

# Modern Sport Fishing in the Azores by Capt. Les Gallagher Amidst a Changing World of Ocean Conservation



The Azores have been heralded as being one of the World's best destinations for sport fishing since the mid 1980's and continues to attract some of the most prestigious anglers and professional crew members from around the globe.

Extensive coastlines and ocean seamounts aggregate huge populations of bait fish that in turn attract an abundance of larger pelagic fishes including billfish and tuna species. The intrinsic beauty of the Azorean coastal landscapes and hospitality of the local people add to the experience.

Sport fishing in the Azores has evolved continually during the last decades along with the need for ocean species and habitat conservation. The days of hanging fish on a regular basis are long gone and today a good trophy photo will be of a live healthy fish with all its colour and splendour alongside the boat next to the angler moments before its safe release.



Photo: a 700 lb blue marlin moments before release. The average weight of blue marlin in the Azores since the mid 90's is 550 lb (250 Kg).



Local MT (Marine Tourism) licensed charter fishing boats predominantly practice “catch and release” fishing. They understand that environmental education and public appreciation of a more sustainable ocean are much more important than taking fish out of the water. The majority of anglers want to fish purely for the experience and pleasure of seeing a fish close-up before releasing it. The older practice of record fishing is rarely requested and is no longer essential for MT charter fishing. In fact, numerous local operators believe that MT fishing for large pelagic fish in the Azores can and should become a 100% “no take” fishery.



Photo: Local MT fishing boat Dois Peixes (alias Double Header) fishing out of Horta, Island of Faial is a world renowned classic boat of historic importance that was recently restored and re-powered with modern “EPA Tier 3” certified motors for clean emissions and low environmental impact.

Modern sport fishing methods are highly selective with close to zero bycatch and have little or no impact on local resident fish stocks. Nearly all billfish and tunas caught are released upon removing a single hook and after the caught fish has been successfully revived alongside the boat. Fishing techniques have been refined for faster and safer releases of fish whilst any gear loss is both minimal and rare, in fact MT charter boats recover many tons of waste plastic from the ocean on a yearly basis.

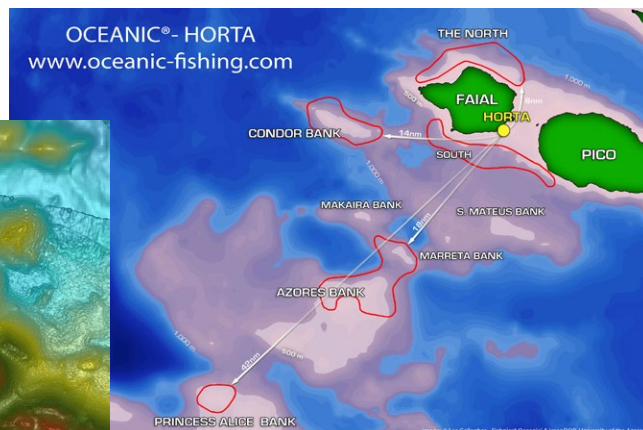
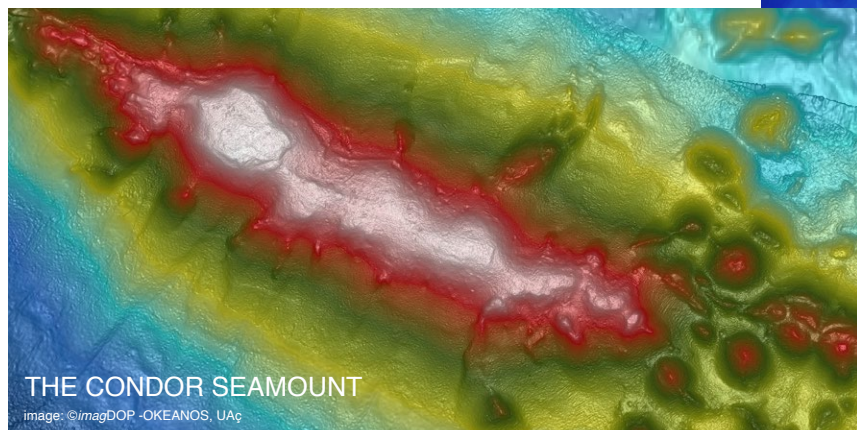
The economic importance of MT fishing boats in the Azores is also worthy of consideration. Demand is high with reputed boats currently charging upward of 2,500€ for a single day of fishing and accepting confirmed reservations years in advance. Additional revenues for the local economy are also being generated from MT fishing via flights, accommodation, restaurants, etc, not to mention the economic “spin off” from the operator costs including employment and vessel maintenance.

