



ISLA MUJERES

Story and Photos by Markus Roth

It is the eve of "Big Game" 2012. Isla Mujeres has a huge case of football fever. In the middle of a crowded bar filled with people glued to the television hinging on every play, three German wildlife photographers and videographers are sitting misty-eyed and smiling with their Dos X's and a cool strawberry daiquiri in front of them. During commercial breaks, you can catch snippets of the trio's conversation, "Unbelievable, this must be the capital of sailfish" or "I still have goose bumps all over my body." But the normally effusive trio are actually consumed by an unusual silence, shaking of heads and had a "cat that ate the canary" look in our eyes. Before that day though, the trip had been tough, and at times very depressing.

Isla Mujeres is a small island located just east of Cancun and north of Cozumel. Together with Cancun, the island forms the Bahía de Mujeres (Bay of Women). It was dedicated to the goddess Ixchel, the goddess of fertility; dedicated to the moon and to medicine. For many Mayan women, it became a destination of pilgrimage. For this reason the Spanish occupiers later called it Isla Mujeres, the "Island of Women".

Today, Isla Mujeres is a popular island for tourists and visitors that want to escape from the bustling mainland. As Cancun was planned and built, Isla Mujeres was ignored. This means the 5 x 2-mile island still offers visitors a well-preserved natural charm.

In the beautiful, crystal clear waters surrounding Isla Mujeres, all types of Caribbean fish can be seen. In particular, the reef known as El Garrafón, located on the southeastern side of the island offers divers a myriad of colorful Caribbean fish.

In the past, the waters surrounding Isla Mujeres were a secret spot for divers and nature lovers, especially for those interested in big fish. From January to March, on a plateau off Isla Mujeres, schools of fifty or more Atlantic sailfish congregate to hunt for sardines.



THE SPECIALIST

To this day, the sailfish mystifies science, because it has something that no other fish has: a sail. Using its unique, sail-like dorsal fin, the sailfish effectively impresses its prey; and with the sail folded down, the sailfish shoots at over 60 miles per hour through the tropical sea. There are a few examples of them covering up to 125,000 miles in their lifetime. These facts, and the enormous plateau stretching for approximately 75 miles make encounters with these predators of the ocean no easy task.

On the main street of the small island, there are numerous offers from charter boats promising you encounters with these amazing creatures. But for high-quality interactions with Sailfish in open water you should seek out a specialist. Anthony Mendillo Jr. has earned his reputation as a specialist over many years. His boat has been a rendezvous for a "Who's Who" of nature filmmakers and nature photographers. But Anthony is not the only specialist. His crew also possesses a wealth of knowledge.

The night before our first outing, at our first meeting with Captain Rogelio and boatswain Juan, we were briefed with an almost overwhelming amount of information on sailfish from them. This discussion was animated as the crew was

still "pumped up" about the experiences they'd had the previous day. They had encountered a bait ball with thirty sailfish that the group observed for two hours.

Accordingly, the next morning as we stepped onto the landing stage of the small yacht harbor, our expectations were high. But Rogelio's expression did not bode well. The wind had changed overnight and they were expecting rain and waves of 5-7 feet. These are not good conditions for frigate birds. Rogelio uses frigates as a natural navigation system. When they are in a shallow formation over the water, there is often a bait ball hidden just below the surface.

For the first four days the conditions were even worse than Rogelio's predictions. We saw nothing but cloudy skies, rain, and the vastness of the ocean. Not one formation of frigate birds came into view. For nearly eight hours, we were knocked around and bruised from what the ocean had thrown at us. This beating went on for four days. Our initial euphoria and positive attitude was gradually fading from day to day. Everything we had read about this had promised adrenaline-fueled action and an unbelievable performance.

