

Cool water, hot blue



Angler Mike Germann (left) with skipper Chris Donato (right) and crewman Chris 'Westie' Marshall with Mike's first marlin, which went within three kilos of the SIGFA national record.

Having spent my New Zealand gamefishing season in search of patches of warmer water, it seemed perverse when on a recent trip to Samoa we were searching out the colder areas!

I have many fond memories of this Pacific Island nation – it was where I caught my first billfish and, until recently, held the yellowfin tuna record. I had been a part of establishing the successful SIGFA Tournament and was a member of its recreational fishing fraternity. This location has always produced the goods, fishing wise.

On our arrival in Apia and sitting around in the air-conditioned comfort of *Southern Destiny's* saloon, her American owner and skipper, Chris Donato, explained that the fishing had been tough, with the water temperature in the low 30 degrees. He had been waiting on some SST charts to determine where the 'cold' water was, but persistent cloud cover had prevented the satellite surveillance from producing much useful information, so we would be 'flying blind'.

The afternoon was spent preparing for the trip, as well as taking a sight-seeing journey across the island to the Salani Surf Resort, where Chris is a shareholder. My companions this time were regular fishing buddies Mike Germann, Ivan Penno and Murray Stewart.

I had fished with Chris before. The previous year daughter Miah and I had spent a pleasant but unsuccessful few days based at Salani fishing the south side aboard his previous vessel, *Black Pearl*, in an attempt to catch Miah her first marlin. For me, we had unfinished business.

Chris' main focus then, and today, is billfish. Our previous trip saw us only pull lures, and big ones at that, on 130-pound tackle. In the intervening 12 months Chris has employed a number of experienced deckhands and has been exposed to a wide variety of fishing styles.

Our 'mate', or crewman, for this trip was Chris 'Westie' Marshall, a young man with a wealth of knowledge, gleaned from fishing a number of the planet's hotspots.

Westie enjoyed fishing baits – both rigged troll baits and tease and switch – and we were to put his methods, refined by Chris for this particular boat, to good use in our four days aboard *Southern Destiny*.

Our spread included two teasers, controlled from the bridge, set in the first and second waves back. Beyond that, slightly staggered on the third and fourth wakes, were two 'armed and dangerous' lures from mid-rigger. Completing the spread were two ballyhoos (imagine a cross between a piper and a large yellow-eyed mullet) rigged behind pusher heads or inside lland skirts and run off the 'rigger tips.

There was a shotgun uprigger, from which either a lure or another ballyhoo was run, especially as we approached tuna workups. Right behind the boat an XXXOS Black Bart 'Braziliano' pusher was run as another teaser.

My initial thought was: "This is a lot of gear to clear on a bite," but over the next few days I was to be proven wrong, and it produced an excellent hook-up rate.

The first victim of the ballyhoo as we trolled the drop-off heading to the eastern end of the main island of Upolo was a mahimahi. Ivan was in the chair and celebrated his birthday with a 10kg fish, whose presence had been given away by the small white 'mahi' bird fluttering above it. Deposited straight into the fish bin set into the cockpit sole, it was iced down in preparation for dinner.

A little further along the Samoan version of Vanuatu's 'Marlin Highway', a couple of frigate birds circling above the mahi birds indicated some more action. This time it was a sailfish that took out one 'rigger

bait before hitting the other, hooking up the second time. Normally sailfish are spectacular performers, their large dorsal adding to the display. This one was a sulky beggar, and apart from some head shaking and an initial strong run, it did little to earn the tag placed in its shoulder before release.

On the initial bite another fish came up on the teaser, but in all the excitement, no one was quick enough with the pitch bait Westie had prepared previously and the opportunity for a double was missed.

Later that afternoon we ran up to the island of Nu'uatale, where we trolled Rapalas and Halco Tremblers without success before anchoring up for the night. Considering how tough the fishing had been, we were well satisfied with the day's results as we celebrated Ivan's birthday with the obligatory bottle of Appleton's rum.

The next day we headed east to a couple of seamounts shown on the chart, where we hoped the currents may have pushed up some colder water. Some 20 miles out the bottom climbs from 2600 metres to around 600m, and Chris said there was generally bait around here somewhere. He was right on the button. As we approached the area a large work-up of birds was seen, wheeling above a school of fast moving, feeding tuna. At trolling speed it seemed like an age before we caught up to the action.

The first pass produced nothing, but as we were taking a wide turn for another shot, the bait was bit, hooking us up to a small blue on 24kg.



Although small, this blue marlin showed plenty of spirit.



Unlike the sailfish, this guy put on a great performance for Ivan, involving plenty of leaping and a strong initial run for which the blue marlin is noted.

Ivan had it to the boat in reasonably short order, where it was tagged and released, its weight estimated at 60 to 70kg.

In the meantime the tuna school had gone down, so we began the long troll back along the Marlin Highway to Apia, our only interruption being a nice mahimahi for Mike. This put all three anglers on the scoreboard, and as it was also Murray's birthday, we had ample cause for more celebratory Appleton's.

Halfway through the trip we had gone four fish from five shots, all on baits. The effort Chris had made to import ballyhoo halfway around the world was paying off.

