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in High Style

A Whirlwind Adventure in an Unspoiled Frontier

Story and Photos by Jon Schwartz (bluewaterjon.com)

AS THE SUN'S FIRST RAYS BATHED THE DISTANT MOUNTAINS IN swaths of coral and blue, my host, Capt. Lance Moss, and I made our way to a thatched-roof cafe overlooking Marina Puesta del Sol. Sipping coffee, we watched a dugout canoe slice through the water's glassy surface while a distant volcano lazily puffed out faint trails of ash. Everything in front of us looked in tune with a page out of an ancient text, except for one slight detail: Moored to the end of the dock lay *Rum Runner*, the opulently appointed 67-foot Viking owned by Carlos Pellas, IGFA rep, billfishing enthusiast and owner of the Flor de Cana Rum Company. Today we'd be riding in style.



Just like the rest of Central America, Nicaragua hosts a plethora of big, hungry Pacific sails.

"He should be arriving with his fishing buddies any moment now," said Moss. And as if on cue, the pulsing sounds of an approaching helicopter broke the morning's silence. Once the chopper set down, a crew of five men exited the craft and made their way onto the boat. "That's our ride," chuckled Moss as we ambled down the dock to meet our hosts.

Pellas greeted us with a smile as we met him boat-side. "How about I give you the 20-cent tour?" he joked, welcoming us aboard his beautiful boat. We sat down in the salon of the Viking as the boat eased out of the harbor, entering the deep-blue waters of the Pacific. Although we were fishing in a remote area, we certainly didn't have to worry about roughing it. Pellas whipped out a remote control, and with the press of a button, a flat-screen monitor rose from a teak cabinet. He flipped through the satellite TV channels and then showed us how the screen can display a matrix of plotter, sonar, sounder, radar, computer, engine-room, cockpit, bridge and trolling cameras.

Next, we visited Capt. Joe Crawford up on the bridge and reviewed the dizzying array of electronics. (I especially liked the cockpit's custom sunshade that opens like the louvers of a

windowpane.) For the rest of the 40-mile ride out to the fishing grounds, we sat on the outdoor couch sipping drinks, enjoying the cool air blown on us by the outdoor AC vents and tracking our journey's progress on the monitor mounted on the rear of the fighting chair.

Even though we'd be utilizing a full complement of state-of-the-art gear, finding the fish was by no means a foregone conclusion. Largely off-limits to tourists until a decade ago, the fertile fishing grounds of Nicaragua remain one of the last fishing frontiers of the Americas, and the *Rum Runner* crew enjoyed

blazing the trail. Without a host of other boats calling in the bite, Crawford relies on his own research, poring over charts and surface-temperature reports to guide their billfishing expeditions. On this day, Crawford's research efforts paid off in spades.

Instant Action

Just before we reached our destination, *Rum Runner* swung a tight arc, the sudden change in course indicating that the captain saw something of interest. I'm used to captains bellowing commands at top volume when the action



The Marina Puesta del Sol Resort offers luxurious accommodations and fine dockage just an hour or so away from the capital, Managua.



heats up, but *Rum Runner's* intercom system allowed him to convey commands in surprisingly relaxed tones. "There's a huge tree floating about 300 yards off the bow. Let's put the lines out now." And with that, the mates set out a mix of teasers and ballyhoo.

"Sailfish, flat line. Sailfish, left long!" came the call, and within seconds we had our first in a series of double hookups. And for the next 90 minutes, we experienced sailfish action as hot as any I've witnessed in the neighboring Central American countries I've recently visited. We even caught one sail without ever hooking the fish when it wrapped itself up in the teaser!

By the time we pulled the lines in for the day, we'd gone 13-for-16 on sails and boated a half-dozen 30-pound-class dorado — and those numbers could have easily been doubled were it not for a rainstorm that blew us off our game. On the ride back to the marina, Moss uploaded footage from the strike cam deployed in the spread, readying a highlights video that he'd show us over dinner.

Rum Runner wasn't the only deluxe slice of Nicaragua we'd enjoy over the next several days; we were staying at Marina Puesta del Sol Resort, located in the Chinandega region of the country. It plays host to Nicaragua's Flor de Cana International Fishing Tournament every year, a week or two after neighboring El Salvador's own international



Travel Details

Surfari Charters' peak months for fishing are May through September, with some good fishing in November as well. (The lodge closes during October due to heavy rains and poor conditions.)