Local MT fishing boats record and share their catch and observations data with OKEANOS, UAç ([www.oceanos.uac.pt](http://www.oceanos.uac.pt)). The boats cover large areas of water on any given day and with mutual interest in a healthy ecosystem will also report potential hazards or questionable fishing activities to the relevant authorities. Collaborations with OKEANOS, UAç and other international marine science organisations on ocean research projects and large pelagic fish tagging programs are not uncommon.

The regional government of the Azores is credited for having implemented many management measures for the protection of marine species in the Azores. These measures include species catch prohibitions, minimum size restrictions, gear restrictions, closed season restrictions and the creation of marine protected areas or areas subject to fishing restriction.

The Condor Seamount was closed in 2010 to demersal (bottom fishing) as a protective measure and to enable an in-depth study of seamount ecology and conservation. The project has been acclaimed both regionally and internationally as being an important success that allowed for essential research and the recovery some fish stocks. The area around the bank now hosts numerous lucrative “no take” MT activities including blue water shark diving and “catch and release” sport fishing (surface trolling for migratory species only).

Image: The Condor Seamount is located 6 miles to the West of the Island of Faial and has been closed to commercial bottom fishing since 2010 with positive results. It is also the single most important area for local MT boats practising “catch and release” fishing for visting migratory species.



Atlantic blue marlin are the most prestigious and most revered of all the large fish of interest to sport fishing. These magnificent animals can grow to be 4 metres in length and can weigh of more than 1400lb (650kg). Blue marlin come to the Azores in large numbers during the summer months in search of the huge schools of chub mackerels that aggregate along coastal shelves and seamounts. They can swim at speeds approaching 20kts (40km/h) and will frequently use their bill to beat their prey in order to slow them down before engulfing them. To see these fish in their natural habitat and to witness their speed, agility and beauty before releasing them back into the ocean is a truly amazing experience.

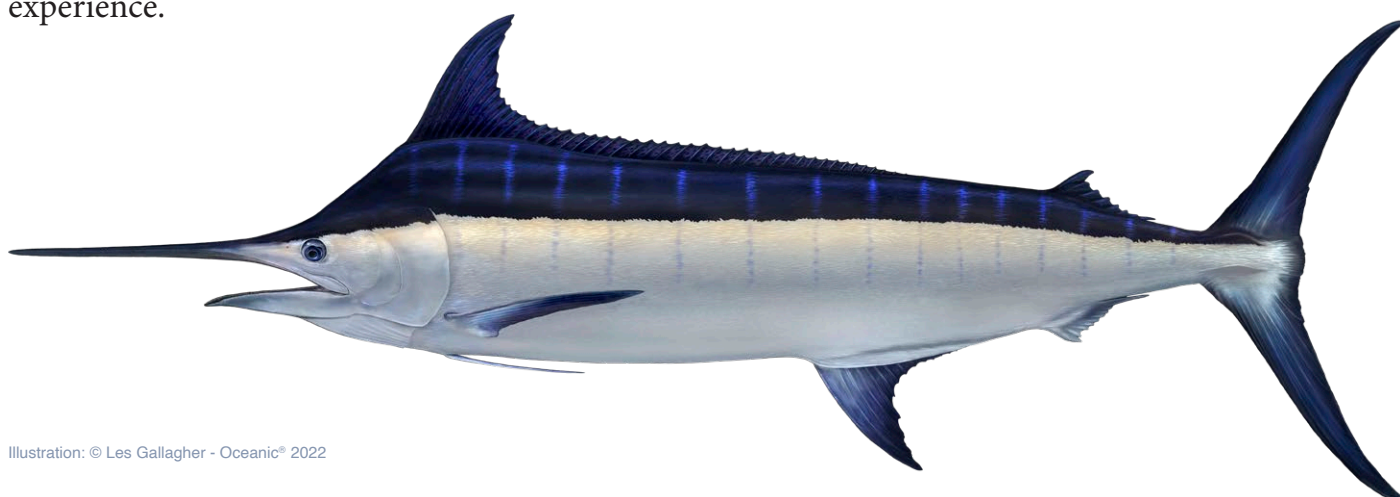


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Although Blue Marlin are the main attraction, the Azores hosts an array of other large species of interested to sport fishing including the smaller white marlin, 4 species of spearfish, swordfish, dourado (dolphinfish) and 7 species of tuna.

The world renowned quality of the fishing in the Azores and the beautiful coastal landscapes has been attracting some of the best known anglers, crew members and researchers from around the globe for decades resulting in a huge local operator knowledge base. The Azores has become well respected a centre of good practice in terms of high quality ethical fishing, environmental awareness, scientific collaboration and environmental education.