

Magnifi Santo

Vanuatu is one of Australia's closest neighbours—and it's worth dropping in for a visit if you like catching big gamefish.

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I'VE BEEN on many trips to the beautiful islands of Vanuatu, but I've never fished the west coast of Santo—the biggest island in the region's archipelago. Santo has always had a reputation for big fish—a few mates have been there and come away with stories of unstoppable blue marlin and other huge gamefish. Just a short time ago, Santo's first fully blown gamefishing operation set its roots on the island and Anthony Pisano from Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures immediately contacted the vessel's owners, seeking to represent them as the Australian booking agent. Within a couple of months, Ocean Blue had several groups of anglers heading to Santo to fish on the operation's 46-foot (14m) vessel *Fiesta*. As for the fishing—it's just full-on!

I was keen to get over there and the time selected was late November. With the moon on the make, I thought it would be perfect for blue marlin. My trip coincided with a couple of Pisano's new clients from Darwin, Glen and Michelle Smedley. As it turned out, I knew Glen from his Sydney days many moons ago, when he was right into his land based gamefishing.

The first night we caught up in Santo at Coral Quays Resort. There was a lot of reminiscing about the 'good old days'.

After a good night's sleep we were picked up early and driven a short distance to an old jetty near the Port of Luganville, where the gorgeous, deep, calm waters of this huge natural harbour allow island traders to dock and unload stores.

Our 46-foot home for the next five days lay on anchor between the mainland and Aore Island, 500m offshore. Our skipper John Williams came over in the tender to pick us up and we were soon on board to meet his wife, Wendy, and the local deckhand, Josespho. *Fiesta* is a huge vessel for a 46-footer and the cabin layout gave us all a comfortable bunk and air-conditioning if we needed it. The weather was sensational and a cool zephyr coming down the harbour made things very pleasant. As we motored out of the harbour toward the offshore FAD (fish aggregating device) the seas were perfect, with just a long lazy swell ruffled by a five-knot breeze.

The fishing grounds along the western side of Santo are unique. The 200m drop-off is within half a kilometre of the shore. The locals have installed a FAD just off the western entrance to the harbour in 400m of water and further to the north lay a series of impressive seamounts. When you study the chart, the Wusi grounds

in particular are amazing. One day when Captain Williams stopped the boat right on top of the mountain, we found we could see the bottom, even though we were 5km out to sea.

The other new hot-spot Williams had marked on his GPS lies between the FAD and the Wusi Seamount, where two peaks rise 200m off the bottom in around 600m of water. Every time we went there we had plenty of bites—but more on that later. Another interesting feature of Santo is the towering mountain range (the highest in Vanuatu's archipelago) that offers protection to the fishing grounds from the southeast trade winds.

We had hardly got out of the bay and into deep cobalt water when the left rigger-clip cracked and the Tiagra 80 reel let out a scream as a huge barracuda took a liking to one of the Mackerel Mauler lures. When we got the big-fanged devil on board, the lure was nearly out of sight down its gob! There was some careful handling involved to get the lure out and the big critter didn't survive the operation, so it was put in the ice box for the locals to eat. It's one of the nice things about fishing these islands—nothing goes to waste.

By the time we set up another pattern of

The volcanic island Lopevi forms just one of the spectacular landscapes you see en route to Santo.

Big wahoo were the highlight of the seamounts.



This mahi mahi featured some unusual colouration on its head.



lures, the FAD was in sight. This bunch of floats had only been in the water a couple of months, but nature had already worked its magic—the place was alive with all kinds of fish. It's amazing how these FADs work. It starts with microscopic marine organisms growing on the rope and floats. They attract small fish such as leatherjacket and triggerfish, which lead to the bigger species. Mahi mahi (dolphin fish) in particular are big FAD lovers, along with many species of tuna. This marine food chain attracts bigger animals such as marlin, wahoo and sharks. These larger species hang around FADs for long periods of time.

