

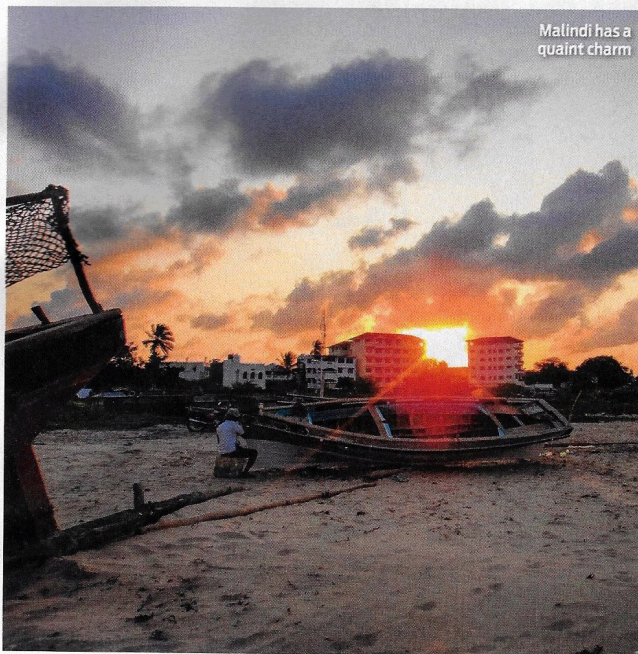


THE BIG READ

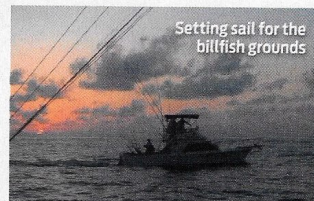
# BILLFISH FEVER IN MALINDI

A DRINKING VILLAGE...  
WITH A FISHING PROBLEM!

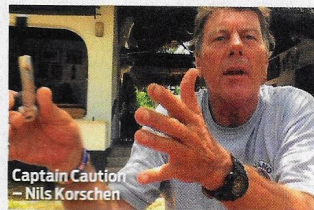
Every year, between October and March, anglers from across the world visit Kenya to experience the ultimate in offshore angling ▶



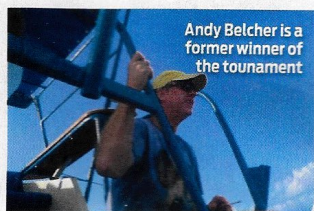
Malindi has a quaint charm



Setting sail for the billfish grounds



Captain Caution – Nils Korschen



Andy Belcher is a former winner of the tournament

IN FEBRUARY 1954, ON HIS SECOND TRIP TO Africa, Ernest Hemingway went deep sea fishing off the Kenya coast. No matter that he had been injured in two successive plane crashes and a bushfire, and that his injuries included a suppurating wound in his skull; a collapsed intestine; a ruptured liver, spleen, and kidney; a temporary loss of vision in one eye; crushed vertebrae; dislocated bones; and severe burns, Papa went fishing. It was, after all, billfish season.

Hemingway couldn't resist the sheer power and speed of the billfish. For him, it wasn't enough to reel in the fish, he had to aggressively pursue it, and get it to the boat as fast as possible instead of letting it tire, so the sharks didn't destroy it. His greatest prize was the blue marlin.

More than years later, Kenya's warm waters still attract anglers who live for the chance to hook a monster blue. Despite travel advice issued in the wake of a handful of terror attacks on the coast six years ago, which have all but destroyed sun-and-sand tourism, sport fishing has remained popular. Every year, between October and March, anglers from across the world visit Kenya to experience the ultimate in offshore angling. The Malindi International Billfish Tournament in March is one of the high points of the season.

## FISH TALES

Malindi Sea Fishing Club ([www.malindiseafishingclub.com](http://www.malindiseafishingclub.com)), with its trim, shaded grounds and colonial architecture, seems a quaint reminder of bygone days, somewhere Papa Hemingway might have drank and exchanged fish tales, except that it is situated on the seaward side of the original breakwater.

