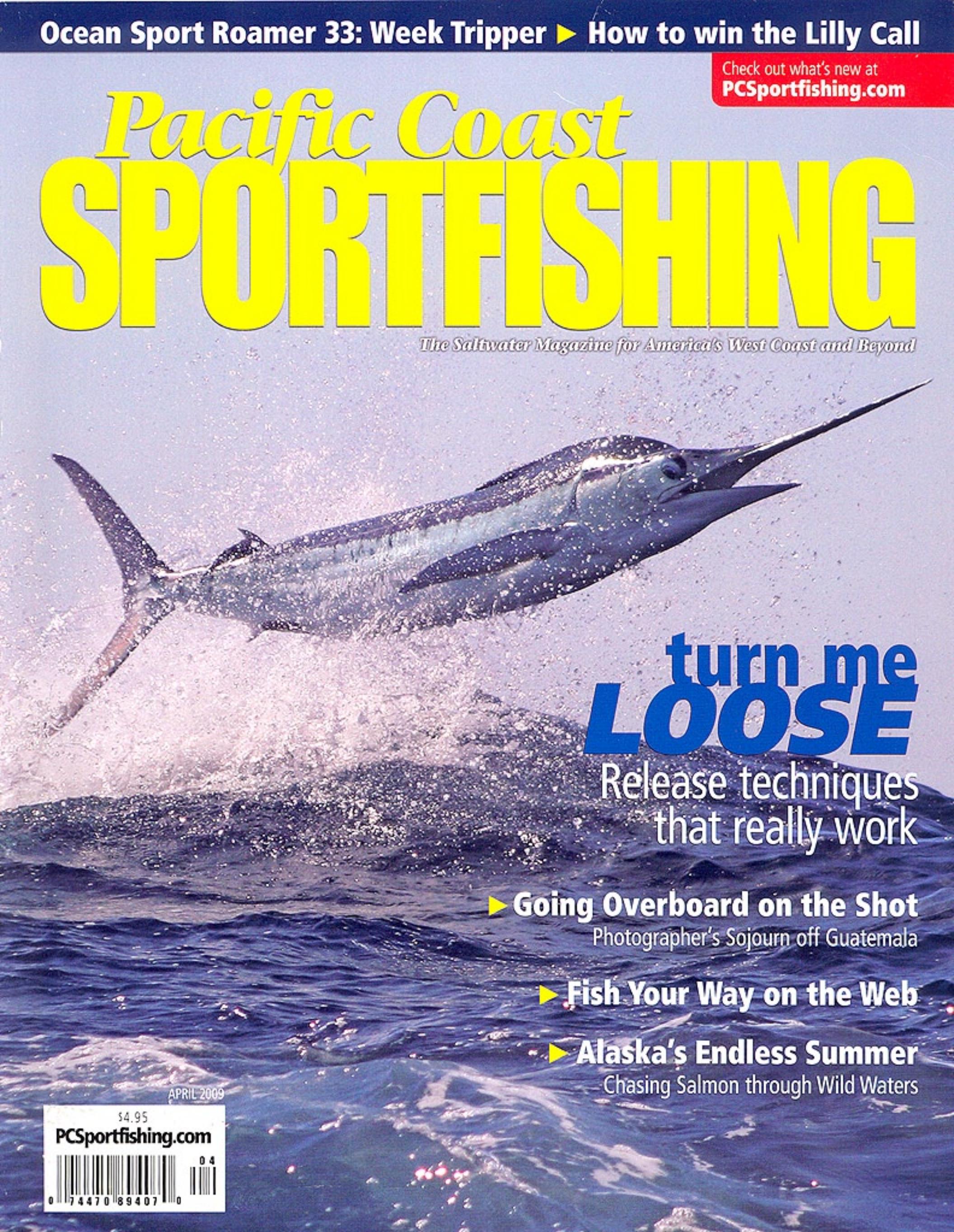


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SAY RELEASE!



I remember the incredible feeling of elation when, as a young man, I was given my first rod and reel for Christmas. It was as if a light from heaven had suddenly beamed down on me, and in the hail of shredded wrapping paper that fell like snow beneath my feet, my destiny was revealed. In my hand lay the key to unlimited action and excitement. Monsters that roam the sea and prowl the depths of the pond at the end of our cul-de-sac would be brought to heel at the end of my line, following epic battles of stamina and will.