Our initial pass of the floats with a spread of both surface lures and deep diving minnows resulted in a double hook-up, the first mahi mahi and wahoo giving the Smedleys their first taste of action. Both fish were bled and put in the ice box and by the time we had set up half the spread again, the long shotgun lure was smashed by a lively blue marlin. Welcome to Santo! We had not even trolled for two hours when a 100kg blue was caught and released and it gave everyone on board a sense of madness. It was a very exciting moment for the Smedleys, as neither had seen a billfish in full flight!

The FAD produced two more mahi mahi before we trolled north. Captain Williams wanted to check out the Wusi grounds and needed to be in reach of the protected

anchorage inside the seamount by nightfall. The length of this western coastline is prime marlin territory and the predominately south-bound current pushes in along the deep edge, bringing baitfish such as skipjack tuna and yellowfin. We found ourselves among a huge school of skipjack just before the seamount so we ran a couple of small lures and cranked in a couple of jellybean tuna and placed them in the tuna tubes. These tubes can be very handy to keep the baits alive for when you need them. The plan was to rig the jellybeans for dogtooth when we reached the edge of the seamount.

This enormous underwater mountain covers a few square miles and as soon as we got close, the ratchet on one of the Tiagras screamed as a big wahoo came out of the water and streaked across the surface, nearly fouling up the other lines. These missile-shaped fish are built for speed. Michelle took the strike and she was rapt at catching her first big wahoo. By the time it was boated we were close to a steep wall on the northern side where the crew have tangled with huge dogtooth before. These animals are very aggressive feeders and like giant

BY THE TIME WE HAD SET UP HALF THE SPREAD, THE LONG SHOTGUN LURE WAS SMASHED BY A LIVELY BLUE MARLIN. WELCOME TO SANTO!

trevally (GT), are dirty fighters. The best tactic is to hook-up and try and drag the fish into deeper water where they can't bust you up on the sharp coral. Saying that is one thing, doing it is another—even on heavy tackle! The other problem you face near the seamount is big whaler sharks that can destroy a fish. So there's some luck involved in boating a big doggie!

We dragged the first live bait out of the tuna tube and quickly bridled it up using a short piece of strong dacron to secure the hook close to the head. The little tuna was fed back 100m then the line was clipped to the downrigger and set at a depth of 40m. The reel was no sooner adjusted with a light drag pressure—so the spool wouldn't overrun—when it burst into life with an almighty scream. A short pause was all that was needed to hook-up and the fish ripped off 200m of line under a solid 20kg of drag. The heavy mono disappeared off the spool like there was no drag at all and the doggie had one intention—to clean Glen up on the reef—and that's exactly what it did! The end of the line was torn to shreds in seconds. This round had gone to the animals, so

we headed for the anchorage with our tails between our legs.

This magnificent, protected bay was perfect for an overnight stay and the light sou-east breeze could hardly be felt at all. The water was like a sheet of glass and as soon as we dropped anchor the locals came paddling out from all directions in their canoes. These guys look forward to the odd fishing vessel coming into their waters for the evening and they were all smiles when we dragged out a pile of large fish for them. They were given all bar one mahi mahi, earmarked for our dinner, and what a great feed it was. Wendy showed off her talents in the galley after helping out on the deck all day. There's no doubt about it, she loves her boat work!

As night fell, the long, action-packed day on the ocean took its toll on everyone and sleep came easy. Next morning the cool air had a distinct earthy aroma from the nearby jungle and the whiff of distant fires from the villages was enough to give anyone an appetite for a big breakfast. Before we knew it we were pulling the anchor and heading for the seamount to do battle once again with the local sea-monsters.

A small dogtooth tuna climbed on a minnow before we even got out of the anchorage, but once out wide the weights went up as we dropped some jigs on the deep drop-off where we were smashed up



Be sure to check any floating objects for mahi mahi.

the previous day. Even Joe the deckie got into the jigging and boated a 17kg doggie on his first drop.

