

Fishing

Seas the Day



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SEAS THE DAY

Without a doubt, fishing is what put Cabo on the map. Home to the largest sportfishing fleet in México, hundreds of boats—from humble skiff-like pangas to sleek luxury yachts—fill every inch of dock space at the Cabo San Lucas marina. The reason they're here: Fishing. Thanks to the nutrient rich waters of the Sea of Cortés, the earth's youngest sea, no other destination in the world rivals Cabo for the number and variety of fish caught year round.

Tracy Ehrenberg explains how to navigate the world's greatest fishtrap, even if you don't know a thing about saltwater fishing.

Fishing cruisers in sunset repose moored in Bahía Cabo San Lucas. Photo Bruce Herman.

Fishing Cabo is an incredible privilege—the only voice fish have is that of the angler. Treating these magnificent creatures with the respect they deserve will help to ensure that our unique legacy thrives in the future.

fishing

Cabo San Lucas is known as the “Marlin Capital of the World” and deservedly so—more marlin are caught in these waters than anywhere else on earth. Unlike other well known fishing destinations where many days and dollars can be spent in pursuit of this most prized sport fish, you may capture one or more marlin on your very first trip. An encounter not to be missed, you will experience the thrill of battling a creature of incredible beauty and size, or landing smaller species and enjoying a meal fresh from the sea. Fishing also lets you view the Cape Region from a unique perspective, affording a close up look at dolphins, seals, rays, brown pelicans, and whales (from January through March).

For first timers, a few tips will make your fishing trip successful and more enjoyable. If possible, decide ahead of time when you plan to fish. These days Cabo is so popular that reservations are usually necessary. Highly sought after boats and crews can be booked months ahead of time. Most major fleets have stateside booking agents with Internet sites and toll-free numbers, or you can call the fleet office in Cabo. (You will generally get more complete and accurate information from the fleet offices.) Doing a bit of research can really pay off and reserving as far in advance as possible will get you the boat you want on the dates that fit best with your travel plans.

It used to be that by visiting the main dock you’d know what was biting that day and could check out the different fleets. Now that boats embark from a number of marina docks with controlled access, you often can’t get close enough to see the catch. If you can, talk to disembarking anglers and ask them if they recommend chartering the boat, and the number and type of fish they caught or released.

Hanging around the marina can occasionally invite other unwanted situations. Someone offering a “real deal” may approach you. These “deals” from commissioned vendors, known as coyotes—who often don’t know a thing about fishing—can be costly mistakes and the boat or trip not as promised. If you go this route, get a contact name, the meeting place and time, and a legible receipt with a phone number. Still, it is far better to charter through an established office or hotel, giving you recourse if anything goes wrong. The best way of deciding on a fleet is through recommendations from friends or, if you haven’t booked ahead, from anglers you meet around town or at your resort. Talking with different fleet operators is another option. If conservation is important to you, make sure you check out the fleet’s policy.



Above, left: A striped marlin strikes. Center: Putting on an incredible show while on the line. Right: Releasing a striped marlin. Photos Joseph A. Tyson.

If you are committed to the catch and release of billfish and other gamefish, tell the fleet operator when reserving your boat. Julio Castro, captain of Pisces Fleet's Tracy Ann, has been the number one catch and release captain worldwide from 2000 to 2003. Other top Cabo fleets boast their own respected catch and release captains. Fishing Cabo is an incredible privilege—the only voice fish have is that of the angler. Treating these magnificent creatures with the respect they deserve will help to ensure that our unique legacy thrives in the future.

Looking at the colored flags hanging from a boat's outrigger after a day's fishing used to be a reliable indicator of what was caught, but that's not necessarily the case these days. In the ever-competitive world of sportfishing, some less-than-scrupulous operators may fly flags just to boost business. And, sometimes a boat will run out of flags, so the actual catch of each species may not always be flown. A blue flag means a marlin was caught and/or released; a red triangle indicates released marlin only. Yellow flags are for dorado (mahi mahi), white flags are reserved for tuna, and red flags are for wahoo.