When Hemingway fished Malindi, this plot of land was under water. Over the past 30 years, sediment from the Sabaki River has caused Malindi's waterfront to prograde by 200 metres. When the shoreline shifted, so did the club.

Evidence that the ocean was once much closer can be seen in old photographs taken of anglers posing next to their record-breaking catches. A few hang on the clubhouse walls alongside trophy mounts of monster tuna, billfish, and sharks, which add a dramatic touch to the decor. The centrepiece is 'Kenya's first grander', a 1,250lb blue marlin that was boated after an epic six-hour fight on the open sea. Angus Paul was the skipper.

A faint odour of fish wafts through the clubhouse. Stray cats gather at the edge of the gantry outside, where boat boys struggle to hoist a 75kg yellowfin tuna. The angler who boated it, after a two-hour fight, poses proudly for photographs; he is one of a group of Europeans that have chartered a fleet of boats from Angus for a week of big-game fishing in Malindi.

## 13 SPECIES

There's an illustrated poster on the wall in the gens describing the 'Billfish of the World'. It means the more beer you drink the more you get to learn about them. There are 13 species of billfish, six of which can be found off Kenya's coast – broadbill, sailfish, striped marlin, black marlin, blue marlin, and short bill spearfish, though no one's ever seen one of those.

Marlin are the most prized. They are remarkably far-traveling predators. One blue was found to have swum 4,776 nautical miles in 120 days, and that's just the linear distance tracked by a satellite tag. The actual track was

much longer. Lately there's been little contact with marlin or sailfish, the two most common billfish. No-one's sure why.

"You can be in the right place at the right time and still nothing happens," says Pete Ready, one of the most experienced anglers on the coast. "At the moment, the current is very strong, about three knots, and the fish don't like that. It's like they just switch off."

## STRANGELY CRYPTIC

I ask him when he came to Kenya. "I came in '84, to fish – not to drink beer, if that's what you're thinking. That came afterwards."

Pete, a Brit, can be found most evenings as the catches get weighed, sitting in the corner of the club bar with a beer in hand and staring at the distant sea. With a face that tells of the ocean taking back as much as it gave him, he scrutinises all newcomers with suspicion. Not only does he live for fishing, he also lives by it.

"I've got one more charter this season," he tells me. "After that, I don't know what I'll do to survive."

Not being a fisherman, I can only observe, enquire, and offer what Hemingway called "the questionable impressions of the greenhorn." I've lived in Malindi on and off for two years, made friends with a few keen anglers, listened to a raft of fish tales, and even fished a couple of times.

It seems a successful day's catch has less to do with the angler than a series of random elements, like currents, water temperature, the global ocean conveyor belt, El Niño, and the bloody-mindedness of the fish. Consequently, the sport is strangely cryptic, like a pirate's map written in blood.

As with any sport, skill and determination



Arran Paul with a marlin

count for a lot. Anglers who go after big fish on light tackle are generally considered to be at the top of their game. There's a wooden plaque on the clubhouse wall that lists the names of the 18 anglers who made the 10:1 club. Bruce Buckland and Russell Brumby feature prominently, and behind the bar there's a glass cabinet with an assortment of burnished silver fishing trophies. I'm told Hemingway held one of those cups.

## BOAT AUCTION

On the night before the start of the billfish comp, a boat auction was held at the club which drew a large crowd – a who's who of Kenya's sport fishing elite. Club chairman Rick Bate, an Aussie with a wooden leg, introduced the event. But, above his raspy-voiced delivery and the heckles of club members, we could scarcely understand a word he was saying. "That's what I said,iddle I!" he grumbled, taking a swig from an iced tumbler full of Jack Daniel's.

Veteran angler Bruce Buckland stepped up as auctioneer. He was dressed in blue shorts and a threadbare T-shirt. "He's worn the same outfit on every occasion since the 1960s," remarked someone in the crowd.

The first boat up for auction was Tarka. The highest bidder for the boat that wins the comp stands to earn a large payout. The winning bids were then marked on a large whiteboard under the monster blue marlin mount.

