

## Little Boat, Big Fish

By John 'Afishinado' King

Land's End, at the very tip of the Baja California peninsula represents a jumping off point for boaters. Every trip out of the Cabo San Lucas marina is filled with expectations of big fish and epic adventures. These adventures become even more exciting when you are leaving for an extended trip around the corner and up into the Sea of Cortez. There is no mistaking this body of water for the Pacific. Although there are times, usually January through March, when the wind will blow just as fiercely as in the Pacific, this is not the stereotypical impression. The Sea of Cortez conjures images of warm waters, tranquil seas and incredible life. A trip into this sea is imagined to be a trip into liquid paradise. And so it was for us on this journey.



The run from Cabo around the corner brings you across some very famous banks that must be fished. There is simply no excuse for passing up the Gorda Banks and the Iman Bank without a stop to check on the fishing, and so we stopped, dropped a line, caught some skipjacks and a Pargo or two and then we were free to continue our journey into the Sea of Cortez. Bahia Los Frailes was to be our destination for this trip. But the real motivator was to return to an area where we had previously fished without successfully catching anything.

It may seem a bit odd to be excited about returning to fish an area that had produced zero fish, however, even though we had not actually landed any fish, we did hook up, repeatedly. This time we were returning armed with the right tackle and more bait, to see if we could find the fishing holes that were holding the giants that were never seen.

We rounded the corner and worked our way up the coast. The trip from Cabo to Frailes is about 44 miles. Although this is a fairly short distance for many trips that we make when fishing our home waters in Southern California, for Cabo, it is a long trip for a couple of reasons. First, you do not often have to travel far to get into some pretty good fishing, and second, most boats return to the marina each night. It is a bit unusual to head out of Cabo on overnights. It is done, but it is not the norm. In any event, we arrived at the dunes (our secret spot) in the early afternoon. Conditions were excellent for the type of fishing we were planning; a light breeze out of the North and very little swell. It was time to fish again.

The more you fish, the more you realize how important the spots and the set-ups are to your success. In this case we were looking for “volcanic holes” near the drop off. This was the name we used because the bottom structure in the area literally looks like a series of cones or pock marks that traverse down the ledge and provide the perfect housing situation for ambush predators. The fish that live in these holes are armor-plated, eating machines. The most distinctive feature is the overly large size of their mouth, which tells you all you need to know. These guys do not swim far or fast after their prey. They simply wait for a nice morsel to come into view and then they dart out and suck it in. Looking at these fish, you can almost imagine the suction they would create when they feed.

Now it was our turn to see if we could lure the big boys out of their holes long enough to get some pressure on them and pull them clear of the jagged rocky structure. I pinned a Caballito and dropped it down 212 feet until I felt the torpedo sinker tick the bottom. Immediately I was hit and in full bend only to break off within a few quick seconds. I turned to my fishing buddy Dave and said, “They’re here....” Dave was next to drop and his story was the same. These fish have some very distinct advantages. They are very fast on the take and they can quickly slide back into their holes, flare their gill plates and lock in to their surroundings. If you do not get one on the uptake, you are not going to be very successful at fishing them.

The wind had pushed us off the spot, and so we retied and reloaded for another pass. It was a bit difficult to get a good reading on the meter due to the glare of the late afternoon sun. On my next pass I could not seem to get a good setup. I retraced my path and still seemed to be having trouble getting into position. The current had picked up and the breeze was working with the current moving me off the spot before we could get a bait into the water. There is no way to anchor and fish this spot, it is strictly a drift technique. So the conditions really have to be right. I tacked to the North of the spot and tried to anticipate the drift. Both Dave and I dropped baits into the water and bounced them off the bottom a few times hoping to get them in front of our target fish.

Dave and I both got hung up on the rocky bottom, although I think Dave may have actually been bit. In either case, the drift was unsuccessful. We lost two more \$2.00 Caballitos and more time. We re-tied and reloaded again. As I set up the drift I clearly could see the “holes” this time and decided to drop closer to them in the hopes that we could get on the fish quickly and not have to bounce our way into their zone. It worked. Both Dave and I were immediately slammed to the gunnels by big fish pulling hard. At this point it is a do-or-die situation. I died but Dave seemed to be gaining ground on his fish. I jumped to the helm and popped the boat into gear heading for deeper water. It worked to clear Dave’s fish and he was now in a sea saw battle with his fish.

