

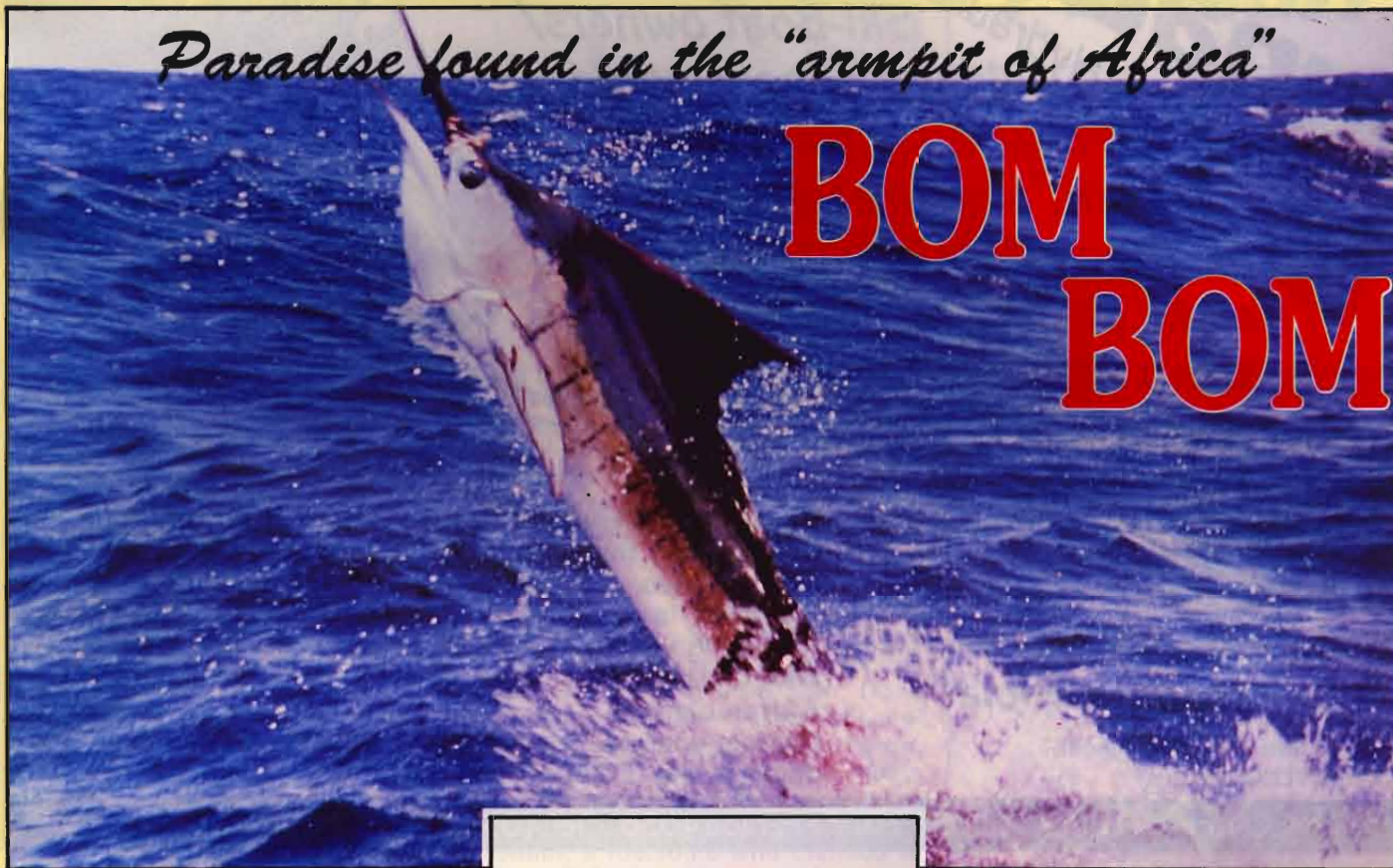


SPECIAL FEATURE

Story and photographs
by Charles Norman

Paradise found in the "armpit of Africa"

BOM BOM



IT'S a whole new ocean and a whole new fishing game – and getting there is easy.

Just set off up the west coast of Africa, past Namibia, Angola, the Congo Republic and into Gabon. When you reach the Equator, midway through Gabon, turn left and follow the dotted line out into the Atlantic for 340km.

You've arrived on Bom Bom Island.

Or you could catch the weekly Transafrik BAC 1-11 flight from Jan Smuts Airport, which lands some five hours later at Luanda to refuel, then continues out over the Atlantic. Two hours later you land on the island of Sao Tome in the Gulf of Guinea, right up in what is crudely but accurately referred to as "the armpit of Africa".