In Los Cabos, the price of the boat, determined by size, is the same whether you are a party of one or fill the boat to capacity. A 28-foot boat holds up to four passengers, but if there are only two of you only your party plus the crew will be on board. The fleet operator will explain the difference in size and performance of the boats they have in



Joseph A. Tyson

A sportfishing cruiser flies flags of the day's catch on the way in to the Cabo marina.

inventory. Some companies offer "share charters," where you go out with other anglers, sharing the charter costs. Your chance of sharing will be much higher if you make a reservation and pay a deposit before arriving in Los Cabos. Reputable fleets will refund your deposit if they cannot find anyone to share with you but if a share boat is found, your reservation is confirmed and cannot be canceled without penalties.

Cabo has changed over the past few years and pricing varies from operator to operator. Day trips are normally eight hours, from around 7 a.m. to 2 or 3 p.m. Besides the basic cost of the boat—which usually includes crew, tackle, and ice—ask if tax, fishing licenses, dock fees, drinks, and filleting and freezing of your catch are included. Live bait, lunch, and beverages are a separate charge on nearly all Cabo charters. Verify any extra charges, and ask if a surcharge is added when paying with a credit card. Live bait costs \$2 U.S. each and is normally available year round. At least 10 should be purchased, paid to the supplier on the morning of your trip. Both all-inclusive and bare boat charters are available; fleet operators will charge about \$320 U.S. for a 28-foot bare boat and \$460 U.S. for an all-inclusive charter of the same size.

One of the new features of the Cabo San Lucas fishing industry is luxury vessels for sophisticated anglers and corporate fishing groups. Once only available for private use, these sleek yachts are much faster, with the finest in equipment and tackle. Nowhere else in the world are such an array of state of the art fishing machines available. These high end vessels offer a variety of equipment, ranging from cherrywood interiors, granite countertops and fine leather furnishings to on board computers, satellite TV, radar, sonar, built in vacuum packers, private chefs, and staff. The larger yachts run regular day charters from 6.30 a.m. to 4 p.m.

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Box lunches and refreshments are extra on standard charters and can be ordered from the fleet office, hotel, local deli, restaurant, or you can pack your own with a visit to the supermarket. The booking agent will advise what time, normally 7 a.m., and where to meet your boat. If you have a tendency towards seasickness, buy some non-prescription Dramamine at the pharmacies in town and take one pill at least one hour before boarding. Sunscreen, a hat, and sunglasses are a must as is a light jacket for the early morning. Bring along a towel or two, as you may get quite wet when the boat is backing down on a fish. Pack your camera: the fish are usually quite willing to put on amazing acrobatic performances while on the line.

