

A *Shogun* stayaway to



Two personal best yellowfin (69 and 71kg respectively) for Mike Clapshaw (left) and Neil McDonald set a high standard for the trip.

Below: As *Shogun* is primarily a day boat, we stayed in the relative comfort of the *Paradise Sunset Bungalows* during the nights and then fished the productive waters surrounding Epi Island during the days.



With its afterburners on, the feisty blue marlin nailed the lure, heading for the boat in its unbridled and seemingly blind fury. The predator was seemingly now the prey!

On *Shogun II*'s bridge the skipper had the hammers down and was in flight mode as the fish threatened to overtake his craft in its frenzied bid to release the 'Pursuit Jellybean' lure lodged in the corner of its mouth. Slowly the combined effort of the two Yanmar 300 horsepower turboed diesels outpaced their pursuer, the fish doing a U-turn to continue its spectacular run at right angles.

Still marvelling at the sight, the crew finally managed to clear the rest of the gear and help the angler into his gimbal and harness. They had survived the initial chaos, and with the marlin now settled down and the hook still attached, it was game on. The 'marlin highway' had once again lived up to its reputation.

No matter how many times I see a marlin bite, aided with the sound of a tortured ratchet, I am blown away by the power and beauty of billfish.

The above scene was repainted several times in a recent five-day charter aboard the Port Vila, Vanuatu-based *Black Watch 34*, skippered by Peter Phillipps.

Readers may recall that in May 2006 I was aboard the first *Shogun* when it was lost at sea to a fire out from Port Vila. Peter searched the boat-trader internet sites and came up with this almost identical replacement in Queensland. She had been immaculately kept and was particularly well spec'ed for her new owner's charter work.

Earlier this year there was a shake-up in the Port Vila charter fleet when a major player pulled the pin, taking several of the bigger boats used for live-aboard trips out the loop. To help compensate, Peter and his colleagues began doing 'live-aboards' on the smaller boats, which were not well suited to handling more than three anglers at a time.

Accompanied by regular fishing buddy Neil McDonald from the Bay of Plenty, along with 'ring-in' Mike Clapshaw from the Bay of Islands, we set out on the five-day trip to Epi Island, where we would be based for four nights at the *Sunset Beach Bungalows* at Lamén Bay.

This was to prove a great arrangement. The location is central to a number

of top fishing spots for several species. Evening meals were prepared for us, allowing the crew to concentrate on fishing rather than catering, and we could stretch our legs at the end of each day with plenty of space before retiring to simple, clean digs and a shower – albeit a refreshingly cool one. The deal was basic, but quite adequate. Besides, we were there for the fishing, not five-star accommodation.

Run by the local chief, Tasso, and his family, it also put a little something back into the local economy. Already a few improvements have been implemented to make future stays even more comfortable. The more it is used, the better it will get.

Epi is the largest of 12 islands making up the Shepherd Group, with Lamén Bay lying some 60 nautical miles from Port Vila up the aptly named 'marlin highway'. It is a comfortable day's trolling and provided us with some great action.

Leaving before dawn on the first day, by 8.30am we had had our first billfish strike – a good-sized blue marlin that threw the lure on its first run. This was followed a short time later by a treble. Looking over the lure spread I saw the bite – a huge hole appearing where one of Pete's homemade pushers had been. Then two more rods went off, although one reel became silent as the fish dropped the lure. Yellowfin were the suspected culprits, and at the rate the Shimano Tiagra 50s were haemorrhaging line, they were not small.

Both anglers lost line well out past the topshot mono and onto the backing, before trying to put it all back on again in what became something of a deep-water slugfest. The circling tactics of the fish stamped them clearly as 'tuna' and to their credit, the anglers – along with the skipper – managed to keep the two taut lines apart. Neil's was the first fish on board, requiring two of us to lift it over the gunwale, leaving Mike still battling on. Colour was soon seen and it was not long before an almost identical twin of the first tuna hit the deck.

With the photos taken and the fish stowed in the XOS insulated body bag, the gear was put back in the water. The tuna were later taken ashore at Lamén Bay and gifted to the village. The locals dealt to these fish with amazing accuracy using their machetes, and made sure all families enjoyed a share. Prior to that, the fish were weighed on a set of

Lamen Bay

copra scales, and at 71 and 69kg respectively, they were personal bests for both Neil and Mike.

As we trolled closer to Epi I asked Peter the question: "What's the fishing like at this end of the trip?" to which he replied, "We don't see much action – just the odd mahimahi and wahoo."

Now, if there's one thing I love, it's the fish challenging the skipper's calls in the best possible way – by hooking up!

With his words still ringing around the flybridge, I saw a billfish come in close on the starboard quarter – but before anything could happen, a second marlin seized what it thought was 'dinner on a plate' – a small Pakula lure set in the shotgun position.

