

# Pura vida, Costa Rica



*It is not just the great weather and scenery that attracts people to Costa Rica – there's plenty of marlin action as well.*

The words *pura vida* mean 'pure life' in Costa Rican Spanish. However, it is also used to say 'Hello,' 'Goodbye,' 'How you going?' and generally, 'What's up?'

I have just finished a six-month fishing season in Costa Rica, and from what I have encountered 'pure life' sums up my time in this amazing country.

Costa Rica is a very long way from New Zealand. It takes three to four long, tiring flights to get there from Auckland, but the refreshing and exciting experiences that lie before you afterwards certainly make up for the long travel.

Costa Rica prides itself on eco-adventure tourism, calm, clean water, perfect surf and breathtaking fishing opportunities.

Our second time fishing here, our season started by flying to San Jose, the capital and largest city of Costa Rica. Next, the crew boarded a small 10-seater plane and flew into an old banana-trade town called Golfito, which is nestled within a naturally sheltered harbour.

Because the bay is so calm and safe, yacht-moving companies like

Yacht Path and Dockwise use it to drop off sportfisher vessels and other boats wanting to explore this wonderful country.

We then waited for two days at the friendly little Banana Bay Marina until our boat came in, enabling us to load up and complete two more days of preparation. Our gamefishing season could now begin.

Our plan this year was not just to target billfish and tuna, but also get stuck into the vast inshore fishery for snappers, grouper and roosterfish.

Los Suenos Marina, near the crazy little seaside tourist town of Jaco, was our base for six months. It's 130 nautical miles from Golfito, and arguably the best equipped marina on the west coast of the Americas. Set up for sport fishing, it offers a massive charter-boat dock, beautiful villas to house owners and guests, restaurants, and plenty of international provisions to keep a travelling sportfish operation running smoothly.

The trip to Los Suenos was the perfect 'welcome back' to Costa Rica for the crew. We slowed down and fished for a couple of hours on the

way, and were greeted with a glassy-calm sea, three XOS sailfish and, of course, mahimahi for the table.

All the while, I was quietly sitting up in the tower with a big grin on my face calling each fish as they rose up into our spread, thinking to myself: 'Life sure is good.'

This season we fished from the Los Suenos Marina from December to the end of April, which are the peak months for fishing. Also, the climate is at its driest and the seas are calm. Blue and striped marlin, sailfish, mahimahi and yellowfin tuna are the offshore species targeted, while we have to pick from groupers, snappers and roosterfish inshore.

The season started off well with a good steady marlin bite for the months of December and January – most days you can raise one to five marlin and have another five to thirty sailfish in your spread as well. Also, at this time of the year the mahimahi can be so prolific you can only troll four teasers with no hooks, as you will get pack-attacked by huge numbers of hungry mahimahi trying to sate their ferocious appetite.

On more than one occasion I

watched a tailing or feeding marlin in front of the boat, got us lined up for a good pass, only to turn around and watch heaps of mahimahi pile in and demolish the spread. We then spent the next 10-15 minutes fighting mahi instead of hooking Mr Billfish.

On one of the more memorable days of fishing this year we caught a striped marlin, blue marlin, sailfish and a mahimahi in less than one hour of fishing. That day it felt as if we were going backwards more often than forwards. To catch a Grand Slam (three species of billfish in a day) is an amazing thing to do, but to catch it in 60 minutes is simply unbelievable, and it sure put a big smile on the boss's face. We ended the season with two Grand Slams.

The bottom fishing tends to be overshadowed in Costa Rica by the amazing billfish action. However, this year we really wanted to put in a big effort and pull ourselves away from the offshore fishing to try some of the inshore bottom fishing. Some days we would bring the billfish gear in early, and on our way back to the marina we would deep-drop grou-



Like sailfish, mahimahi like to get aerial and are great fun on light gear. Right: this rooster fish, which was photographed then released, made for a great end to Tony's stay in Costa Rica.

per and snapper rigs down to 80m to 300m. To our great surprise, we came up with fish on most drops. In the end, we just went bottom fishing some days, as the possibilities were unlimited and the fishing area huge – it would probably take a lifetime to cover the entire area.

The rest of the season was pretty steady and the fishing changed regularly, as some days you would be targeting tuna, the next it would be blue or striped marlin – and sailfish and mahi would always be present.

The usual billfish technique used in Costa Rica involves trolling dead baits and teasers, then switching and dropping back dead or live baits to the teased-up fish. Only circle hooks can be used, and almost all billfish are released (the sportfishing community is very active in catch and release, and the fishery looks pretty good for the future).

On the non-fishing days, guests

and crews enjoyed a vast selection of outdoor activities, including quad bike and Zip Line rides (giant flying foxes – one of the main tourist attractions in Costa Rica), as well as rafting, crocodile, volcano and nature tours. Then there is the surfing: with calm seas and a swell constantly coming out of the Pacific, there are always high quality waves to be had. At night, Jaco comes alive – it parties all night long, and is a crazy, wacky little place full of tourists taking advantage of the good times to be had in Costa Rica.

But back to the fishing. With our season fast coming to an end, we had one last goal: to catch a trophy-size roosterfish. My Costa Rican deck-hand Diego told me of a place near his hometown of Golfito, where very large roosters had been caught in the past. Even a few light-tackle records

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Sailfish are a spectacular adversary on light tackle and in Costa Rican waters are commonly caught in the 40-60kg range.



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*Cubbera snapper are a fun bottom species to catch, but watch out for those teeth.*

Eventually we carefully boated the fish, accompanied by huge cheers and hoots. A couple of quick photos were taken before we released one of the most beautiful fish to swim the oceans. High fives all round and a very satisfying way to finish an amazing fishing season.

Out of all the countries I have visited and fished, this is up there with the best – if not the best. After all, boasting calm seas, large numbers of billfish and tuna, excellent bottom fishing, great marinas, varied outdoor activities and wild nightlife, as well as filled with friendly people enjoying life, Costa Rica has something for everyone. *Pura vida.*



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had come from there, so on our way back to Golfito – where we were to prepare and load our ship for our next destination – we decided to give

it a crack.

We caught a bunch of small bonito and filled the tuna tubes, then headed for the spot. On the second slow pass of the reef, our long 'rigger dropped, and yes, we were in. However, with

the line peeling off very quickly, we initially thought it might be a large cubera snapper. But then, as the fish came closer, we could see silver and black, and we knew the targeted fish was on the end of our line.



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