

El Salvador recce by Roj Mortimore

El Salvador is the smallest but most densely populated country in Central America. It's bordered by Guatemala to the north, Honduras to the east and Nicaragua to the south.

I set off on a November Sunday morning and flew in via Houston, Texas, where I met up with my old mate Nick Meyer who is president of Breakawayusa, we then flew down to San Salvador, the capital, where we were met by Nick's mate and our local guide Chia Zeng Juang. Things didn't quite go to plan to start with as I got held up by US immigration and missed my connecting flight and Nick's flight from Corpus Christi was cancelled, but we got there by Monday morning - but with no luggage!

Chia whisked us away to his home and kitted us out with some gear until ours arrived, then he took us south to the camp where we'd be based for a couple of days. Despite El Salvador's reputation for dangerous gangs, we saw and heard no trouble at all - only one police siren and I hear more in this little village where I live!

The camp has a choice of bungalows or villa's set among dozens of coconut trees. There's a shop, a very good restaurant and a boat dock with fuel and water facilities. Once we'd dumped our gear in the gaff Chia called our boatman, Jose 'Rufi' Rufino, to pick us up at the dock and take us to the river mouth to fish. It's a 30 minute ride through the mangroves to the best fishing spot. This is where the river current meets the sea current. The baitfish are pushed out and the predators come in to feed - as we were about to find out!

I was casting a big topwater lure, just on the sea side of the inlet. I think it was only my 3rd cast when I got hit. The rod cranked over as the fish ran then jumped twice - a bloody great snook. After 5 minutes of mayhem I managed to get it onto the beach.



Chia weighed it on the boga grip at 22lb - what a start!

My next cast in the same spot was hit by something bigger that was difficult to control. Big Pacific breakers are constantly sweeping the beach and one minute you're on dry sand, then up to your waist in water - very warm water.

This fish was putting up a great fight, but unfortunately it was ripped off in the back wash. Ten minutes later it was Nick's turn to get a snook - not as big as mine, but still a good fish, that put up a great fight on light gear. Things went quiet at high water, so we sat down to rehydrate and have a chat, tidy our gear and wait for some action. Chia suddenly jumped up shouting "Gallo! Gallo!" (Spanish for rooster). We grabbed the rods, ran down the beach and started casting. I had two follows that didn't take but Chia had a follow that did.



We could see the huge dorsal fin chasing his lure as he cranked as fast as he could then - **SLAM!** His rod arched over and the spool was a blur as the rooster headed out to sea. Constant pressure and a firm drag slowed it down and he was able to gain line as the fish fought from left to right, then back again, until he slid the beast up the beach.



What an amazing looking fish they are; with the dark stripes along the body and that huge cock-comb dorsal fin. After a couple of quick pics he ran back down the beach and held it in the surf until it recovered and swam away, but that was all the action over for day one.

Day 2 saw an early start and we were on the mark before the sun was up, we had some good sport with jack crevalle but no roosters or snook so after three hours of fishing we headed back for a delicious El Salvadorian breakfast. Oh - and our baggage arrived - at last!



Sadly, we had to leave and head north to Costa Del Sol where Chia was entered into the El Salvador Marlin Championships. That evening we were invited to the 'Captain's Meeting' at the marina that was full of sportfishing boats, some worth more than \$1 million. In true British style Nick and I turned up in an 8ft rubber dinghy. The event was sponsored by *Flor de Cana* Nicaraguan rum, promoted by those lovely girls. I just enjoyed the free bar!

The next day we chilled out at Chia's beach house and had a boat trip up the river to fish for 'world record' sized snook, but after the torrential rain

they'd had a week or so before, the water was too coloured. However, we did manage a few small snapper and some weird looking fish. Later that evening, after the marlin fleet were in, Chia said we had to go south again and booked us back into the camp. Early the next day, we set off and Rufi took us down the river to the hot spot.

We set off 2 hours before low tide to get our gear set up and plan an attack, but as we were getting organised it kicked off - a vicious gang had turned up; not human, but jack crevalle - dozens of them everywhere. The water was exploding with mullet trying to escape. The three of us ran down the beach and hurled any lure into the mayhem and instantly hooked up.