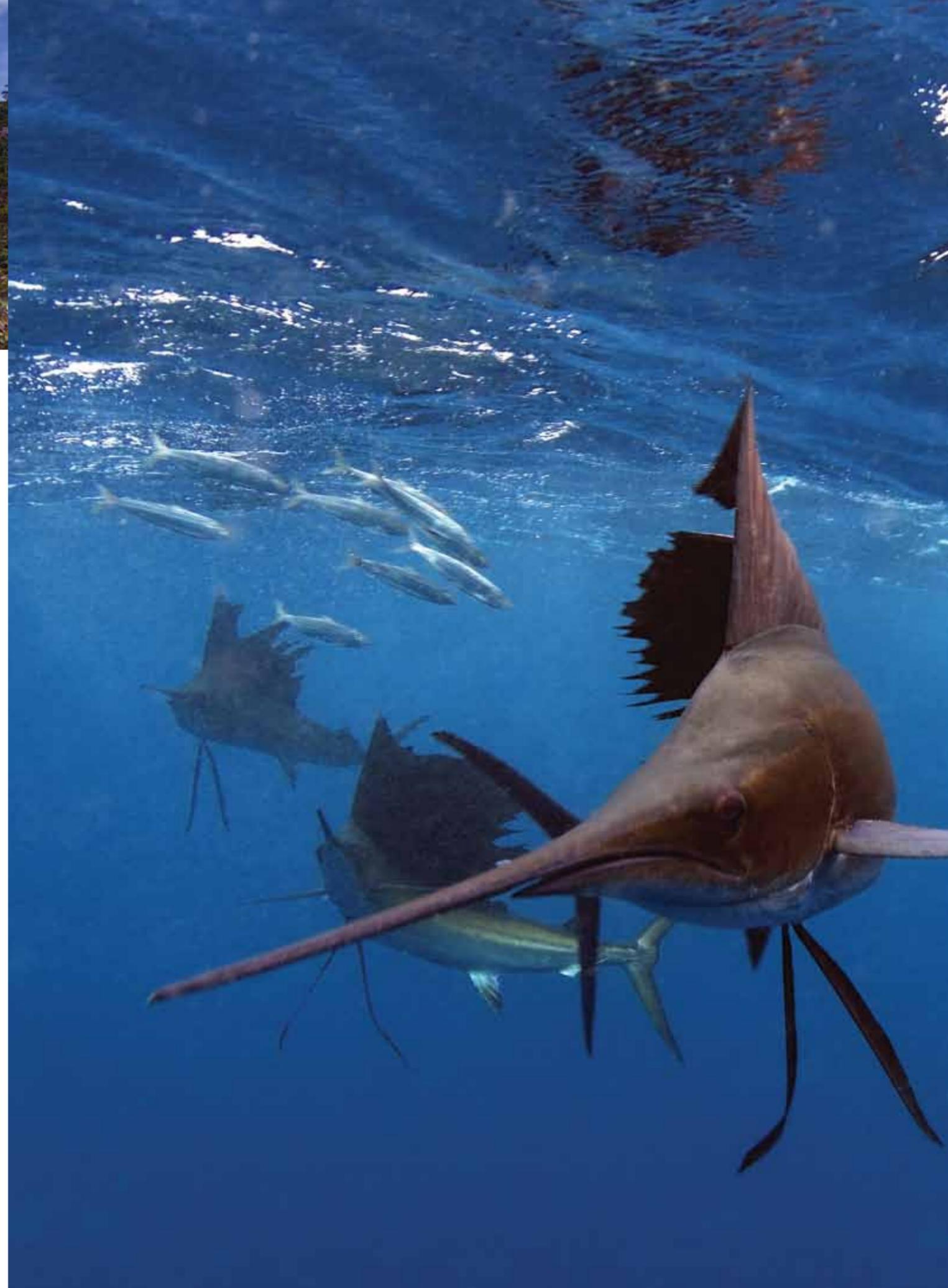
We only had to see this beautiful fish once and we would fulfill our dream.

THE DEVIL AND POLISHED SWORDS

The main attraction of the sailfish is, above all, its sail, after which it is named. It is in fact an oversized fin that starts at the neck of the creature and continues to curl itself over the fish's back. In some fish it is so wide that it is greater than the body beneath it. The sailfish can fold these fins at will - then they disappear on the top of the body. What then remains is a torpedo-slim, yet muscular-looking body that makes the sailfish one of the fastest creatures in the sea. For comparison, Michael Phelps, a man, swims at up to 5 miles

per hour, a barracuda 26, and a killer whale 35. A sailfish by comparison reaches almost 70 miles per hour.

When the fish flips open its sail, it transforms into a magical creature, a being from another dimension. To some, it looks just like a demon. A few years ago a sport fisherman described it with these words, "With its long snout and big eyes - I thought the devil himself had swallowed my bait." The Mayans, on the other hand, looked upon the sailfish as a type of bird and so they called it the "peacock fish."





This name is probably quite justified when looking at its colors. Normally a sailfish is bluish-grey with a silvery-white belly. "Like polished swords, their slender bodies sparkle when they jump out of the sea," as one eyewitness once described the sailfish. But when the fish is excited or stressed, it changes its coloring instantly. It adorns itself with purple dots or bright blue stripes, and some can even turn red.

The cells in the uppermost layer of the skin of the fish are responsible for these colors. These cells, called melanophores, contain dark pigments that can contract, so the view of the underlying cells is released. These cells contain tiny crystals that reflect light waves. Because the light waves partially overlap, the fish sparkles in different

D-DAY

Even as we left the harbor, both the horizon and coastline had changed. For the first time in a week, it was possible to see the horizon and there was no spray hitting anybody in the face, and not just because we had taken shelter in the back of the boat. Unlike the previous days, we were accompanied by whole flocks of frigate birds. The first spark of hope re-ignited our spirits, and I could fill the excitement begin to build.

