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Bold Bahamas tuna and dolphin

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I wish the remote Bahamas Island of San Salvador had a lotto. If it did, I know I'd be their first winner. That may read like a bold statement, but consider the incredible luck I've had during the only two times I've been here:

Five years ago, on my first trip, I caught a giant wahoo weighing 143-pounds, three-ounces. And on my second trip this past May, while fishing for tuna and dolphin, I scored another monster wahoo! More on that 113-pound, two-ounce, trophy later!

Located approximately 400 nautical miles from South Florida, San Salvador is allegedly the first island Christopher Columbus set foot on during his 1492 voyage. However, if you're more into fishing than history, it's the incredible winter run of big wahoo that one is likely to associate with the island. Simply stated, San Salvador has the world's best wahoo fishing.

My trip last May was with Trey Rhyne, aboard his big sportfishing boat — Low Profile. At the helm was captain Joe Trainor, and working the cockpit with Trey and me was Thomas Neligon. Trey Rhyne heads up Over Under Charters (<http://www.overundercharters.com>), the largest big game charter operation in the U.S. Over Under specializes in fishing trips to the remote Islands of the Bahamas, as well as several major U.S. big game destinations. I've fished with Trey before and we always seem to have incredible luck.

Little did I know just how impressively we'd keep that streak alive when I boarded his vessel.

Having already caught a monster wahoo before off San Salvador, while shooting an episode for my ESPN2 television series, we decided to skip over the peak winter wahoo season and instead target the dolphin and yellowfin tuna that push through here in impressive numbers during the spring.

Our base was once again the Riding Rock Resort and Marina (<http://www.ridingrock.com/>). And while the wind was on the breezy side when we set forth, it was certainly fishable.

Most of the fishing effort takes place over a hump situated off San Salvador's northern end. From the Riding Rock Marina, located on the island's western side, it's roughly a 30-minute run to cover the ten miles to the hump, which rises to 180 feet from a surrounding depth of approximately 4,000 feet. Like most seamounts in the Bahamas, this hump attracts schools of tuna, wahoo and big, big sharks! Just off the hump, in deeper water, you'll find dolphin. And, of course, billfish are a distinct possibility anywhere here! The peak fishing season for wahoo is November through March, while dolphin, tuna and marlin show in numbers from April through June.

Our bait spread consisted of a mix of small to medium artificial lures — such as jet-heads, cedar plugs and blunt head designs, lures tipped with ballyhoo, and plain ballyhoo. We trolled mostly with Penn 30 and 50 International reels, paired with matching Penn Tuna Stick stand-up rods. The 30s were spooled with 50-pound test braid and topped off with 150 feet of 50-pound test monofilament, whereas the 50s were spooled with 80-pound test braid and topped off with 150 feet of 80-pound test monofilament. We also had a pair of 70 Internationals, reserved for big baits and lures that we'd put out for blue marlin.



George Poveromo (left) and Trey Rhyne hold up a big San Salvador, Bahamas, dolphin. Both dolphin and tuna migrate heavily past the island during the spring.

The ocean was alive with birds, both terns and frigates. Flying fish frequently took to the air, to escape predation by dolphin and tuna, only to become vulnerable to the birds. Of course, when we saw pushes of flying fish and especially diving frigates, Captain Joe Trainor steered in that direction. Our trolling speed varied between 5 and 10 mph. On the hump, we trolled our lures and baits over its peak, and then off and out into deep water. The tuna were active on top of the hump, and we hoped to hook them when the baits were coming off the structure, rather than up onto it; our goal was to quickly drag them into deeper water and away from the sharks, which hang tight to the hump. Even then, the sharks were on the tuna like Bonnie and Clyde on a bank.

What was ironic is that the tuna would show a marked preference for a faster trolling speed and pure artificials one day, and then a slower trolling speed and natural baits the next. The dolphin seem less interested in trolling speed and ate just about whatever we had out, although they did lean more toward the pure natural baits and the lures tipped with natural bait. To keep the bites coming, it was imperative to frequently switch out baits and lures and play with our trolling speed. When we found what was working at the moment, we'd replace a couple baits in the spread with the "hot" ones, until they chilled out — and then it was back to experimenting.

Trey and I enjoyed awesome blitzes of tuna and dolphin. The tuna averaged around 40 pounds, but there were some really big ones in the mix. As for the dolphin, most were between 20 and 40 pounds. As soon as we hooked a tuna, we had to put as much pressure on it as our tackle would allow, to muscle it to the boat and away from the sharks. We lost several tuna to sharks. So much so, that Joe immediately went into hard reverse and often forward to quarter any tuna we hooked, to help capture them quickly. Sometimes we were victorious, others times the sharks ate our lunch.

The fishing off San Salvador was on fire. It was fast action, with little time to rest, or even scarf down a sandwich — exactly the way a person hopes to find the fishing on such a trip. We even caught a small sailfish, which was promptly released at the transom.

With a successful show in the can, and plenty of tired arms, legs and backs from battling tuna and dolphin, we decided to put out a spread of marlin lures and troll back to the marina. We nearly made it! About three miles away, Trey hooked into a big dolphin. We cleared the lines and I eventually gaffed a beautiful 30-plus pound bull dolphin. After depositing the dolphin into the fish box, Joe Trainor brought us back up to trolling speed and we were all dropping lures back into the spread. I paid out one lure and went to the opposite transom to help dispatch another one. Thomas had put a blue and white Rick's Fancy lure back into position off the port outrigger. He was running the release clip up the outrigger, when something huge hit. Thomas passed the rod to me, and all I could do initially was hold on!

Considering its long run and weight of the fish, I guessed it to be a small blue marlin, maybe around 100 pounds. The fish occasionally angled to the surface, where I was expecting it to jump. It never did. It eventually dove deep. Given the vertical give and take fight we settled into, Trey called it as a yellowfin tuna. I still banked on a marlin, since the fight was different than a tuna.

Toward the end of the fight, the fish was nearly straight beneath the boat and deep enough where we couldn't see it. A shark suddenly appeared off the transom, so, in a semi-panicked state, I really put the pressure on the fish. There was no way a shark was going to steal this fish. As the leader came into view, Joe bumped the boat forward in an attempt to lead the fish in along the starboard side. It was then when I heard Trey yell — "It's a wahoo! It's a huge wahoo! Get a gaff"

Of course, hearing that, and keeping one eye on the shark off our transom, I kept cranking on line. I caught a glimpse of the fish, while it was out of gaffing range, and nearly freaked out. From that moment on, everything seemed to go into slow motion. In what really took only 30-seconds or so to sink a gaff into the fish and lift it over the transom, seemed more like a half hour. Once the huge fish hit the deck, only then did it sink in that we boated a monster wahoo — and just minutes away from Riding Rock Marina!

Talk about an incredible ending to a trip! Here we were, during the spring and past the peak wahoo migration, and I score another big wahoo. On the marina scale, this fish weighed 113 pounds, 2 ounces.

Talk about luck! I've been to San Salvador just twice and each time I've scored a wahoo over 100 pounds! Yes, indeed. I wish San Salvador would establish a lotto. I'm quite sure I'd win it. For some reason, this island smiles upon me!

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