I was testing a Daiwa Tournament Global travel rod matched with Chia's Saltiga Z6000. It's a pokey rod but it was still taking 5 minutes of hard pulling to land a fish. After a couple on the Daiwa I switched to a Hart Bloody 265 with a Stella 4000, the same gear we use for bass back home. If you want some arm aching fun - hook a jack on this gear - it's a blast. They take about 10 -15 minutes to land on this gear but they're so tough they go straight back. This action lasted almost an hour and we were totally knackered and were glad to sit down for a rest over the slack water. Low tide was at 4pm and we sat there admiring the view across the river, palm trees on the far bank and volcanoes in the distance - an amazing and special place!

By 4.30pm the water was starting to make and the surf was building up. Then I spotted something - flying mullet - being chased by big dorsal fins "ROOSTERS" you forget about being tired and start blasting lures out as far as you can. Nick was in first using a tiny spoon and had a brilliant fight on his hands. All you can do when they hit is just hang on until they slow down and you can gain line. I put my rod down, grabbed the camera and filmed a bit and then got some great shots once he'd landed it.



I put the camera down and grabbed my rod and whacked the lure out. The Saltiga has a very fast retrieve and as the lure came over the top of a breaker and surfed down the front, a big fin appeared chasing it.

I kept winding as fast as I could until - **BAM!** The rod slammed over and line was ripped off a pretty tight drag. For a couple of minutes it was a case of hang on and hope the hooks hold. We were using barbless hooks to do less damage and get them back quickly. I brought this fish into the surf four times and every time it turned around and headed back out until I could eventually beach it and hold it up for a pose.

Nick got a few shots of it and some video and I ran back down the beach and up to my waist in water and held her until she powered away - success - mission accomplished.

I'd got my rooster. Just the one, but well worth the 12,000 mile round trip for the experience - except it's addictive and I want to go back for more -

I **HAVE** to go back!



The Bumble in the Jungle! by Andrew Walker

Seconds Away – Round 2 – January 2012

Bum-ble: verb

1. to blunder awkwardly; muddle:
2. to stumble or stagger:
3. loosely organised get-together, involving angling, p**s-taking and joviality:

Hi Guys. I will post a fuller report on my return, as the internet connection here is very dodgy.

An uneventful but long and boring journey out here and thankfully all bags and rod cases made it too! There was myself, Roj Mortimore and Andy Garnham (non Forum fella). The fishing has been tough from the beach, with only some small stuff caught, but thankfully Roger's friend, Chia has lent us his boat and Rufi, his boatman. Fishing from the beach involves a 20 minute boat ride and then being dropped off short of the mark as it's too rough to get the boat in at the actual mark.

I know this is a macho culture, but we were given a gun for protection when we were on the beach! As Rufi puts the bows to the beach, we jump from the boat into thigh deep water; quickly pass the gear to the shore and then we have to walk to the mark. I have done this twice now and each time I have not managed to land on my feet, but performed a spectacular nose dive that resulted in me being totally immersed, much to everyone's amusement!

On Sunday we went out with Chia and 3 of his friends on his boat and although his boat is a superb 22 ft fast centre console, it was very busy as we all tried to fish! They were all very friendly and mostly spoke English but totally barking mad! Thrashing along at 25 knots with the stereo turned up max to some awful Spanish disco music holding on as best we could!

I had a follow from a Rooster and Andy Garnham had one on briefly but it was the Spanish boys' day as they landed two and lost two others.

Chia (on the left) with his friend Rabbit



Monday was mostly lost due to the weather, although we messed around for some bits and pieces.

Today we went back out on the boat and tried to find the shrimp boats as the Roosters and Jack often follow these when they are fishing but none were around. Eventually we spotted some feeding fish and hurled the big surface poppers at them. There is nothing sophisticated about this style of fishing – it's just wind as fast as you can, which for someone used to pike and bass, is totally alien! It is something else when you see a Rooster chasing through the waves but so often they veer away at the last moment.

I was using a 10 ft Tsunami Airwave (thanks to Dave Irving!), a large Diawa Emblem with 40lb braid and a large Super strike Little Neck Popper at around 3 oz. Just as I had almost retrieved to the boat, Andy shouted and instantly, I had a hook up! The fish turned away from the boat and within seconds was 60 yards away as I frantically tried to hang onto the rod! The speed and power was amazing. Two strong, long runs and the fish was at the boat. It wasn't a Rooster but a Barracuda!



