



Slow Pitch Jigging (SPJ) in the Mozambique Channel



**Expedition on the Leven bank
with Nirvana Fishing and
Daniele, the *maestro*
of the SPJ technique!**
By Julien Lajournade





Slow jigging session off Cape Saint Sébastien.



Many groupers fell for the slow jigs skillfully worked by Daniele

The gear is three times lighter than a 60lb speed jigging combo, allowing the angler to work jigs weighing more than 300g without ruining the arms and back. Virtually all game fish of the Indian Ocean, including black marlin and dogtooth tuna, can be caught using this technique. Fights with larger fish (over 20kg) are particularly uncertain with slow jigging equipment and emerging victorious requires a lot of skill and composure!

Two SPJ experts on the great Leven bank

It was on one of Alain Soulet's boats in 2017 that I tried for the first time a SPJ set up and the bites were almost non-stop! Last December, Alain invited me again to learn more about this technique. The program involved an eight-day trip with a speed boat and a catamaran towards the north part of the Leven Bank and Cape Saint Sébastien, in the company of his Italian friend, the *dottore* ès slow jigging Daniele Scabini.



In Madagascar, slow jigging and speed jigging complement each other perfectly.

▶▶▶ **A** technique that has been very popular for many years in South-East Asia is slow jigging, or slow pitch jigging (SPJ), which is gaining more and more followers in the Mediterranean Sea and on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In the world of fishing travels, this technique has also established itself in the tropics (often in addition to popper fishing and speed jigging) but also in some Arctic regions, too, to catch halibut, saithe and large migratory cod. The tremendous effectiveness it has is therefore universally recognized. SPJ has become the preferred technique of Alain Soulet, who is

the director of the Nirvana Fishing organisation. It's been in operation for 16 years in the northwest of Madagascar. For quite some time now, Alain has been suggesting to his clients that they come equipped with a specific slow jigging set as well as a bag full of slow jigs. To those who do not yet dare take the plunge (the use of a slow jigging reel with a drag lever can often be a big obstacle), he willingly lends his equipment and generally, after a little training, the first captures don't take long, bringing with it a whole lot of new sensations. It must be said, though, that this subtle technique is practised with specific equipment that is quite revolutionary. The rods are ultra-thin and light and at the same time incredibly resistant

(their curve during combat can be astonishing!) and, after a time of adaptation, you soon realise that a small baitcasting reel made for this style of fishing is much more suitable than a spinning reel and very fun to use.

◀◀◀ Less physical than speed jigging, SPJ allows an angler to fish for hours without any particular effort.



A large number of species are receptive to a slow jig, including the famous giant trevally (GT). Alain Soulet shows one with a "full black" coat!

▶▶▶ At 76 years old, Daniele is a hell of a man! He is in the office every morning at dawn at his factory near Milan. However, when he's not working, he races on all the European circuits with his Ferrari 488 – he was 9th out of 72 participants last year in the Ferrari Challenge Championship! He also fishes for tuna, amberjack and dentex as much as possible in the Mediterranean Sea around the island of Elba off the coast of Tuscany and goes on fishing trips every winter, mostly to Madagascar. He is so passionate about slow jigging that he wrote a book on the subject for his friends and is planning to write a second edition this year! Our slow jigging maestro is in Olympic form. On the boat, when a mate fixes his leader, cut by a narrow-barred Spanish mackerel for example, he takes the opportunity to do a series of push-ups to stay warm! And during the four days we spent in Nosy Be ("Big Island" in Malagasy), he went for a 30-minute jog on the beach every morning before breakfast! When fishing, this sportsman has the absolute concentration to control the jig and the line, to stay informed

about the depth, the nature of the bottom, and the detection of fish and quickly changes strategy depending on the configuration of the spot. He never rests and never takes less than four jigging rods with him which he chooses at any given moment depending on the depth, the wind and the current.

A hit on the Cordelière Bank
Nirvana Fishing expeditions on the offshore banks depend on the weather conditions. They are changeable in the northwest of Madagascar but generally stable enough in December to venture offshore and sleep onboard a catamaran.



There are 11 species of barracuda in the Indian Ocean. We identified this one as Sphyræna jello, or pickhandle barracuda (but we can't be certain!)

Nivana Fishing expeditions

THESE CATAMARAN TRIPS ARE À LA CARTE AND TAKE PLACE SOUTH OR NORTH OF NOSY BE ISLAND DEPENDING ON THE SEASON AND WEATHER.