The journey isn't finished here, though. If you're lucky, there'll be time for a drive into the capital of this Mauritius-sized island for a cold beer at the Mirimar Hotel and a look at the crumbling ruins of once-grand mansions built centuries ago, when Sao Tome was the headquarters of the Portuguese slave trade.

Then it's back into the air again, this time aboard the smaller Equatorial Airlines Gulfstream, for the half-hour flip across to Principe, which is a quarter of the size of Sao Tome and has a tenth of the population.

When you consider that, between them, the two islands have one-tenth



Bom Bom Island, in the Gulf of Guinea, is home to a wide variety of gamefish, including sailfish, sailfish and more sailfish! While there, Angolans Renato, Andy, Paulo and Mario showed the more experienced anglers a thing or two...

of the population of Mauritius, then you'll know we're not talking about a lot of humans to mess up these pristine little jewels of volcanic outcrops.

Coming in to land at Principe, you glide past impossibly steep volcanic peaks, surrounded by forested valleys so deep and dark that one imagines dinosaurs awaiting discovery. Still the journey isn't finished, although the final destination is now only 5km away.

Here you transfer to a Unimog, which bumps and sways its way like a

mechanised camel along a muddy track carved through tropical rain forest. This final leg passes at walking speed, accompanied by the hoots of monkeys and screeches of parrots high in the jungle canopy.

All thoughts of far-off Johannesburg already seem a distant memory by the time you emerge, blinking in the sudden bright light, onto a powdery beach and an ocean so clear it looks like an advertisement for pool chlorine.

Now you have arrived at what developer Chris Hellinger calls "...the most remote place I could find in all the world to build my dream..."

The place is Bom Bom Island Resort, the world's newest and possibly most exclusive fishing lodge – so new it doesn't officially open until August; so exclusive that our sad little rands are going to keep it out of range of many South African anglers.

Chris Hellinger is a German entrepreneur who controls the Angolan diamond industry and has many South African interests, including a hotel and wine farm in the Cape and a Johannesburg-based import-export company operating into Africa.

He chose Sao Tome as the headquarters of his Transafrik airline because of its stability and access to mainland Africa, plus the fact that it has good aircraft maintenance facilities. During the Biafran conflict in the late 1960s, the island was also used as



Bom Bom's attractive airconditioned chalets lie on a limpid, palm-fringed bay, overlooking an untapped ocean teeming with catches of which dreams are made.

a base for airlifts into that short-lived country.

Hellinger's decision to build Bom Bom Resort was partly because the Sao Tome government, strapped for cash after an unhappy flirtation with Marxism following independence from Portugal in 1974, asked him to help establish a tourist industry. But it was also because he is himself a fanatical angler and was intrigued by reports of islanders bringing in a wide variety of big gamefish, including marlin, caught on handlines from their tiny wooden boats.

Bom Bom (which in Portuguese means "good, good") is a jungle-covered speck of rock lying off the southern tip of Principe, so close that one can walk to it at low tide. A 200 metre walkway has now been built so that you can do the same at high tide.

The 26 beautifully crafted chalets that make up the resort are on Principe itself, linked by the walkway to an as yet uncompleted restaurant on little Bom Bom. (Because the restaurant wasn't ready, Chris had sent his 1 400 ton freighter, *Dorado*, on the three-week trip up from Cape Town to be our floating base and dining room. This man doesn't mess around!)

The entire resort has been built by Filipino labour, used in Angola for many years by Chris (who is also the honorary Filipino Consul in Angola!), because of the quality of their work. It's easy to see why, for the chalets are beautifully finished. All lie right on the beach, beneath overhanging coconut palms, and all are airconditioned – and boy, are you grateful for that air-conditioning!

Chris's sportfishing fleet consisted of two Blackfins of nine and ten metres – skippered respectively by Cape Town's Brett Woolridge and American Mark "The Shark" Quartain – a nine metre Bertrams, skippered by Brett's father Derek, and an eleven metre T-Craft, which was sidelined during our visit with broken gearboxes. The fourth skipper, Luanda's Helder Tenente, took over the reserve boat instead, a seven metre Acecraft ski-boat.

These craft, along with skippers, had arrived just before our party of six-

teen flew in to fish the Bom Bom Island Virgin Billfish Tournament. No modern sportfishing craft had ever fished these waters before, so their potential was pure guesswork until our pioneering trip.

It was a dirty job, but someone had to do it!

The teams consisted of Piet and Arlene Joubert, John Roberts and myself making up the Vaalies; Harry North, Dick Tillin, Derek Hickman and Richard Vainer from Britain; Dave Abbott, Ernest Abels, Gerhard Louw and his son Allie, representing the fairest Cape; and flying the Angolan flag were Paulo Eraclides, Renato Herminio, Mario Moutinho and Andy Smith, a foursome who claimed to know little about deep sea fishing.

