

Know your quarry - the Indo-Pacific Sailfish.

- The Sailfish is a tropical and temperate water species normally found above the thermal incline in the first 30 metres of the water column in both oceanic and inshore waters.
- Sailfish can be caught well offshore but compared to the other billfish, the sailfish is much more of a coastal species.
- It prefers water temperatures of 21 to 28 degrees Centigrade.
- The Sailfish feeds on halfbeaks, mackerel, mullet, small tuna, and squid.
- They are blue to grey in colour and have a distinctive dorsal fin that is also known as a sail, which often stretches the entire length of the back.
- The sail is normally kept folded down when swimming, but it will be raised when the sailfish feels threatened or excited, making the fish appear much bigger than it is. This tactic has also been observed during feeding, when a school of sailfish use their sails to "herd" a school of bait fish towards the surface before embarking in a feeding frenzy on their herded victims.
- Rarely specifically target Sailfish but they are often taken as a by catch while targeting species like Tuna, Marlin, Couta, and Dorado.
- Many sources believe that the sailfish is the fastest fish, capable of swimming at speeds of up to 100 km/h (68 mph or 54 knots).
- Sailfish hit hard and fast and usually explode the surface with awesome display of aerial acrobatics.
- When targeting Sailfish and Marlin keep an eye out for tell tale signs such as current lines and working sea birds, also keep an eye on your sounder and watch for bait fish balled up high in the water column, this often indicates that bigger predatory fish like sailfish and marlin are rounding them up.
- Sailfish usually travel alone or in small groups. They appear to feed mostly in mid-water along the edges of reefs or current eddies. Hence the most action is found where sailfish are located on or near the surface.
- The fighting ability, speed and spectacular aerial acrobatics endear the sailfish to the saltwater angler. However the sailfish tires quickly and is for this reason considered a light tackle species.
- The average size of these fish caught are between 15 and 40 kilograms.
- Most Sailfish are caught using trolled rubber skirts similar to what are used for Marlin. They will also take trolled plugs like Rapalas although they often throw the treble hooks back at you at a high rate of speed when they jump.

Right equipment

- Rod - 7ft Shimano Beach Master – Medium Heavy (15kg).
- Reel - TLD 25 (store with the drag off).
- Line - Ande 10kg – IGFA tournament yellow.
- Drag setting - 30%.
- Terminal tackle.
 - Bimini double line, wind-on leader, ball bearing clip swivel.
 - 20ft / 6.096m – 1m, 3m, 1m.
- Fishing bucket, gloves, pliers, good set of polarised glasses, camera.
- Flyfishing.
 - Generally not practiced in SA.
 - 14/15 weight rod with a floating line on a high quality reel.
- Lures
 - Colours.
 - overcast = dark colours.
 - clear day = bright colours.
 - clear water = natural coloured lures.
 - murky water = brighter colours (chartreuse, orange, etc.)
 - Lure size and action matter more than colour most of the time, so make sure you get those right.
- Hooks
 - must be sharp.
 - J-hooks for lures: 6/°-8/°.
 - Circle hooks for drift and live bait.
 - Chain gangs – dangerous free swinging hook.

Boat setup

- Can be caught on drift bait, live bait and Rapalas.
- Concentrating on lures.
- Outriggers, tag lines & centre riggers.
- Use elastic bands – 20 wraps. No line slippage as this causes burn-offs.
- Teasers – either from outriggers or from a cleat on the transom.
- Spread: 4-6 rods (dependent on boat size and crew experience).
- Speed: 6-7 knots (11-13 kph). Equates to approx. 1800-2200 rpm.

Techniques

- Trolling.
- Visual fishing.
- Drop back.

Where to catch sailfish

- Depth: 20m – 150m.
- Around reefs and in large bays.
- Look for birds feeding – bait balls.
- Sailfish nearly always hunt straight into the current.

