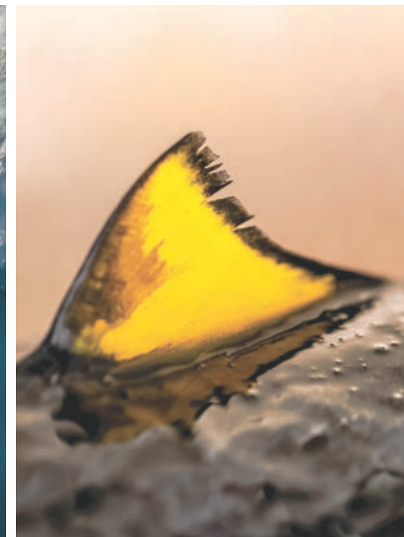
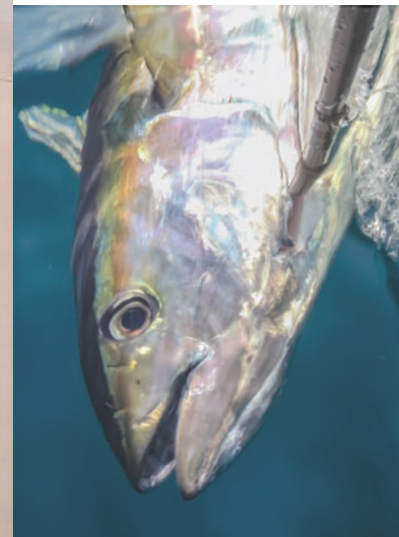
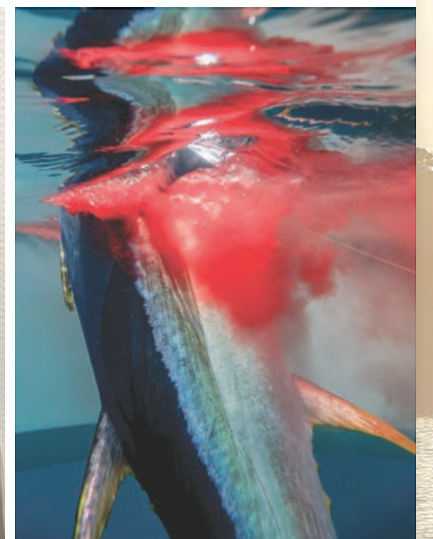
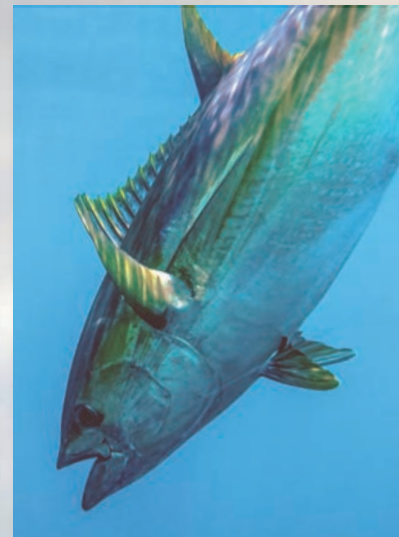


# Mercury Rising

Panama's Tranquil Island Escape  
Amid Explosive Tuna Fishing

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CAPTAIN STEVE DOUGHERTY







► **SOME JOBS COME WITH PERKS...**a company car, tickets to the playoffs, stock options, four-day workweeks. Though, I somehow stumbled into a career that enables me to see things many will never see while traversing the furthest stretches of open water with only a few close colleagues for company. And through my travels nothing compares to what I've seen across the fertile waters surrounding the rugged coast of Panama.

Nearly 10 years ago I visited the Republic of Panama to write a destination piece for this very publication. It was one of my first international assignments as an editor and the experience enlightened me to the legendary fisheries that exist across the expansive Pacific Ocean.

I was fresh out of school and already thought I had seen it all. But after spending a week of solitude on a private island paradise I was fully convinced the various species found throughout these unspoiled waters were stronger, smarter, larger and more damaging to tackle than any location in the world.

Almost a decade later with a now ink-soaked passport, I'm watching the sunrise on that same dreamy island in the Gulf of Chiriquí sipping coffee with Captain Shane Jarvis and devising a game plan for the day.

With a cast of proven journeymen including Captain Bill Wichcrowski from *Deadliest Catch*, Raymond Douglas of King Sailfish Mounts, and Scott Ruperchet of Pacific Fins Guatemala, I knew this trip orchestrated by Ozzy Delgado of Grundéns was going to be one to remember. We were isolated in a remote jungle escape for a week and couldn't be more content with the current situation.

Islands evoke a unique feeling of simplicity and isolation no matter their size, surrounding or development. And while they all share the defining feature of being encompassed by water, Sport Fish Panama Island Lodge on Isla Parida offers more than one could ever imagine being so far off the beaten path.

