

A MARLIN FOR THE RICKER

By Rick Ireland

Our quest for the elusive marlin started over 20-years ago. Our first trip to Mexico was a well deserved vacation from years of hard work and saving money. At least for one week anyway! The kids were teenagers at the time so we ended up booking a trip to Cancun, where an experienced colleague said we should go with the kids for our first trip to Mexico. We chose an all-inclusive resort on the strip that was close to many attractions and "all of the action," as the kids would say. We notified the kids that mom and dad wanted to try our luck at deep sea fishing and they were okay with that. And why not? They would have the run of the place while Darlene and I were out fishing.



The trip, to us, was thought to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience so we purposely booked the trip with just the two of us fishing on the boat. I couldn't bear the thought of going out with several strangers and hooking into a big billfish only to find out it was on someone else's line. I mean, let's face it, why not avoid having to punch somebody in the mouth and take their rod if you can, right? I made it known to the Captain that I really wanted to catch a sailfish and he promised that he would try very hard, but he didn't seem too positive in his response.

We weren't out in the deep blue very long before the action started. We caught some nice Wahoo and then my wife hooked into a three to four-foot mahi-mahi, also known as dolphin or dorado.

Wahoo are much like a cross between a muskie and a barracuda, with big teeth and big eyes. They have a very mean disposition and those teeth are not to be taken lightly. A German Shepherd with fins comes to mind!

The mahi-mahi was a real education for both of us, but more so for my wife. I couldn't believe how fast that fish was. You could see a miniature wake come off the 50-pound test line as she fought the fish. More impressive was the fact that my little wife was doing battle with it. She wanted me to take the rod as she began to tire but I insisted she finish on her own - and she made it!

We continued to troll for several more hours and the Captain knew I wanted a sailfish really badly. He didn't seem too confident on us catching one, but I wasn't giving up hope.

Mal de Mer

Despite the beauty of the open ocean, the constant rolling has a way of making some people a little green around the gills, me included. I have tried many methods of helping my ailment but dimenhydrinate tablets seem to work the best for me. The ones I use come in a tiny bottle with a pink label marked "Motion Sickness" and I get them over the counter at my local drug store. Since I discovered these little beauties our big water excursions have been much more enjoyable and a lot easier to handle. I never go out on the big water without them.

Wahoo have a mean disposition and a mean set of teeth to go with it.



It was late in the afternoon and the charter was just about to come to an end when all of a sudden a fish slammed into one of the lures and launched himself airborne, wiggling frantically in mid-air and crashing down into the turquoise waters.

With a proud look on his face the captain extended out his arm and, just like introducing a movie star, he said, "Sailfish."

I, on the other hand, was already in motion and heading for the fighting chair, ready to do battle with that glorious fish. It wasn't very big in sailfish standards, but I didn't care. It was mine, it was on the rod and I was holding it! The fish put up a spectacular fight, jumping fully out of the water several times, head-shaking and tail-walking. It was everything I dreamed of.

Finally the fish began to tire and I was able to get it up nice and close. The first mate grabbed it by the bill and hoisted it aboard. He and the captain laid it out gently across the top of the transom.

As we admired the beautiful fish and took pictures, the Captain looked at me and said, "Choose!" I knew what he meant.

We took one more look at that fish and I said, "Okay, release it. It's too beautiful to keep!"

They carefully lowered it back into the water and held on to the bill, working it back and forth. A few minutes later the striped beauty tore off, heading straight down into the depths. We all applauded! The Captain smiled and nodded with approval, knowing that fish would be just fine. It was only about a five and a half-footer, but we will never forget that first billfish.



This first trip planted a special seed in both of us and laid the groundwork for many deep sea fishing trips to come. Since that first billfish we have gone on several more charters in the Caribbean and Mexico.

In Acapulco, we caught a seven-and-a-half to eight-foot sailfish. On another memorable but frustrating trip we actually saw six sailfish right on the surface. The captain spun the boat around several times, on many instances dragging the lines right over their backs.