Flushed with expectation, I was marched down to the pond, the Land of Plenty, where I would begin my reign of dominance. As my

father tied on a Mepps lure, I felt a rush of adrenaline run through me. Primed for battle, I readied my stance and clenched my teeth, sure signs of innate instinct and ability. My father leaned over, passed the rod, and, to complete the symbolic gesture, offered the following pre-battle advice in hushed tones: "Jon, don't expect much, now. Don't forget this is fishing, not catching. You've got to be patient."

Needless to say, I reacted like a guy on the first night of his honeymoon whose wife tells him she must go home to Mommy by midnight. Since then I've never really bought into the whole patience thing.

BY BLUEWATER JON SCHWARTZ

CATCHING BILLFISH ON CAMERA

One of these days, I might develop the ability to take fruitless days of fishing in stride. In the meantime, I'll continue to use my insatiable desire for full-throttle fishing adventures as a tool and follow my nose to where the action is at its apex.

Enter Guatemala! For years, I'd heard that this coffee-rich Central American country just south of Mexico was Ground Zero for the world's hottest sailfish action. However, the numbers of

sailfish releases that I'd seen reported were so high (15 to 20 or more per day, sometimes way more in the peak season) that I'd always given the reports about as much credence as those emails I get from Nigeria telling me I'm due a couple of million bucks.

Recently, though, my fascination for all things fishing has taken an unexpected turn. I've been bitten by the shutterbug, and I'm obsessed with a new form of fishing. Instead of seeking to catch them on hook and line, I've taken to the joy of capturing them on film.

In many ways, my new passion brought forth many of the same signs of fixation as my angling. Interaction with fish is what I





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Opposite: One of the 29 sails released by Ric Weider and his daughters.

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craved, and, in fact, by jumping in with an underwater camera and photographing the fish as they swam near the boat, the immediacy of my interactions with the fish only increased. Yet, one thing had changed: When I saw a photo of a huge fish on the end of a line, it wasn't about which reel was used to catch the lunker. It was now about camera selection, shot composition, and positioning. I was hooked!

One common thread popped up in my research: Many of the best shots had been taken in Guatemala. Well, I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, but I had enough smarts left to put that together with the stuff I'd heard about Guatemala years ago, and soon enough I was looking into places to stay. Word had it that I'd do myself a favor by looking into Casa Vieja Lodge, so I contacted Herb Rosell of South Fishing, Inc., who does their booking.

Talking to him, I could tell the place was first-class. Mind you, *I'm* not, but my parents are, and it sounded and looked like a resort that even *they* would be happy at (too bad they like horses, Vermont, and opera).

My main concern wasn't the quality of accommodations, though. It was staying long enough to get enough epic shots of sailfish doing their thing. "Herb, how long do you think I need for that? I mean I want to see a million of them. I want to leave with enough images for a lifetime."

"Jon, you could get that in one day here!"

"Well, suppose the fishing's off, or something goes wrong? Let's plan for the worst and hope for the best," I said.

"Jon, look. The worst day I've heard of anyone having in December was twelve sails. Since 1994 the fleet has averaged raising at least twenty bills a day per boat year-round!"

"Alright then," I said. "Then give me the last week in December."

"No can do," he said. "We only have space for you for four nights. That'll be more than enough. Trust me."

Fast-forward a couple of weeks. Michael the driver picks me up at the airport in Guatemala City in a Casa Vieja Lodge van, and we make the 90-minute drive to the lodge, passing through the capital, which looks way more sophisticated than I had thought it would. Where I'd imagined huts and stuff, instead there are plush hotels dotting the city streets. Think Waldorf Astoria – that kind of plush. Surprised the heck out of me.

Later, after settling in at the lodge, I had dinner there. Shrimp were as big as my hand, and they were so good I ate them whole, like a soft-shelled crab. My dinner companions, a fellow named Ric Weider and his two daughters,

Madison and Hunter, and I got along so well that – even though I was scheduled to go out with a hotshot angler and his two sons the next day – I opted for them instead.