We had a wonderful crew with us on the catamaran, always caring and always smiling. Valente, the friendly, imperturbably calm captain, the Top Chef Julio, Noella who took care of our cabins and the service (and bruised back massages!) and the young mate Giuliano, as discreet as he is efficient.

Life on board was well organised. Breakfast was at 6.30am, departure for fishing when everyone was ready and return to the catamaran half an hour before dark. A quick shower, a good meal of fish or zebu and then off to bed!

Our catamaran was a 45-footer, ideal for three anglers and we had a cabin each. Other larger (50ft and more) more luxurious catamarans with air-conditioned cabins can accommodate up to six guests. It is Alain Soulet who is, of course, responsible for booking the catamarans according to the wishes and budgets of his clients. Note that Alain is one of the three partners of the famous Tropical Lodge on the Mitsio Islands and that a combined trip catamaran-Mitsio is easily possible with him.

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From left to right: Julio, Valente, Noella, Giuliano and Alain Soulet.



Chef Julio and Noella worked miracles in the catamaran's mini kitchen.



The villagers visit us.



The boats of Nirvana Fishing offer space for four anglers.



Giuliano cleans the catch of the day.



Many big fish roam the Leven bank. Fights with slow jiggling equipment are often epic!

▶▶▶ Nowadays, you must travel quite a while from Nosy Be Island to find areas that are still full of fish. Having left the beach of the Sarimanok Hotel early in the afternoon, we motored more than 40 miles to reach the catamaran which was waiting for us at the first mooring. From there, we gradually moved north where we experienced increasingly sustained fish activity. The jiggling playground is immense in this region. It is near the Mitsio archipelago, 70km north of Nosy Be, that we find the largest continental shelf of the entire island of Madagascar. About 40km north-west of Nosy Be, the famous Leven Bank begins, a system of shoals (culminating 10m below the surface) which extends from north to south for more than 100km and 40km from east to west. The Leven Bank is itself divided into several banks and, this time, Alain has mainly focused on the

northernmost part, the Cordelière Bank and its mysterious drop-offs.

From our first morning on the Cordelière, we experienced a festival of bites. For hours, any jig sent to the bottom was attacked!"

For Daniele, who tried to keep count, we caught and released more than 100 fish on that first day on the Cordelière (I think he caught half himself!) that included green jobfish,



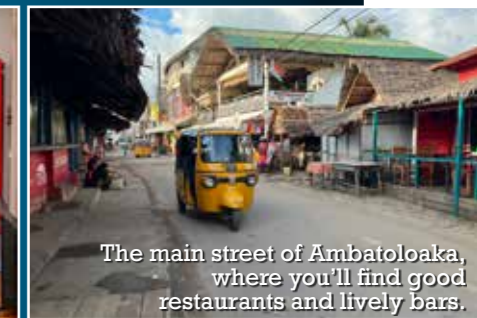
Pink jobs are generally caught beyond 100m. This one was hooked at around 160m.

Hotel Sarimanok in Nosy Be, a friendly and practical place for anglers

This is the hotel that Alain Soulet recommends to his clients. Located on the beach of Ambatoloaka, next to the small Notre Dame des Flots church (don't miss the *capella* singing during the Sunday office!) and to many bars and restaurants, this hotel has 15 rooms, a swimming pool, a private villa with its swimming pool and a very good restaurant by the beach.

This hotel is well maintained, and the staff bend over backwards to assist you in any excursion or visit to Nosy Be and the surrounding islands like Nosy Komba. In addition, Nirvana Fishing boats pick up their anglers right in front of the hotel – which is convenient!

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The main street of Ambatoloaka, where you'll find good restaurants and lively bars.



The view from the Sarimanok terrace.



Notre Dame des Flots church



Blue spangled emperor presented by Daniele and Nanou.



Alain with an orange-spotted grouper (Epinephelus coioides), a common species in the North of Madagascar.



The longnose emperor is a particularly combative fish.



Dogtooth tuna will happily attack slow jigs.



