

HOT

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BlueWater

Game Fishing



The
best-kept
secret for
**MASSIVE
BLUES**

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COVER PHOTO: Azores blue marlin
Photo: Capt Les Gallagher www.oceanic-store.com



Brasilia hooked-up off Faial Island with Capt Les Gallagher at the helm.

Azorean blues

Few anglers in the Southern Hemisphere realise just how prolific and how big the blue marlin are in the waters off Portugal, in the North Atlantic. One of the game fishing world's best-kept secret hotspots is Horta, on the island of Faial in the Azores, as Captain Mike Tan discovered on his recent mission to escape the Covid-blues.

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My search for blue marlin utopia finally led me to the Azores in the North Atlantic, an autonomous region lying 850 miles off the west coast of Portugal. This island archipelago offers plentiful blues in large sizes. The Portuguese island of Madeira is another well-known destination for very large blue marlin, as is the lesser known port of Algarve on the coast of mainland Portugal. These three blue marlin hotspots form what I term the 'Axis of blue marlin fishing'.

The Azores derives its name from the Portuguese word Açores, which translates to 'hawk islands' or simply 'goshawks', due to the local abundance of a similar bird of prey. The provincial flag features a symbol of a hawk. The archipelago consists of nine volcanic islands, together with extensive banks and seamounts running along the mid-Atlantic Ridge. The area holds enormous quantities of chub mackerel and other baitfish, forming an essential destination or refuelling pit-stop for numerous seasonally migrating pelagic species.

REALM OF GIANTS

While fishing these islands, with stunning landscapes all around you, you really sense that you are fishing in the realm of giants.

Although immersed in remoteness and raw untouched natural beauty, you also have the benefits of modern amenities at an



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established travel destination. In this respect, I believe the Azores is the most beautifully rugged place on earth to successfully target really big blues.

Charters to chase blue marlin in the Azores are run out of three ports or marinas. The primary charters are operated out of Horta Marina on Faial Island. Charter boats also operate out of the Port of Madalena on the neighbouring Pico Island, and out of Ponta Delgada Marina, located 150 miles to the east on Sao Miguel Island.

Horta is an epic centre for blue marlin fishing. With just a few boats operating, this small fleet has produced 25% of all the current IGFA world records for Atlantic blue marlin on conventional tackle.

Both Horta and Madalena offer easy access to the steep slopes in 200 to 700 metres of water off North Faial, a 20-minute run from either marina. Within a 20-mile run to the southwest is the Azores Bank, or within a 12-mile run in a south-west direction you reach the Condor Bank.

Like many blue marlin hotspots, the Azores has an average fishing season of three months, running from July through to September. At this time, the summer water temperature averages 23°C. Sometimes the season extends to mid-October, but after that the water drops to around 19°C.

THE AMAZING CAPTAIN GALLAGHER

I made my 2.5-hour flight from Lisbon to Horta and looked no further than meeting the legendary Azorean captain Les Gallagher, who runs Brasilia, a well-equipped 40-foot Black Watch built 2005 (www.oceanic-fishing.com). Les lives in Horta, on Faial Island, and has been fishing these rich and diverse waters since 1987. He has mentored and taught several other notable blue marlin captains, including Capt Ezequiel (Zak Conde) and Capt Olaf Grimkowski.

Due to the short fishing season in the Azores, Les also runs a marine-themed art gallery packed with exceptional artworks, photography and more (www.oceanic-store.com), plus a number



The remarkably talented Capt Les Gallagher.

of apartments, and a vibey modern bar in a historic 200-year-old building. I found him not only a renowned blue marlin expert, but also a marine conservationist, photographer, artist, writer, and educator. He taught me a great deal about the immensely rich bio-diversity in these waters.



A selection of Capt Les Gallagher's favoured Fronteira lures for huge blue marlin, rigged on 800lb mono with 10/0 Dozer hooks.

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Aussie angler Tom Graham releasing a large Atlantic blue aboard *Brasilia* during the week before Mike Tan's trip.

The busy and multi-talented Les is also a boat mechanic, maintaining not only the Black Watch that he runs, *Brasilia*, but also the other three gameboats in the *Brasilia* Fishing Charter fleet. This business is owned by the passionate gamefisherman Louis Sougne, who also has two gameboats for charter in the Canary Islands, making it the largest gamefishing operation in Europe.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Capt Gallagher does not see the need to troll multiple teasers or dredges, instead preferring a simple spread of four skirted lures. He subscribes to the 'Less is more' school of thought. However, he does run a bridge teaser in close, with a large lure positioned nearby – "Just to please the doubters," he says with a cheeky grin.

With his intimate understanding and ability to read his environment – taking note of seabirds, wind and current direction, and underwater topography – Les sets the gold standard for a blue marlin charter captain. He has no need for fancy bird-radar or sonar, instead he reads Mother Nature, watching for signs to anticipate bait aggregation, and then sticking close to the baitballs once they form.

"Les recorded 13 releases from 19 strikes over the six-day charter; the biggest was 850lb."