Upon feeling the prick of the hook it greyhounded away in typical black marlin fashion, cutting a swathe through the swells bordered by flying spray and continuing across the surface long after the gear was cleared, with Peter reversing *Shogun* in hot pursuit.

The fish didn't get much of a head start, and with Neil doggedly getting

line back, it was not long before the trace was in hand and Mike was placing the tag perfectly behind the dorsal. Still relatively green, the fish was now tail-walking across the stern, so rather than risking damaging either the deckie, Tommy, or the fish, the order was given to cut the trace close to the hook once the lure was retrieved. But no need, as the marlin reversed its angle and the hook, embedded in the bill rather than the jaw, pulled free, providing the best possible outcome.

Neil was stoked; the black was another marlin species ticked off his personal list, and Mike also registered another first – his first tag shot. Tommy was rapt: he hadn't had to deal with a green fish at close quarters, while Pete had the smirk of a skipper who has just helped an angler achieve a goal, and I had one or two useful pictures 'in the can'. It was a very happy crew that pulled into the paradise that is Lamen Bay that evening, the rum tasting just that much smoother!

With such a great day behind us, we



A happy 'Clappers' with his first dogtooth tuna, which weighed 21kg and was caught on a Black Magic jig.

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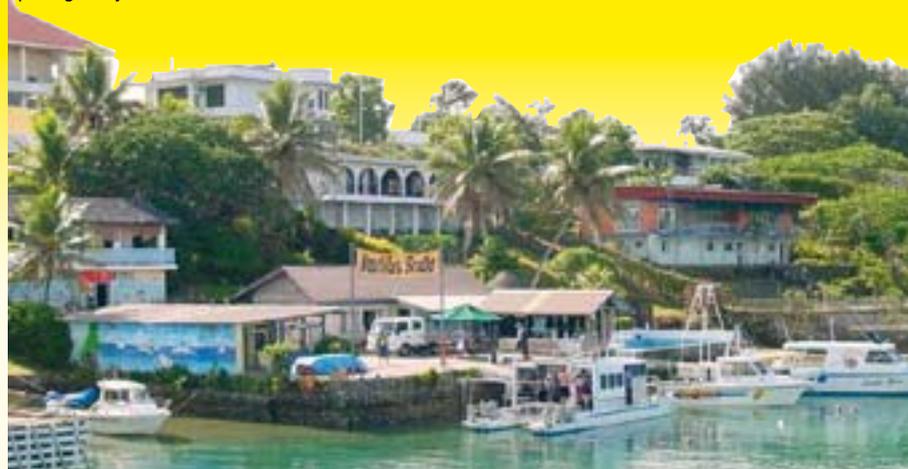
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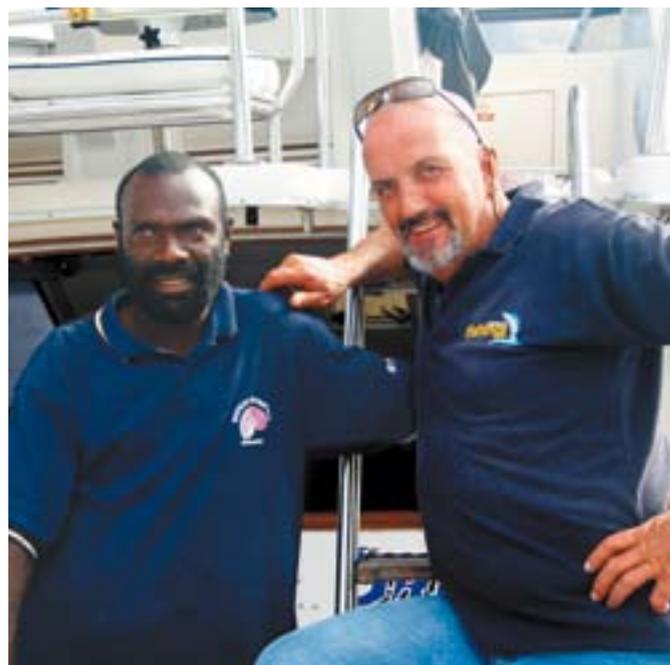
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One of the many tropical 'firsts' for Mike Clapshaw was this red bass, caught using a Storm Wild Eye giant shad.



One never knows what will bite next when jigging the seamounts. The writer with a colourful coral trout taken on a Bozo's soft-plastic lure.



Above: The 'A' team, deckie Tommy and skipper Peter Phillipps, were a good combination, working hard to ensure the success of our trip. Left: Everything in the tropics seems to have good dental work. Mike with a good-sized barracuda.

thought things could only get better. Unfortunately, for the next three days the weather dealt us a bad hand, with winds to 30 knots whipping up three-metre seas in any exposed areas.

Fortunately, one of the aims was to get amongst the dogtooth tuna and GTs

with jigs, soft-plastics and poppers, as well as to target wahoo on light tackle – 4kg to 10kg – so this was our chance.