Oh, to be young again! The jigging action soon wore Glen and me out and we were happy to start trolling lures again.

Within seconds a large rainbow runner grabbed one of the lures. It was kept and rigged as bait for big dogtooth. These runners make great live-baits and you don't need a downrigger either—they dive for the depths as soon as you feed them out. The Smedleys made the comment, "isn't it a bit big for bait?" but it's the old story: the bigger the bait, the bigger the fish. It went off within 30 seconds! The 130 Tiagra screamed and before Glen could get in the chair, it was all over. This was no dogtooth though, and when we wound back the remains of the well-chewed bait we could see the culprit was a big shark.

We eventually left the seamount and set a course for the new ground further to the

south. No sooner had the depth sounder indicated a rising bottom when the left rigger-lure tempted a nice blue marlin. The approximately 350kg blue came in from the side and smashed the lure, made one jump to show off her size then proceeded to empty the 130 Tiagra reel. Glen was quick to be harnessed in the chair and he witnessed something he'd never experienced before when 800m of line vanished off the spool in a blistering long run. The look on Glen's face was utter incredulity; he couldn't believe something could swim so fast, so long and so hard. Just when we thought this one might have been well connected, the hook came out! These blues are so good at shaking out the hook, it's not funny!

This turned out to be one of several big blues we hooked and lost. The following day, on the same grounds, we had four marlin bites and hooked up another beautiful big fish that demonstrated another way to lose one of these unpredictable animals. In typical

blue fashion, it smashed the lure in a ball of spray, ran around in a tight circle, then came out of the water on its tail and ripped the ocean to foam. The speed at which these things can travel on their side never ceases to amaze me. It must have had the lure well down the throat as it crushed and pinched off the heavy 300kg trace in the corner of its jaw. The leader came back without a lure or hook, just a rough, flattened end!

As with all action-packed fishing trips, the time slipped by quickly and, before we knew it, we'd come to our last day. We worked our way back from the seamounts

towards the harbour and, as we approached the FAD, we could see the place was alive with tuna. The sea birds were having a field day. On our first pass one of the rigger lures was smashed and a solid fish bolted for the depths, hard and fast. The actions had me thinking it was a big yellowfin tuna and Glen had to work hard to gain line. When we finally got some colour, it was a very long fish. Up popped one of the biggest wahoos I've ever seen. It was a beast of a fish and took three of us to lift it over the gunwale. We all had bets on its weight and it wasn't till later when we got back to the

resort that we were able to weigh it. At 48kg (105lb), it was one hell of a wahoo!

As it turned out, that wasn't the only giant wahoo around the FAD. The action during those last few hours was absolutely red-hot and included Michelle catching and releasing her first marlin. This beautiful 100kg blue took a lure and jumped about in spectacular fashion. Michelle got a work-out she'll never ever forget and both these guys will long remember a trip that gave them so many fish they had never seen before, let alone caught! But that's Santo for you. It's an amazing place!

PRO TIPS

SANTO CLAUSE

- Although the *Fiesta* has a full range of Shimano tackle, you are welcome to take your own gear.
- If you want to jig for big dogtooth or popper fish for GTs, tackle loss can be high—it pays to take plenty of spare lures and terminal tackle.
- If you plan to stay at any of the resorts and fish only day trips, drink bottled water and pack a quality insect repellent. At certain times sand flies and mosquitoes can be a nuisance.
- If you choose to live on board, pack a separate bag and leave the bulky stuff behind at the hotel or resort. You only need the bare minimum of light clothes and toiletries.
- At certain times the weather can be very hot and you can expect the odd rain. Take plenty of sun block, a good hat and sunglasses and a light spray jacket.



Michelle won't forget her first blue marlin.

CHARTER DETAILS

Sydney based Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures has been operating a charter and travel business for more than a decade now. John Ashley has fished many of Ocean Blue's locations and highly recommends them.

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The 46ft *Fiesta* was a comfortable base for our fishing adventure.



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