

## Mahi Mahi



I dropped the bait over the side of the boat, opened the free spool on the reel, and let out a hundred feet or so of line. I turned the reel's crank to engage the gears and to stop more line from going out. We were trolling a weed line for Mahi Mahi so I held on tightly to the rod, ready for a strike.

We were once again aboard the Fancy, Tim Parker's 36-foot Tiara, plying the deep water south of Isle Morada in keys of Florida. We had come here last week to angle for the delicious Mahi Mahi and also to escape the heat and humidity of Lake County. Sure, it's warm and humid that far south, too, but it's different when you're in a boat, on the ocean, fishing. Trust me.

"Fish on!" I yelled after only two minutes or so. Tim backed off the throttle to slow the boat so I could fight the fish and work it back to the boat, which I did. Mike Parker, Tim's son, gaffed the beautifully colored fish, hauled it up and over the gunwale. After a couple of pictures, into the icy cooler it went.

A couple of minutes later, Mike nailed one a tad bigger than mine, and after some incredible acrobatics, there were two Mahi in the cooler.

Trolling for this tasty species isn't hard. We looked for thick weed lines of floating, dead vegetation ten to twenty miles off shore. We used pre-rigged ballyhoos for bait with giant saltwater plastic lures that resemble tube jigs. Trolling speed is fairly fast, about five miles per hour.

Even though the water is deep, up to several hundred feet, the fish lie just underneath the weeds, so the closer the bait travels along a defined weed edge the better.

Over the course of a couple days, we caught a lot of Mahi, also known as dorado, but many were undersized and had to be released to grow up. But enough of the fishing details, right? I know you want more of the human side of this trip, what else did these guys do, what other paint was on the canvas of this particular trip?

The fourth member of our group was Bobby Parker, younger brother to Mike. The Fancy was our home for a week as we eschewed the more civilized confines of an expensive motel for the more affordable (read that as "free") space below deck. Tim and Bobby took the big bed, Mike had the upper fold-down berth, and I was quite happily ensconced each night in the lower fold-down berth beneath Mike.

Sunday afternoon we rented SCUBA gear and dived above a reef, enjoying the solitude and splendor of the ocean bottom with its lovely and elegant coral. When you are diving, fish of all sizes and colors pass by, unafraid, knowing that you're no predator in the water. They can tell that your teeth are fit only to bite a baloney sandwich, that your underwater movement skills are clumsy at best, and that the only living thing you're like to kill in their environment is yourself when you screw up in deep water.



On Tuesday, we all hopped into the rental car to bring Mike back to the Miami airport for an early evening flight because he had to be back in Mundelein. We got him there on time, but leaving to go back to the Keys was a traffic nightmare. So, we opted to kill some time and went to South Beach, the popular area of ocean beach and nightlife.

Mango's Mambo Bar attracted our attention with its fantastic musica cubana so we stopped for a libation. Cuban singers and dancers entertained and electrified the patrons with style and energy. We stayed for a second sarsaparilla.

Dinners each night tasted even better than the day before, a concept seemingly impossible. Seafood lovers to a man, we ordered fresh fish entrees beyond compare including blackened and jerk grouper, medleys of Mahi Mahi and red snapper, and local spiny lobsters. If that weren't enough, Gulf shrimp routinely found their way to our plates and, without a doubt, we consumed enough delectable conch chowder to feed the proverbial army.

But the best came at the end. On the last day there, we drove to Key West to see the famous Sunset Celebration. Sprawling over a huge oceanfront boardwalk and plaza, dozens of artisans and actors entertained and thrilled thousands of people who came to witness a glorious sunset and participate in the fun.



As for me, your intrepid reporter, I took it all in. I got a tattoo on my left leg, just above the ankle. It's a complete ring of tiny fish, nose to tail. For ten bucks, I got my palm read by Solaya. It was so cool! And she was disarmingly accurate, something that left me a little spooked by it all. But her prediction? A good future for me.

And later that night, after watching sword swallowers, jugglers on unicycles with lighted torches, singers and other assorted actors, we bade farewell to the Sunset fun and went to a bar called "Sloppy Joe's", a joint not far from Ernest Hemingway's house that the writer himself used to frequent.

The bar itself was rectangular and efficient in its three sided-design. The walls were adorned with huge fish: blue marlin, sailfish, and Mahi Mahi, trophies that must have delighted, and financially enhanced, the taxidermists. Opposite the bar was a stage for bands, and on that particular night, a rock band was really rockin'.

The place was jumping. Halfway through a cold beer, as Tim, Bobby and I chatted with a young couple on vacation from London, about 80 people colorfully dressed as pirates stormed Sloppy Joe's and took over the dance floor. The place went crazy. You had to be there to believe it.

As it turned out, these folks, all corporate OSHA experts, were in Key West for several days of continuing education, and over the years, an evening "pirate" theme emerged for their recreation, always at Sloppy Joe's. We had been lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

So, as always, a fishing trip isn't only about catching and killing. It's mostly an opportunity to see something else about life, a blackboard to diagram another experience, a piece of paper on which to document a journey. I'm glad you came along.

Oh, yeah. The tattoo? It's only temporary and will wash away in three weeks.

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