▶▶▶ rosy jobfish, five grouper species, bohar snapper, blubberlip snapper, grey sharks, small dogtooth tuna (the big ones disappeared), GTs to 25kg, bluefin trevally, yellow-spotted trevally, black jack, blue spangled emperor, long nose emperor, narrow-barred Spanish mackerel, Greater barracuda and pickhandle barracuda. Daniele even hooked a 150lb black marlin which jumped to the other side of the boat before freeing itself! Later, we saw a big Indo-Pacific sailfish hitting a jig twice with its bill just under the hull! Big fish were lost, of course, and our jig bags became much lighter. In short, action the way we like it! To keep up with this infernal cadence, we were firmly supported by the excellent crew of the Yin,

Jean-Claude the skipper and Nanou the deckhand, two real professionals to whom you can entrust the making of your knots and rigs with their eyes closed!

We fished the Cordelière Bank for two days without respite before the wind increased and forced us to leave the open sea to reach Cape Saint Sébastien and its sheltered anchorages. We didn't lose much because this wild and magnificent area offers excellent spots for jigging and lure fishing.

One hour by boat north of this cape begins the area known as Courrier Bay, which is also part of the different expedition programs offered by Alain Soulet. Two loyal F&T readers were there during that same week with another boat of Alain, but to fish, unlike us, a lot

with big poppers and a little with jigs. The day before their return to Nosy Be we went for a drink on their catamaran anchored not far from us.

They were so happy with their trip that they were already booking the next one for the spring, which Daniele also did before even leaving Nosy Be! ♦

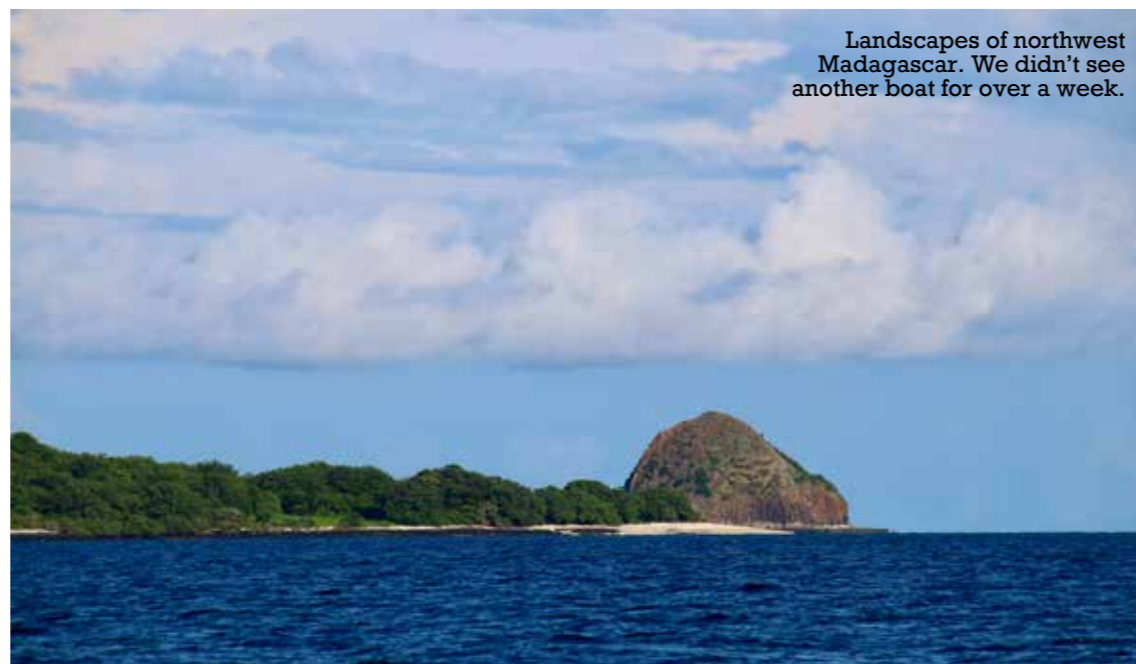
A white blotched grouper (Epinephelus multinotatus).



The technique is formidable on the green jobfish that we often caught one after the other!



Landscapes of northwest Madagascar. We didn't see another boat for over a week.



This bohar snapper was caught using the speed jigging technique.



A beautiful black-saddled coral grouper. All groupers are returned to the water. If they can't be released due to barautroma or a shark attack, they will be taken for the table. There is no waste in Madagascar!



