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Baja's Fantasy Island

By Tony Pena

Forget the bait, I'm fishin'," said Kit McNear as he rigged a lively cocinero and fly-lined it off the bow. The baitfish sped away and then suddenly came to a halt. An anxious McNear locked up the reel and whipped the rod repeatedly against dead weight. A blue marlin rose halfway above the slick surface, seemingly in slow motion, and shook its huge head, and the bait came flinging back, almost hitting McNear.

"Did you see that?" yelled McNear. Loreto Green Lucero and I, busily rigging up, barely witnessed the incident. Lucero, our pangero (boat operator), chummed handfuls of small sardines, and the surface erupted with slashing schools of yellowfin tuna and dorado, joined by diving frigate birds. My cocinero (green jack) dove deep as we drifted over the edge of Montana Rock, where the dark depths contrasted with the green hues of its shallow 60-foot, flat-topped peak. Line ripped off my Shimano TLD 20 in a blur as I engaged the drag, only to see more line disappear before I was instantly cut off.

"Pargo. Big pargo," remarked Lucero nonchalantly of the Pacific cubera (dog snapper), as if he'd seen the same thing happen a thousand times before. While I re-rigged, a whoop and holler from McNear signaled another hookup as Lucero, rod bent in a tight arc, quietly worked a fish from the stern. McNear released an amberjack while Lucero tried hard to raise his heavy fish. Mysteriously, the line parted halfway up and Lucero quickly studied the clean-cut end.

"What was it?" I asked. After a deep thought, Lucero just shrugged his shoulders. He didn't have a clue - understandable around this busy game-fish junction.

Plenty of Structure

The southernmost island in Baja's Sea of Cortez, Cerralvo lies between La Paz and the East Cape. It's too far south and north, respectively, for the large charter fleets based in these two popular areas to fish. The only accommodation nearby, Hotel Las Arenas (currently being refurbished), commands a sweeping view of the Sea of Cortez and Cerralvo Island lying just 5 miles offshore.

Except for the panga fleets that operate from the beaches of Punta Arena de La Ventana (Las Arenas) and Bahma de Los Muertos, Cerralvo Island manages to remain relatively untouched and its environs are home to a staggering number of game fish. Offshore structure includes La Reina (Seal Rock) about 4 miles north of Cerralvo, and Inner Montana Rock, about 3/4 mile south of Punta Sudeste at the island's south end. Inner Montana Rock has a high point of only 4 feet below the surface. The S.S. Montana struck it in 1874, giving the name to this fishy graveyard. Its underwater, rocky terrain continues southward in depths of 30 to 100 feet before rising abruptly again about a mile and a half offshore.

Anglers favor this second ridge, called Montana Rock, over the Inner Rock because it's near deeper water. Within a quarter-mile, Montana Rock drops off to 100 fathoms and eventually connects with the 1,000-fathom shelf that attracts big pelagics such as blue marlin. Other productive fishing areas for pelagics include the 88-Fathom Bank 12 miles east of Cerralvo, Yellow Bluff on the northeastern side of Cerralvo, and Cerralvo Channel.

Seasons and Seas

Many species are present year-round, but most anglers visit the region between April and October. Prevailing sea and weather conditions during this time are characterized by calm mornings and afternoon breezes of 10 to 15 knots from the southeast to southwest. Some periods will be flat-calm for several days but may be followed by a two- or three-day wind that creates short, steep windblown waves commonly referred to as the "Cortez chop" by Baja regulars. During the summer, clear, blue water is found close to shore at Cerralvo as well as Baja beaches. Sea and air temperatures usually range from 78 to 86 degrees and 75 to 105 degrees, respectively. Anglers can stay comfortable on the water by selecting pangas equipped with canvas shade tops, wearing wide-brimmed hats and light tropic wear and drinking



plenty of water. Conditions change while on land, where cooling breezes quickly lose their influence due to the dry desert heat of Baja.

Rainstorms occur mostly between September and October. From November to April the wind usually comes from the north. During northern cold fronts a chilly wind can blow for weeks, making fishing uncomfortable and difficult.

Tackle, Techniques, Live Bait and Birds

The great variety of game fish at Cerralvo can pose tackle-selection problems. Some anglers pack a veritable tackle store of goods for pursuing everything from 2-pound ladyfish to 500-pound blue marlin. Others prefer to target a particular species such as roosterfish and gear up with only a few outfits in the 15- to 40-pound class. The variety of game fish here promises action for any type of gear - fly, spin or conventional. Whatever your choice, it's important to bring all your own tackle, lures and terminal hardware because most of the panga skippers don't have a good supply. Some charter packages include tackle, but you should verify the type and quality before leaving your gear behind.

Conventional (level-wind) reels matched with sturdy rods in the 12- to 30-pound class find wide usage here for casting light surface poppers and other lures. When slow-trolling live baits for big roosterfish, I spool my favorite light lever-drag reels - Shimano TLD-15 and TLD-20 series - with 20- to 40-pound line. I recommend at least 20-pound tackle in order to get the fish to the boat quicker for a healthier release. For marlin and large yellowfin tuna, most anglers find that two-speed reels such as Penn Internationals or Shimano Tiagra 50s provide the maximum size that makes sense for stand-up fishing in a panga.

Proven lures include swimming plugs such as the Rapala CD-14 and CD-18, PILI popper, Haddock Jig-n-Spoon, UFO and Salas metal jig, Braid Ten Pins, Moldcraft Softhead Chugger, C&H Lil' Stubby and Yo-Zuri Bonita swimmer. Don't forget small bonito feathers and small shiny spoons for bait-catching purposes, because Sabiki rigs often get destroyed by larger baitfish.

It's still hard to beat live bait, though, especially when game fish turn picky. Sardines, the baitfish that attract the widest interest, can usually be purchased from commercial pangeros, which allows more time for fishing. Otherwise, your pangero will have to catch bait with a cast net. A proven method to locate sardines is to first look for pelicans. Whether actively diving on sardines or perched on shore, pelicans won't be far from the bait you're after. Sabalo (ladyfish), which are favored for big roosterfish, eat shiny spoons, bonito feathers and small sardines. Cocinero excite pargo, yellowtail, roosterfish, dorado, big tuna, marlin and sailfish. Found in open water near the surface, cocinero take small lures jigged at depths to 60 feet below the visible fish. Black skipjack and bonito fall to trolled tuna feathers, and make great live baits for marlin, big grouper and shark. These small tuna in the 1- to 4-pound size take large roosterfish, pargo, amberjack and grouper. Chunked skipjack are excellent for dorado and yellowfin tuna. A trolled belly strip turns on sailfish. Cubera snapper love agujon (needlefish) as dead bait - remove the needle jaws and air bladder and let it sink with only a hook through its eye sockets. Other baits include lisa (mullet), caballito (bigeye scad), mulgate (frigate mackerel), macarela (Pacific mackerel), California halfbeak and squid (although these are often difficult to catch or not around at all).

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