

SPEARFISH IN THE MED

A NEW FISHERY IS
EVOLVING FOR ONE
OF THE WORLD'S
LEAST-KNOWN
BILLFISH SPECIES
BY DAVE LEWIS

The Mediterranean Sea could become a new hotspot for this unique billfish species.





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Just after 6:30 a.m., IGFA Capt. Vince Riera piloted the 42-foot Tiara sport-fisher *Mad Max* from its berth at Port de Alcudiamar Marina into the 50-mile-wide Majorca Channel, a tongue of deep blue water that separates Majorca from her sister Balearic Island of Menorca, located in the Mediterranean Sea southeast of Spain. It was just over an hour's run to the fishing grounds, so we had time to savor freshly brewed coffee and still warm-from-the-oven croissants until we arrived in an area where Riera is making bluewater sport-fishing history.

About a mile away from the actual waypoint, we slowed to trolling speed and began to set our spread of lures. With the high anticipation that all anglers feel at the start of another fishing day in a new part of the world, I sat back and watched the lures working in our wake.

Less than five minutes later, the short left suddenly dipped, the reel's drag making a throaty cough as a few yards of line pulled off the spool. I had jumped up from my seat ready to grab the rod, but when nothing happened, I sat back down, assuming that the sudden jolt on the line had been the result of the lure pulling through a wave. Moments later, the same rod bent over again, and this time, line continued to pour steadily off the reel. I grabbed the rod and held on, waiting for that first blistering run to ease, calmly assuming that I was hooked up with one of several species of tuna that thrives in these pristine waters. Then, perhaps 150 yards

BEAUTIFUL VISTAS
ARE PLENTIFUL
AROUND NEARLY
EVERY TURN
IN MAJORCA, A
POPULAR VACATION
DESTINATION.



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AN EFFECTIVE
TROLLING SPREAD
CONSISTS OF SMALL
TO MEDIUM LURES;
JET AND BULLET
SHAPES IN A VARIETY
OF COLORS ARE CON-
SISTENT PRODUCERS
FOR SPEARFISH.



JOE BYRUM / JAYBLES
PHOTOGRAPHY

IGFA's Mediterranean Projects

The IGFA Great Marlin Race deployed the first-ever satellite tag on a Mediterranean spearfish and is currently working with Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn—Napoli tagging Mediterranean spearfish off Italy as part of the IGFA Great Marlin Race to learn more about this rarely studied species. The IGFA is hosting the inaugural IGFA Mediterranean Championship from July 4-9, 2022, in beautiful Porto Rotondo, Sardinia. Don't miss out on this incredible new event targeting bluefin tuna, swordfish, Mediterranean spearfish and more.

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in our wake, a silvery saber launched itself into the air, the first of an impressive series of aerial acrobatics. Riera and the rest of the crew called out, "Spearfish!" At that moment I was speechless, calm no longer, my pulse racing as the realization hit me that within minutes of starting to fish on our first day, I had hooked the one species I had flown to Majorca hoping to catch: the little-known Mediterranean spearfish.

A DEVELOPING FISHERY

I first came into contact with the Majorca-based Riera on social media. I had been aware that the tuna fishing—mostly bluefin and albacore—around the island was superb. Along with a steady stream of images of tuna, swordfish and other species that Riera had sent me, I had noted he was also catching spearfish. I mentioned that I'd love to catch one, to which I received the utterly unexpected response of: "If you want a spearfish, come to Majorca. You'll catch one!" I had made plans to travel to Majorca in summer 2020, then along came the pandemic, and the world quickly ground to a halt.

Jurgen Oeder, a very good friend of Riera's, had also noted the seemingly higher-than-usual number of spearfish that were getting caught in the waters around Majorca. Oeder is one of the most experienced bluewater anglers in Europe and had put it to Riera that if he was able to target spearfish with anything better than a slim chance of success, then undoubtedly there were many anglers around the world who would travel to the island to try to catch one, specifically to complete the coveted IGFA Royal Billfish Slam.

Riera's response was emphatic. He had fished the area all of his life, and yes, he knew where, when, and how to fish for spearfish. He had said

that they were a relatively small fish and were not good to eat—so far as Majorcans were concerned, at least. On the other hand, tuna were abundant, and the anglers who fished with him either wanted to fight a large bluefin tuna or catch albacore or other species they could take home.

UNDERSTANDING THE BATHYMETRY

To understand just why the waters around the Balearic Islands and Majorca in particular are so productive for so many pelagic species, you need only to study a chart covering the western Mediterranean. At its closest point, the drop-off is located a little over three miles from the southeast coast, where an average depth of 300 feet falls rapidly away to more than 3,000 feet, and in some places as much as 6,000 feet.