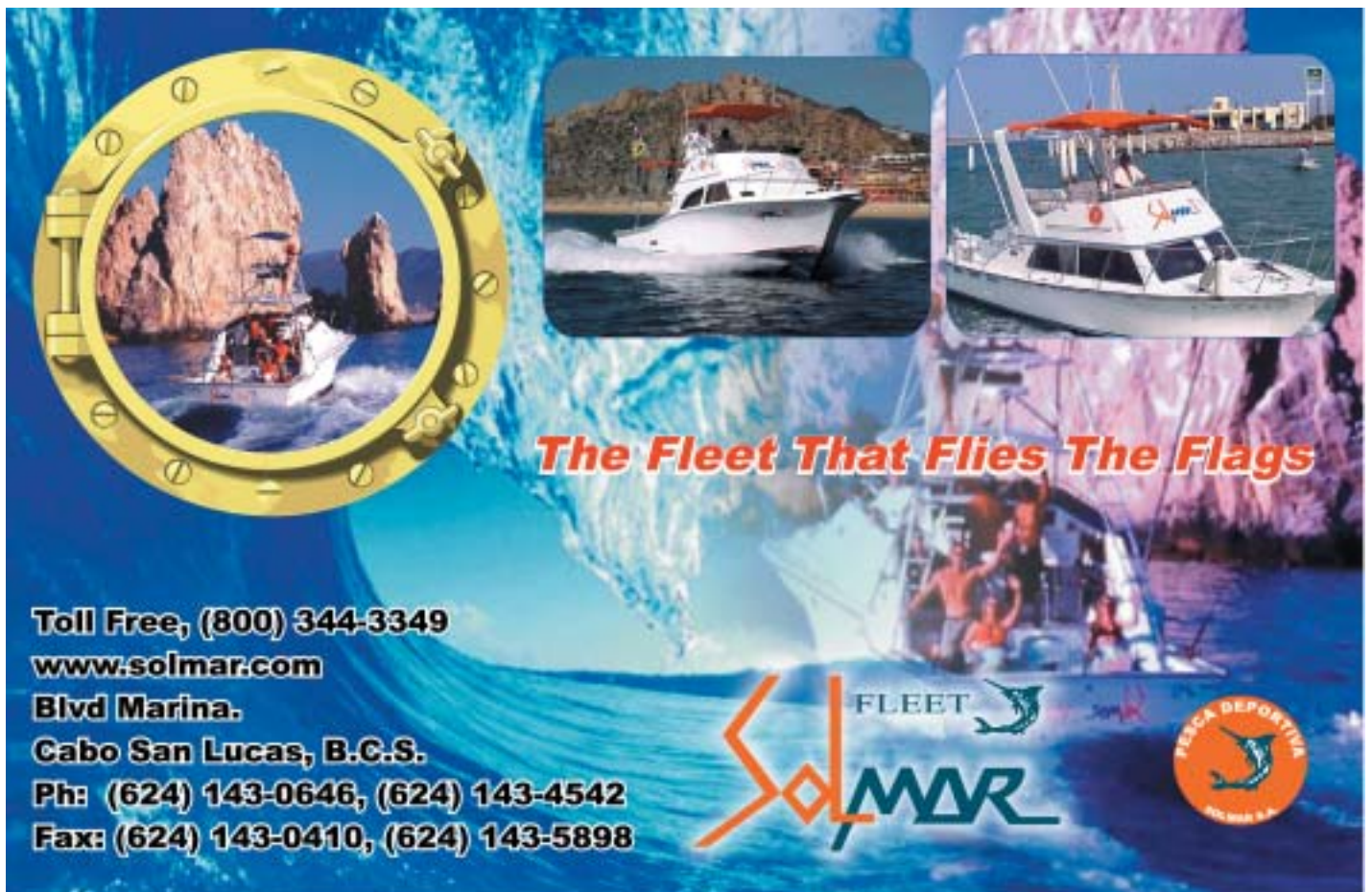
Boats depart from several docks, so make sure you know where to meet your dispatcher. On arrival, you'll see booths lining the wharf announcing the different fleets. The dispatcher will greet you, walk you down to your boat, and introduce you to the captain and mate. Most crews speak some English and will be happy to coach complete novices in the techniques of big game fishing. Once underway the deckhand will bring out rods and reels and set them in rod holders. The captain will decide where to go depending on where fish are likely to be biting. The deciding factors are the time of the year, the range and the engine speed of the boat, and the size of your group. (The fewer anglers on board, the greater chance you have of hooking more fish.) Twenty eight-foot boats have single engines, with less range and slower cruising speeds than larger vessels. To cover more area, serious anglers may choose to split into two groups.

All charter boats have a selection of artificial lures that look like bait to the fish, usually with fairly heavy metallic-

fishing

Nowhere else in the world are such an array of state of the art fishing machines available . . . including a rare glimpse into the world of the rich and famous.

colored resin heads with large eyes, and a plastic skirt (fringe) representing the body, which can be any color combination. At the fishing grounds, the deckhand will attach lures to rod lines, positioning them at various distances behind the boat as it slows to trolling speed. The captain then covers an area where he believes the fish to be. The type and size of the lure does not necessarily dictate the catch as most smaller game fish will be attracted to lures intended for marlin.



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When a fish strikes, the reel makes a loud zinging noise as the fish takes line, thrilling all on board.

Although it is not always perceptible, the crew is on a constant lookout for fish, spotting birds, bubbles or fins indicating activity in the area.

Getting a hook into a fish's mouth and getting it to stay there is known as setting the hook. Experienced anglers should let the crew know in advance that they prefer to handle their own rods. For those unaccustomed to the tackle or unfamiliar with the species targeted, watch while the deckhand sets the hook on the first fish. If you are a complete novice don't worry, the crew will help you through every step of the fight; by day's end you'll be feeling like a seasoned professional. Depending on the season and the hunger of the fish, you can spend minutes or hours trolling and looking for fish. Occasionally you will not catch anything—which is why this sport is called fishing and not catching—but by fishing off Los Cabos, your chances are greatly improved.

