



High life, high birds

Jonathan Young visits Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic to witness shooting of a superior calibre – and party (a little)

Game-shooting at the Rancho Peligro

“OH, how reckless of me. I made you all wet.” “Yes, but my martini is still dry. My name is James.” If you visit Casa de Campo, best come armed with a battery of Bond quotes and, ideally, a stuffed Persian cat for a little impromptu stroking. Otherwise you just won’t feel at home in this real-life Albert Broccoli set filling 7,000 private acres of the Dominican Republic.

The obligatory helicopters clatter over bone-white beaches sprinkled with bikini’d blondes while the resort’s rozzers in jolly golf-carts patrol palaces picked and mixed in Gothic, Hacienda, Southfork and a hint of Frank Lloyd Wright. Most of their occupants

seem to slumber in the sun, save for the ver-vain hummingbirds fuelling up on nectar, their continuous bustle almost outlandish in this tropical languor. Yet there is activity, and not just the faint thwack of a golf ball on its trajectory to a baize-smooth green or the clink of ice in another mojito.

Back in the Eighties, when Madonna was material and sales reps yearned for Sierras, rumours surrounded Michael Rose of the West London Shooting School and his fabled departure to a billionaires’ resort where clients arrived by seaplane and ordered Purdeys by the half-dozen. And they were almost all true. Rose had left the WLSS in 1986 to set up a shooting school for Pepe Fanjul, a *Field* top

shot, the owner of scores of Purdeys and someone who has a place in your larder.

He and his brother, Alf, own Fanjul Corp, a vast, private sugar and real estate company that has its origins in Cuba, where the brothers’ ancestor, Andres Gomez-Mena, established a sugar plantation. The family left Cuba in 1959, following the revolution, and started a new sugar business in Palm Beach County, Florida. Today, Florida Crystals owns 155,000 acres, two sugar mills, a sugar refinery, a rice mill, a packaging and distribution centre and a renewable energy facility, while the Fanjuls’ sugar empire abroad includes 240,000 acres of cane plantations in the Dominican Republic – and our own Tate & Lyle.

All this sweetens Pepe Fanjul’s sporting interests. He comes over to Britain most years for the grouse (he likes Knaresdale) and pheasants, especially at Alnwick, but also shoots redlegs in Spain and duck around Venice. At his ranch in Florida he employs Roy Green, former manager of the Buccleuchs’ sporting interests, to oversee his bobwhite quail-shooting, done in the old way, and his kennel of 30 or so English pointers, labradors and cockers.

“On a typical shoot day we now have the pointers hunting quail, the cockers flushing and the labs retrieving and that has made each shoot day so much more special,” says Green. “All of the labradors are English bred, three are field trial champions and all the others are

Right from top: collecting the bag; Patricia Bosisio Schechter on the Sporting layout; Pepe Fanjul sends one of his FTChs for a retrieve

very capable working dogs. Mr Fanjul’s old favourite is 11 years old, International FTCh Claybrow Earl, Glen to his friends. Glen won the 2008 Irish Retriever Championships and is dual champion both in England and Ireland. Mr Fanjul also owns and works FTCh Kaliture Black Spruce, which won the International Gundog League Retriever Championships in 2011. He and his wife Emilia are both passionate dog lovers and take their dogs with them all the time, including in the helicopter between shoots and on the jet when he travels farther afield. This passion has been passed to their children and grandchildren; I once took them all to the airport in a variety of cars and watched eight labs and a teckel board the private jet before the family and settle into their favourite seats.”

Over the briny in the Dominican Republic, at Casa de Campo (“house of the countryside”), Pepe Fanjul employs another English game manager, Gary Salmon, formerly in charge of the Ashby St Ledger shoot and a Gamekeeper of The Year. Salmon joined the Casa de Campo team in 2014 and now runs the shooting school, set up by Michael Rose, and the Sugar Shooting Tournament, an annual competition embracing clays and gamebirds.

The event attracts competitors from throughout the world, though many come from Texas where they readily accept the concept of competitive quarry shooting. That now seems odd to us though it was the norm in the Edwardian era and still exists, to an extent, on some grouse moors and remains commonplace on Spanish partridge-shoots. So it was perhaps of little surprise that on the first day of the game-shooting session Lawrence Berry asked laconically whether “we’re shooting Spanish rules”, which means, essentially, that if the shot’s safe, it’s taken.

