

A Week in San Juan

Get the Red Carpet Treatment at the San Juan International Billfish Tournament



The proud members of the Club Nautico de San Juan, located on the edge of metropolitan San Juan, Puerto Rico, love to invite anglers from all over the world to fish the local waters. Sure, the club members value the opportunity to pick up new tips from anglers who fish in various hot spots around the globe, but they also love to catch fish and throw a good party. That's the basic premise behind the San Juan International Billfish Tournament, and it has been working like a charm for more than half a century.

The tournament sets itself apart by hosting themed parties, a boat parade, amazing dinners and "wife-friendly" daily activities. A consistent blue marlin bite doesn't hurt either. Of all the unique characteristics that

Blue marlin in the 250- to 500-pound class thrive just a few miles from downtown San Juan.

this prestigious tournament brings to the table, however, the opportunity to compete as an international angler is what most anglers find so appealing. The tournament format allows fishermen from around the world entrance onto some of the best boats

in the Caribbean. Each boat in the fleet must leave a spot open for an international angler. And these aren't rinky-dink charter boats — these are beautiful private yachts with top-notch crews.

"For our international anglers, you just show up with a rod," says past tournament director Gonzalo Ferrer. "Even if you don't have a rod, we put you on a different boat every day. That way you get to know the owner and the teams. It's very hands-on. You really get to meet our people here. It's a winning formula and format that are not very common throughout the world. Many places you have to charter a boat if you want to fish in the tournament. Here, you can put a team of your friends together and come compete as international anglers."

It's an excellent way to learn different techniques and make new friends. My father always told me that each time you fish with a new person, you should learn something new — even if the thing you learn is that you will never fish with that crew again.

To kick off the event, the fleet gathers just off the coast of the historic Fort San Felipe del Morro, a fascinating structure built by the Spanish in the 1500s. The fort's looming presence makes the perfect backdrop for the shotgun start. The boats blast off for the fishing grounds but do not stay on plane for long. The edge drops off like the Grand Canyon, and the outriggers come down just a few miles from shore. The Puerto Rican Trench, the

SPECIES AVAILABILITY CHART

SPECIES	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Blue Marlin	F	F	F	F	G	G	E	E	E	E	G	F
White Marlin	E	G	G	G						G	E	
Sailfish	E	G	G	G						G	E	E
Dorado	E	G	G	G	F					G	E	E
Yellowfin Tuna	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	G
Wahoo	E	G	F							F	G	E

E=excellent; G=good; F=fair; blank=n/a



Tradition meets modern-day fishing each morning as the fleet of gorgeous sport-fishers lines up just off the coast of El Morro.

deepest waters found in the Atlantic, starts just off the coast of the island.

The best months to fish off San Juan are around the moon phases of July, August and September. I fished on three different boats during the 2009 San Juan Tournament and found that they all ran a spread of lures similar to that found in St. Thomas: two bridge teasers, two short teasers off the transom cleats and four lures. Each boat also carried rigged pitch baits — dink ballyhoo for smaller blues and split-tail mullet, mackerel or horse ballyhoo for the bigger fish.

The fleet releases a good amount of fish every year. In 1988, the tournament racked up 190 blue marlin releases. Most of the blues caught off San Juan range from 250 to 500 pounds, a sporting challenge on the 50-pound gear required by tournament rules. Big blues show up off these shores as well. Roger Medlock of South Carolina caught a 1,086-pounder in 2000.

The highlight of my trip came on day two when I was paired with Luis Bacardi and his team on *Rum Bum*. Bacardi got the day started, hooking a nice blue on the shotgun lure. The fish appeared behind the long rigger, and Bacardi reeled in the shotgun at the perfect time, getting the fish to switch over just as it was about to fade off. Capt. Baxter Still did an expert job of maneuvering on the fish, and Bacardi got it to the boat for the tag-and-release in about 20 minutes.

Next, Doug Covin hooked a lively blue of about 300 pounds. The fish nearly hit the boat as it took off on a wild tear down the port side of the Bertram. A mystery bite on the left rigger during my rotation turned into another rowdy blue on the leader. This fish was a scrapper and stayed deep for most of the fight, but thanks to the work of the veteran crew, I caught the 275-pounder after about a 30-minute fight. Covin added another blue in the late afternoon, helping the team go 4-for-4 on the day — a damn good score no matter where in the world you are. *Rum Bum* went on to win the event, and Covin took home second-place-angler honors. As for me, I got the lucky draw, getting to ride along with the hot boat.

As we backed into the covered slip at the club, a group of people waited to congratulate the team on a fantastic day and do a little recon in the hunt for some top-secret information. There wasn't much to tell; we were just at the right place at the right time. That evening, at a safari-themed pig roast, I spoke at length with some of the older club members. I quickly learned that this tournament and the big-game scene in San Juan are about more than just fishing. It's about conservation, camaraderie, good times and sportsmanship. It should come as no surprise that San Juan is home to the longest consecutively held international big-game fishing tournament in the world.

GETTING THERE

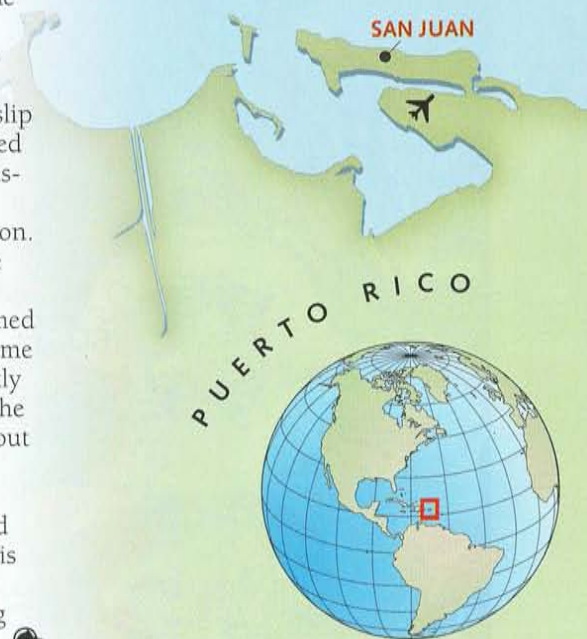
San Juan serves as a major airline hub for the entire Caribbean, so finding a flight to Puerto Rico is never a problem. And since the island is a U.S. territory, Americans do not need a passport or visa, making the trip nice and easy.

For those anglers taking part in the International Billfish Tournament at the Club Nautico de San Juan, you need not worry about a thing. The event staff makes sure to take care of all your needs, including providing ground transportation to and from the airport as well as cab vouchers to take you from the host hotel to the club and back each day. The 2010 tournament is slated for August 16-22. To view a complete schedule of events, rules, rates, hotel information and everything else you will need to know about the event, visit www.sanjuaninternational.com. You can also contact the tournament director, Frankie Mirandes, at chairman@sanjuaninternational.com or 787-722-0177.

For those looking to charter a boat in San Juan any time of year, contact Benitez Marine Services and Sport Fishing at 787-723-2292, or visit www.mikebenitezsportfishing.com. Mike Benitez also operates a ship's store located just below the club.

If it's your first trip to San Juan, set aside a day to tour Old San Juan, especially El Morro. It's well worth your time.

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