With no colder water to the east, our attention the next morning

turned to the west as we headed past the Apolima Passage to fish off the island of Savaii. While this did not produce any more action, other than Murray's first mahimahi and a good yellowfin bite that did not stick, the signs were promising. Chris was marking plenty of bait, and despite working the area close to where we intended anchoring, we didn't raise another fish this day.

On our final day we woke to heavy cloud cover and solid rain that saw the sea temperate drop a degree or two. It was also the last day that Westie and Chris would fish together after teaming up over six months ago.

We headed back to where we had marked the bait concentration the day before and began working the area over. At morning teatime, with the rain stopped but the cloud still there, a good fish came in and grabbed the teaser, only to apparently disappear



Mahimahi are spectacular fighters, often taking to the air during various stages of the fight. Right: Murray Stewart (left) and crewman Westie with the former's first mahimahi.



Mike Germann puts plenty of effort into getting string back midway through his fight with the 213kg blue marlin.

out of the spread – or so we thought. Just as we were beginning to rue our bad fortune, it popped up behind the right lure, a Joe Yee medium plunger, and snaffled it, heading off towards the horizon in typical blue fashion – no set direction and with water flying everywhere.

“This is the fish we have been waiting for,” Chris said as I was attempting to keep the lens focused on the action.

They say if you can survive the initial onslaught from a blue, you are in with a chance. It was Mike’s first marlin and he played it like a veteran. He had seen a number caught, but had never been the lucky angler. He was about to make amends.

SIGFA tournament

Due to a cancellation, *Southern Destiny* is available for charter at a special tournament rate for the Samoan International Game Fishing Association’s Contest based out of Apia, May 3-9.

Last year Chris won the top local skipper prize, with his anglers taking out the heaviest blue marlin and top male angler honours fishing from *Black Pearl*.

For more information, contact skipper Chris Donato by phoning 00685 758 3200 or emailing chris.donato@samoasportfishing.com

The initial estimate was a fish of around 220-270kg, so with the Samoan record currently standing at 216kg, the gaffs were called for.

By this stage the sun had emerged from behind the cover, and while he might have been drenched in sweat, Mike was making good ground on the fish. As is the case with so many blues, the marlin had blown itself out on the initial run and was now doggedly settling into a scrap down deep. The angler and crew were equal to the task however, and eventually the fish was brought aboard.

Various calls on board had the fish close to or beating the record. Chris prides himself on his catch-and-release principles, so fish have to be tournament winners or potential record breakers before they come on board.

SIGFA’s president, Ray Bancroft, made a special effort to weigh the fish for us on arrival in Apia. We couldn’t get to the official weighstation, so Ray arranged for a forklift and strung the fish up on that, where it pulled the scales to 213.5kg – just three kilos short of Vaughan Simpson’s record, and a case of close but no cigar.

While we were all disappointed for Mike, Chris and Westie, it took nothing away from the effort – it was a fish to be proud of, and a great one for Mike to lose his billfish virginity to. It was also a great way to end



It would have been a slow trip had it not been for Westie’s baits.

what had been a particularly fun trip with good mates and a top crew.

This live-aboard trip had been an eye-opener for me. I had almost always ‘pulled plastic’ when fishing in Samoa, with the exception of

sewing skipjack belly flaps in sailfish lures, so the bait option proved a life-saver – one I hope to introduce into my own fishing in local waters with flying fish or piper. I’ll keep you posted.



About *Southern Destiny*

Southern Destiny is a popular American designed and built sportfisher, a Cabo 43, powered by twin MAN 800hp diesels that produce great cruising and top-end speeds.

Her bridge sports a plethora of modern electronics, including Furuno, Garmin and Raymarine sounders, chartplotters and radar. Safety is well catered for with *Southern Destiny* carrying all the usual equipment, including a 10-man liferaft.

Accommodation is perfect for four anglers, with three housed in the forward vee-berths and the fourth in the owner’s stateroom. There are two showers and heads, and air-conditioning throughout, with the latter a popular feature in Samoa’s heat. There is plenty of cold storage on board, including two freezers, a refrigerator and a number of insulated bins and coolers.

Tackle is all top-of-the-range Shimano, and there is an impressive array of chair and stand-up tackle

from 60kg down to 10kg. Jigging and casting tackle is also carried, along with a huge lure choice. There are quality outriggers, as well as a heavy-tackle fighting chair.

In the saloon there is a flat-screen television, along with an excellent selection of general and fishing movies on DVD. The boys love their music, so there is a good sound system, both inside and outside the saloon.

Southern Destiny is a well appointed, comfortable and near-new (2004) boat that’s well set up for both day and extended, longer-range charters.

Owner/skipper Chris Donato has been in Samoa for three years, previously running a 31ft centre-console *Black Pearl* before importing *Southern Destiny* late last year.

He has been a fisherman all his life, getting a good grounding over a number of species found off the Florida coast. He is a quiet, unassuming character with a passion for his fishing, surfing and music.

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Polynesian Blue has low fares to Samoa from Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

Book at polynesianblue.com