I later overheard Dave Darnborough talking to Rick about the preservation of the comps. "It's attitude, it's all attitude," said Dave, who used to run Ocean Sports Beach Resort, or as the locals call it, "Open Shorts", the starting point for most fishing charters out of Watamu. "If we don't make it happen, who will?"

With the formalities over, the festivities could begin. Gathered at the bar, sport fishermen from as far away as the Britain, Germany, the US and Belgium swapped stories, recalled their strikes, hooks, and one that got away.

"I love fishing on a small boat, no crew, doing all the rigging myself," said Russell Brumby, a retired British Airways pilot who fishes from a 23ft dinghy called Pintail. He then recounted a freak maritime accident: "Out fishing with my son on Pintail off Watamu one afternoon, we were suddenly struck by a large wave which broke over her stern and swamped the electric outboard engine. No power!"

"This was followed by another large wave, whereupon she capsized. I lost all my electronics including the radio, so could not send out an SOS. We'd managed to grab the lifejackets before the boat capsized, then simply trod water and prayed someone might spot the capsized hull floating between the swells. A hull that small would be hard to spot.

"Luckily, a boat fishing nearby saw us and rescued us. So, with a rope tied to Pintail's bow and another to her gunnel, the two boats pulled her right side up again. We towed her back to shore and repaired her. She was back in the water in less than a week. A few days later we won the comp."

## INVENTION PROTEST

In a fishing competition, sportsmanship and fair play are sacrosanct. Witness Robert Duff, an International Game Fishing Association captain, causing a fracas at the end of the first day of the billfish comp when he accused one of the competitors, who was absent at the time, of inventing his catches. Never mind that he had

no proof, the angler in question was known to have cheated in the past.

Robert remonstrated to the club chairman: "When you call in a hook-up, the date stamp on the photo to prove your tag and release must coincide with the hook-up." Rick Bate raised an eyebrow, peered over a pair of black-rimmed glasses, but said nothing. His mollifying skills were legendary. He knew Robert was using the adjudication issue to project his frustration about not winning that day.

Pete Ready was having none of it, citing competition rules. "If there's no written protest," he said, "and no 1,000 shillings deposit, there's no protest. End of story!"

Lately the Kenya comps had experienced some bad blood surrounding tag and release. Because the fish is set free again, there's no way of proving that it was caught in the first place. An unscrupulous angler could easily claim a phantom catch that had never existed. For this reason, organisers were now insisting anglers submit photos stamped with the date and time the fish was hooked.

"I love my fishing," said Bruce. "I don't need this. Out of protest, I'm going to hook up my catch, let it go without taking a photograph, and then disqualify myself."

Robert then left in a huff. "He's stirring!" growled Pete, tucking into his beer.

Rick chuckled, took another sip of his Jack. "Did you hear about Nils?" he asked. I shook my head. "On getting out of the dinghy, fully laden, a wave hit him and his iPad, his iPhone, his pipe, all went in the water. I see him, he's got his wallet on the bar. His money is wet, his credit cards are wet, his pipe is wet, but his tobacco is okay." ▶

## BRIGHTENING HORIZON

It's the last day of the tournament. Before sunrise, competitors gather on the beachfront at Ocean Sports Resort in Watamu. There's little talk as they drink their coffees and stare at the brightening horizon. With 41 anglers fishing on 16 boats, all of which are moored offshore, dinghies are in short supply.

Andy Belcher, a Kenyan angler and former winner of the tournament, has invited me to join him on Snark. He's an affable Anglophile in his forties, who flies helicopters for a living.

The ocean is calm, copper-coloured by the first light of day. A light breeze lessens the odour of fish and fuel in the dinghy as we motor over gentle swells past Turtle Rock, a large rocky outcrop. As we come alongside Snark, her twin 120hp engines are already rumbling. Built in Kenya in 1960 and recently restored, she is a smart outrigger with a 32ft wooden hull.

Two crew members are busy preparing strip baits, cutting and hooking the bait. I find a spot in the shade and try to stay out of everyone's way. Above me on the flybridge, skipper Adi is about to set sail. The object of this comp is to catch as many billfish as possible. Anglers must have lines in after 7am and lines out before 4pm, and send a message by radio as soon as they have tagged and released, or boated their first billfish.