The first day out from Lamén Bay saw us heading to Lopevi Island, an active volcano with scenery not dissimilar to the Bay of Plenty's White Island.

However, patches of structure where Pete had slayed wahoo on the previous trip drew a blank, and even the dogtooth were notable by their absence. We worked hard for the rather small doggies (more like puppies!), along with the usual red bass, coral trout and other

bottom-dwelling ooglies.

While Peter, Neil and myself – knowing what this region can produce – were a little disappointed, Mike put it in perspective: "I have seen or caught four different species I have never encountered in my life, the scenery is spectacular and the weather is warm. It's been a great day." Who could disagree?

The next day saw us braving the swell to head across to the Maskelynes, a group of islands at the southern end of Malekula, where we intended to jig a couple of seamounts before trolling lures and casting poppers for GTs along the exposed reef edges. Some thirty-knots-plus of breeze put paid to the casting and jigging options, and the fish seemed to have their mouths closed, refusing all manner of bibbed and bibless lures towed up and down the outside reef's normally consistent hit zone.

A little dejected, it was a glum crew that headed back to Lamén Bay that afternoon, although Peter was already scheming a plan for our third and final day.

The plan was for a pre-dawn start to fish a nearby seamount, as well as the drop-off around Lamén Island. It proved a good call, producing the best dogtooth of the trip – a 21kg specimen and another first for Mike – along with several other bottom species. While it had not been a red-hot bite, it lifted our spirits, and Mike's enthusiasm for his first dogtooth was contagious (this fish was later donated to the village school, where it fed 90-odd boarders).

The late afternoon was spent taking in the local independence celebrations, which included fiercely contested soccer and volleyball matches. It was a colourful and happy scene, complete with commentary box, live band, 'corporate' stand, food stalls and a referee who had the ability to make decisive offside calls while at least 50 metres away from the action!

Starting out early the next morning, the weather gods had flicked the switch. The seas were calm, albeit temporarily, allowing us to put in some comfortable miles towards the scene of our last marlin action. The bait and the birds were still there, and so were the fish.

Our first bite produced the scene described in the article's opening. This blue was called for a little over 100kg and had more moves than a Rubik's cube – and as it was Mike's first blue marlin encounter, these will no doubt be etched in his brain forever. We gave it a perfect 10 for aerobatics.

With it safely tagged and despatched, both Mike and Neil had a billfish for the trip. It was my turn to set up the Black Magic Equaliser harness while the lures were checked and reset. That done, the call came to put the billy on for a brew

– but it never happened, the peace being broken by a good-sized black marlin that poked its bill in on the tea party and was soon lunging off with Pete's favourite pusher in its mouth.

With some furious backing up and winding, Tommy had the trace after about five minutes, the fish tantalisingly close to the tip of the tag pole. Twice he had the leader, but the opportunity for a tag shot did not present itself, with the fish – estimated at over 200kg – charging off.

Several times it took out the topshot, only to have it regained. Then, just when it looked like I was winning, I felt something give and thought the hook had pulled. Most likely the trace had become wrapped in the tail. Steadily the fish took line, and despite ever-increasing drag pressure and some fancy moves from Pete on the helm to arrest the line loss, it was soon evident I was on a hiding to nothing.

So with maximum drag and both hands on the spool, we attempted to plane the fish up backwards, but with time against us we pushed too far and the inevitable happened: the line popped.

It is always sad to lose a marlin like this, and it was to be our final fishing thrust for the trip. Then, with the wind picking up, we prepared for the long slog home.



Home away from home: our lodgings at Paradise Sunset Beach Bungalows at Lamén Bay were basic but adequate.

The marlin fishing had been good, with plenty of action, while the jigging had been less rewarding – but that's fishing – and as we reflected on the trip we noted the number of 'firsts' or 'personal bests' had certainly mounted up.

Peter and Tommy make a great team. There is plenty of humour on board *Shogun*, often helped along by Peter's repertoire of one-liners at the appropriate moment, and both work hard to ensure that *Shogun* and the wide range

of predominantly Shimano tackle are kept in pristine condition. Peter's partner Leanne Collett prepared the food for the boat, and we never wanted for anything. Her coleslaw, in particular, was a firm favourite!

The way Peter puts these charters together, with his anglers staying on shore at Lamén Bay, is a great way to fish these prolific waters, as it gives the best of both worlds and doesn't break the bank!



Skipper Pete Phillipps' three favourite lures (from left): Black Magic Pursuit Jellybean, Zuker 5.5 and his own homemade pusher. If you take your own lures, don't expect to replace any of these in the spread!

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to: Air Vanuatu (www.airvanuatu.com) for helping put this project together; Pete and Leanne at Nautilus Watersports (www.nautilus.com.vu) for their hospitality; the villagers at Lamén Bay for helping in a number of ways; and to Neil and Mike for their companionship and humour.

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