

## CROCODILE BAY - BOB DAHLBERG

Crocodile Bay, Costa Rica Reviewed.  
Bob Dahlberg, Menlo Park

(NOTE: Bob's report was filed in 2002. Since then, Crocodile Bay has developed the fly fishing aspect of their fishing to a much more sophisticated level which I personally verified in Dec. '04 – Don M.)

Crocodile Bay is a first class fishing lodge in Costa Rica, located on the Golfo Dulce Bay, on the Pacific Ocean side, near the Panama border. A major draw for the fly fisher is that the lodge provides high quality 10 and 14 weight tackle to go after rooster fish and sail fish, respectively. Not having to invest significant dollars to buy this tackle was a big plus for me, so I checked in out recently (April 15 through April 21) before the rainy season started.

### The Fishing

I experienced three different types of fishing: Off-shore for sail fish and blue marlin (in November Dorado is said to be plentiful), in-shore for rooster fish, jack trevally and bonita. I am told that permit take a fly more readily than rooster fish! Sail fish take a fly much more readily than rooster fish. In-shore fishing for snook is also available, but I did not go for snook this time.

Sail fish, marlin and rooster fish are "teased up" with live bait off the back of the trolling boat whether you are using flies or bait. The teaser for sail fish can be somewhat elaborate, typically a multi-colored plastic squid, with a live bait fish, typically a "blue runner". In the case of rooster fish, the teaser is simply live bait fish is rigged by inserting some string above the eye-ball sockets, and connected to a snap off a casting rod. The teaser / live bait are trolled behind the boat. The skipper watches for the game fish to attack the teaser. Once a fish is raised, the teaser is reeled in toward the boat, and then the fisher casts the baited hook or fly near the incoming fish. Fly casting is pretty easy, as the teased fish, sometimes multiple, are easily brought within 20 feet of the boat.

Bonita fishing was more like classic sight casting. The guide searches for bonita smashing schools of bait fish in the bay. He brings the boat near the feeding frenzy and the fisher casts a bait fish fly pattern or jig 50 to 60 feet into the fracas, and strips the fly back to the boat.

Off-shore fishing for sail fish (and blue marlin) is done 60 minutes boat ride from the lodge in the Pacific Ocean, just outside the Golfo Dulce bay mouth. In-shore fishing for rooster fish is done 30-50 yards from the beach either in the Golfo Dulce (bay) just minutes from the lodge (typically afternoon). In the mornings the guide took us just outside the bay along the Montepalo peninsula, or Point Banco. It usually took 45 minutes to get to rooster fishing spots each morning. Bonita fishing is done on the bay within 20 minutes of the lodge.

The bait fisher is in very competent hands with the guides. The fly fisher can rely on the guides getting you to the fish. But you will have to rely on your own fishing know-how, skill and the flies you bring to catch fish on a fly. The rod, reel and line are of decent quality, you don't have to purchase those. But you do have to do your research and come prepared.

### The Guides

The fishing program is managed by Todd Staley. Todd, an American, is a long time Costa Rica resident. He has a great sense of humor that shows up in teasing the guests in a friendly way. He was involved with lodges on the Atlantic side catering to tarpon. Then he moved to San Jose working "hotels". One of his side businesses was importing Cuban cigars. He eventually got tired of "bus fumes and perfume" and helped get Crocodile Bay off the ground. He meets with all the anglers each evening to set up the next day fishing, and then checks in again each morning at breakfast.

I am left with the impression of the guides are much more comfortable fishing with casting rods with live bait, than the fly. They are familiar with fly fishing, but I'd say with the exception of Robert, they are at best tolerant of it ("whatever the customer wants" kind of attitude, instead of a clear passion for fly fishing.) I had three different guides for these three different experiences.

Jesus was our off-shore sail fish/marlin guide on a Srike 30 boat. His first mate was his son, Steve. Steve speaks very good English. We fished with Jesus for two days. The first day we neglected to ensure that fly gear was on the boat so we ended up bait fishing. Steve worked very hard for us. We raised 12 sails and landed 5 between us. We were told this was a good day. The second day we requested a fly rod. The lodge provided a 14 wt. Orvis Matrix 10 rod, with an Orvis Vortex reel. Jesus had sail fish blue feathered popper flies. Fishing was slow, after the first 2 hours of no raises, Steve went up top with Jesus (his dad), and the two spent their time joking and laughing, not even looking not even watching for fish at the teasers. After an hour of no results we demanded that Steve come back down and work to get us to fish. We raised 4 sails that day in total; it would have been just 3, but I saw the last fish hit the teaser near the end of the day. In my mind when the fish are not biting you work harder, not less. To top off the day Jesus ended the fishing day with a phony sighting. We knew it was false as Steve did not do his usual high effort to make sure we got bait to the teased-up fish, but it was their way of saying the fishing day is over. We told incoming guests to avoid Jesus. I complained to Todd, the fishing director, that the mate went up to the upper deck to talk and joke. Todd told me that this behavior was unacceptable. Todd was glad that I told him saying that most customers don't give him feedback. I will not accept Jesus when I return to this lodge.

