





One highway, two wheels and 10 species of knuckle-busting, back-burning, high-flying fish add up to the coolest fishing adventure in North America **BY JOHN McMURRAY / PHOTOS BY RON MODRA**





**The winter of '09 was brutal.** New York's fall striper run had ended unusually early. By January, temps were in the single digits, and I was already suffering from an acute case of cabin fever. On top of this, my wife was seven months' pregnant with twins, our first children. Gone would be the days of being able to pack up at a moment's notice and head south to fish. At the ripe old age of 38, I was being thrust into adulthood and fatherdom. Though I was excited about being a dad, I couldn't help but feel the walls were closing in.

*The Florida Keys continue to offer the world's best and most diversified fishing experiences. And they still produce the world's finest mates and captains. KJ Zeher (above left) throws a perfect pancake over ballyhoo; these baits were used to catch six Atlantic sailfish, including this 75-pound monster (above right).*

As I pondered the gravity of such thoughts, I sat down to check my e-mails. Up popped a message from my longtime friend Terry Gibson. The subject line read "SNOOK!" Attached was a photo of Terry holding a big, fat, silvery fish. As I ogled the photo and soaked in the beauty of the blue water, I was startled by my wife's hand on my shoulder.

"You should go," she said quietly. "You deserve one last hurrah before the babies come." I was on the phone to Terry in a matter of minutes.

This couldn't be your run-of-the-mill trip. As my wife had clearly stated, it would be my "last hurrah." I wanted it to be extraordinary. I started to think *Easy Rider*, *Fear and Loathing, 92 in the Shade*. This would be my chance to realize a full-blown fantasy—do the trip on a bike! Make it a classic motorcycle tour from Miami to the Keys, with a heavy dose of hardcore fishing thrown in.

A few quick phone calls to some media contacts and I was set. A brand-new Suzuki Boulevard touring bike would be waiting for me—a big piece of chrome-laden machinery, with a speedometer that topped out at 150mph. Perfect!

Two weeks later, I was on a plane headed to West Palm Beach and Terry's house.

## Day 1: West Palm

It's surprisingly cold the night I land. Perhaps I should have heeded Terry's warning to pack some warm clothes. Still, compared to what I've left in New York, it feels tropical.

Terry picks me up and we head to his house in Jensen Beach to develop a game plan. Several cold beers and three helpings of the absolute best homemade venison chili known to mankind later, we lay down our strategy. In seven days, we will try to cover all the hot spots in the Keys with a rigorous combination of inshore and off-shore fishing.

## Day 2: Key Largo

I'm up at the crack of dawn, but Terry's already outside loading gear. I can see his breath as I sip coffee from the comfort of the heated kitchen. It couldn't be that cold, could it? But as I walk out the door, the fresh air startles me.

"I can't remember the last time it was this cold in these parts," Terry says. Heck, this is Florida. Undeterred, I put on every bit of clothing in my duffel and jump on the bike. I crank the throttle and give Terry's wife, Ericka, a quick wave goodbye as the bike leaps onto the street. I lean back, shift into fifth and let the bike do its thing as palm trees whisk by in a blur. We're on our way; the sense of freedom is overwhelming.

Three hours later, we're splashing Terry's boat in Flamingo. Off we go through a maze of mangrove-lined creeks. Each turn we take is indistinguishable from the last. I thank God I'm not the one navigating through this twisting labyrinth.

After settling on a spot, we toss shrimp imitations up against the mangrove roots. I spot a

Photo: TERRY GIBSON (top left)

## If You Go

### Best Time to Fish:

February is the perfect time for a mid-winter getaway. It's also one of the best times to target sailfish, which stack up against the offshore reefs. January and February are also prime months for blackfin tuna.

Swordfish are available year-round. Some say the fish are larger during winter. Daytime swordfishing is difficult in rough seas; summer is the time to catch monsters from the deep.

April through summer offer the best opportunities for tarpon, bonefish and permit, as well as red drum and snook. You can catch these fish in the winter, but you need a string of warm days.

### Guides:

**FLAMINGO:** Capt. Jorge Valverde, Low Places; 954-822-0647; [lowplacesguideservice.com](http://lowplacesguideservice.com)

**KEY LARGO:** Capt. Jason Swensson, Lone Ranger; 305-522-2340; [keylargobackcountry.com](http://keylargobackcountry.com)

**ISLAMORADA (OFFSHORE):** Capt. Scott Stanczyk, *Catch 22*; 800-742-7945; [budnmarys.com/catch22](http://budnmarys.com/catch22)

**ISLAMORADA (INSHORE):** Capt. Bob Reineman; 305-852-0741; [budnmarys.com/reineman](http://budnmarys.com/reineman)

**KEY WEST (OFFSHORE AND INSHORE):** Capt. Tony Murphy's Saltwater Angler Outfitters; 800-223-1629; [saltwaterangler.com](http://saltwaterangler.com)

*A decade ago, Florida banned longlining in state waters, and swordfish populations rebounded. Most anglers catch them at night, but the Bud 'n' Mary's Marina crews, and the Stanczyk family in particular, pioneered fishing for swordfish during the day-time. The fish run larger, like this 255-pounder.*

good-looking snag, make a toss and *bang!* I'm on to a solid mangrove snapper.

Two more fruitless casts and *pow!* Another really solid hit, but this time the drag is screaming. A much better fish, yet after a brief battle, it spits the hook.

At the mouth of the creek, I stick an exceptionally small snook. Terry forces me to pose for a photo. A pontoon boat full of European tourists goes by and applauds, while the tour guide pokes fun at the fish's size. We stay with the spot, getting a snook every other cast, but they're all small fish. Still, quite fun on fly rods and light gear.

We write down day one as a score and celebrate our success with cold beers and fried grouper sandwiches. I make the obligatory phone call to my wife and tell her I miss her.

