

# Hooked!

The quest for 'the one that got away' keeps anglers coming back to Kona's waters.

“Give a man a fish and you’ll feed him for a day. Teach a man to sport fish and he’ll be hooked for life.” Okay, that may not be the exact wording of the proverb, but it certainly holds a lofty level of credibility.

Each year, the sea and thrill of **SPORT FISHING** attracts thousands of seasoned anglers and fervent newbies in pursuit of that great catch.

Positioned comfortably, surrounded by pristine marble blue waters of the mid Pacific Ocean, dozens of charter captains in Kailua-Kona on Hawai‘i Island smile confidently knowing sport fishing in this small parcel of the world’s oceans is a venerable quest that raises a person’s adventurous spirit.

Comparatively, what makes sport fishing off Kailua-Kona’s coast more favorable than other marquee locations like Cabo San Lucas, Cape Town, or Key West? With a gaze toward the horizon the answer may seem obvious, but one scientific answer lies beneath the surface, as Kailua-Kona has a rather fortuitous proximity to deep pelagic ocean zones.

Many sport fishing expeditions take hours of navigation time and gallons of fuel to reach deep ocean depths where big game, tropical predatory billfish have a penchant to migrate. Not off Kailua-Kona though.

“Once we get outside the harbor, within the next mile and a half, depths drop 3,000 feet. I start charters at 8 a.m. ... You get nearly eight hours of fishing because we’re fishing 10 minutes outside the harbor, which is unseen in the whole world,” says Captain Al Gustavson of TopShape Kona Fishing—who points out that due to the island’s topographic positioning, the water conditions are typically “soft” and calm, protected from trade winds.

A sport not for the faint of heart, sport fishing—much like hunting—plants adventure-seekers in the middle of the wilderness. It just so happens this wilderness is teeming with primal aquatic activity.

“You can see such cool stuff out here, there are turtles and whales everywhere. Some pretty strange stuff happens out here too ... like dolphins being eaten by sharks,” says Gustavson.

The year-round fishing season and species of fish that can be caught off Kailua-Kona are also fairly rare commodities in the sport fishing scene. Kailua-Kona is the only location where blue marlin can be caught January to December.

“Some months are obviously better than others, but everywhere else the season may only be three to four months,” adds Gustavson. Large-scale billfish like marlin or swordfish—weighing upwards of 1,500 pounds—are the obvious targets, but they are not the only game in town.

Other species of fish sought during charters in Hawai‘i include *mahi mahi*, *ono* (wahoo), and species of tuna like *‘ahi* and *aku*.

“We want to catch the biggest fish of that day, whether that’s a 20-pound mahi, eight-pound aku or 1,000-pound marlin. We want to show the client the thrill of catching a monster fish. That’s a big deal, because it doesn’t happen all the time,” says Gustavson.

And he’s right. Newcomers to sport fishing need to realize the captains and crew mates of charter expeditions want nothing more than to see you reel in a prized fish, but the reality is it’s called fishing, not catching, for a reason.

“It is the endless search for that fish. We never give odds on fishing to our clients. It wouldn’t be fair to the fish or us,” says Kailua-Kona-based Bite Me Sportfishing marketing director Stephanie Smith.

Even as many sport fishing charters in Kailua-Kona are equipped with top of the line boats, are trolling five to six lines at a time, are fashioned with state-of-the-art tracking devices, and have captains conducting constant satellite research, the art of luck and attitude play a major part in the successful catch of large game fish.

“We have fish finders, sonar and radar, but when it boils down to it, it’s about which boat is going to get lucky that day,” Smith explains.

BY CHRIS FLECK



And when that luck strikes, which can literally be at any moment, it's all hands on deck—including charter guests—because you'll be the one in the fighting chair about to encounter the chaos and thrill of your life.

"I've been fishing since I was five, but when that reel goes off my knees still shake," says Gustavson.

Reeling in a massive 1,000-pound marlin or 300-pound 'ahi could be a quick 15-minute sparring or bleed into hours of strategic struggle between your boat and the resiliency of that monster fish.

For the high stakes sport fishermen, Kailua-Kona hosts world-class tournaments several months out the year. Many charters, like TopShape Kona Fishing and Bite Me Sportfishing will allow you to hire their boat, captain and crew for tournament participation. There are typically 6 to 12 prize categories ranging from most successful catches, number of billfish caught, or overall weight of catch.

Entry fees vary in the thousands of dollars depending on the tournament, as do payouts that can equate to over \$1 million in total purse prizes.

The heart-racing element of sport fishing is exceedingly enhanced during one- to three-day tournaments with those large stakes on the table. Even if your boat hasn't tasted a bite in the early stages, you can be surprised how fortunes can swing in a split second.

"Two years ago we didn't get a bite for three days. I was grumbling, everyone was, and then the screams from the bridge came down. We hooked a 652-pound fish in the last five minutes of regulation, fought it for half an hour and ended up winning the tournament. One of the coolest

things ever, because everyone else thought they had won," says Gustavson.

For bragging rights only, the main stage tournament in Hawai'i is the annual five-day Hawaiian International Billfish Tournament, an invite-only event that started in 1959 and kicks off in late July. The HIBT pits the world's most experienced sport fishing captains against one another, including Bite Me Sportfishing's Deneen Wargo—Kailua-Kona's only female captain who has garnered her fair share of record catches in the tournament.

When scheduling a private or shared charter on a sport fishing boat it's smart to discuss with the captain who will be keeping caught fish. Most charters have a strict tag-and-release protocol set in place for billfish, but those good eatin' fish like mahi mahi or 'ahi will either go to the crew to sell or are fileted for guests to take with them.

"We'll filet any other fish than billfish no problem, but a lot of boats—because they charge small fees for the charters—the crew relies on that fish money. So you don't have hard feelings, make sure to ask that question beforehand," advises Gustavson.

As Santiago said in *The Old Man and the Sea*, "It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready." Charter captains in Kailua-Kona know these waters better than any and they'll put you in position, it's just up to your luck to determine if you'll be gliding into harbor with a fish flag flying from the riggers. 🎣

*For more information on sport fishing charters, contact TopShape Kona Fishing at [topshapekona.com](http://topshapekona.com) and Bite Me Sport Fishing at [bitemesportfishing.com](http://bitemesportfishing.com) or see your concierge.*