We fished in-shore two days with Wilber on a Challenger 25. Wilber loves to fish, and speaks fairly good English. While fly fishing is not his strength, he is knowledgeable enough to know that you use poppers for rooster fish. At the end of the first day, we caught 2 rooster fish on bait. The lodge provided fly rod was a Loomis GL3 10 wt. with an Orvis Odyssey VI+ reel. Fortunately I purchased some poppers just before departing on the trip, as Wilber had no flies. I did hook a rooster on the popper, but after 15+ minutes the fish gnawed through the 20lb test leader. We caught numerous jack trevallies. On the second day we told him we wanted more, albeit smaller, roosters; we caught 8 between us, none on a fly. Wilbur worked very hard for us, had a good sense of humor. Despite his lack of familiarity with rigging a fly outfit, I would recommend Wilber to fellow anglers.

Before we flew home, we fished one-half day with Robert, on a flats boat. Todd told us that Robert was the most experienced fly fishing guide on his staff. Robert is actually a recent transplant from Miami, Florida, where he was in the guided and was in the fly fishing retail business. His wife is Costa Rican, and he wanted a change in life style that comes with moving to Costa Rica. He has been in Costa Rica for 6 months; and my sense is that he is still learning how to catch lots of fish in the Gulfo Dulce. The downside of using his flats boat is that there is no shade. The sun is very bright, and it is very hot in the afternoon, at this location, as the lodge is located at 8 degrees 30 minutes off the Equator. It was acceptable for a morning half day however. The rod provided by the lodge was a Redington Nano Titanium, with a Vinor Riptide reel. The fly line was dirty and was worn by abrasion, making it difficult to shoot the 60 feet to the fish. The fish were exceptionally spooky on our day of fishing, going down quickly once the boat got close enough to cast. We were skunked in our 3 hours of morning fishing prior to our departure to the USA.

The Lodge.

The lodge staff picks you up at the airport, which is just a 5 minute ride away. It is a quicker walk! We were greeted at the lodge with mango smoothies, and in hand was a bottle of rum for fortification.

The lodge was completed 3 years ago. Each room has a firm bed, is air conditioned, with ceiling fans. Shower. Bottled water is provided in the room. All the furniture and other wood work were made locally. 120V. Low cost laundry service (shirt \$1) is available.

There is a swimming pool. There were little no-see-ums that bit pool goers. Birds skim the pool for a late afternoon bug snack.

The bar has friendly attentive service. Local beer and spirits are complimentary. The house Chilean sauvignon blanc was pretty good. The merlot should be passed. Cuban cigars, including Cohiba and Montecristo, are available for purchase (\$15). Smoking is allowed in the bar, there is an electrostatic air cleaner there.

#### Meals

Overall the food is very good. Breakfast included fresh fruit (local water melon, pineapple, mangos and papaya). Orange and "Mixed" juice. Coffee. Entrees included your choice of eggs, rice and beans, toast, greasy hash browns, bacon, omelets, pancakes and French toast.

Lunch on the boat included a sandwich roll that rotated among roast beef, ham and tuna salad. Watermelon and pineapple. There was seemingly unlimited bottled water, soft drinks, local fruit drinks and local beer.

Dinner usually had a green salad or soup, and choice of 3 entrees. Samplings include: "false salmon" (baked marlin, with a heavy herb cream sauce), breaded marlin, grilled marlin, filet mignon, teriyaki tuna steak (excellent), beef tenderloin and lobster, chicken spaghetti, beef lasagna, fettuccine Alfredo. Desert included locally made ice creams, banana flambé, and banana bread. Coffee. Generally the dinners were quite tasty.

#### Getting There

I flew from San Francisco, CA to San Jose using TACA Group, [www.taca.com](http://www.taca.com). TACA is the El Salvador national airline. I paid \$870 for roundtrip business class; coach was available for \$450. TACA aircraft was a 2 year old Airbus A-320. The flights were all on time. Food and service was as good as any airline. (I sat next to TACA's CIO on the flight back. He is former Silicon Valley resident, worked at HP for 15 years.) My fishing partner flew using United Air frequent flier ticket via Los Angeles. No problem with that too.

The lodge arranged for land transfer between international airport to the domestic airport, and air taxi from San Jose to Puerto Jimenez. Carlos, the lodge's logistics manager based in San Jose did the transfers personally, and arranged to have an earlier flight out to the lodge than originally scheduled. His English is excellent.

#### Other activities.

It is possible that the entire family can enjoy this lodge. While we were there, there was a family with a mom and two daughters 6 and 13. The two daughters each caught 2 sail fish one day!! They enjoyed the various tours and other activities other days.

Wildlife viewing (i.e. Eco Tour) is done on the Montepalo Peninsula which is a 40 minute truck ride away. This is not a national park, but rather a sparsely populated area with roads and trails. We selected a walking tour into the jungle. We saw four types of monkeys, ant eaters, iguanas, three-toed sloth, red macaws, American crocodile, toucans, and numerous other bird species. Another option is to sit in the truck and drive slowly down the road.

Other activities include: birding adventures, gold panning, horseback riding, surfing, kayaking, snorkeling, sailing, scuba diving, waterfall rappelling (rainy season only). A romantic beach sunset excursion with guitar and wine can be arranged too. There is a butterfly farm on the premises (they used to ship pupas to Europe), and a pet crocodile (kept in a cistern).

The ECO tour director is Beau Williams, an American, and son of the owner. Randall the Eco tour guide will come by and talk to you at dinner time.

The local town is cleaner than usual third world town. Vendors sell fruit out the back of their cars. There are two Internet Café's, which sell access in 20 minute increments. There are hermit crab races every Wednesday night at one of the cantinas (the smaller ones are faster).

Overall a great place and I look forward to my return.

#### TRIP REPORT

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