Equipped for a slow jigging trip in

Madagascar

The equipment of Daniele Scabini and fishing guide Alain Soulet

As its name suggests, slow jigging is a slow fishing technique intended for prospecting without squeezing the entire water column by making your jig "dance" from the bottom to the surface. Regularly, though, the angler releases his jig during varying depths (short fall, long fall); the jig then descends while gliding and zigzagging, imitating a wounded fish or a fleeing squid. And this is when you often have a bite! To work a slow jig to perfection, super light and sensitive equipment is necessary. Some rods mentioned further weigh as little as 120g! As for the lightweight modern baitcasting reels, they are filled with PE2 or PE3 line (30lb-40lb braid) and at most with PE4 (50lb) for heavy slow jigging! Here are the references of rods, reels and jigs used by Daniele Scabini and Alain Soulet, our two experienced slow jiggers.

Sharks are also attracted to slow jigs. Nanou holds this one with a lasso... time to unhook and release it.



Slow jigs are commonly rigged with a tandem or two tandem assist hooks. Like the VMC 7269AH.



The rods used to jig on depths of less than 100m with jigs weighing 150g-250g

Daniele particularly likes the Evergreen Poseidon series of rods.



The Accurate Boss 400.



This is the most common scenario in Madagascar. Anglers fish with jigs above large coral bommies, along drop-offs, below bonito frenzies and around interesting baitfish balls detected and spotted using a depth sounder. In this context, Daniele Scabini's favourite rods are two models from the Evergreen brand: The **Poseidon Slow Jerker 603-4** (jigs 90-200g) with an **Avet Raptor SXJ 6/4 M.C.2** reel filled with PE2 braid, and the **Poseidon Long Fall Jerker PLJ-710 ML** with one **Accurate Xtreme 400** narrow, PE2 braid. Alain used his **Temple Reef Levitate 68-2** (150-400g, 2016 model) a lot, with his trusty **Daiwa Saltiga 35NHL** reel filled with PE3. As for their rods #2, Daniele had a **Seafloor Control Jam JR 603-2** and Alain a **Sakura Mitsio SJ 30lbs**.

Alain's slow jigging rods are all coupled with Daiwa Saltiga 35NHL reels.



Alain Soulet in action with his Temple Reef Levitate 68-2.



To jig between 100m-150m with jigs weighing more than 250g and to practice “long falling” in all weathers



The Spathe rods – here a DEEP I – are designed to perform long falls; they are powerful enough to pump a good fish.

On the steep drop-offs of the Leven Bank, Daniele primarily fished with a **Spathe Deep I** rated 200-500g (600g max) rigged with a **Studio Ocean Mark Blue Heaven BH L-50 HI/L** (20th Anniversary Limited Edition) filled with PE3. This rod, as well as Alain’s Spathe Long Ranger 80MH coupled with a **Daiwa Saltiga SJ 35NHL** with PE3, are two inline models (the line runs through the middle of the blank), a very interesting concept for windy days and long falling! Indeed, when practicing long falls with a classic rod, it is common for the braid to get caught in the tip rings when lowering the rod. To avoid this, the angler makes a quick lateral semi-circle with the tip, like a little whip as he lowers his rod, but sometimes that is not enough, especially when it’s windy! If the braid loops around the blank and a bite occurs at the same time, it takes a miracle to avoid disaster. Rods with so-called Brazilian guides or spiral wrap reduce the problem. With an inside line rod like the Spathe, the tangle problem is out! Plus, these **Spathe** rods (from the famous Temple Reef brand) have a good backbone and allow you to pump a fish with some authority! The **Spathe Deep I**, which measures 1.98m and weighs 158g is suitable for jigs up to 600g



The Spathe Deep and Long Ranger are well suited to the long fall technique.

(Daniele used it with 650g jigs), but more powerful versions (Deep II and III) allow you to use jigs weighing 900g and even 1200g! The **Spathe Long Ranger 80MH** measures 2.40m, weighs 180g and offers a jigging range of 150-400g; it was equipped with a **Saltiga SJ 35NHL**, the most reliable slow jigging reel according to Alain! This Long Ranger is great for the long fall technique and is also available in 500g and 600g jig power. Finally, these Spathe rods are in two sections and offer a reduced length for travelling: 111cm for the Deep I and 145cm for the Long Ranger 80. The Spathe rods can be found on www.pechextreme.com



Spathe Long Ranger 80MH, Saltiga 35NHL and Scout jig from Seafloor Control.