The quarry were reared partridges and pheasants, shown over the folds of Rancho Peligro, the Fanjuls’ shoot about 45 minutes drive from Casa de Campo – or seven minutes’ flight by helicopter. Texans Lawrence Berry and his son Mason were competing for the third time and while they might not have won prizes for formal shooting attire, their accuracy was astonishing. It was said of Lord Ripon that he could kill his birds “deader” than anyone else, an observation that could easily have applied to the Berrys. They used the same cartridges as everyone else – 32g No 5s – but anything that came within 50yd of either of them simply folded, whatever the height or trajectory. They didn’t appear to miss or prick birds. They were black holes into ➤



James Horne, chairman of James Purdey & Sons, on the Driven Grouse stand



To book shooting at Casa de Campo or register interest in the Sugar Shooting Tournament, email Gary Salmon at g.salmon@ccampo.com.do. For further details of Casa de Campo, visit www.casadecampo.com.do.

which birds disappeared, never to emerge. It astonished the English observers, some of whom had witnessed top-class shooting many times. One second a bird would be seen heading towards them, a speck appearing over the folds of the hills, the next it was bouncing dead on the grass.

Pepe Fanjul remained unfazed, partly because he was anchored at the end of the line for most of the four drives, shooting steadily at a ratio of 1.5 cartridges per bird before despatching his beloved labradors to retrieve after the drive. This was hot work for the hounds, as afternoon temperatures were in the mid-80s, prompting Judith Salmon. Gary's wife, to deploy her cunning wheeze between drives – Velcro-fastening dog jackets with ice-filled “pockets”; once cooled, her dogs were back in the field helping scour the ground for birds with a diligence that would win approval from the sternest field trial judge. Dead game is scarce and so highly valued in the Republic. “All the shot birds are distributed among the workers and the needy,” said Salmon. “And since we produce many more pheasant and partridge eggs than we need to set, we give a lot of those away, too, including some 15,000 to the local orphanage. Next season I'm going to try and get some of the game in there but that's harder as the birds go off very quickly in our climate.”

“ ‘We can shoot clays and game 365 days a year, including quail over English pointers’ ”

The clay element of the tournament is held over three days, with 100 targets on each day. There's a handicap system, with target penalties fixed according to calibre, with zero points docked for using a .410 and the maximum for those wielding 12s. The event's divided into AA, A, B, C, veterans and ladies classes and is held over a mix of Sporting targets. “We have 245 acres and 200 stands to play with,” said Salmon, “so I can simulate practically any bird. We don't try to beat the guns through distance and we don't throw the type of targets designed to challenge hardened clay-busters. A decent game-shooter can put in a good score here so long as he or she can read the different speeds of normal and midi clays. And it definitely helps if you can shoot driven birds, as a couple of the stands involve our 110ft tower.”

Salmon is an excellent shot but he also knows how to teach. “Understanding experienced game-shots and how to make those old dogs learn new

tricks is what we're all about,” he said. “Anyone staying at Casa de Campo can book a session here, from a round of skeet to a full-blown lesson, and most of our clients are keen sportsmen who like to mix some shooting with their golf and marlin fishing or with a family beach holiday. We can shoot clays and game here 365 days a year, including quail over English pointers. We have all the guns and ammunition here, so there's no need to bring them in though that's easy on commercial flights as we look after all the paperwork.”

Casa de Campo has its own international airport, which means visitors have only to struggle with a six-minute delay between hot rubber on touchdown and booking a hot tub at the hotel reception.

In fact, only one speck of grit appears in life's oyster for most of those wishing to compete at the Sugar Shooting Tournament and that's how to take part. As it's an “invitational”, participants must be able to shoot but also shine at the pre-shoot shindigs, during-shoot do's and at post-tournament knees-ups, all hosted by Pepe Fanjul and his effortlessly stylish wife, Emilia. It's an event for those who can party hard yet dodge the straight left

from the rum punch, keep their mojo among the mojitos and are stirred but never shaken. ■

PARTRIDGE SURPRISE

Marlin MANIA

Competitive angling in the Dominican Republic can mean a catch of a dozen blue marlin in just a couple of days. By Jonathan Young



BOBGING companionably in the Casa de Campo marina, each of the sport boats is a personal refusal to accept the rule of Fs: if it flies or floats, it's cheaper to rent. Trimmed in teak and white leather, for most of the year this fleet slumbers at berth, waiting quietly with its owners for the spring arrival of plankton to build the predatory pyramid peaking in the mighty blue marlin.

