



A Quiet Villa on the North Coast of the Dominican Republic Offers Something Different

■ BY CHARLIE LEVINE



CHANGE OF PACE

ADRIAN GRAY (4)

When I set foot in a foreign country, I want to feel like I'm worlds away from the States. I don't want to down a burger at a Hard Rock Cafe, I want to sit down with a local at a taco stand. And if you see me ordering a Big Mac in any place other than the airport, please shoot me.

The desire to experience new cultures and places shapes my fishing trips as much as the fishing itself. Of course I want to visit a country that offers a great bite, but I don't want to spend four or five days in a place that has the same look and feel as Las Vegas. I don't want to go to Vegas. I want to go on an adventure!

Adventure is one of those subjective words that's open to interpretation. While some aspire to hike Mount Everest, I'm fine hopping on a puddle-jumper, flying into a little tropical oasis and dropping a line in some unknown stretch of water. Wash it all down with a few cold ones and, to me, that's paradise — I just found it.

Located on the north coast of the Dominican Republic, on a sleepy little stretch of farms and beaches, the Golden Dolphin Villa is not exactly your typical fishing lodge. In fact, it's not a fishing lodge at all. It's a private villa that happens to be owned by a passionate angler, Mike Siemer. And since Siemer loves to fish, he set up a fishing operation just a few minutes down the road from the house in one of the most unique natural lagoons I've ever seen.

The Golden Dolphin Villa offers luxurious accommodations in an idyllic location.

Rio San Juan, the Golden Dolphin Villa is a custom-built, nine-bedroom estate made up of two separate houses perched on a picturesque hilltop with a view of the Atlantic Ocean. Each room offers expansive views of the grounds and the ocean. Fountains and lush landscapes enhance the property. There's even a regulation-size baseball field, with dugouts and the whole bit, that Siemer built right beside the house.

I first heard about the Golden Dolphin from Mike's son, Darryl Siemer. Based on his description of the place, I knew there was no way I would be going down without the wife — unless I wanted to come home single. We'd made deal a long time ago that has helped us keep the marriage intact. I can go on as many fishing trips as I want as long as she gets to ride along on at least one each year. And I choose those trips very carefully. I don't want to bring her to a lodge where she'll have nothing to do but wake up at the crack of dawn and watch me fish all day. She needs a place that offers a bit of luxury, where her options include relaxing by the pool, getting a spa treatment or going shopping in town. The Golden Dolphin Villa made perfect sense.

We traveled down with Darryl and our friends Derek and Cory Redwine, as well as photographer Adrian Gray from the IGFA.

Built and designed by Renato Visente, a Swedish architect, artist, engineer and general man about town, The Golden Dolphin was his masterpiece. Under his direction, all of the intricate metal and woodwork was made by hand on site. The villa has the air of an old European country estate with some Latin flair and every modern convenience. We shared each meal together in the main room on a round marble table that would have made King Arthur proud.

TIME TO FISH

The north coast of the Dominican Republic is mostly untouched, fishing-wise. Some sport boats operate quite a ways to the east in Puerto Plata, but we'd be all alone out in front of the lodge, which has its pluses and minuses. If you find the fish, they're all yours. But you don't have many eyeballs out there prospecting — and it's a big ocean.

The north coast offers about the quickest access to deep water in the Atlantic. The Puerto Rican Trench lies just off-shore, and upon leaving Rio San Juan, the depths quickly drop to several thousand fathoms. The landscape and the depths reminded me of fishing out of Kona, Hawaii, except that this water is definitely not like the Pacific's — there was a good chop on the surface each day.

The Golden Dolphin operates two boats out of Laguna Gri-Gri, a 15-minute ride from the villa. This spring-fed, fresh-water lagoon is lined with the tallest mangroves I've ever seen, and I live in Florida. I couldn't think of a better way to start the day than leaving the lagoon in the morning and knowing you'd get to return to it later on. As the lagoon is only a foot or two deep, Siemer runs catamarans for the fishing. These wide boats provide a steady fishing platform and can still make it in and out of the lagoon with ease. The lodge operates two boats, the 28-foot Kevlacat and a brand-spanking-new 32-foot custom catamaran with a 13-foot beam. The boats are well stocked with the latest tackle and electronics. We brought a collection of trolling lures, wire, leader and swimming plugs, but we didn't need to. All you really need is some light clothing and plenty of sunblock. The captain, Jose "Pico Tin" Aberto, speaks fluent English and is fun to joke with. He grew up fishing these waters, both recreationally and commercially, and can talk for hours about his hometown fishery.

To help locate fish, the staff put out a series of 13 FADs (fish aggregating devices). The locals call them "fishing stations." The FADs (made up of a float consisting of a bunch of crushed

milk jugs tied into a large rectangular or circular shape) are set out with several thousand feet of rope tied to a giant anchor. Like any FAD, these floating stations provide baitfish with a sort of oasis in the middle of the ocean, and in turn, the dorado, wahoo, tuna and marlin show up to feed. Each time we came up on a station, we spotted something, whether it was a massive school of oceanic triggerfish, dorado or wahoo.

Aberto says that dorado make up the bulk of their catch and they're pretty much a sure thing when you roll up to a FAD. "The dorado are here all year," he says. "The best time for them is in December, but it can be rough that time of year. The big bulls show up in April and May when we see many birds and schools of bait."

The boats and local hand-liners who fish off *yolas* also encounter blue marlin in these waters, but they are still working to figure out the best time and area to target them. A few weeks before we showed up, our mate, Alan, caught a large blue on his *yola*. It was still the talk of the town, and the young man beamed when I asked him about it. Aberto says the bonito show



The north coast doesn't get much fishing pressure, but all your favorite targets make a showing — especially around the local fishermen's FADs.