We began scanning the horizon for large flocks of frigates. Over and over we reported flock sightings to Rogelio. Every time he casually pushed his sunglasses higher, took a quick look, told us said that there were either too few birds or they were still flying too high.

After another two hours passed, Rogelio suddenly accelerated and steered the boat towards a black haze already visible in the distance. As we got closer we could make out that it was a huge flock of frigate birds.

colors. Scientists assume that the sailfish controls the contraction of the pigments using their nervous system - hormones like adrenaline probably play a role. Sailfish use this talent when hunting, that's for sure. But marine scientists still do not know whether they also make use of it on other occasions, such as during mating.

Would we finally have fortune on our side and encounter this elegant and mysterious fish in all its beauty? By the fifth day of our adventure, it was becoming increasingly difficult to torment ourselves and get out of bed around 5:30 so the boat could be at sea by about 6:15.

After parking our golf cart at the harbor, Rogelio was waiting for us with a broad grin. "Look at this beautiful sunrise. This is a good day," he said.

Tobi and I skipped like little kids on the small boat and shouted "Sailfish, Sailfish!" but suddenly Rogelio slowed the boat, turned around and said the worst words ever: "No sailfish, just bonitos".

Our joy once more turned into great disappointment. This time though, we began to feel a sense of desperation. We stayed a while to watch this spectacle while Rogelio told us how he knew that it was, in fact, bonitos and not sailfish.

When it is bonitos hunting sardines, frigate birds stay in a broad formation about three feet above the surface of the water. The bonitos drive the sardines in front of them and then from underneath shoot themselves abruptly into the ball of sardines.

In contrast, sailfish circle their prey. This results in a much more compact formation of frigate birds flying low over the water.

Not long afterwards however, Rogelio identified the next potential bait ball.

GET READY, WE'VE GOT SAILFISH

As we got closer, Rogelio again slowed the boat down, but this time he turned to us and said calmly but excitedly, "Get ready! We've got sailfish!"

While we were pulling on our wetsuits, masks and fins, I noticed how my nerves thrilled with anticipation. As we were only a few feet away from the action, we had an incredible view.

25-30 frigate birds were in the formation described by Rogelio over the surface of the water. The sails of the sailfish were clearly visible shooting through the water and the surfaced constantly erupted with sardines frantically jumping out of the water to at least evade the inevitable.

The tremendous speed at which the sardines and sailfish shot through their element was clearly evident. Rogelio shouted from the wheelhouse "Go, Go, Go. Stick with the birds." In my excitement I could feel my pulse beating in my throat.

With a quick roll backwards I landed in the cool water. After I had struggled through the curtain of bubbles created from my entry, I felt like a man under sailfish.

To my left, to my right, above me, below me, behind me and in front of me; everywhere I looked, there was a wall of sailfish.

Their bodies gleamed silver, although little sunlight was showing through the thick cloud cover. It was breath taking to be so close to these creatures. Unfortunately, they were so fast that no sooner had they appeared, they disappeared again.

It was simply not possible to keep up with their pace. Shortly after we raised our arms, Rogelio and Juan were already on hand to pick us up and drop us off back into to the action hotspot. We repeated this routine six more times before we gave up exhausted and took a break.

But the afternoon would also be kind to us. Rogelio suddenly turned and once again called back to us, "Get ready to go", took his bearings and set off at high speed towards a large flock of frigates. This time there was, however, a significant difference from our previous encounters. This was the mother of all sentences, "This bait ball is dead! Have fun and good luck, gentlemen! Enjoy it!"

Rogelio was right. Upon closer inspection of the sardines, there were clear signs of battle. As I looked at the sailfish circling the absolutely terrified sardines, I remembered the quote from the American fisherman, who compared the sailfish with the devil. I have to be honest; it did strike me that in fact I would describe these incredible creatures as diabolically beautiful.

Their elegance and their most intelligent hunting behavior are unbelievable. The order of things is clearly recognizable, first attack, and then eat. The fish working the perimeter still had their sails retracted and were a silvery color. It seems that their job is to herd the sardines together. Then the fish charge in for their turn to attack and devour their share of the ball. These have their sail slightly extended and are often much darker to black in color.

The inner circle has extended their sail completely and their skin is like a fireworks display of colors. Suddenly to my side I hear a muffled "Rock 'n Roll! WHOO-HOOO!"

It was my buddy Toby who had also been a part of the incredible encounter. Overall, we were able to witness this spectacle for 45 minutes, until the sailfish had enough. We arrived back at the docks exhausted, but completely in awe over what we had just witnessed. We slowly made our way back to our rooms to get cleaned up, then arrived just in time to watch the "Big Game" at a local pub. After this epic adventure, we left the island certain that the waters surrounding Isla Mujeres are indeed "the sailfish capital of the world".

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