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The first mate looked at me, shrugging his shoulders, and said, "Fish no hungry."

Tell me that's not a kick in the can, especially when you've come all that way and invested all that time and money! One good thing though, I'm fortunate that my wife enjoys fishing too so we can share the joys and the agonies together! No sense being disappointed alone... right?

Some years later we decided to give Mazatlan a try. It is located on the Pacific side, directly across from the Sea of Cortez. If you draw a line directly west from Mazatlan's shoreline it will run right through Cabo San Lucas, on the southern tip of the Mexican Baja. It seemed like a perfect place to try since Cabo and the cities on the West Coast are all famous for great bill-fishing. Large billfish, like Blue, Black and White marlin, as well as sailfish are in those waters, along with many other varieties of game fish.

We took the local bus as close to the marina as possible for a look around. When we got there we strolled into a little office and met an elderly gentleman, sitting behind a desk. The walls were full of photos and mounts of nice fish. The gentleman spoke excellent English so we struck up a conversation.

Keep or Release?

After landing a trophy fish you have to quickly decide whether to keep it or not. You won't believe how fast an eight-foot sail fish can lose its colour. In a matter of minutes you will notice all those beautiful iridescent colours disappear and the fish begins to take on a coppery grey hue. This is the reason many outfitters quickly put a blanket or cloth over the fish and pour water over it to keep it wet.

If you want to keep the fish for mounting, most reputable outfitters have all the contacts. Bear in mind that a good billfish mount including taxidermy fees, shipping and handling could easily exceed \$1000 or more. Another (and preferred) option is to photograph your catch, take accurate measurements and have a replica mount made. Some of these are more realistic than skin mounts and they will last forever. That way you can have your trophy while still releasing your catch to fight another day!

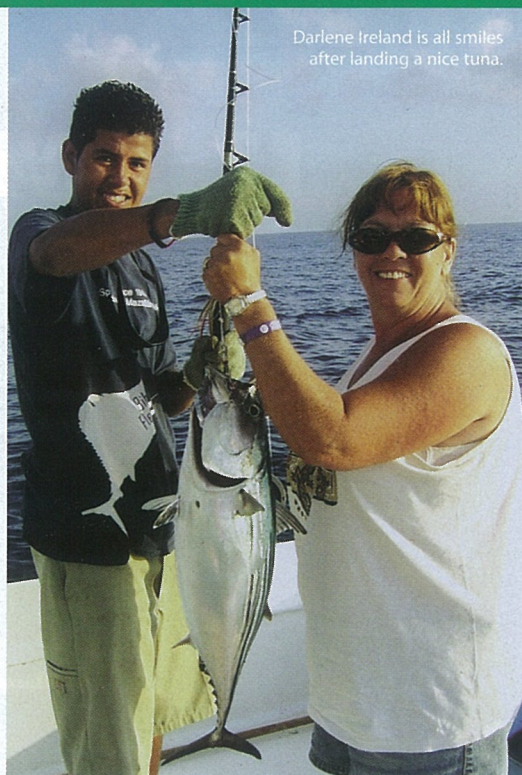
The prices he quoted us seemed great and better than we had experienced anywhere else. I had to be sure he understood that we were talking about the entire boat to ourselves, in case he misquoted us. He confirmed that this was the price for just the two of us, for an all-day charter. He also included hotel pick up at the front lobby in the morning, water, soft drinks, bait, ice and the return trip to our hotel. For a small fee he would pack us a box lunch or alcohol, if desired. We were sold! After giving him a small down payment and a handshake, we walked back from the pier with a sense of accomplishment. This was the start of a great and long-lasting relationship we have with the Bibi Fleet. Since then we have caught several large fish with them over the years, including two sailfish in the seven to eight-foot-plus class.