Originally built as a family vacation home, the remote retreat has since evolved into a traveling angler's paradise. Resting 12 miles offshore, Isla Parida is the closest base of operations for anglers fishing the legendary Hannibal Bank, and the largest island within the Chiriquí National Marine Sanctuary.

Mere words and photos alone cannot paint an accurate picture, but the cozy jungle lodge features amenities to accommodate up to eight guests including a private chef, Wi-Fi, air conditioning and hot water. However, even though you can connect to the Internet, you are still very much off the grid and immersed in the dense jungle with exotic hardwood canopies

**Sport Fish Panama Island Lodge redefines roughing it on a deserted island. Comfortable amenities in the vicinity of epic big game fishing leave little to be desired.**



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and palm tree lined beaches edged in volcanic rock. Besides a few small trails, the jungle growth is impenetrable.

The lodge is amazing, right where you would least expect it. And with the absence of marinas and infrastructure along a majority of the Panamanian coastline, fishing these unspoiled waters can be a major undertaking otherwise.

Over the years there has been a variety of sport fishing developments in the area including mainland and mothership operations, eco-lodges and boutique hotels, but with long runs required to reach the grounds, most have come and gone. Shane's offshore island escape puts anglers as close as it gets to some of the best fishing in the world. And with much of the area remaining largely unexplored due to its remote location, the

Many "fish of a lifetime" have been taken off Panama's Gulf of Chiriquí and the region has become one of the world's top sport fishing destinations.

development of Sport Fish Panama Island Lodge has recently set the fishing industry on fire. Here, a full day of fishing is actually a full day of fishing.

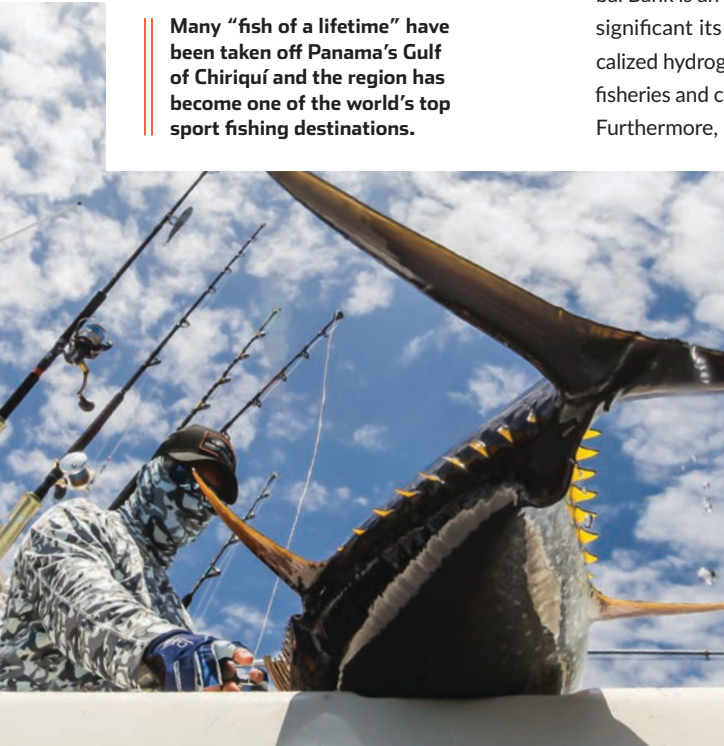
Although two of the area's main angling attractions are Isla Coiba, the largest island in Central America, and Isla Montuosa, where the dense landmass rises from 10,000-foot depths, our late July trip was focused on the world-famous Hannibal Bank. And for good reason. The tuna bite here is often wide open with chaotic frenzies unfolding daily as ruthless game fish attack from below and screeching birds crash from above. There may be no better spot in the world to target 100+ pound yellowfin tuna.

Named after the *USS Hannibal* that discovered the area while performing survey work for the development of the Panama Canal, Hannibal Bank is an underwater seamount that is so significant its existence actually modifies localized hydrographic conditions. The resulting fisheries and conditions are unique to the area. Furthermore, the ocean currents that collide

here are rich in plankton and forage, and the prolific predators that surround the seamount in astounding numbers are mesmerizing to even the most world-traveled scientists.

From extensive acoustic seabed mapping studies we know the bank ranges in depth from 170 feet to just over 1,300 feet. The broad area it covers is roughly nine miles long and four and a half miles wide, featuring extensive zones of slopes, crests, gullies and pinnacles. Detailed topographic maps display two extreme pinnacles to the north

“Islands evoke a unique feeling of simplicity and isolation no matter their size, surrounding or development.”





