

# Capt Peter Bristow

## THE 'GRANDER' MAESTRO

In the world of gamefishing there are few names as legendary as Australia's Capt Peter Bristow. From the dawn of the Cairns black marlin fishery, to his interlude in Micronesia, to his current charter business chasing the planet's biggest blue marlin off the Portuguese island of Madeira, Peter has blazed an astonishing trail, catching more 1000-pound (450kg) marlin for his clients than any other captain in the history of the sport!



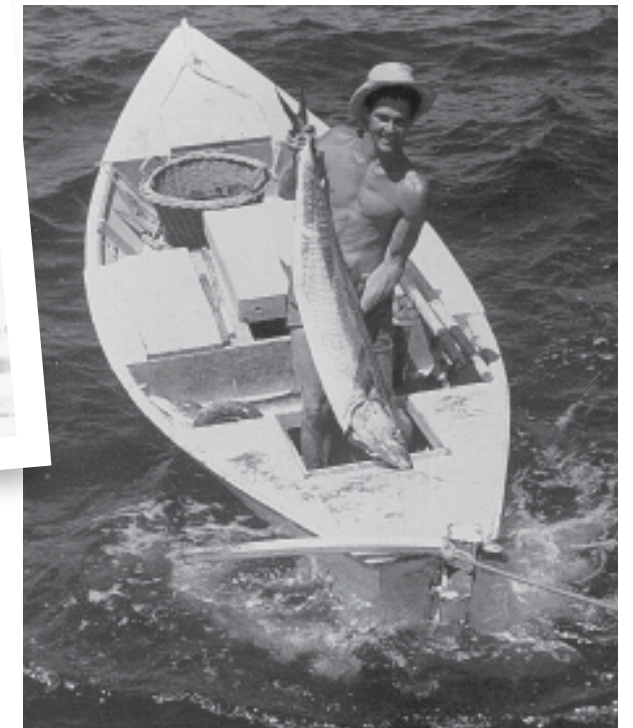
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PHOTOGRAPHY: FROM THE LIBRARY OF PETER BRISTOW; NICK BAYNTUN; JOHN ASHLEY; THE IGFA



**CAPT PETER BRISTOW** is one of the living legends of big game fishing. Born in Brisbane in 1938, Peter started fishing at the age of four and remained in Australia for 53 years. From an early age he was catching fish, even while World War II was still raging in the Pacific – he can remember fishing in the shadows of the giant aircraft

carriers navigating Moreton Bay off Brisbane.

Peter credits much of his knowledge of the seas and boat handling to his experience in competitive sailing at the Royal Queensland Yacht Squadron (RQYS). He learned his way around boats and waterways, learned to read the seas and weather, and fell



**Above:** Capt Bristow started his career as a commercial fisherman working from a dory launched through the surf near Brisbane, Australia.

hopelessly in love with anything to do with oceans, fishing and boats.

For a 10-year period Bristow lived at Point Lookout – the northern extremity of North Stradbroke Island, off Brisbane – where he fished from the beach through the surf with dories and nets. For about three years during this time he worked on a 60-foot trawler, fishing for prawns, snapper and mackerel. Don McMillan was his mentor, working with him every day, teaching him how to manoeuvre under difficult conditions, and everything else a young sailor would need to know about running a boat.

**Top left:** Peter (left) with Bill Lawler at the old Point Lookout pub in 1962 with a catch of cobia, including Peter's IGFA All Tackle and 30lb line-class record that weighed 100lb.



### CAIRNS CALLING

In 1968, an article in the *Courier Mail* (Brisbane's daily newspaper) caught Bristow's attention. The fishery in Cairns was just being discovered and there were stories of giant marlin being caught by a fledgling charter fleet. Bristow was running a charter boat out of Brisbane at the time, but made the decision to give Cairns a try. Cairns was nearly untouched territory, but the buzz was irresistible. With a couple of his buddies from the RQYS he made his way up the coast. From then on there was no looking back.

In his first year in Cairns, Bristow crewed for one of the established charter boats, but when the owner sold the boat, the promise of a second season faded. Disappointed but not discouraged, Bristow went on to build his own boat

*"Avalon became one of the most famous charter boats in the history of Cairns gamefishing."*

Capt Bristow (at left) with angler D Mead Johnson and his 1216-pound world record black marlin on 80lb tackle caught aboard *Avalon* off Cairns.

