



Isla Mujeres Is Still Hot

Escape the Long Winter with a Visit

When I got the call from Ron Kawaja of Pelagic asking about the possibility of me joining him on a fishing trip to Isla Mujeres, Mexico, in February, my first thought was about the amount of work I had to do to get the next issue out. But I do love Isla Mujeres, so I layed down until that work feeling went away and called him back to confirm the trip. It has been pretty cold here in Florida this winter, so I was ready for a little break and a bit of fishing with my good friend Capt. Joey Birbeck on his fabulous new F&S.

I'd been to Isla Mujeres once before for a Marlin University session several years ago and pretty much fell in love with the island's laid-back atmosphere and proximity to a truly world-class sailfish bite. I travel quite a bit, but Isla marks one of those special spots where I'd have no qualms about bringing the whole family and letting them run wild. The only cars allowed on Isla are taxis, so everyone else gets around on scooters or golf carts — which is a whole different kind of fun itself.

I first heard of the big sailfish bite off Isla Mujeres in the mid-1990s, and back then, it was more of a springtime fishery. Boats, some from as far away as North Carolina, would meet up in Key West and head down in late February or March to intercept the multitude of sailfish that gather there to feed off the baitballs in the spring.

Boats racked up some incredible numbers, catching 30, 40, 50, up to 100 sails in a day working these fish with spinning rods and dead ballyhoo. Things got a little out of hand, and the locals eventually outlawed foreign vessels from using these methods in an attempt to preserve the fishery. This was long before the use of circle hooks, so it worked out in favor of the resource, which is still going strong.

Over time, boats started leaving the States earlier and earlier to get first crack at the sails as they moved into the area. The fish can show up like gangbusters in January, so as soon as those early boats started doing well, the news spread, and nowadays, most boats head for Isla soon after Christmas and stay until March.

Kawaja and some friends of his planned on fishing the Fifth Annual Island Time Fishing Tournament while I was there, and I couldn't wait to get in on the action. Unfortunately, the bite had been dwindling for several days before my arrival, so it looked like my chances at a 30- or 40-bite day weren't very good. But I always like to hear that the bite isn't going well before I leave on a trip. If you hear that the boats somewhere are tearing them up and you still have a week or more to travel, you usually find that the bite peters out before you arrive. So when Birbeck told me that the bite was off, I just smiled and told him that they were just waiting on me to get there.

We took the first day of the tournament as our lay day to get used to the program and sure enough, we started getting some bites; it wasn't stellar, but we picked at them throughout the day and ended up catching six out of 10 bites or so — better than most of the fleet.


After a decent first day, we headed it around the corner again, about a 45-minute



run, and fished in the same spot. Usually, you can find sails relatively easily here because of the large numbers of frigate birds that signal the presence of feeding fish, but the bait was staying down on the trip, so the option of “bird fishing” was not in play.

We started marking bait on the bottom in about 80 feet of water, and almost every time Birbeck marked a ball and made a turn, we’d get a sail up in the spread. We ended up catching 11 that day and were actually leading the tournament for a short time. But our luck — and hooking

ability — didn’t hold up on our next day of tournament fishing, and the local boys, including Anthony Mendillo on *Keen M*, took over and eventually captured the win, with Mendillo releasing 14 on his second day alone. Again, not the incredible numbers you sometimes see here, but if you can’t be happy with 20-plus sail bites in a day, then something is wrong with you.

If you get the chance next winter or even this spring (whities starts showing up in April), you shouldn’t miss the chance to fish in this unique and wonderful fishing village. 

GETTING THERE

It couldn’t be easier to get to Isla Mujeres, as several airlines offer nonstop service to Cancun, Mexico, from Florida (JetBlue’s flight from Orlando to Cancun is two hours), and most airlines can connect you to Cancun. Once in Cancun, you need to take a taxi or shuttle to the ferry dock at Puerto

Juárez, which takes about 20 minutes or so and costs about \$70. A short ferry ride to Isla Mujeres runs about \$12 for a round-trip ticket — save your stub once you arrive so you don’t have to pay again to get back.

If you are coming by boat, there are two main marinas to choose from: the charter boat dock called Enrique Lima’s Marina (islamujeresmarina.com) or the more fancy Puerto Isla Mujeres Resort and Yacht Club (puertoislamujeres.com). Both provide excellent service.

If you are looking to charter a boat, you’d be hard-pressed to find someone better than Capt. Anthony Mendillo on *Keen M* (islamujeressportfishing.com). We use Mendillo when we have a Marlin U session there, and his operation is first-class and customer-first. He even owns a nice hotel called the Playa La Media Luna Hotel (playamedialuna.com), which offers an excellent base for your stay — it’s close to everything.