# Mercury Rising

and southeast of the bank that have sheer drop-offs of nearly 400 feet.

What's more is this offshore seamount and surrounding pinnacles are heavily influenced by an interaction with nutrient-rich upwellings bringing deep water to the surface. With the south-flowing Panama Current, the

Hannibal Bank's incredible tuna fishery is remarkable due to the unique bathymetry dominated by pronounced undersea structure.

north-flowing Columbia Current and the westward Equatorial Undercurrent abruptly hitting the area, my theory of fish growing stronger and larger here might be substantiated given the epic biomass recorded day in and day out.

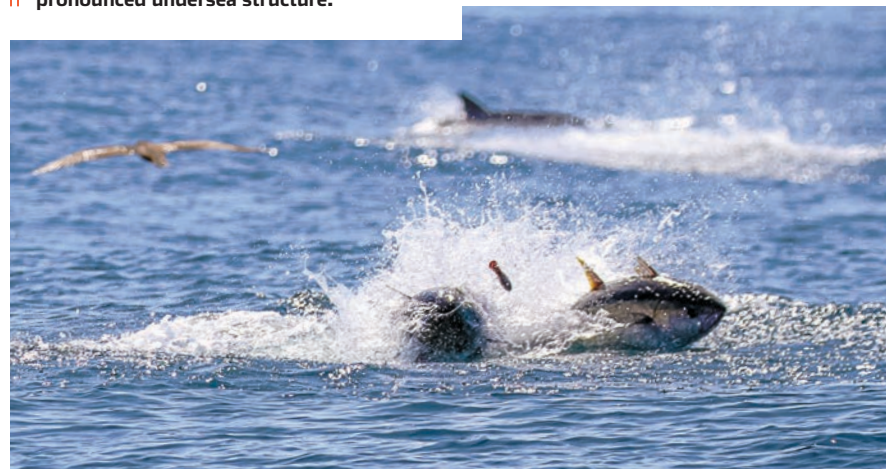
Panama has long been associated with incredible blue and black marlin fishing, but yellowfin tuna are available year-round, with peak season April to August. This is when fish well over 100 pounds and encounters with fish eclipsing 200 pounds are a real possibility. This year alone Shane captured cow yellowfin tuna in the 200- and 300-pound class.

Over the course of our time offshore we came

“There may be no better spot in the world to target 100+ pound yellowfin tuna.

across numerous tuna frenzies each and every day. We hooked tuna on surface poppers, live bait, cut chunks, fly and subsurface soft plastic lures at the Hannibal Bank and along porpoise schools in open water. While every method resulted in a screaming drag, catching tuna on poppers cast into boiling surface water is more fun than any angler should be allowed to have.

The fishing here is world-class and the



"Big game fishing is hours of boredom interrupted by sheer moments of panic!" *Charles Perry*

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# Mercury Rising

Hannibal Bank is no secret, but for the most part you'll be on your own. The Panamanian government banned large longlining operations and purse seiners, with the local panga fleet the only commercial harvesters in the area.

While the locals have been plying these waters for their entire lives, in just a few years Shane has developed a great rapport by sharing and

bartering ice, fuel, bait and fishing information.

After five straight days on the water we had all surpassed species-specific big fish goals. The tuna bite was as good as it gets and the inshore fishing was icing on the cake. Trolling live baits along rugged shorelines and ripping poppers through turbulent waters resulted in savage attacks from bluefin trevally, monster houndfish, roosterfish, rock snapper, horseeye jack and cubera snapper.

Our live baits were pulverized and brightly colored plugs reduced to paintless pieces of plastic. As cliché as it is, the rugged landscape and prowling game fish found here are

straight out of the storyboard of *Jurassic Park*.

Without risk there is no reward and traveling from Miami to the island lodge requires two flights and an hour boat ride. It's feasible in a day, but any hiccup along the way and you'll likely miss the connecting flight, requiring an overnight in Panama City or David.

The sun in Panama is harsh, daytime temps extreme, and no see-ums highly visible. However, with all-inclusive packages covering every detail, adventurous anglers who are willing to immerse themselves can expect intimate experiences with some of the most powerful fish in all of the world's oceans. Paradise awaits. **FSF**



## Notes of Interest

**Official Name:** Republic of Panama

**Capital:** Panama City

**Population:** 3,678,000

**Area:** 30,193 sq. mi.

**Weather:** Panama has two distinct seasons. The dry season stretches from January through April and the wet season from May through December.

**Language:** Spanish is the official language, but many Panamanians speak English.

**Currency:** While the Panamanian Balboa is recognized as the currency, U.S. dollars are accepted everywhere.



## Contact

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Captain Shane Jarvis—[fishpanamatoday.com](http://fishpanamatoday.com)

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