Last year turned out to be a very special trip. We decided to book a week in August, which the locals call the start of the rainy season. Quite often we would be awakened by horrendous thunder storms around 3:00 – 5:00 am. Kelly Hernandez, the manager of Bibi Fleet, told us not to worry and usually by 7:00 am the storms would clear out and make for a nice day. True to his word, this phenomenon occurred several times during the week.

We confirmed our arrival in Mexico with Kelly and booked a charter trip for Tuesday. I asked for the same crew as we have had in the past - Alex senior and Alex junior, the father and son combination. Kelly said the guys would be ready and were looking forward to it. Over the years we have grown accustomed to them and mutual respect and understanding seem to be shared between our families. Not to mention that they can really catch fish!

We pulled out of the harbour around 7:00 am and it wasn't long before we ran into action. For a short time it was pandemonium on the boat with rods being tripped everywhere. What a blast! We boated five nice Yellowfin tuna in a matter of minutes before the school moved on. Alex kept one fish for dinner and we let the rest go.

We continued out further into the sea in search of the "blue water," where the ocean's colour changes from a turquoise-



Darlene Ireland is all smiles after landing a nice tuna.

green to the most beautiful shade of blue you've ever seen. Unfortunately we couldn't buy a fish until about 1:00 pm, when Alex Junior came flying down and grabbed one of the rods. A sailfish had come up and smacked one of the lines, but after a few head shakes it was gone. Shortly after we had to turn around and head back to shore with only the tuna to show for our efforts.

Darlene and I were somewhat disappointed, but that's fishing. We began to discuss the possibility of booking another charter and she agreed to try again later in the week. We asked Kelly if he could accommodate us again on Thursday and he said he could.

On Thursday morning Kelly swung by and picked us up at the hotel lobby at 6:00 am. We had to make a little detour on the way to the marina since some of the streets were flooded due to the heavy storm the night before. The showers continued as we approached the harbour but then the rain let up just long enough for us to board the boat and get under way.

By 8:30 am Alex Jr. had finished cutting and tying the bait rigs and we had all the rods in water. As the day progressed, Alex Sr. steered us into the deep blue while Junior kept changing lures, freshening up the live bait rigs and adjusting lines. He showed me one lure that was his favourite - a squid-looking creature about a foot long. Alex Jr. informed me that this lure had caught five 5 marlin and lost 11 more.



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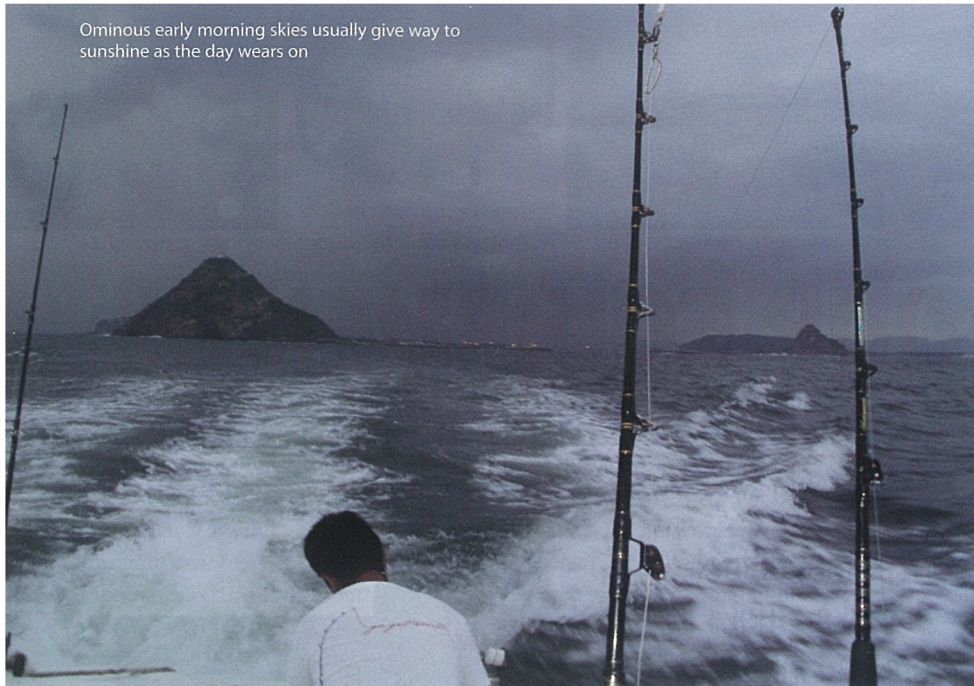
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I said, "You're kidding?"