Venues

- Guatemala is definitely the place for numbers, with Costa Rica being second.
- Kenya is well known for its billfish – fraction of the costs of Latin America.
- Anywhere along the east coast of Africa – Sodwana, Cape Vidal, St Lucia, Mapelane, Richards Bay, Durban to South of Shelly Beach.
- Mozambique: Ponta do Oura, Ponta Malengane, Painsane, Guinjata, Barra Peninsula, Morrungulu, Pomeine, Bazaruto Archipelago off Villancoulous.

Interest shown

- Visual – come into the spread.
- Attacking the teaser lines.
- “No sticks in the ocean”.
- Consider popping the short rigger and use drop back technique.
- Missed strike.
 - Reel lure back to teaser.
 - Hold high.
 - Watch.
 - Use drop back technique.

Once hooked – what next?

- Keep and maintain pressure.
- Clear teasers and lines – first around the lucky angler, thereafter the rest.
- Aerial displays and acrobatics.
- A typical sailfish that's solidly hooked in the jaw will make a sudden, drag-scorching run, followed by lots of jumps. First run – usually long 200m - 400m.
- You can never guess in which direction those antics will take them, and so it's vital that the angler be prepared to pick up line quickly in the event the fish comes at the boat. It's also vital the skipper be prepared to take evasive manoeuvring, to avoid a fish in the boat. Similarly, the skipper has to be ready to chase down a really wild fish. There's a reason why sailfish reels hold 400 or 600 metres of line—an unattended fish on a hot run can take it all. Here again, the angler has to keep a tight line.

Close to the boat

- Gloves.
- Leadering.
- Keep boat moving.
- Take photographs.
- Remove hooks.

- Revive.
- Release.
- A tired sailfish, or one that's detained for a boat-side photograph, may be dehooked with pliers, once you safely have gloved hands on its bill. Revive by pulling the fish forward just above idle, then release away from the boat. Always — always — focus on keeping the fish's head in the water. That keeps the fish oxygenated, and keeps the sabre directed away from your own vitals.
- A sailfish should be released alive as soon as possible. If you'd like a mount, all you need are some approximate measurements and a picture!

General tips

- Try to maintain a positive attitude when fishing. Even the best fishermen have slow stretches but they persist and are eventually rewarded.
- When fighting fish, do not let them rest. If they are not pulling line off the reel, you need to be putting line on the reel. The line should never not be moving in one direction or another. Even a small amount of rest can give fish a second wind and double the amount of time it takes to reel them in.
- It is important to know the limits of your tackle. Before you go out fishing, you should know how much pressure your line will take before it breaks. That way will know how much pressure you can apply to fish.
- You should avoid "high sticking" when fighting fish below you. High sticking refers to bringing the rod angle too close to vertical when pulling up on a fish. This puts a lot of pressure on the rod tip and can snap it. You can do this if the fish is far out in front of you as the angle will not put as much pressure on the tip.
- When fighting a fish, make sure the line does not touch the side of the boat or anything else. It doesn't take much to snap taught fishing line if it rubs on something.
- When fighting large fish that will take a long time (30 mins or more) to reel in, calm down and take a deep breath. It's a marathon, not a sprint. Don't try to reel like a maniac in the first 5 mins and tire yourself out. Also, make sure you stay well hydrated throughout the fight, especially in hot weather.
- When setting a hook (for non-circle hooks), first make sure the line is tight, point the rod towards the fish, and then snap it from 0 degrees to 90 degrees quickly. You will have to do this very fast if you are fishing with a lure. Do not set the hook unless the line is tight as that will not do much. Most beginners set the hook too softly rather than too hard. Set it like you mean it; rod bend and line stretch will cause there to be much less pressure at the end of the line when you set the hook than you might think.
- Once you set the hook, do not let up on the pressure even for a split second. Make sure the rod stays bent at all times to keep pressure on the fish and eliminate slack. It is amazing how quickly fish can throw hooks if given just a bit of slack.
- When setting the hook, the rod tip should not go behind your head as this will cause you to have to move it forward again and give the fish a little slack.
- Many lures come with weak split rings and hooks. If you are fishing for fish that put a lot of strain on tackle, make sure you change out those split rings and hooks.