The fish can reach over 1,000lb and was immortalised by Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*. But while the old man knew, “My big fish must be somewhere”, it's not to be found in the Dominican waters of Casa de Campo. “I would say the average marlin here runs to around 100lb, with bigger fish travelling through in May and June I estimate to be around 650lb,” says Captain Daryl Brower, a skipper at the Casa de Campo International Blue Marlin Classic event. “And in 2015 we saw a couple of fish in the 400-500lb class. But we're not really trying to fish for those. We scale our tackle, baits and lures to match the usual class of fish travelling through.”

The two-day, catch-and-release, open event is held under International Game Fish Association guidelines, in which points accumulated on one boat by one team throughout the competition determine the overall winner. Every team is accompanied by a different official observer for each day of fishing and competes within an IGFA class of tackle, determined by the breaking strain of the line.

“Our standard tackle consists of 30lb-class outfits, with custom 20-40lb-class rods and Shimano 30 Tyrnos reels spooled with 500yd of 50lb braid backing and 250yd of 30lb Momoi Diamond high-vis yellow line. Depending on the class of fish travelling through and our angler skill level, we also use Shimano Tiagra 50s reels spooled with 500yd of 60lb braid backing and 250yd of 50lb Momoi Diamond hi-vis yellow line on custom 50lb rods,” says Brower.

“At the business end we use a combination of small to medium lures with ‘J’ hooks on 200-300lb leader and natural baits of ballyhoo or small ‘bullet’ tuna on a 80-130lb leader with 8/0-9/0 Mustad circle hooks. Sometimes we pull all lures, sometimes all natural baits, or a combination of the two. We typically pull two hookless bridge teasers, consisting of two squid chains, or a squid chain and a large lure teaser. We also pull two double dredges, which have mud flaps and mullets as teasers.”

Trolling strings of lures through miles of ocean might seem to offer long odds >

Left: the marlin are caught under IGFA rules and all are released



against connecting with a marlin but the skippers have a secret weapon. Before the start they anchor a series of Styrofoam rafts known as Fish Attractor Devices (FADs). These mimic the effect of floating mats of weed that naturally attract baitfish – and their predators.

Frank Rodriguez is a regular competitor. “Even with a competent captain, fishing the FADs can come down to the luck of the draw. There’s an old adage that if it’s flat calm they don’t seem to bite, although we have had great days on flat seas. There’s a great deal of current and along with the prevailing south-easterly winds it can cause rather bumpy conditions. A typical day out of Casa de Campo would be in 2-4ft seas and with a good skipper you can expect four to five blue marlin bites a day.

“For any fisherman to maximise those chances,” adds Rodriguez, “the best advice I can give is be honest about your skill level at the outset and specify what you would like to accomplish on your fishing days when booking your trip. Qualified charter crews will adapt to your skill set, whether you’re a beginner attempting to catch your first billfish, to the advanced fisherman chasing billfish on lighter line classes or wanting to catch a blue marlin on fly. All that said, there are days when you catch zero and there are days when you catch a handful and then there are those days like we’ve had when you’re on the right FAD and you wind up catching eight to 10. Our best day last year we caught eight out of the 14 bites and saw a total of 18 that day.”

Above, left to right: it’s a team game; an ambitious barracuda; some of the marlin fleet

“The day rate varies with the size of boat and fuel used,” says Captain Brower. “A typical day trip, out of Casa De Campo, for a boat like ours, a custom Jarrett Bay Boatworks 53ft Sportfish, including everything you need for the day – tackle, bait, ice, snacks, lunch, drinks, beer and fuel – works out at \$2,500-3,000. Typically, the more days you fish, the better price you can negotiate.”

Rodriguez retains his own boat for his sole use. “I have had many memorable days fishing with my captain of 12 years, Captain Rob Moore, and my mate of three years, Taylor Beckford, and the rest of our team. Together we’ve won both the Bahamas Billfish Championship and the Bermuda Triple Crown in the same year – and no other boat/team has ever accomplished this. We’ve also won every single category in the Casa de

RICHARD GIBSON

Campo Blue Marlin Classic in 2014 by catching 12 blue marlin in the two days of the tournament, winning both the daily scores, the most tagged fish and the overall tournament.”

To achieve this requires patience as well as a heavy piggy bank. “We spent a day fishing out of Casa de Campo without a bite,” recalls Rodriguez. “Then in the last two hours my wife and I caught eight blue marlin and a sailfish.