As is true with almost all bottom fish, the first part of the fight is the hardest part of the fight. If you can get a bottom-dweller at least a third of the way up the water column you are going to have a good chance of landing the fish. Dave was fully bent and at the moment of truth when his line snapped and he literally fell backward into the boat. “Oh man, that had to be a nice one,” he moaned as he collected himself into an upright position. “Damn! I had him.” “You did have him Dave, but these fish got big for a reason, and you just found out why” I consoled. “Let’s get on ‘em again.”

We were using some fairly stout gear with 40# pound test and 100# leader. We could have gone to the heavier stuff, but we wanted to fish stand-up, and these were the best outfits we had for this application. As we re-loaded I made a decision to fish a large white jig with a single 12/0 hook. “Let’s see if this gets bit” I told Dave, “you stick with the bait so we have the bases covered.” We set up for another drift and I got down pretty quickly with my set up. I bounced it along the rocky bottom but got no takers. As we came into the zone Dave gets hammered hard on the live bait. He is not gaining ground, so I decide to wind in and see if I can help. As I start to retrieve the jig I get slammed and it surprises me. Luckily I was in retrieve mode, so I had only one job, to keep the jig, and now the jig and the fish, moving away from the bottom. I could not believe how strong this fish could pull. More importantly, I could not believe how fully a rod could bend without breaking. You could literally hear the rod straining. I was making ground by pumping and winding, but the fish was still fighting for the bottom. The see-saw battle gives the fish and then the angler a sense of winning, but it is never clear who will prevail at this stage. I had to button the drag down or lose the fish. I pumped and cranked one revolution at a time and I could feel the weight and strength of the fish. I was gaining.

Then it was over. The fish seemed to lose its punch as I cranked it up through the water column. Dave had lost his fish during the battle, so I told him to grab a gaff. When the fish popped to the surface Dave froze. We were both shocked to see this giant denizen of the deep come to the surface, mouth agape. “Gaff it” I yelled. That was enough to get Dave restarted on his task, but when he swung the gaff into the fish it literally simply bounced off the gill plate. “Gaff him in the mouth”, I instructed. This was a much simpler task given the size of the fish’s mouth, and Dave “hooked” him solidly with the gaff. “Get him in the boat” I urged. But this was not to be a one man job. I put down my rod and helped Dave to lift the fish into the cockpit.



“Holy mother of all broomtails”, I yelled, “Look at that fish!”. We were slapping high fives and pretty excited when we noticed that the radio was chattering with an English speaking voice. This is pretty unusual in Mexico, particularly in the area we were

fishing. It suddenly dawned on us what was being said, “Little boat with big fish, come in, little boat with big fish, come in.” came the sound from the VHF. “He must be calling us”, I said to Dave, but as we looked around us, we could see no other boats. We were all alone with a big fish in our cockpit and the sun setting over the dunes on shore. “Little boat with big fish, little boat with big fish, come in. “I see you”, the VHF caller responded. As I picked up the mic I was a bit apprehensive, “This is Afishinado, we are a little boat with a big fish, but we do not see another boat in our area.” “I am on shore”, came the VHF caller, “I am on a four wheeler at the top of the dunes. Man that is a big fish, what the heck is that monster?” the caller asked. “It is a broomtail grouper, pretty close to a hundred pounds I would say, and it is the reason we came to this area.” I replied. “Awesome, dude, great catch!” came the VHF caller.

We took some shots of the fish as the sun was setting and decided to head back to Cabo and weigh the fish. It was one of those perfect evenings. The sky was cobalt blue, the stars were just coming out on and the ocean was working with us as we motored back toward Cabo. I asked Dave to take the wheel. I went into the cockpit and sat on the transom as the boat purred its way home. The moment was etched forever in my mind. A beautiful adventure on the water. I looked down at the fish and could not help but laugh as I repeated the phrase, “little boat with big fish...awesome!”