He said, "No," nodding his head with a smile. He told me he had modified it a little and then showed me some of the changes he made to it. I could see his handiwork and told him he did a great job.

I said, "Well Alex, let's see you make it six marlin, okay?"

He laughed as he headed back up top to sit beside his dad.

The two of them allowed me to come up top beside them and help spot. You can see a lot better from up on the flying bridge. Each time I'd spot something that just didn't look right I would point in that direction.

Alex senior would say, "No, that's a duck," or "No, that's a turtle," before smiling and laughing. A sea turtle's flipper or a duck standing on a turtle's back looks pretty convincing from a quarter-mile away, but Alex was always right!

By about 1:00 pm we were starting to get discouraged. The weather had been perfect for quite a few hours but there wasn't a fish to be bought.

I said to Darlene, "Do you believe this? Two hard days of fishing and all we've got to show for it are a few tuna?"

We were over 30-miles offshore by now so Alex senior had to turn us around and head back, although we still continued to fish. All of a sudden Junior came flying down from the bridge with a loud thud as his feet hit the floor. That got our attention real fast. I don't think his feet touched one rung of that 10-foot steel ladder! The boat sped up quickly and Junior said something to his dad in Spanish as he grabbed one of the rods off the transom.

I said, "Have we got something?"

I looked up and heard a reel screaming, only to see Alex Senior hanging on to one of the rods up top for dear life.

He looked down at me with a big smile and said, "Si, marlin," and motioned with his head for me to look out over the back of the boat.

Way out in the horizon I could clearly see this fish flying horizontally, about 10-feet above the surface, and then ploughing into the waves again!

"Yahoo" was the word of the moment as I flew into the fighting chair. Senior and Junior negotiated the rod down from up top and handed it to me. The fish looked very dark, almost black, and not very big because he was a long way out there and heading for China! He continued his long, high horizontal leaps and kept bulldogging. I just could not stop this fish! The line on the spool continued to get smaller and smaller and the reel was so hot you wouldn't dare touch it. Senior and Junior were shouting in Spanish and then Senior threw the boat into high gear and began to chase the fish. Finally we made up a little distance and I was able to get a few turns of line back on the spool, albeit only for a moment. The fish took back everything I had gained in one hard pound of the rod. The reel was dangerously close to being empty but I finally began to gain a little. Junior continued coaching me and telling me to keep moving the line evenly across the spool with my thumb.

Darlene removed my hat and kept wiping the sweat from my forehead. My left arm was throbbing in pain.

I said to Junior, "I think this fish is a lot bigger than we thought. I'm not kidding here guys, you should feel this thing! Even the big sailfish I've caught don't pull this hard!"

Alex could see the rod, which was as big as pool cue, being pounded by this fish. I could tell he was starting to think I was right.

The fish sounded and it was all I could do to hang on. Then, all of a sudden, everything went slack. A sad feeling came over me but, as I reeled like hell to take up the slack, I felt the weight of the fish again.

"Ah-ha," I said to myself. "This crafty guy is pulling the old, 'run at the boat,' trick in an effort to break free!"

The fish tried that stunt on more than three occasions and each time it sent my heart sinking, thinking I had lost him. The line would go completely limp and I swear I broke the world record for speed-reeling! Alex Senior was well educated in the "marlin magic tricks" and would expertly increase or decrease the boat's speed as necessary. Alex Junior couldn't help but inform me that, out of all the lures and live bait rigs we had dragging out there, the fish had hammered his modified lure, and he was beaming with pride.