With a harmonious hum of engines, the fleet departs. The first rays light up our faces as we head towards the rising sun, charting a course for the Watamu Bank, eight miles offshore.

## SAILFISH ALLEY

Many anglers haven't the inclination to study fishing stats. But Nick Conway, a keen angler and long-time resident on the coast, is the exception. He's statistician-in-chief of Kenya's bill-fishing season.

I discover that going forward, season by season, from 1985, the number of marlin caught begins in the low teens then quickly climbs. Within five years it's risen to over 100, where it remains, more or less, for the next two decades. In 2010 the season's catch is 452 marlin, more than half of them striped marlin, and 2,993 sailfish. It's the best year on record. After that the numbers start to decline.

'Sailfish Alley' is the nickname given to the deep sea off Malindi and Watamu, though that accolade is fading fast. I asked Nick Conway why he thought the sailfish numbers were bottoming out.

"That's the big question. The African Billfish Foundation ([africanbillfish.org](http://africanbillfish.org)) has a marine biologist looking into it. Massive hauls of sailfish being taken in the Gulf. Could be over-fishing, could be they're going on a different migration with the crazy heat in Indian Ocean and record-breaking heat in the Pacific. Nobody knows."

Completely off-topic, Andy says: "The sparrows have flown with the 40 camels." Noticing my quizzical look, he adds: "I'm supposed to radio that to my brother Eddie when we catch our first stripey."

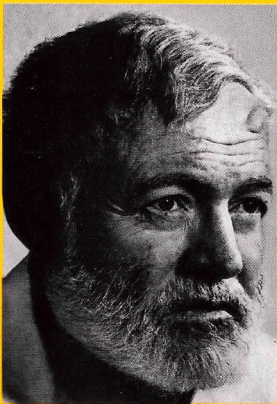
His confidence is indefatigable, he will catch a billfish today. All eyes are on Snark's stern, a spread of lines and lures skimming in her wake, a boiling sea, a topsy-turvy horizon. The

## HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway was deeply in love with the coastal towns of Kenya. In 1934, after hunting buffalo up country, he spent eight days in Malindi, invited his hunting guide Philip Percival – the 'Mr P' of 'Green Hills of Africa' – to join him for a bout of big-game fishing on the coast. For once Hemingway could be teacher instead of student.

Hemingway helped Mr P catch big sailfish, jacks, snapper, dolphin, and kingfish.

Hemingway was old school, a worldly-wise hunter and fisherman who lived for the chance to pit himself against big-game predators. I admire him as much for his writing as for his manly pursuits, none of which came at the price of his humanity. He proved you can live life large and still have empathy with your fellow human beings. And he loved Malindi, my home, and the thrill of the billfish catch.



anticipation is palpable. So far, though, we've seen no action, not even a strike.

Each of the three anglers on board, Andy, Craig, and Kavita, has a different take on the sport. Andy and Craig have been big-game fishing since they were kids. Craig lives in Watamu, so he gets to fish more often than Andy, who lives in neighboring Tanzania. Kavita, who's at least 10 years younger than the rest of us, took up angling a couple of years ago.

At midday, having skunked on the Watamu Bank all morning, Andy tries a new strategy, by moving to Casuarina Ledge away from the other boats. Nothing happens. At 2pm, we hear a report on the radio: "16 boats have caught only four billfish between them." This is the sixth day in a row that Andy and Craig have skunked. Kavita caught a broadbill the other night, so she's off the hook. No one seems too bothered about the absence of fish flags flying on the halyard.

## MOTORCYCLE TAXI

Riding to the Fishing Club on the back of a motorcycle taxi, I'm hit by a fishy stench wafting up from the waterfront. It's shark liver oil, the traditional sealant for dhows, the sailing vessels with lateen sails, and a clue that the fishing season is coming to an end as boats get an overhaul.

Malindi is an ancient maritime town that was once the epicentre of the world's oldest commercial sailing route. The town has since grown to just over 200,000 souls. It hasn't lost its charm, though, a drinking village with a fishing problem.