Ha! Never trust anglers who say they know nothing about the game...

With only four just-arrived boats, skippered by captains who were as new to the waters as the teams they were carrying, one might think this would be a very light-hearted tournament. It was, in a way – but there was a serious side too, for the winning team stood to collect four double tickets to a week's holiday back at Bom Bom once the lodge officially opens. For coming second, you collected only sympathy!

Apart from that, there was simply the excitement of taking part in a genuine "first". There aren't many of those around these days.

Small though the tournament may have been, it was aptly named the "Virgin" Billfish Tournament, and nobody knew whether we'd all still be virgins once the event was over!

We needn't have worried, as we soon found out when the tournament got under way. The bath-warm seas around the islands literally swarmed with gamefish, so that trolled ballyhoos (half-beaks) seldom stayed in the water long before being chopped by sailfish, wahoo or great barracuda.

Flying fish erupted constantly from beneath our bows, and to get ideal live baits for sailies we seldom had to pull daisy chains for long before they were snapped up by lovely little one-kilo bonnies. Often, the tricky part was get-

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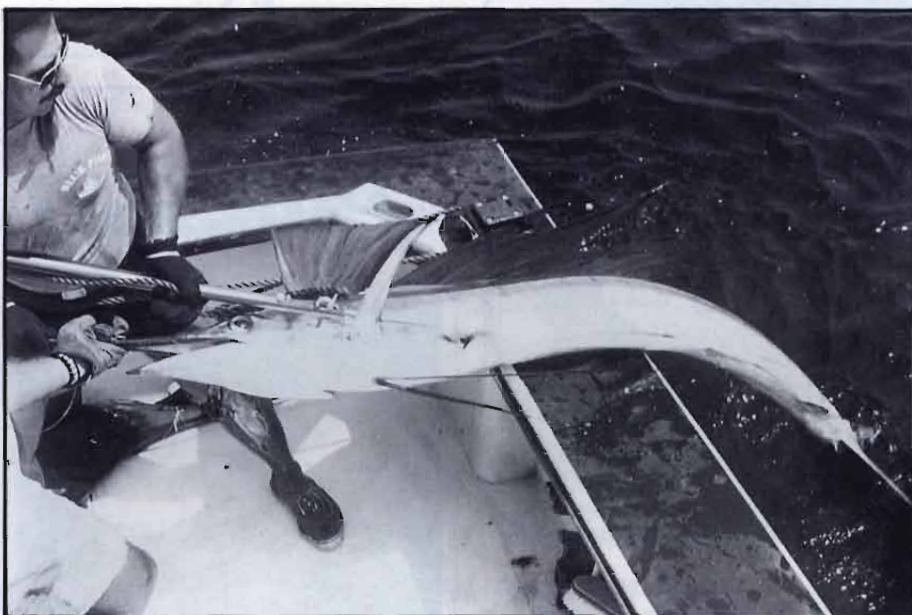
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A 46 kg sailfish comes aboard, a memorable fish for Piet Joubert – it's his first billfish on a spinning rod!

ting the wriggling bonitos into the boat and rigged before barracuda and wahoo rendered them useless or non-existent.

But if you evaded those toothy predators and got two or three live baits swimming, it usually wasn't long before an outrigger – often both outriggers – would pop and you'd be in business. Double strikes were common; triples not unusual. But, strangely enough, our team saw only one

shark in three-and-a-half days of fishing, and I heard of nobody losing fish or baits to sharks.

Maybe they're just too well fed to chase baits!

With Carltonville's Piet "Scraps" Joubert as our skipper, it went without saying that we'd scorn the sailies and go far offshore in search of a big bait and a marlin. We got both, and before the event was two hours old, John Roberts was on the receiving end of an

argument with a respectable and very frisky blue marlin.

We had drawn to fish from the reserve boat this first day and nobody had thought to bring flying gaffs, so the fish was played for two hours until it could be subdued with the light equipment we had.

Though it was still only mid-morning, we decided to call it a day; our 195kg blue would give a respectable score for starters, and besides, Piet was suffering a lot of pain from an infected leg.

So it was that the first day saw a catch of one marlin, six sailfish and an assorted batch of dorado, wahoo and barracuda. Many were the stories of fish lost through inexperience or simply lack of communication between new skippers, new boats and new anglers.

But we were all learning, and learning fast...

With a first day lead and our tails up, the Vaalies elected to concentrate on marlin again the second day. This time we weren't so lucky, with Arlene doing battle with one for only moments before it jumped off. We persevered, had and missed a couple more anonymous strikes, and finished with only one sailie for the day.

The others, meanwhile, were learning that these waters swarmed with sailfish and that, provided one stayed away from the shallows which were home to wahoo and 'cuda, one could

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