Depending on conditions, anglers have a chance at sails, marlin, wahoo and dorado offshore, and mackerel, jacks and roosterfish inshore, during the peak. However, you can also book fishing charters during the spring dry season that runs from January through April — although inshore fishing takes the front seat during this time due to heavier wind conditions.

Major airlines such as Continental, American and Iberia provide daily service to the capital city of Managua. Representatives from Surfari Charters pick up arriving guests as soon as they exit customs and drive them to the lodge. The lodge offers all-inclusive weeklong stays. Beachfront cabins are located at the world-famous Playa Guascatel. The Surfari Base Camp offers an office, a bar, a clubhouse with full entertainment center, spacious 20-by-20-foot air-conditioned rooms, full Internet access and a phone line to the States.

Surfari Charters, www.surfaricharters.com, 610-624-3204

Marina Puesta del Sol Resort, www.marinapuestadelsol.com
(Taxi service to the marina is available from Managua airport, as are rental cars.)

tournament. Ironically, the marina was created in 2001 by Robert Membreno, an engineer of both Nicaraguan and U.S. citizenship who, like Pellas, was educated in the United States.

Just before he retired, Membreno's firm sent him to Nicaragua to build a geothermal plant. The plant never came to fruition, but while sailing the Pacific Nicaraguan coastline, he found a

natural setting for a marina, a facility that the country sorely lacked. Something in his engineering genes kicked in, and he decided to fill the gap by designing and constructing a modern marina to his own exacting specifications. Now the location boasts 600 beachfront acres, 30 slips, a clubhouse, palapa bar and café, main restaurant, swimming pool and 19 plush suites. Trust me, it's sweet!



The small seaside town of San Juan del Sur hosts the annual Casa Pellas tournament and is just a short ride away from the Surfari Charters lodge (top right) in the Popoyo region of Nicaragua.

We ventured out on *Rum Runner* the next day, and after some more scouting, found ourselves in a similarly spirited sailfish bite. On this day, the weather was perfect, and between servings of fresh shrimp and sailfish releases, I was able to convince Pellas to let me take some underwater shots of a sail he had fought as it swam near the boat. I dove in and approached the fish, which seemed barely to notice me as it propelled itself through the crystal-clear waters with its scythe-like rear fin. After snapping some photos of the mate releasing the sail at boat-side, I watched it swim slowly back down until it faded from view completely.

The following day we drove to the scenic seaside town of San Juan del Sur, where we would participate in the Casa Pellas tournament. A comfortable



blend of old and new, the small city enjoys a warm, townlike feel. I've traveled quite a bit, and I've never seen American and European tourists mingle so seamlessly with the locals. While the local youth and tourists sit in Internet cafes sipping coffee, milkmen still make their deliveries on horse-drawn carts, and families sit on their front porches singing songs and playing guitar. However, you will also find a strong contingent of fancy new hotels, restaurants and condominiums, and we attended some surprisingly posh parties held for the tournament's participants.

New Spot and New Boats

I accompanied Gabriel Fernandez of Superfly Charters on day one of the tourney and spent the last day on board El Salvador's IGFA rep Paco Saca's

45-foot *Rampage*, *Sandy-ita*. After boating what we all thought was the winning fish in the dorado category, Saca decided to go big with a full spread of Black Bart lures on his 80-pound setups. The strategy was partly a result of wanting to fend off a big fish from Moss, who last year wowed the contestants with a 425-pound black caught on stand-up gear. Saca's big gamble didn't bear fruit, and *Rum Runner* placed tops in the billfish division with six sail releases.

After the tournament, I spent the remainder of my Nicaraguan adventure in the Popoyo region, at Lance and Kristin Moss' Surfari Charters fishing and surfing lodge. In addition to offering access to hundreds of miles of uncharted fishing grounds, Nicaragua is also one of the last countries in Central