Les does not troll blindly, instead he is constantly keeping tabs on bird activity, as well as anticipating the movements of bait on his sounder. He pays attention to the angle of the wind waves and swell, as well as the constantly changing pressure waves that follow the boat – all of which can affect the action of the lures.

He doesn't seem to prefer any particular set or brand of lures, except that they need to be well balanced and run well. One brand that he frequently runs are the Fronteira lures, which he rigs on 800 to 900lb leader with 10/0 Dozer hooks. Les stresses that the heavier than usual leader is not for strength, but to prevent chaffing from the bill of the marlin, which average 550lb (275kg) in the Azores.

FISHING OFF FAIAL

Boarding *Brasilia* at the Horta marina, I met our amiable deckie Mario before we set off on the six-mile run to the north of Faial. The marlin fishing over the week before I arrived was red-hot, with Les recording 13 releases from 19 strikes over the six-day charter. The biggest was estimated at 850lb (385kg), which really put me in a marlin-centric mood as I anticipated the action ahead.

The Atlantic blue marlin migrate to the Azores in waves, similar to the way they do in the sister-hotspot of Madeira. The action and catch rate vary weekly, but the best concentrations generally arrive between late September and early October.

On our first day we scored a 500lb (227kg) blue in the early afternoon, then 15 minutes later we released another of 400lb



The Azores produces excellent fishing for large yellowfin tuna, as well as bigeye tuna like these three.

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Local boat *Makaira* hooked-up on Condor Bank, only 14nm from Horta.

(180kg). An hour after that, we hooked a smaller marlin, but pulled the hook. I also saw a huge dorsal fin rise behind one of the lures. We estimated that blue to weigh 750lb (340kg), but although it made a several swipes at the lure, it failed to connect.

TESTED ON THE LEADER

I'd travelled to the Azores to learn from Capt Gallagher, honing both my angling and deckie skills – yes, I was playing both angler and wireman! Mario was a true sport, working as a team to relieve me in the chair towards the end of the fight, freeing me to jump out and leader my own fish.

Later that first day we hooked a blue of around 550lb (250kg), which crashed the short lure. These powerful blues were fat right to the tail – a far cry from the Malaysian sailfish that I am more accustomed to leadering. With thanks to some coaching from Les

in his calm demeanour, I released the fish after performing a little better on the leader.

SECOND DAY OF BLUES

A group of anglers from the Netherlands were scheduled to fish with me, but they had to cancel at the last minute due to a significant rise in Covid cases at home, threatening a positive test on arrival in Horta airport.

When Les told me we had the opportunity to get two of his friends onboard, both of which were marlin virgins, I was excited about the chance to turn them into fellow marlin addicts. As I travel to fish and host charter groups in various marlin destinations around the world, I totally enjoy my role as guide, including showing my clients the best local bars and restaurants.

Our marlin apprentices, Victor and Martin, did not have to wait



After fighting his fish to the boat, Mike Tan leapt from the chair to take the leader on his own fish.

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long for the action to start once we began trolling on my second day. Within a five-mile run from the marina, Victor scored a 350lb (160kg) blue that delivered loads of boat side action.

Martin was up next, facing a pack-attack with a double-hook-up on 250lb (110kg) blues. With two reels screaming, he headed to the chair and awaited Les' calm instructions from the flybridge. Unfortunately, the hook pulled on his first fish, but we had a spare to secure a release. Les causally made his way down from the bridge to knock the hook from the fish's jaw with a short plank of wood, which I could see was much more effective than a standard de-hooker device.



Mike carefully removes the hook from his large Atlantic blue.

AFTERNOON DELIGHT

The day had already produced two releases from three strikes, but it was about to get even better. We ended the day with a late afternoon bite from a fat 400lb blue, giving Victor his second marlin. He did a great job in the chair, constantly cranking and even laying the line neatly back onto the reel.

The day was an all-round great team effort, and Les also took some excellent photographs from the bridge. I had taken the leader on six blue marlin over the two days, leaving my left hand swollen and looking like Hellboy. I think I need to refine my technique before handling the really large specimens!

A PLACE LIKE NO OTHER

This has been and words like fat, big, huge come to mind from observing the numerous dolphins and a couple of whales.

With its volcanic nutrient-rich water supporting a vast web of

marine life, the Azores archipelago is by far the most tremendously fertile marine environment I have ever fished. Its conveyor belt buffet of chub mackerel not only plays host to one of the world's largest big marlin aggregations, but it is also perhaps one of the world's last frontiers for blue marlin fishing.

During the northern hemisphere's late summer months, with the water temperature still around 21.5°C, it is the only place on earth you can expect truly good shots at very big blue marlin as well as giant Atlantic bluefin tuna. This period also sees an influx of 400 to 500lb blues.

The region is home to seven species of dolphins, 20 species of whales, 14 species of seabirds (including the largest shearwater), as well as white marlin, spearfish, wahoo, dolphinfish and swordfish. The Azores also produces five species of tuna, including Atlantic bluefin, bigeye, yellowfin, albacore and skipjack. This is a truly astounding big game fishery! 🐟



With his marlin secured on a bill-rope for safe removal of the hook, Mike Tan was stoked to both fight this fish on the rod as well as wire it to the boat for release.