ADRIAN GRAY (2), CHARLIE LEVINE (OPPOSITE, INSET)

GETTING THERE

THE GOLDEN DOLPHIN VILLA is available for groups of up to 18 people, making it a perfect spot for family reunions, corporate retreats and destination weddings. Each suite has a luxurious bathroom, a fireplace and great views. The staff will look after you, ensuring that you're well fed, with a full-time gourmet chef cooking up delicious food for all of your meals. The villa only rents as a solitary unit, so your group will have the grounds all to itself.

The closest airport is in Puerto Plata, which is accessible by several major airline carriers from various points in the United States. We actually took a direct flight on Jet Blue from Orlando, Florida, to Santo Domingo and made the two-hour drive to the lodge. For us, that was much better than connecting in Miami.

The staff at the villa can accommodate any need imaginable and will help you plan a full adventure with fishing, golf, shopping, beach excursions or anything else you'd like. For more information, visit goldendolphinvilla.com.

up in huge numbers during the early summer months, from May through the end of July, and the blue marlin chase them in. "The bonito come closer to shore then, and we find them at the fishing stations," he says. There is no doubt the marlin move through here, following the deep trench toward Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Surprisingly, they see very few white

marlin and only a handful of sailfish.

They also find wahoo, which bite best in the winter, from January through February, along the 500-foot edge, located just a few hundred yards from the shore. The peak of the yellowfin action is in April and May, but they are also caught all year. A local commercial fisherman caught a 190-pound yellowfin on a *yola* out of Rio San Juan, which Aberto says is the largest tuna recorded in the Dominican Republic.

FISHING FAD

We set out a spread of six to seven lines from the 28-foot Kev-lacat, an Australian-built catamaran. The mate set out a mix of billfish chuggers, softheads, jet heads and a couple of smaller dolphin feathers. Gray also set back a swimming plug run right down the middle that dove down to about 15 feet.

We rolled up on our first FAD and hooked up immediately. Although oceanic triggerfish weren't exactly on our list of targeted suspects, we were happy to catch a few and get the skunk off — and you'd be hard-pressed to find a better eating fish. A few hours later, Derek spotted a dorsal fin sticking out of the surface, and sure enough, the right short went down hard. Unfortunately, the reel hardly spit out any line before the mystery fish was gone. We scored a dorado later in the day when a 10-pounder took the swimming plug that Gray rigged up on wire looking for a wahoo bite. We caught a few more dorado and spent the last two hours chasing a giant school of small tuna up and down the beach. We hooked one on the first cast, but the tuna were keyed in on micro baits and not interested in our bucktail jigs and topwater plugs.

The seas were up the next day, but the bite improved. We slowly motored out of the lagoon, scored a few handfuls of

live bait from a local and hit the FADs. Late in the morning, a dolphin jumped on a pink squid daisy chain fished way back on the shotgun and made for some nice photos. After a few more hours of trolling, we found the fishing station we were hoping for. As the lures went by, three nice dorado came skipping away from the floating bale and pounced on our baits.

"They're behind the boat," Aberto yelled. "Get a ballyhoo out."

The mate sent a bait back on a spinner and hooked up another one.



Blue marlin frequent the north coast during the summer; however, white marlin (above) are more likely to show up on the eastern end of the island near Punta Cana.

THE CAP CANA OPTION

WHILE THE GOLDEN DOLPHIN VILLA offers solitude and an ocean all to yourself, **Cap Cana Resort and Marina** just outside of Punta Cana, near the easternmost point of the Dominican Republic, offers a full-scale marina, hotels, night life, golf courses and a world-class marlin bite.

From March through the end of the summer, Cap Cana is a prime spot to access blues and whites, with the action less than 20 miles offshore. With a full marina, fuel dock and all the amenities you would expect from a world-class marina, this spot has steadily grown in popularity with the big-game crowd. It's a quick getaway for boats coming from Puerto Rico, and more U.S. crews are stopping by on their way to the Virgin Islands. In the 2011 International **Cap Cana Billfish Shootout** held in early June, the fleet of 11 boats caught-and-released 96 whites, seven blues and two sails in just three days of fishing.

For more information on Cap Cana, visit capcana.com.



Gray jumped in to get some underwater photos as the mayhem ensued. He snapped a few and popped up to the surface, yelling, "Wahoo! There's a bunch of wahoo!"

We began another mad dash as the boat pitched in the waves, and we stepped over each other trying to get a wahoo bait out as we battled the tripleheader. Once the dust settled, we cracked beers and headed home with five nice dolphin in the box. The wahoo had managed to escape.

We opted to check out the river on our third day, running up along the farmlands looking for snook — not an easy target in these waters. Aberto talked about growing up here and how the fishery has changed. He told stories of fishing the Silver Bank, a high seamount about 50 miles offshore where the water goes from several thousand feet to less than 50. The area offers a long list of prey to target, including all of the pelagic fish, as well as big snapper, grouper and other bottom dwellers. The Silver Bank boasts some of the best fishing in the Dominican Republic, and we had originally hoped to get there, but the rough seas kept us to the line of FADs. I've already got plans to go back and fish the Bank.

After a festive evening on the terrace with plenty of new adventures to talk about, we were back in the truck heading to the airport for the return flight to the States. The trip was too short to experience the whole fishery, which is full of potential. When you look at the globe, this portion of the Dominican Republic is close to some of the Atlantic's best marlin spots, such as St. Thomas, Puerto Rico, and the Turks and Caicos. The potential is endless. And it can only get better.