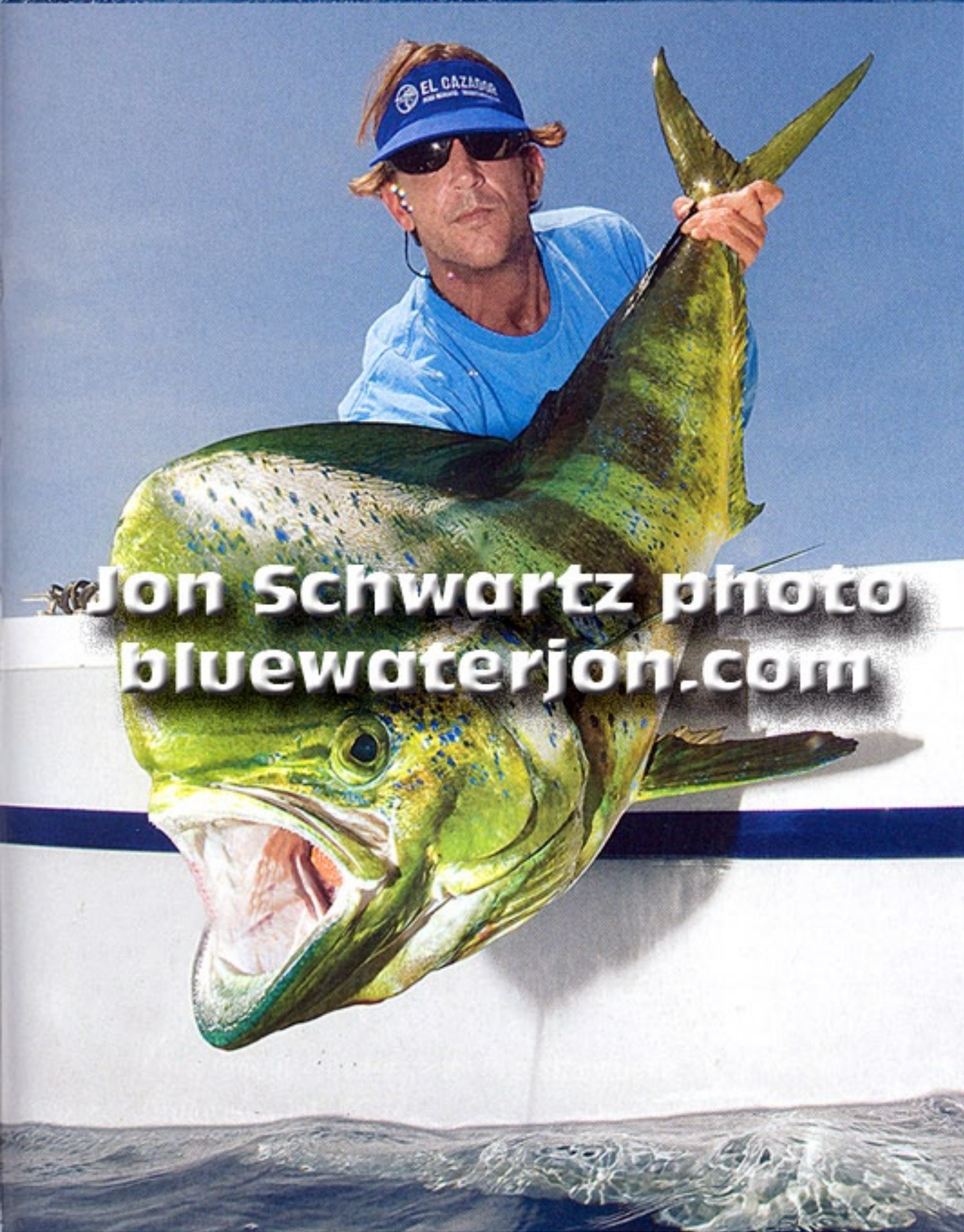


While sails make up the majority of the billfish catches, blue, black and striped marlin also show up from May through September.

America where entrepreneurs like the Mosses can lay claim to prime parcels of land and pursue commercial ventures in a business-friendly climate. In 2002, they left Florida, bought some pristine land in a key location and set about constructing a comfortable spot for travelers who wanted to experience Popoyo's world-class surfing.

It wasn't long before Moss, a U.S. Coast Guard-certified captain, discovered that he was sitting in the middle of some prime sport-fishing grounds as well and decided to provide fishing charters to his surfing clients. His lodge continues to be one of the few places where guests get a realistic shot at catching a big sailfish or wahoo, and a nice wave, all in the same day.

On our way from San Jose del Sur to



**Jon Schwartz photo
bluewaterjon.com**



Live baits, like these pretty little bonito, hook good numbers of billfish and 30-plus-pound dorado.

Surfari Lodge, Moss' cell phone rang and his chef, Jeff "Josco" Thome, reported that he'd just caught the season's first wahoo, a 61-pounder, and was preparing something special for our arrival. By the time we pulled into the lodge's driveway, we could hear the sound of waves crashing in the distance. Guests sat around the bar, enjoying cocktails and plates of fresh sushi. Mates prepped the 30-pound Shimano outfits for the next morning's outing across the courtyard as I unpacked my gear in my spacious air-conditioned room. After a game or two of pool, we headed up to the dining room and dined on coconut-crusted wahoo served with chardonnay.