As the fight continued I kept pumping and reeling, keeping a watchful eye and feel on the rod for any more tricks this fish would dish out. At this point my left arm was really sore and my thumb was stiff too. As we gained line we also began to catch the occasional glimpse of a big shadow in the water. The two Alex's were talking in Spanish and you could tell that they were impressed by the size of this fish. We could start to see the blues, silvers and stripes coming into view.

Planning Your Trip

If you plan to try a deep sea fishing adventure, be sure to do your research prior to going. The internet and a few phone calls can work wonders. Hotels in the area can also offer contacts.

If you'd like to give Mazatlan a try, I highly recommend the Bibi Fleet. They were Mazatlan's first sport fishing fleet and they have been in business for over 65-years. That should tell you something! You reach them through their website at <http://bibifleet.com>, on their Facebook page, by phone at 669-913-1060 or by email at gogetem@bibifleet.com. Ask for Tadeo Hernandez - Kelly - and tell him "The Ricker" sent you!

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Junior began to pull line in and out of the rod tip by hand to aid me in fighting all that weight. As the fish got closer, we couldn't believe the size of it. I stopped reeling before the leader got too close to the rod tip, stood up out of the chair and moved way back, holding the rod high and keeping the line tight. Junior bent over the stern and his dad joined him. At once, they both heaved and this huge marlin came flying into the boat and lay in front of us! Darlene and I couldn't believe our eyes!

"Holy crap," was now the word!

Junior removed his special lure and said, "Si, I told you is good!"

We all shook hands and hugged each other in joy. After sharing several "high-fives" and taking a bunch of photos, it was time to head back to shore.



Rick's marlin measured nine-feet, six-inches long and weighed 211-pounds!

Alex Senior had marked the spot on his GPS when we hooked up and he said that I had fought that fish for one-hour and three-minutes. Junior nodded with approval and patted me on the back.

He said, "You did good. Sometimes we catch bigger."

I said, "Bigger?"

He said, "Si, grande. Sometimes three or four- hours!"

As we headed back to shore, Alex Senior tried to call Kelly to let him know we would be late getting back.

He couldn't get an answer but laughed and said, "You watch, come three o'clock he'll be on the phone saying 'Where are you? What's wrong?'"

Sure enough, shortly after three the call came in. It felt great to have the manager call me personally to congratulate us on our fine catch!

When we made it back to shore more congratulations were in order. The Blue marlin was weighed, measured and hung up for photos. It topped the scales at nine-feet, six-inches and weighed 211-pounds.

When I told Kelly the story about it almost spooling us he said, "Not to worry, if it had got down to the end of the spool they would have clipped another rod onto yours and thrown your rod overboard. That's what we do. We don't like to do that, but we will if it means landing a big fish!"

I could only think, wow, what a team! These guys will go to no end to ensure you have a great day on the water.

Kelly asked if we wanted to get the fish mounted but we declined. We told him the photos would have to do. And besides, the money could be put toward another future fishing excursion! Kelly liked that idea. He then offered some of the meat to us, so we took a large portion back to the hotel. I had promised Dago, who works at the front desk, some fresh fish if we caught anything. Kelly said not to worry about the rest of it. There were many hungry people in Mazatlan who would benefit from it and a large portion would help feed the children in the orphanage that was just down the road. Kelly's operation donates a lot of free fish to the needy children and families in the district.

When we arrived back at the hotel, Dago was very happy to see all that marlin meat. He also made arrangements for some of it to be delivered and cooked for us at one of the restaurants. We had fresh marlin steaks with our meal that night and they were cooked perfectly. We gave some back to the bell captain, the waiter and the cook so they could enjoy it too.

If you like to fish and have never tried deep sea fishing, you should give it a try. You just never know – that one day could be your lucky one! 🐟