Slow jigs



With two assist hooks on the jig, this yellow-spotted trevally couldn't escape!

For a week of intensive jigging in Madagascar, you need to bring at least twenty-five jigs per person because the Spanish mackerels and the barracudas will steal several from you every day. Daniele brought 10kg of jigs with him! His favourite slow jigs are all from the Japanese brand **Seafloor Control**, these are the Arc, the Scout, the Spunky, the Abyss and the New Rector. On the deep drop-offs where rosy jobfish and amberjack roam, he also successfully fished a **Hearty Rise Slow Deep II** jig weighing 650g! Alain Soulet particularly likes the following: **Sakura Spinback**, **Evergreen Caprice**, **Storm Kensaki**, **FC Labo SL** and **Explorer Tackle Funa**. I had brought along several **Sea Falcon Slow Jigs Z** of 150g and 180g. These are superb Japanese jigs whose action is great since they all quickly disappeared on the battlefield. I also took some **Explorer Tackle Funa** 180g, all were lost soon due to the razor teeth gang and the same story happened to all my **Daiwa Saltiga SK** 140g, 170g and 200g jigs. This is the harsh law of jigging in Madagascar!

Assist hooks for slow jigs

We used the **VMC 7269AH 7/0** a lot. For the smaller jigs, we also used the **VMC 7117AH 5/0** which is thinner, and which sometimes opened during fights. This had no untoward consequences because we mostly fished using two tandems of hooks (one at the front and



Just a small selection of Daniele's slow jigs collection.

one at the rear) and there were always one, two or three other hooks stuck in the fish! The **Daiwa Saltiga SK** jigs are originally equipped with a tandem of solid **VMC 7264** and the **Explorer Tackle Funa** is delivered with a large sturdy single hook. I also tried with satisfaction the **Hearty Rise Keen Power** assist SJA50 11/0 (the one with a 2cm cord).



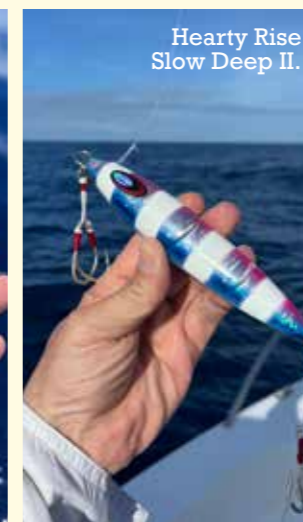
Bubberlip snapper caught using a 150g Scout.



Evergreen Caprice.



Explorer Tackle Funa.



Hearty Rise Slow Deep II.



Sea Falcon Z.



Speed jigs

Each day we also did a bit of speed jiggling. The jigs that hit hard were the **Megabass Ocean Slash Beat** 150g silver, the **CB One Quick** 200g yellow/silver, the River2Sea Sea Rock 200g abalone and the **Sakura Orion** 250g silver.

As for the leader: 5m of the new 80lbs Saltiga Fluoro, a relatively soft fluorocarbon from Daiwa.

Arming the speed jigs

The ready-to-fish **VMC Fishfighter 7264SA** assist hook size 11/0 proved to be very solid once again. It's a shame VMC doesn't also produce this excellent assist hook in size 13/0!



CB One Quick 200.



Megabass Ocean Slash Beat 150 with a Hearty Rise Keen Power Assist hook.



River2Sea Sea Rock 200 with a VMC Fishfighter 7264SA.

Terminal tackle

You need to carry some accessories to attach your jig to the leader, some pouches of split rings 80, 100 and 150lbs, solid rings, scissors, two split ring pliers - one light (100lbs) and one strong (200lbs).

Explorer Tackle Ball Bearing Combos

To securely connect the leader to the jig, Explorer Tackle offers two "combos": 1 rolling swivel + 1 split ring, or 1



rolling swivel + 1 split ring + 1 solid ring which is used to attach the cord of an assist hook. I used the 65kg model. It is sold in packs of 4 and is also handy for lure fishing (take 4 or 5 pouches for a week of fishing).

Decoy Front Ring 5-51

Practical accessory for connecting a leader to a lure or a jig. I used the 75lbs and the 100lbs versions which I thought I could attach to a jig eyelet by hand, but you need split ring pliers. This does not take away its great interest, giving complete freedom to a jig. Available in 50, 60, 75, 100 and 150lbs.