Well off the beaten path, Nicaragua is one of the few places in Central America that can still be considered a true fishing frontier.

At sunrise, we loaded up one of the lodge's SUVs and headed down to the beach where we'd board the Mosses' custom 25-foot panga, *Va Pue*. Both qualified fishing guides in their own right, Thome and Jeff Soderline would be taking me out — they're part of a crew of five key employees that the Mosses brought down from Florida to help run the operation.

Since I've done a lot of fishing around Kona, Hawaii, I normally associate wahoo with depths around 40 fathoms. But here, a single ridge that rises from 100 to 55 feet marks the hot spot. And this little underwater ledge really stacks them up: Moss once caught 12 wahoo weighing more than 35 pounds here. Rather than trolling large skirted lures or marauders, Moss says that most of his success comes by pulling smaller Yo-Zuri Hydro Magnums.

The water at this nearshore spot wasn't an optimal color, and after several passes, we decided to switch target species and go looking for sails or an elusive black marlin. Recently, live bait seemed to be getting a lot of action, so we set out the planers and bait rigs in search of the preferred billfish candy — beautiful 9-inch bonitos. Within minutes, the fellows caught and bridled up a livey on a circle hook.

Instead of running it out on one of the outriggers, Thome preferred to hold the line in his hand, staring intently at the spread. Playing such an active role in the fishing process became a key ingredient in our success that day.

Once again, we came upon a large floating tree. I don't know why, but Nicaragua seems to have the largest pieces of flotsam I've ever encountered. We're not talking about floating branches; I'm talking whole trees, sans leaves. After making four circles around the tree without raising a fish, we decided to move on. Soderline told the mate to slow the boat so Thome could start hand-lining the bait again.

Something — perhaps the change in the boat's speed or the way the bait reacted to being tugged through the water by hand — caused a predator that we hadn't yet seen to attack the nervous bonito. Fortunately, both guides had kept their eyes on the spread, and Thome released the bait right into the sail's hatch for a picture-perfect hookup. The only one who dropped the ball was the photographer — me. I'd already put away my camera and watched with a mix of excitement and exasperation as the sail danced acrobatically off the stern. By the time I was ready to fire again, the fish settled into

a fighting rhythm below the surface.

Photographing jumping billfish from a panga is much harder than from the deck of a big sport-fisher, and since the sail had already put on whatever show he could above the water, I made the decision to don my fins and prep my underwater camera.

To get a shot, we would need to perform a balancing act; once Thome battled the fish to the boat, they'd need to keep it under control so that I could get some decent release shots. Fortunately, the fish cooperated like a champ. By making sure that the sail stayed mostly underwater, giving it plenty of time to breathe, we managed to keep the fish calm, get our shots and watch the sail swim off in great shape.

That night, we gathered around the bar with the other guests and reviewed the photos on my computer as we noshed on fresh mahi tacos. As pleased as we were with the shots, we hadn't reached our lofty goal of getting the rare "over-under" photograph that clearly shows the anglers above the waterline and the fish below. With one more day before I headed back to the airport at Managua, the pressure was on to get that one-in-a-million shot.

Taking off at dawn, we headed straight for the horizon on a glorious morning that called for clear skies and little wind. After slow-trolling live baits by hand for several hours with only some medium-sized dorado to show for our efforts, we decided to change tactics. Soderline deployed a full spread of trolling lures, and the boys fired up the sound system on *Va Pue* with Bob Marley's "Live at the Roxy." Somewhere in the middle of "Lively Up Yourself," the sweet sound of a reel screaming made the hair on my neck stand up. Fish on!

Everyone rushed to their stations once again as Soderline brought the line tight to the fish. Thome cleared the spread, and the mate chased after the fish — a big sail that leaped repeatedly off the starboard side. With that special shot as our goal, we'd raised the bar pretty high for success, and you could feel the tension. Minutes flew by and the next thing I know, I'm swimming face to face with the lit-up sail, firing my camera in full-burst mode as the crew bills and then releases the fish. As the now-free fish faded off into the blue abyss below, I felt a deep sense of satisfaction in having documented this fantastic action in one of our continent's last untamed fishing frontiers. 