"Little Toot wins Malindi International Billfish Tournament with three blue marlin tagged and released. Well done, Captain Caution and crew," announces Craig Griffith.

Nils Korschen (aka Captain Caution) has been fishing the Kenya coast since he was a nipper. In the 1960s his parents moved to Lamu, an island off the north coast, and opened the Peponi Hotel. When Nils was 18, he and his brother Lars started skipping fishing safaris on a boat called Gem. Little Toot, Nils's current pride and joy, a 33ft Black Fin Flying Bridge powered by twin V8 caterpillars, is rarely idle. She regularly

wins tournaments. In the billfish comp, though, they allow up to seven lines. Nils fished with five and used only large lures.

"He was fishing on a different ocean," said Robert Duff, after hearing that Nils had won the competition.

## SUPER GRAND SLAM

We take our beers outside and sit at a picnic table in the shade of a palm. Nils, a Dane in his mid-50s, starts by recalling his early years.

"I got my first little dhow when I was eight," he says, stoking his pipe. "It was about the size of these two tables put together. Bought it for 350 shillings. No, seriously, man, I learnt everything there, Swahili, I learnt about tides... everything like that, the wind and what, man. What a freedom my mum gave me there, you know. I had my independence, you know, it was just like, 'When are you coming home?' 'I'll be home for lunch,' or 'I'll be back tomorrow morning for breakfast.'"

I fired off another question: "After all these years, what do you value most about fishing?"

"I like taking out the younger generation, the kids. Father and son, I love that. Try to get the son on to it. They feel happy, and they learn, and they want to catch, and they want to get a bigger one. It's like that, you know, you get them a few fish, smaller ones, they're happy. You get them a sailfish, they're chuffed. Once they get stuck into a bigger fish, then they start dreaming. They want a bigger one now, you know," he said.

"What's your best catch?" He tilts his head, thinks about it, hums a high note to tease out the memory: "I once cleaned up in the Interprovincial in South Africa. I had seven sailfish in a day, and then we went up through the Rips, and on the way there, we got a black and a blue, and in the night we had a swordfish. Ah, I thought, a super grand slam. We tried to get a stripey before going in, it didn't work. We had a chance, though. But it's like that, you can't win them all."

Kenya's one of the few places you can catch a fantasy slam – five different billfish in one 24-hour period. "It's happened here twice. There's

not many places in the world it's happened before, but we have a very good chance here," said Nils.

I wanted to know why 10 years ago there was a marked increase in the numbers of billfish caught, in particular marlin.

"The pirates," he says, tapping his pipe on the table, "not letting anybody come within 300 miles of their coast, and Somalia's got, I think, it's the second-largest coastline or third largest coastline after Mozambique and South Africa. It's about 1,800 miles. That's a long stretch of coast. It's a lot of water, and the breeding ground for both stripeys and tuna, up there at the Horn.

"The Italians know that, the Spanish know, the Chinese know. But with the pirates there, it kept a zone 300 miles out free. It's amazing what it's done. Five years of that piracy, and you now see these juvenile fish coming through."

I ventured: "You mean there's an upside to Somali piracy?"

"It made a difference. It did. Before then

we never had a boat getting more than 100 marlin in a year. Then there was a year the pirates were there when three boats caught over 100 marlin each. And these stripeys that were coming through, they were coming through in packs. And, again, juveniles. Because they were recuperating."

"What do you think is the greatest threat to this coast?"

"Human population; it has expanded so much. The demand for fish is big, and the price is going up. There will be a problem one day in, I'd say, 50 years or so. We'll be struggling to get any kind of fish out of there, the way we're going."

The winds have changed from north to south, bringing clouds and the promise of rain to the Kenya coast. The currents are warmer, so the billfish have dispersed. So too have the anglers, except Angus, Pete, and Rick. They live in Malindi, and can be found most nights at the club, "Where the cheaps are drinker," says Rick. ■

A sailfish for Calvin du Plessis



**"You are killing me, fish," the old man thought. "But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother." ERNEST HEMINGWAY, 'The Old Man and the Sea' 1952**