The bottom throughout much of this area consists of numerous deep canyons and seamounts, which further deflect the currents. Toward the northern end of the islands, the cold water collides with a warm-water current flowing in a southerly direction from mainland Europe. The resulting mix is a powerful trigger, setting into motion a rich food chain, beginning with plankton and resulting in vast shoals of baitfish that are sufficient to sustain the incredible numbers of tuna and other pelagic species that congregate here.

In 2020, Riera began deploying conventional tags on Mediterranean spearfish. Despite minimal fishing effort because of the pandemic, by early August 2020, the *Mad Max* team had tagged an incredible 11 spearfish. Even more impressive is the fact that on seven consecutive occasions when he had targeted spearfish, he successfully tagged one. "I can guarantee that at certain times of the year—late June through August—we will

About the Mediterranean Spearfish

This species of billfish is located almost exclusively within the Mediterranean, but it is occasionally found in the Atlantic beyond the Straits of Gibraltar. The current IGFA All-Tackle record weighed 90 pounds, 13 ounces, and was caught off Madeira in 1980. The body of the Mediterranean spearfish is slender, with a dark-blue back and silvery-white sides. The fins and body do not have spots, and the bill is short, barely longer than the lower jaw. The first dorsal fin is higher than the body is deep, and the second dorsal fin is positioned closer to the caudal fin than the second anal fin. The pectoral fins are noticeably short, with a clearly visible lateral line arching above the pectorals before dropping off at the midsection. The tip of each pectoral fin does not reach the lateral line.

get, at the very least, a strike from a spearfish," he had confidently explained when I spoke to him on the phone. As far as I am aware, the only other area in the world where there is such a high probability of a spearfish encounter is Kona, Hawaii.

THE HUNT BEGINS

In July 2020, I was allowed to travel from my home in the United Kingdom to Spain, and immediately booked a flight to Majorca. On the 40-minute drive from Palma, the island capital, to Alcudia, where *Mad Max* is based, I learned that the fishing the previous days had been excellent. Several spearfish had been tagged, along with some little tunny and large albacore.

Majorca is a popular destination for Europeans, and it gets extremely busy during the summer months. Certain parts of the island will not be to everyone's taste—think Cancun or Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, during spring break. Thankfully there are many towns that have managed to retain their traditional charm, and Alcudia is one of these. A visit to the old walled town on market day—Tuesday—is a must. You'll find an abundance of great restaurants throughout the island, many specializing in locally caught seafood. Be sure to try the classic Spanish specialty, paella. Accommodations range from cheap and cheerful to five-star-plus. Locals speak a version of Spanish, and English is widely spoken and understood as well.

The most consistent spot where Riera catches spearfish covers only a relatively small area, and he fishes there only when a client wants to catch a spearfish. They are caught all around the island, and he has found a few other areas where the bite average is more than just occasional, so with further exploration, it is highly likely that even more hotspots will be located in the future. Often he sees spearfish free-jumping, and if he manages to get his lures in the vicinity of the fish quickly enough, a strike is highly likely.

I had hooked my dream fish within five minutes of starting to fish on the first day of my trip. I've hooked enough billfish over the years to know that the fish can throw the hook at any stage of the fight, especially with lures, so I had remained as tense as a drum skin until Riera

leaned over the side and grabbed the leader, securing my fish with a snooter to keep it in the water to better control it for revival and release.

One billfish enthusiast who has experienced this fishery is Rick Benitez, from Stuart, Florida. He says: "When I read about Majorca in *Marlin* [magazine] many years ago, it reminded me of a friend of mine telling me that nobody had caught all nine species of billfish, especially the elusive Mediterranean spearfish. So I called Riera in Majorca, and after speaking with him, I decided to give it a go. We ended up catching not just one but four Mediterranean spearfish in six days of fishing, plus albacore. We also tried one day for bluefin tuna and ended up catching three by midday. Needless to say, the fishing was beyond my expectations. As far as this destination goes, with its calm seas, beautiful beaches, fantastic accommodations, great restaurants, safe location and super-friendly people, it was the experience of a lifetime."

So if you're looking to punch your spearfish ticket for an IGFA Billfish Royal Slam, or you just want to experience a unique fishery with a distinctly European flair, check out Majorca. You won't be disappointed.

THANKS TO ONGOING TAGGING EFFORTS BY THE IGFA GREAT MARLIN RACE, SCIENTISTS AND RESEARCHERS HOPE TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT MEDITERRANEAN SPEARFISH.