It's tough writing this in the evening when it is still over 25 degrees and I only have beer at one dollar a bottle to cool me! Despite the macho culture, the people have been very friendly and welcoming, although it's a country of contrasts with obvious wealth and clear poverty.

We were due to meet Chai for lunch so had to come back in and as we did we had a visitor!



The background to how all this came about is that Nick Mayer runs Breakaway Tackle in Texas and sold some mail order stuff to a guy called Chia Zeng from El Salvador, they end up chatting and Chia tells Nick about the Rooster fishing in El Salvador so Nick went out last April and had a good time. This encouraged him to go again last November and Roj went with him.

Further research indicated that December and January were the best months for the Rooster fish, hence Roj's plan to return and the rest you probably know.

It's a small world! I don't do that much flying these days but when I do, it's usually from Gatwick and not Heathrow. Trying to meet anyone at an international airport with 5 terminals without specific times and place would be a nightmare, so inevitably I bump into someone I know in the queue for security and of course they are on the same flight as we are to Houston!!

Puerta Barillas is about 90 minutes drive from the airport with the last 5 miles over rough track. It's a complex of around 8 small villas around a central restaurant and slipway into the river.

There is a small swimming pool but basically there is not much to do and without the fishing, it would be very boring, as you are some miles from anywhere else. They have boat storage and launching facility for the more well-off weekend visitors.



A little underpowered perhaps?!



It's fair to say that the fish weren't quite following the script as we had hoped for and the Roosters were definitely not around in numbers. The conditions on the beach were changeable and with the clarity of the water ranging from modest to poor and as we had been given the loan of the boat, we spent more time than we had planned fishing from the boat, rather than the shore.

The surf fishing was very exciting if ultimately unproductive. The actual mark is where the river flows into the sea and the collision of the currents creates a turbulent surf. The long, heavy Pacific waves sweep though, nearly knocking you off your feet and then the undertow, as the wave recedes, feels like you are wading a waist-deep river!



The flow sucks the sand from under your feet, leaving you in a hole if you don't keep moving and there is always the extra big rogue wave to look out for. Amidst all this you are trying to cast a 3 oz lure as far as you can! It's exhilarating, but quite exhausting!

The visibility of the water out at sea was not that good which meant that lure fishing was tougher than we planned. We sought some bait from a nearby village and although they do see '*Gringos*' we were certainly a novelty and with such a smart boat compared to all the *pangas* and water taxis, we caused quite a fuss.

We gave some small hooks and light line to some local children, plus Andy had some chewing gum, so we became even more popular after that!



On one day we anchored over an inshore wreck, as Andy knew how to work the GPS/sounder that Chia had fitted to the boat. This caused a little stress as Rufi our boatman, who is at heart a simple hand-line fisherman, but had been given the chance to 'captain' the boat for the week, was keen to decide all things to do with the boat and wanted us to just fish. The concept of anchoring to a wreck or drift fishing allowing for wind and tide were a little alien to him. He didn't speak any English and the macho culture meant that he wouldn't admit this. We should really have just made it plain, but being the polite Brits we are, we just made the best of things.

Having just about got the boat anchored to the wreck, the lures didn't work, so we feathered for some live baits. A testament to the difference it seems with all tropical fish is that a 'full house' of 4 almost took line from the heavy rods. They are so strong and aggressive! These were quickly sent back down as live baits and it wasn't long before Roger had a good run.

This was dropped after a few seconds. I then had a take and hit it, but after a few seconds, it all went slack and I retrieved just my leader. It looked like a knot had failed! Bad angling? But that knot had held with the barracuda! Then Roger had another run and was cut off a few feet above the hook, just as I was! Several more takes and either we were cut off or the hook hold failed, very frustrating! I then had another run which I let go for a minute. It stopped and then I hit it but I had hooked the wreck as it was totally solid. However, the 'wreck' then moved slowly up-tide!

A little manoeuvring around the anchor rope and the fish moved off on a run and then stopped again. I don't think it knew it was hooked! It moved off again but then the hook failed! Gutted! We don't know what I hooked and what seemed to cut our line a few feet above the hook but our best guess was that it was shark as we suspect the skin was the reason for the unexpected 'knot failures'. Unfortunately the tide turned and as we went to retrieve the anchor. We had lost it due to abrasion on the anchor rope. There was no chain on the anchor rope, as they don't normally anchor to wrecks, in the way that we are used to. We were now on the hunt for another anchor as the spare was too small to hold the boat! We finished the day on the beach in the surf, but nothing showed.