“Capt Peter Bristow is one of the living legends of big game fishing.”

Capt Bristow (crouching) and his deckie Gordon Hallam, together with angler JoJo Del Guercio and party, with his 1021lb black marlin landed aboard *Avalon* off Cairns in 1971.



for chartering. Named after his property in Point Lookout, *Avalon* became one of the most famous vessels in the history of Cairns gamefishing.

Peter's close Australian friends, TV personalities Bob and Dolly Dyer, introduced him to the great tuna anglers of Florida. Bob was a popular figure, and was MC for many years at Florida's Masters tournament in Palm Beach. In those early years it was not uncommon for some of the prominent anglers fishing with Bristow to bring their captains with them to Cairns. It was the friendship with the Dyers, and this elite group greatly familiar with the new world of heavy tackle, that was invaluable to Bristow as his knowledge of big game fishing expanded. Of most influence were captains Walter Voss, Bill and George Staros, Jacky Lance and Allen Merritt. Bristow has the deepest appreciation for the knowledge these men shared, as well as for his good friend Capt George Bransford, the pioneer who

instigated the Cairns marlin fishery, who was always there to help the up-and-coming skippers. To pay this kind of generosity forward, Bristow believes that any help or knowledge that can be passed on to future generations willing to learn is important to the future of responsible gamefishing.

From 1969 until 1991, Capt Bristow's charter business flourished in Cairns. This was the most popular giant black marlin destination in the world and Bristow was at the centre of it. Australian Ray Joyce has recently shared some records that he has kept from that time. While many world records were created on *Avalon*, the books also show that during its time in Cairns they landed 55 granders, 13 of which were over 1200 pounds. Twelve of those granders (and many other giant blacks) were caught by Bristow's favourite angler, the world-famous JoJo Del Guercio. Other famous anglers who caught granders with Bristow include Bark

Garnsey, Emilio Botin, E Jay Gould, Sir William Stevenson, Don Tyson, Earl Long and Steve Zuckerman.

The list does not stop there: in 1971 *Avalon* became the first boat to catch over 100 giant blacks in a single season. Two years later they broke their own record by catching 192. In one three-week period in 1973, JoJo Del Guercio caught 93 giant blacks aboard *Avalon*. Along the way *Avalon* also scored such landmark numbers as 20 giant blacks in a single day, and a lifetime record of more than 2000 giant blacks off the Australian coast.

Capt Bristow was the first to fish the famous Number 10 Ribbon Reef, and the 'Cod Hole' at the top of Number 10 Ribbon was discovered and named by him. In 1970 he discovered the Dunk Island billfish grounds and shortly thereafter founded the Dunk Isle Billfish Classic, which he ran for the first five years. The event continued on for another 15 years as one of the important billfish tournaments in Australia.

### MICRONESIAN ODYSSEY

In 1991, after 26 years in Cairns, Bristow was looking for a change. With his wife, Pepe, and partner Capt George Bransford, he drove *Avalon* to Micronesia in the central-west Pacific to establish a charter business and fish for blue marlin, which during his five years there, Bristow ran successfully. The blue marlin fishing was excellent and the lifestyle was agreeable. While there, Bristow founded the Ponhpei Fishing Club that is still in operation today.

While in Micronesia, most of *Avalon's* charters came from Japan, which in 1996 was heading for tough economic times. Looking forward, the captain could see dark times looming. The decision was made to sell *Avalon* and go to where the fishing for big blue marlin was hottest. Bristow had several things to consider: one was that Pepe was from England and he knew she would be happy to be closer to her family; another was that Madeira, the Portuguese island 300 miles west of Casablanca off the African coast, was producing blue marlin in the numbers and size he was looking for.

### KATHERINE B

In 1996, Bristow bought a 27-year-old, 40-foot Nelson with twin Perkins diesel engines. Don't be fooled by its age, this boat was built by the Royal Navy as a gunboat to operate in the waters around Abu Dhabi! It may have been 'mature' when Bristow bought it, but knowing that this hull was built for the worst of conditions, he refurbished it from one end to the other, including a complete engine re-build. When it was ready for service, he christened it *Katherine B*, named after his



baby daughter, and shipped it to Madeira, where it is considered one of the sturdiest boats in the fleet, and has been setting blue marlin records ever since.