Your crew will nearly always be aware when fish are about to bite on lures and will accelerate the boat, catching most first time anglers by surprise as the frenzied activity begins. When a fish strikes, the reel makes a loud zinging noise as the fish takes line, thrilling all on board with the excitement that this causes. Once the deckhand is sure that the hook is well set, he will sit you in the fighting chair, placing the rod in the holder attached to the seat. A crew member will stay with you until the battle is finished, teaching you to pull up on the rod, crank the reel handle rapidly as you lower the rod tip, and wait when the fish takes more line. Depending on the size and strength of the fish and your determination, the fight can last a matter of minutes or an hour or more. If you catch a marlin, and you plan to release it, the crew and captain will gently wiggle the hook free before letting the fish go. Sometimes a fish may be so exhausted by the fight that it is in danger of dying. The crew will revive it by holding it by the bill and slowly moving the boat forward to circulate oxygen through its gills. Occasionally a marlin will die during the fight and will be brought aboard. If you don't want the fillets, the locals will share them.

Once the captain has spotted fish, if the trolled lures fail to attract them, he will race the boat to a favorable position in front of the fish, while the deckhand quickly readies a live bait rig. Once in position, the live bait is tossed out, with the deckhand waiting several seconds for the fish to swallow the bait before setting the hook and the drag on the reel, then handing it to you in the fighting chair. If your fish turns out to be smaller game such as dorado, tuna or wahoo, you will

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want to keep it to eat, or take home. Once the catch is up to the boat, the deckhand will reach over with a gaff (a large hook on the end of a pole), lift the fish out of the water, and club the fish on the head to kill it. If you catch a marlin on live bait it is still not a problem to release it, even if it has swallowed the bait, hook and all. The deckhand will cut the line as close to the fish as possible and release the marlin. The acids in the fish's stomach will disintegrate the hook in a short time with no permanent damage done.

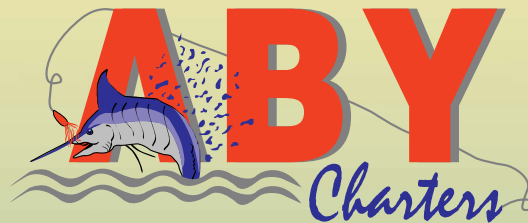
If you are catching many fish, keep only what you need for eating and release the rest. Bragging rights are the same, whether you keep them all or throw them back. The only reason to keep a billfish is to make it into a trophy. These days, replica mounts are far superior to skin mounts in quality, last much longer, and the process is practically identical. If you choose to release your billfish and still want a trophy, a replica can be made from a photo.

On the way back to the marina, the crew will run up the flags corresponding to your catch, announcing the success of your day. If it's not too rough, most deckhands will clean your smaller fish on the way in. Back at the dock your dispatcher will meet you but before leaving the boat you should tip your crew—10 to 15 percent of the charter cost is average. Tipping is customary and should be based on the effort made, not by the number of fish caught. Crews prefer that you show your appreciation with cash, not fish.

Once you are off the boat, you may want your photo taken if your fish is of a notable size. The fleet operator will have your catch taken to the scale, hoisted up, and weighed. A professional photographer will take your photo and deliver an 8 x 10" print (with negative) to your hotel the next day for around \$20 U.S. If your fish needs to be cleaned it will be taken to the filleting tables, skinned, and cut into fillets. Expect to pay between \$2 and \$10 U.S., depending on size, per cleaned fish. Then it will be handed to you, or taken by the fleet operator to be frozen and collected later. There is nothing better than fresh fish, so keep a couple of fillets, which can be cooked by a local restaurant for a few dollars per person. Smoking and vacuum packing your fish can be arranged by your dispatcher for around \$5 U.S. per pound.

To take your catch home you'll need a cooler, easily purchased around town. Inexpensive Styrofoam coolers are also available, but some airlines don't accept them—check their regulations first. Before you leave, collect your fish, pack it in the cooler, and tape the lid securely with duct tape. If the fish is frozen solid there is no need for ice. There is no problem passing your cooler through customs and once home your catch will provide you with plenty of tasty meals as memories of your Cabo fishing adventure.

English-born Tracy Ehrenberg moved to México in 1984 and has been the manager of Pisces Sportfishing Fleet since 1989. Founded by her husband, Marco, Pisces Sportfishing is known for its consistent catch rate, customer satisfaction, and conservation ethic. Tracy authors a weekly fishing report for publications including the Los Angeles Times and Western Outdoor News.



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