

Travel to the South Pacific for a Feisty Marlin Bite in *Vanuatu*



Grander Marlin's boat, *Southern Destiny*.

TBF member Chris Donato, with established charter services in the South Pacific, contacted us several years ago to take part in TBF's Tag and Release Program. Thanks to TBF's International Grant Program, Chris has received close to 250 tags and three tag sticks over the past two years to tag billfish in Samoa and, now, Vanuatu. His regular reporting and constant contact has provided TBF with valuable insight on the fisheries health in that region, in addition to developing a stronger conservation ethic in the area. **By Chris Donato**

It seems for the last few years that we have had just one adventure after another, working our way around the globe on the tails of billfish, tag after tag! On our last adventure, we picked up our Cabo '43, *Southern Destiny*, in South Florida and, via container ships and some running, we transported her through the Panama Canal, up the Mexican coastline and on to California. Then it was time to load up and head down to the wonderful island nation of Samoa, where we fished a good big fish fishery, averaging around three bites a day. But it took us a journey of 1600 miles, traveling through Polynesia, into Melanesia and finally arriving in Port Villa, Vanuatu before we hit real pay dirt.

It was in Vanuatu that we found some of the most spectacular fishing in the world. We originally had wild plans of traveling on and tagging fish around some of the most remote islands in the South Pacific; however, those plans were quickly put to rest. As the fishing in Vanuatu heated up more and more by the month, we seemed to have found a home for our

Southern Destiny. And with an abundant and healthy fishery of blue marlin, grander black marlin, sailfish, giant big eye and yellowfin tuna, who's to argue? Vanuatu truly is a fishing heaven.

Vanuatu is an archipelago of 83 islands in the South Pacific, located approximately 1,090 miles east of northern Australia. This breathtakingly beautiful island nation at one time boasted the title "Happiest Place on Earth"; it is a safe place and the people are very friendly. While the fishing is reason enough to visit, Vanuatu has something to thrill any adventure seeker. Activities include: diving and snorkeling (a shipwrecked luxury liner in clear diveable water makes for a diver's Mecca); abseiling down one of the islands' many waterfalls; visiting the world's most accessible active volcano on the island of Tanna; intriguing cultural ceremonies and dances on the island of Malekula; and, when you just want to relax and soak in your amazing surroundings, blissfully private and picture-perfect beaches await.



The crew of Southern Destiny tags another blue marlin off Vanuatu.

The French-influenced capital, Port Villa, is located on the island of Efate. Most of the fishing we do is out of Efate; however, we also offer three to four day live-on board trips, which allow us access to some rarely fished islands and truly amazing fishing. On an average day of fishing in Vanuatu, we see three to six bites but, believe me, there are days when the bites can get up to double figures. Most of the fish are medium-sized blue marlin in the 250-400lb range, but several granders are caught here every season and the black marlin run in the larger sizes, around 700lbs and up. Yellowfin and big eye tuna seem to gather near the Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) in the area, although the medium sized tuna and big dorado seem to hang in very close to the structure. I have found the marlin to be feeding on the outside of the FAD and down current, with the larger females showing up as far as half a mile to one mile down current from the FAD. We recently had a great bite on the November full moon; in three days we

went nine for thirteen tagging and releasing some very healthy fish. We tagged all the fish we could, hoping it can produce some valuable information for TBF. These fish were acting extremely aggressive and were stacked up in good numbers in a relatively small area. Most were small males but on day three we got a fish in the 650lb range; we all pondered if they were mating or feeding before a migration.

In a nutshell, the blue marlin of Vanuatu seem to be more aggressive than the rest of their brood in the Pacific. I am not sure why but they feed far differently than the fish in Samoa and some of the other islands; they will eat teasers up to the back of the boat and inhale lures, often coming back time after time until they are hooked, which produces a great hookup percentage on our single hook rigs. We mostly run large to medium Black Bart Lures and our Black Bart teaser is by far the star of the show. Run just behind it on our right short is our Black Bart Blue Breakfast, which gets 80% of our fish. Since we are in it to tag and release, we find that single hook rigs greatly decrease the chance of seriously injuring the fish, yet we are still very happy with our hook-up to catch ratio.

Recently we began offering trips up to the Espiritu Santo island chain, located on the northern end of Vanuatu. When we venture up there, we often stay for a month or two, allowing us to offer some truly unique and astoundingly perfect fishing options for our charter clients. We often base ourselves out of the beautiful private island eco-resort *Ratua*; it is one of the most beautiful resorts I have ever had the privilege to experience. The fishing we have found to be world class. What I see as the most exciting aspect of Espiritu Santo fishing is that no one has extensively fished there. This makes every day out on the water an adventure- you are always learning, finding new spots and looking for the next hot billfish bite. As the captain of a sport fishing boat, it does not get any better than that!



Proud TBF Member Captain Chris Donato shows his support with his TBF t-shirt.



Blue marlin encounters are common because of their aggressive nature in the region.

Informative Websites

Vanuatu Information: <http://vanuatu.travel/>

Airlines: <http://vanuatu.travel/airlines.html>

Accomodations: Ratua Resort: <http://ratua.com.au>

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