Madeira enjoys a reputation as one of the world's premier gamefishing destinations, and big game fishing enthusiasts from around the globe visit Madeira for the giant bluefin and bigeye tuna, and to test their skills against some of the biggest blue marlin in the world. *Katherine B* is right in the mix of things, bringing home records and being ranked among the top boats in the local fleet.

### LESSONS LEARNED

After starting his career with an extensive background in commercial

fishing, Peter found it a dramatic switch to change over to big game fishing. Cairns is a billfish bait fishery, meaning the giant blacks are fished for using natural fish baits as opposed to artificial lures. Lures were not an option in the early Cairns years, as there was very little known about how to use them, and with so many toothy critters on the reef edge they were nearly impossible to use effectively.

Although everyone else at the time was using expensive mullet, Bristow figured out how to locate and catch the local scad (double-lined mackerel) in large numbers using a deep paravane and a daisy-chain of small lures. Scad soon became the region's staple and most valuable source of bait. Peter's innovation enabled long-range fishing up the Ribbon reefs with a constant supply of fresh bait. The move to Micronesia required a complete change in tactics. The blue marlin of the mid-Pacific turned their noses up at the carefully presented baits. After switching to lures, the success was instant, quickly becoming the basis for his serious lure fishing in the Atlantic, too.

After decades of battling Madeira's huge blue marlin, Bristow came to a few important conclusions: set a light drag for the strike; use smaller-than-usual hooks; and use single-hook rigs. This combination has proven to be the most successful and humane way to catch and release these magnificent Atlantic billfish.

Capt Bristow gives his clients personal attention and works with them to create a team that functions well together and is prepared when the action starts. He is well aware that off Madeira the action can become explosive any time after the lures are dropped in the water outside the harbour entrance.

“*Avalon* landed 55 granders, 13 of which were over 1200 pounds.”

*Katherine B* is a 44-year-old ex-Royal Navy gunboat that has been lovingly restored by Peter and is now an extremely functional and successful gameboat plying Madeira's waters for Atlantic blue marlin, some of which weigh more than 1000-pounds.





The proudest moment of Capt Peter Bristow's long and outstanding career was watching his 14-year-old daughter Katherine catch then tag and release her first marlin in 2009. The blue was caught on 37kg tackle and estimated at more than 600lb, qualifying her to claim the IGFA Junior world record had she decided to keep and weigh it.

**"Katherine cried from the joy of the catch, and gave her daddy the biggest hug he can ever remember."**

**WHAT DOES IT TAKE?**

Capt Bristow frequently receives inquiries from young men who would follow in his footsteps and pursue the life of the big game fishing captain. He has plenty of answers and is always keen to share his insights. The life of a professional charter captain, he says, is different from any other kind of career path, and anyone who wants to tread it must be prepared for a serious commitment.

The best captains, according to Bristow, come from a background in commercial fishing. Knowledge of the seas and boat handling must have begun at an early age. An appreciation for a shipshape cockpit and safe boating conditions must be intuitive. They must be disciplined, neat in their personal life and care about the appearance and condition of their boat. They must know the meaning of the word 'respect': respect for their boat, the sea, themselves and others. Anyone who cannot be courteous and respectful of his charter, and give the client an exceptional experience, might as well not get started. A bad

appearance or bad attitude will be the undoing of a charter captain or crewman.

Safety comes first. A captain and his crew must anticipate every possible hazard. If the fight is on, the cockpit must be cleared so no-one gets hurt and no equipment gets damaged. If a crewman sees a client having a beer, he knows automatically that an empty beer bottle will follow and must be properly disposed of. A rod left on the deck ends up as a broken rod. A hook on the deck could easily lodge in someone's foot, hand or eye. The deckies and captain have to be on constant alert for anything that might interfere with the client's safety or their enjoyment of the charter.

No less of a consideration is the captain's personal lifestyle and how that affects the family. There must be a patient partner and understanding children to put up with the long periods of absence, while the captain is off making his living in remote locations. Says Bristow, "The sea is the captain's irresistible mistress, and

she is jealous and will demand the greatest amount of his time and energy".

**PROUDEST MOMENT**

Booked solid with charters for months during the summer, Bristow usually doesn't get to be with Pepe and Katherine until the fishing season is over. So it's a special treat when they come to visit him in Madeira during his busy time. When asked to tell a story about a special event, in all of his life of big game fishing, in which there are hundreds of stories of drama and trauma, one event stands out from all the rest.