“That pretty much sums up blue marlin fishing – hours of boredom followed by moments of sheer pandemonium. There’s no greater rush than to pitch a bait to a 500lb beast and have her crash-inhale it. It’s a sight that makes it hard for your knees not to shake, and when you set the hook and she feels the stick of the hook and the drag of the line, it’s like having a freight train attached to your rod. The tremendous strength and speed of these magnificent aquatic creatures and their ability, even at massive weights, to propel themselves full body out of the water is indescribable.” ■

“ ‘Even with a competent captain, fishing the FADs can come down to the luck of the draw’ ”



Hunting the marlin
The next the Casa de Campo International Blue Marlin Classic is scheduled for 29 March to 3 April, 2016 at Casa de Campo Marina. The team entry fee covers competing in the tournament as well as tournament social events (accommodation and charter boat not included). The 2016 entry fees are \$2,600 for a team of two anglers, \$2,950 for three and \$3,250 for four anglers. For details, visit www.intlbillfishtours.com.

ALAMY



**Above: tobacco grown in the Santiago area.
Below: freshly rolled cigars in a pressing device**

FOR the most discerning smoker, cigars from the Dominican Republic are often the pinnacle of a prized collection. While many novice smokers and casual hobbyists will claim they can't compete with a Cuban, the real arbiter of taste recognises the quality of the tobacco and the craftsmanship that goes into making what can only be described as some of the most superlative cigars in the world.



The year was 1962 and on a frosty day in early February, US President John F Kennedy signed off on the embargo against Cuba, preventing the import of cigars into the world's largest marketplace. Recognising the limitations it placed on revenue streams, a number of Cuban cigar makers decided to open up shop elsewhere and the Dominican Republic proved to be the prime location.

The soil is lush, fertile and superb for growing tobacco. With its tropical climate, the 30-mile zone where most of the Dominican's cigars are manufactured is an unsurpassed breeding ground for some of the most delectable tobacco in the world. Although the Dominican Republic became a staple location in the global cigar industry following the Cuban embargo, it has served as home to the La Aurora cigar company for over a century. However, it really didn't make its mark on the world until the Seventies when free-trade zones were established which permitted new manufacturers to hang their shingle and craft cigars exclusively for exportation.

Within a decade, exports of cigars snowballed from just shy of six million to more than thirty-three million by 1980. That trend continues to grow, now reaching an estimated 160 million in exports to the US alone.

Unfortunately, since the prime region is just 30 miles and with such accelerated growth, the Dominican Tobacco Institute's records show that unless production is decreased, the Republic may soon run out of tobacco meaning a cessation of production or a hiatus at best.

Farmers with little training grow 16,000 acres of tobacco northwest of Santiago. With such boundless crops and the uncompro- ■ mising elements, a vast percentage of the yield

RECOMMENDED CIGARS

H UPMANN 1844 RESERVE

With a legacy that's rich in history and tradition, the 1844 Reserve by H Upmann is a testament to the exacting standards required by Dominican cigar factories. Despite using the Dominican tobacco as its filler, Tabacalera de García imports the wrapper from Ecuador and the binder from Nicaragua. The hallmark of H Upmann, the 1844 Reserve offers a complex, medium-bodied flavour profile with strong notes of leather and aged cedar mixed with a delicate burst of citrus and the warmth of honey. The flavours and intoxicating aromas grow with the ash and result in a captivating smoke that makes you sit back and relish your next opportunity to smoke such a refined cigar.

DAVIDOFF NICARAGUA TORO

Davidoff is one of the most renowned cigar companies in the world. An elaborate palette of flavours with a graceful intricacy, the Toro is an example of a cigar whose tobacco is imported from Nicaragua because the quality of domestic tobacco in the Dominican Republic isn't good enough. However, the Toro is an example of the extraordinary craftsmanship found there. Davidoff could have saved money and had the cigar rolled in Nicaragua but opted to use the expertise of the Dominican factories to accentuate its rich and elegant flavour profile that's driven with notes of roasted espresso, deep and sumptuous leather and a brilliantly smooth finish with the sweetness of toffee. This is one cigar that is worthy of any collector's attention.



AGING ROOM QUATTRO F55 CONCERTO

A small-batch cigar with an initial run of just 400,000, the Quattro F55 Concerto by Aging Room is difficult to find. It is a truly remarkable cigar that showcases the quality of craftsmanship in the Dominican Republic. With its Sumatra wrapper and expertly harvested Dominican long fillers and binder, the Concerto is a masterpiece like no other that's rich in bitterness with a sweet syrup flavour from the wrapper. Notes of cloves and dried plums accentuate the masculinity of the cedarwood and fierce undertones of sun-soaked leather. Decadent with a full mouth-feel, it's a cigar that will be missed when the last of the batch has been extinguished.