Everything takes so long to get done! Just refueling the boat seems to take forever! Nobody is in a rush for anything and the '*Mañana*' culture is all too evident. However, the people are very friendly and helpful and we were welcomed by everyone we met who were all very impressed that we had travelled so far to visit their country.

Despite wasting a lot of time trying to find an anchor big enough for the boat we decided to drift the wreck again to see what we could get. Poor Andy was very patient with Rufi as we coaxed him to get the boat into the right position. One drift we got right. As I frantically wound back a large popper at high

speed, it was suddenly hit and instantly the drag screamed in protest at the sudden run from a good fish. The speed of tropical fish is something else!

I have caught some big coarse fish in my time, to over 50lb, but tropical fish are so strong aggressive and fast! Several strong runs later with the rod bent double, I eased a nice jack crevalle to the net.

Roger fancied drifting a livebait over the wreck, so sent down some feathers with a small jig on the end. However, a jack hit the jig and Roger had a great scrap on his lighter rod.



Andy then had something very big take his live bait. It didn't roar off at pace but headed doggedly back towards the wreck and after about 5 minutes, he lost what we think would have been a grouper, in the sanctuary of the wreck.

We were switching between lures and live baits and I had my livey suddenly start tugging, which I guessed meant that a predator was around. A few moments later a strong run and fight gave me another nice Jack.

As the day closed I was plugging away with a diving plug when I saw a small pipe fish jump from the water. Was a predator chasing him? I cast in that direction and the instant the plug hit the water I was hanging on to the rod for dear life! This seemed heavier and stronger than the last couple and I was getting stick from the guys about wasting time, but with a tight drag and the rod bent double, I couldn't do much more! Eventually I got the fish to the net and it was another jack, but probably well over 20lb!

This is very addictive stuff!



Thursday night and Nick Mayer, Roj's old friend, arrived from Texas for a long weekend with a group of 5, so a few had to be supped to welcome them to Puerta Barillas!

Friday morning, Andy and Roj went to the local town but I joined Nick and his group to fish the shore, but nothing for anyone. We tried again in the evening, but again we couldn't find them and so the fishing was done.

Saturday morning we had a chance to visit a part of the jungle that had squirrel monkeys. We were driven down long dusty tracks into the forest and found a couple of small shacks that were home to an extended family. As we got out, the children grinned shyly and a few moments later we could see some activity in the tree canopy overhead. Down came a troop of monkeys that had clearly come to associate the arrival of a small minibus with food!

Although the monkeys were great fun and climbed up to reach food held up for them, it was the poverty that touched me. These shacks were home to around 8 people and clearly had no electricity or running water. We probably never appreciate just how lucky we are!





The return journey involved a detour to the tackle shop in San Salvador to meet the owner, Epe, who sells both some superb tackle and coffee!

We made it to the airport despite an extended delay caused by a police roadblock who seemed to have a problem with our driver!

The potential for the fishing there is considerable and much of it is virgin for sport fishing. We didn't get it quite right, although I think that's partly down to bad luck (that's just fishing) and maybe we should have not fished from the boat so much, but it is such a lovely boat! We had no trouble and everyone was friendly and helpful. I would love to get back there as I do think that, with a little more luck, I could get that rooster and more! I had heard a lot about Chia who is a real 'happening' guy. He lent us his beautiful boat and came over (by plane) to see how we are getting on. He is young, charming, good looking, a talented angler and minted! I hated him on sight!



Actually - he is a really great guy, who couldn't have done more for us.

The people we met were very friendly and they were most impressed that we had travelled so far to visit their country. We had no bother from anyone, even when Andy and Roj went into town.

Lastly, most of the pictures are mine but I have used some of Roj's pictures as well – any good ones you see are almost certainly Roj's!

My thanks go to Roj for organising the trip and thanks to Roj and Andy Garnham for being two top blokes. We spent a week in close proximity and we never had a single cross word and just took the p**s out of each other all week! We lost count of the amount of beer we drank and we got through 3 bottles of rum, 2 bottles of vodka and 4 bottles of red wine A proper bumble!