We met Captain Nico and crew at the docks the next morning at seven o'clock, and he welcomed us aboard the *Release*, a 37-foot Merritt, built in 1961 by Merritt himself – an impressive detail that boat fans can appreciate. It has a teak cockpit, hardwood paneling, and mahogany girders, all shined to a mirror finish throughout the vessel. Classy.

For a guy who'd released over 15,000 sails in his career

(one of several captains at Casa Vieja who share that distinction, including the famed Ron Hamlin, who has released over 28,000), Nico was a pretty unassuming fellow.

Departing the harbor, I noticed a trio of volcanoes – the pointy, real Fred Flintstone-type – in the distance, and I figured they were inactive. But about 10 minutes into our trip – roughly halfway out to the fishing grounds – one of them lazily puffed out a willowy cloud of ash into the sky, resembling a Disneyland theme park display. As Ric's girls roared with approval, the mate informed me that it was an almost daily event that's been occurring for centuries.



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Bill fishing in Guatemala is a very visual sport. Fish are raised by a spread of artificial teasers and ballyhoos, and once spotted by the captain from his perch (*Left teaser! Right outrigger!*) the mates draw the fish closer to the boat by reeling in the lures. Clients have the choice of dropping a bait back to the raised, finning fish, and the usual offering is a circle-hook-rigged ballyhoo. You can have the mates do it, but most anglers opt for the hands-on approach. Those new to the sport often appreciate a bit of help at first, and by the second day, they usually have the hang of it.

Ric was getting his girls all pumped up for the action. Madison, the youngest daughter, had regaled me with tales of the first pig that she'd bagged hunting just months earlier, and just as I was readying my long lens for shooting, the first dorsal appeared in the spread. Before I could finish prepping my gear, the mates teased the fish within a stone's throw of the transom, and Ric picked up one of the boat rods (a shiny-new Avet with fresh 20-pound line), and tossed a bait in front of the fully lit-up billfish. The slap of the ballyhoo on the water elicited a savage strike, and the reel sang the sweet song of the trip's first hookup. Erupting skyward, the sailfish left a trail of salty spray in its wake.

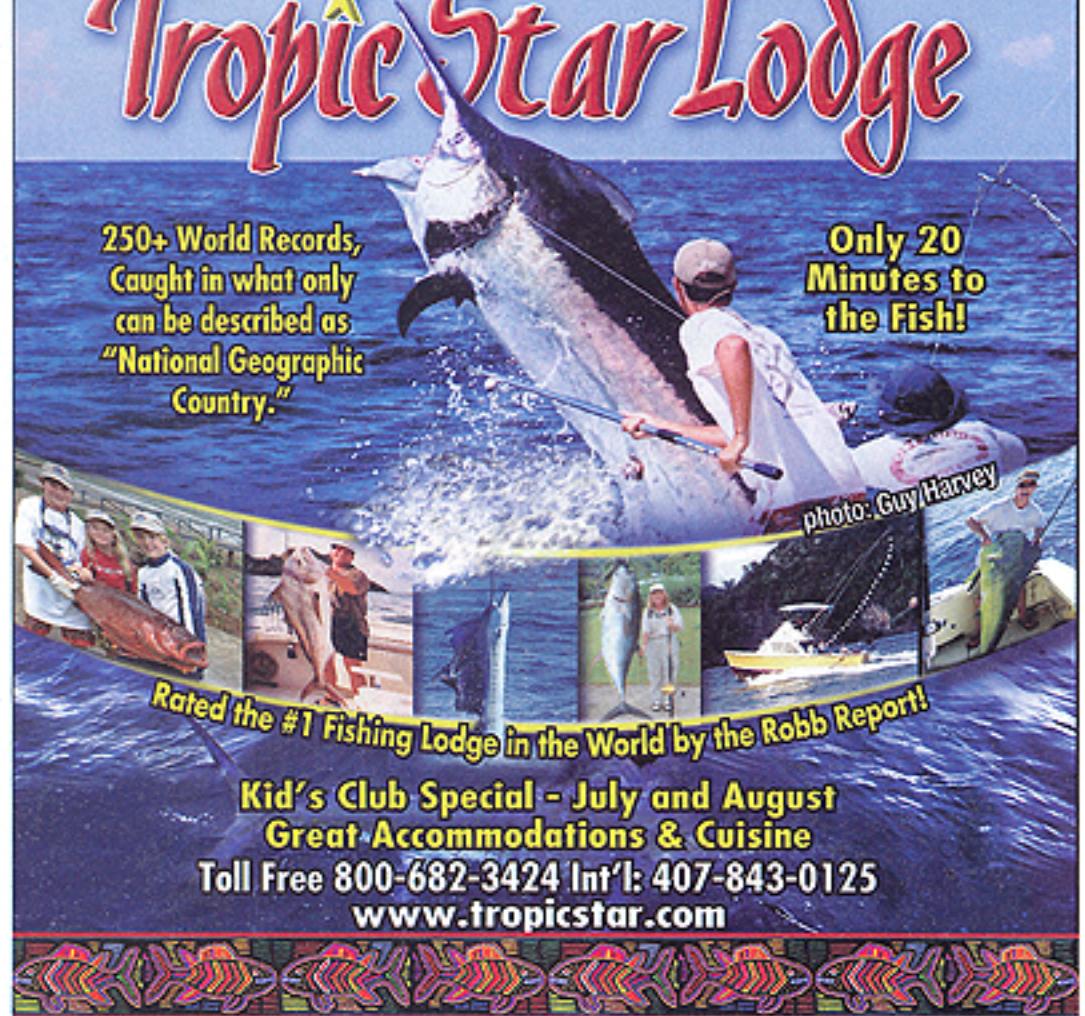
Like a true pro, I watched with mouth agape, camera lamely dangling from my neck, arms flush against my sides, as the fish proceeded to tail walk around the transom of the boat. Bozo the Clown would have scored a dozen magazine covers with one hand behind his back, but, somehow, I failed to fire a single shot during that incredible display!