In the summer of 2009, when Katherine was only 14 years old, Bristow took her with him for a day of offshore fishing. On this special day they hooked into a feisty blue marlin and put Katherine in the fighting chair. As she felt the strength of the great fish she matched its strength with her own determination. While Peter performed his duties as captain, moving the boat as needed and calling instructions to the cockpit,

Katherine performed her duties as angler. This was a giant of a fish for such a young girl, but Katherine never gave a thought to quitting. She fought that sassy lady for over an hour and finally brought it alongside the boat. The fish was wired, tagged and released, estimated to be a 700-pounder. Once the fish was swimming safely away and the rush of excitement had passed, Katherine cried uncontrollably from the joy of the catch and the release of tension, and gave her daddy the biggest hug he can ever remember.

This was one of Bristow's proudest moments. His precious daughter had performed beautifully and, perhaps much more importantly, this was a moment that he can remember as the time when the most important person in his world came to a full appreciation of who her father was, and what it took to be the man he is. It was an epic, shared experience that neither the father nor the daughter will ever forget.

**THE LEGEND**

When a person has accomplished what Capt Peter Bristow has, to say that his lifetime knowledge of big game fishing is unique is a beginning, but doesn't quite tell the whole story. Millions of people on this planet fish either commercially or recreationally. When taking into consideration the things it takes to be considered elite, such as knowledge of the weather, sea conditions and equipment, and the rules of the road and rules of sportfishing, coupled with the need for intelligence, experience and passion, soon there are only a few players in the world who have reached this pinnacle.

At gatherings of the world's best charter captains, such as the annual worldwide events of the International Game Fishing Association (IGFA) or The Billfish Foundation (TBF), top anglers from every corner of the globe congregate to catch-up, reminisce and reconnect. This is where you'll see Bristow sharing tales about adventures in Australia with Peter Wright or Brazzaka, or Kona stories with Bart Miller, or adventures in Madeira with Bark Garnsey, or a lifetime of memories with George Matthews, Ron Hamlin or Alan Merritt. Bristow can take his seat at the table with the most famous names in big game fishing because he's one of them.

In 2008, the IGFA awarded Capt Bristow the Gil Keach Award for outstanding achievements in the field of heavy-tackle angling, and in 2010 he was honoured for services rendered to conservation and responsible recreational angling by the Big Game Fishing Club of Portugal.

Capt Peter Bristow runs his charter boat *Katherine B* out of Madeira, Portugal. For more information, visit: [www.fishmadeira.com](http://www.fishmadeira.com). He can be emailed at: [bristow@fishmadeira.net](mailto:bristow@fishmadeira.net)



**Above:** Capt Peter Bristow in 2008, flanked by IGFA President Rob Kramer (on left) and Dr Guy Harvey, while being presented with the IGFA Gil Keach Award for outstanding achievements in the field of heavy-tackle angling.



**A THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE**

I met Peter in 1979 on my first trip to the Great Barrier Reef. The purpose of my visit was to investigate whether or not the black marlin were spawning there, and Peter could not have been more helpful. He loved bringing out old Japanese charts of the area showing marlin catch rates dating back to the 1950s, and engaging me in long discussions about the movement patterns and lifecycle of the mighty black marlin. Peter's charter at the time was none other than the 'chicken king', Don Tyson, also on his very first trip to the area. Don was very interested in the research and hosted me aboard the mothership, *Coral Reeftel*, where I was able to examine nine grander black marlin in just one week.

Cutting out the 30kg paired ovaries from those 1000lb-plus marlin while aboard a rocking boat was not without its humorous moments, all duly photographed by Peter and retained for posterity.

Perhaps my best memory of that trip was heading out one day on *Avalon* with Pete at the helm, the young American 'Hollywood' on the deck, and me as the sole angler. Don Tyson had decided to take the day off, as it were, and generously allowed me to take the charter. I caught and tagged my first and second black marlin on that memorable day, and then had the pleasure of steering the chair while Peter fought and lost a grander – one of the few times he took the rod himself.

Subsequent analysis of the gonad samples from both male and female black marlin proved that they were in spawning condition, with egg counts from the larger females topping 200 million!

I have stayed in touch with Peter ever since that memorable trip, and his passion and thirst for knowledge of the biology of the pelagic fishes has never faltered.

**- Dr Julian Pepperell**

**"Avalon scored more than 2000 giant blacks off the Australian coast."**