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CHARTER FISHING AMID A PANDEMIC

Positive signs of a recovery are starting to show

BY CHRIS KELLY

● I had the great privilege of turning 50 this year and had big plans for an epic trip with the family to celebrate. Having been to Costa Rica many times, I thought bringing my wife, son and daughter would be the perfect getaway: blue marlin fishing at the seamounts, with a few bonus days of catching roosterfish inshore. Well, when COVID-19 struck and Costa Rica closed its borders to visitors, that plan evaporated. I did have a backup though, and wanted to spend the week on Elbow Cay in the Bahamas. We had a house lined up with a boat slip, so we took our COVID-19 tests and received our travel visas, then a hurricane that never fully developed squashed that idea too. Finally we ended up going to Islamorada, where we chartered a local boat called *Blue Heaven*, and had an awesome time. Capt. Skye Stanley has spent his entire life in Islamorada—he produced great fishing, and we also

grabbed a couple dozen lobsters for the freezer. So, how has the charter business survived during the pandemic? There are many different viewpoints and insights.

FAR FROM HOME

For the charter boats in foreign countries, I found that they have had a much more difficult time surviving the effects of COVID-19. In Guatemala, my distant cousin Chris Starrs runs Blue Bayou Lodge. To keep the lodge open and everyone employed, he needs to run approximately 200 trips per year. Because the pandemic began on the back end of his season, he made it through without too much trouble. His summer is typically slower, but with the travel restrictions, he had to temporarily shut down his entire operation. Fortunately, he is able to keep his mates and staff employed. Unfortunately, the

larger operations are having a harder time. Some are downsizing, and some are selling a few of their boats. Even with all the uncertainty though, bookings are picking up and the fishing has been excellent for those who have been able to go.

In Costa Rica, the story is similar. I spoke with Capt. Michael Allgood, who runs the charter boat *Epic* out of Los Sueños. Allgood tries to run about 220 trips per year, and he made it through the end of last season doing pretty well. One of the main issues he sees is that 95 percent of their charters comes from the US, while the other 5 percent is a mix of Canadians, Europeans and a few Russians. In 10 years, he has had maybe three Costa Rican charters. Going into this season, he is optimistic and believes the industry will fully recover. On the bright side, from what I understand, Marina Pez Vela in Quepos has made

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arrangements with the charter-boat fleet to lower their dockage and a few other fees, which is very helpful. Also, for those who have been able to make it out, the fishing is awesome, with some boats getting 50 to 60 sailfish bites a day. There has been much less fishing pressure, and there is also plenty of bait around.

STATESIDE RECOVERY

From talking with several captains in South Florida and North Carolina, the charter business has not been impacted as much. There are several contributing factors, but one is that we haven't experienced any major travel restrictions here in the US. Sure, it can be difficult to get somewhere, but many times the charter clients live relatively close to where they want to fish. They don't have to book airline tickets, worry about health visas, or even pass COVID-19 tests. Another

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interesting fact that has helped is that our government provided a stimulus package that helped customers who would otherwise be out of work. I can remember back in my day, a lot of the charters were six

guys who worked hard and saved their money for that annual fishing trip, which was the highlight of their summer. I also learned that several charter boats applied for, and were granted, Paycheck Protection Program loans. Just like any small business, the government provided some assistance to carry those who needed it in order to hopefully make it through to their next busy charter season.

It might have seemed like the charter industry was dealt a huge blow, but for most of them, just like everyone else, they need to stick to a budget and be diligent.

As for me, I'm looking forward to the upcoming charter season. The captains and crews are excited about a new season too, so grab some friends and go charter a boat. Find your dream destination, keep up to date on the openings, and when it happens, get out there and enjoy the experience of a lifetime. 🎣



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