Meanwhile, Ric, still fighting the fish – and wrongly assuming that I had at least the competence of a baboon – called out to me: "Did you get all that, Jon? I bet you got some great shots there!"

"Uh, no, Ric."

"Well, get in there and take some underwater pics with that camera of yours. Get your butt in gear!" he said. Not wanting to look like a complete doofus, I donned my swim fins, dove in with my new housing, and my own special Guatemalan adventure began.

All the clumsiness I felt on deck vanished as I felt the clear, warm water envelop me. Scanning the sun-streaked blue depths, I made out the figure of a lone



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fish swimming slowly at the end of a line. *That's him!* I thought, and as I began to kick my fins, the distance between us gradually closed. This majestic fish kept a wary eye on me the whole time, but by the time we called it a day, Ric and his ladies had landed and released 29 sailfish, and I had more pics than I knew what to do with. Herb was right!

With such an abundance of fish, people find new ways to push the envelope. Half of the clients were repeat offenders (one of them has been there eight times in the past two years), and out of these, a fair number were fly-fishing for billfish – and not just for sails. Nat Harris from North Carolina and Kirk Weisman of Miami were there not only to try to beat the record of 57 billfish in one day, set by owner Jim Turner, but to also land the elusive blue marlin on a fly (perhaps not *too* elusive – Weisman managed a 200-pounder on a

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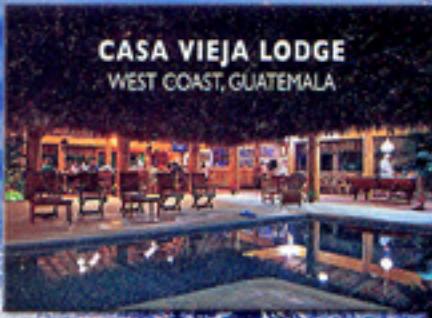
fly the day before I left on one of Casa Vieja's five other boats, the *Rum Line*, captained by Chris Sheeder). They've got fly-fishing for bills down to a science, and watching the choreography unfold as the fish are coaxed into accepting a fly not 15 yards from the transom after the captain bellows "*Caaast!*" is truly an awesome sight to behold.

The final day of my trip, I accompanied a charter on the boat *Cañaso*. After another day of non-stop action, we headed home, and, for the second time in as many days, came across a log loaded with dorado – big ones. While anglers pitched baits to the throngs of golden-hued bulls, I donned my fins and mask one last time, capturing these majestic animals in their own element. We enjoyed fresh mahi sushi on the ride home as the sun began to set over the horizon. For more information on Casa Vieja Lodge, visit www.SouthFishing.com.

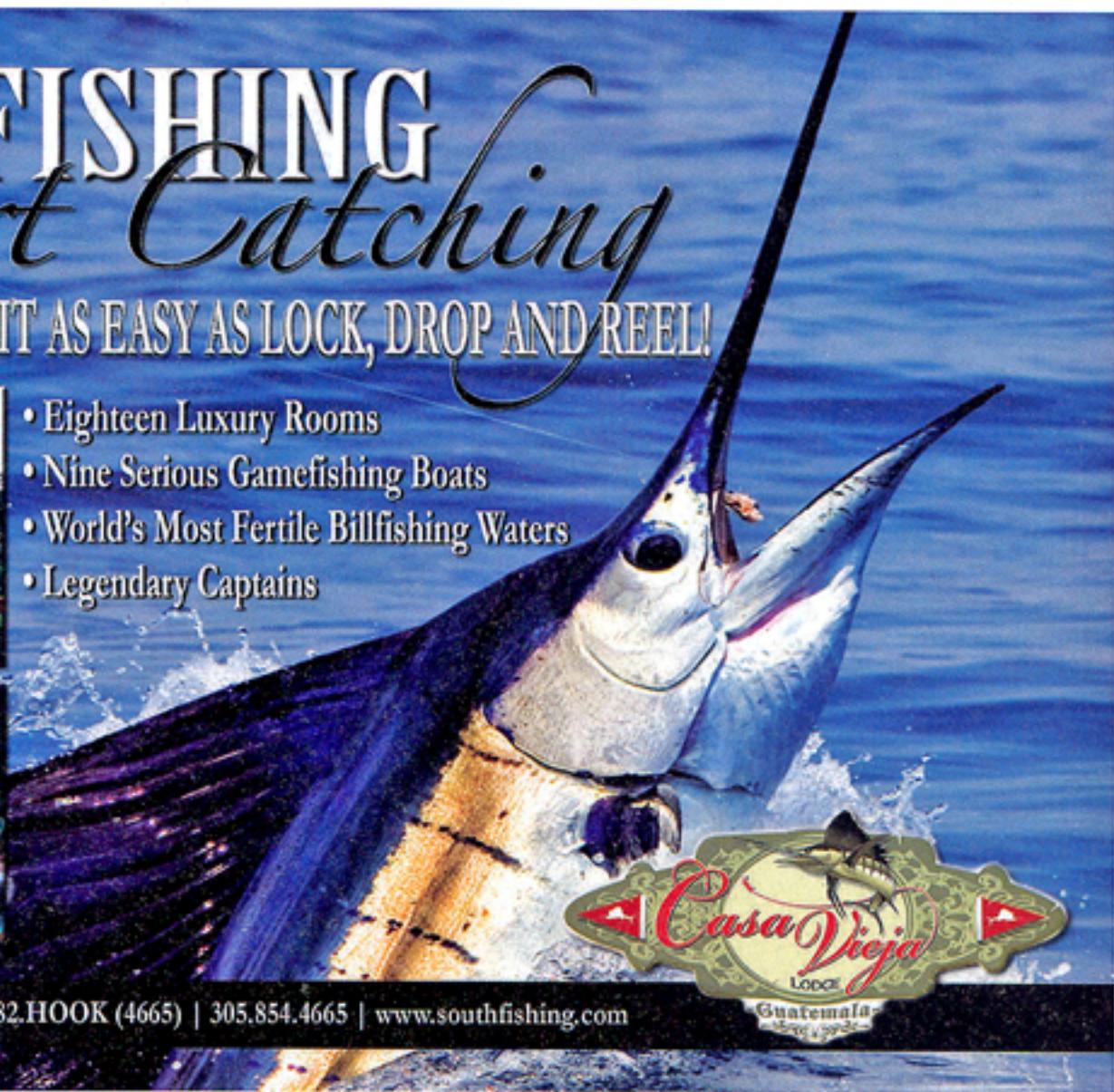


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