### Day 3: Islamorada Sails

The original plan is to target bonefish and permit with Capt. Jason Swensson in Key Largo. We arrive in Largo, but given the cold spell, it's unlikely we'll find any willing bonefish. Just as we contemplate

riding back to Flamingo, Richard Stanczyk, long-time owner of Bud 'n' Mary's Marina, calls Terry and says to get our butts down there for some prime light-tackle sailfishing. We're off.

Richard greets us at the crack of dawn with his son Nick, who is fresh out of college but already a highly experienced captain. Because of a 100-year low tide, we need to be taxied via small boat to the *Catch 22*, a 54-foot custom Carolina-built sportfisher.

A short stop to catch ballyhoo and cigar minnows for bait, and we're off to the sailfish grounds, the edge of the Florida Keys reef tract, where the azure waters abruptly drop off from 45 to 90 feet. Richard and Terry explain that a northeast wind stacks bait schools against the reef. The sails gang up in cooperative "wolf packs," swashbuckling baitfish they've driven into a cyclone formation with their bills while the others feed on the wounded fish falling out of the bait ball. On the reef edge, we see bait and spray fly out of the water. The captain throttles down and the mates busy themselves getting the deck ready.

Live baits are bridled with rubberbands and small circle hooks. Kites are launched and lines

are snapped into outriggers. Less than 10 minutes in idle time goes by before the captain yells, “Port rigger!” as the line snaps off and peels off a light spin reel. The fight begins.

I try to put pressure on the fish, but the drag seems very loose. I go to tighten it, but the mate yells: “Don’t touch that!” We’re working on these large pelagic (read super-fast/super-strong, long-distance migrating) fish on 12-pound-test! Twenty minutes go by and the mate is grabbing the bill of a beautiful, silvery-blue 75-pound sailfish. Sweet!

Deckhands KJ Zeher and Nick are poetry in motion as they stay in constant communication with Capt. Scott Stanczyk, Richard’s brother, who is in the tower at the helm. We stick another five sailfish and a frighteningly large barracuda and lose a couple more sails before we head in.

It’s Super Bowl Sunday at the hotel bar, and what a scene! There’s a gaggle of shot-filled baby boomers acting like they’re in college. There’s a Chihuahua running around painted red and white (Arizona Cardinals colors). The female bartenders

are scantily clad in referee uniforms and very attentive. Terry lets them know I’ve caught my first Atlantic sailfish, and the traditional “first sailfish” shots begin.

I don’t make it halfway though the game, or my fish tacos, before putting a fistful of cash on the bar and sneaking away to avoid doing more shots. After all, tomorrow is swordfish day. Those things are reputed to pull like tow trucks and the sea is supposed to be rough.

I fall asleep on the couch and forget to call my very pregnant wife, later using the “bad cell-phone reception” excuse.

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## Day 4: Islamorada Sword Fight

It’s 5:00 a.m. and the wind is a honking 25 knots. We’re told it’s going to be a bumpy two-hour ride out to a series of shelves in about 1,600 feet. Terry and the crew look for comfortable sleeping areas while I get the lowdown from Richard Stanczyk, who pioneered daytime swordfishing. Prior to Stanczyk, almost all recreationally caught swords were taken at night.

Two hours of pounding through broadside 8-foot seas and we arrive at our destination. The mate drops what appears to be a 15- to 20-pound piece of concrete below squid and bonito baits. An hour passes and nothing.

We pull up and move to another spot. The baits go back down, and in a few minutes the mate shouts: “I think we’ve got the bottom. Ummm. Nope, that’s a fish!”

Organized chaos ensues as I’m strapped into the chair and harness. I crank hard, using my back and legs, but pulling a large, angry fish up from 1,600 feet is no easy task. The shots from last night, along with tossing seas, aren’t helping much. Still, I prevail and we boat a swordfish well north of 100 pounds. It will be donated to a veterans’ dinner later that week. High-fives are in order. Score!

*You can always find a well-equipped boat and eager crew at Bud 'n' Mary's Marina (below). Nick Stanczyk and KJ Keher (bottom right) are two young guns who love to put people on billfish and compete against other boats.*



## Great Eats (and Drinks)

Fresh seafood, funky ambiance and sweet rum drinks abound; try these local hot spots

**Snapper's**, Mile Marker 94.5, Key Largo  
An eclectic menu, but the bar food is what I found most appealing. These folks make a mean fried grouper sandwich and the seared tuna is darn good. The bartenders here are awesome. A good mix of eccentric locals and tourists make for interesting nights.

**Whale Harbor**, Mile Marker 83.5, Islamorada

If you're down with the all-you-can-eat seafood buffet, this is the place to go. Steamed shrimp, grilled grouper, dolphin, snapper—the list goes on. We went upstairs to the à la carte restaurant and had the best whole fried yellowtail snapper ever!

**Lazy Days**, Mile Marker 79.9, Oceanside, Islamorada

Just northeast of Bud 'n' Mary's, and the food is excellent. Great rum drinks and

the usual selection of fresh Keys seafood, but the prime rib is also excellent.

### **Mangrove Mama's Restaurant,**

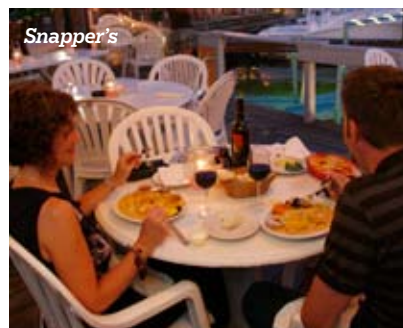
Mile Marker 20, Sugarloaf Key  
Easy to miss, but don't! Just west of the Bow Channel Bridge on the Gulf side. A Keys landmark, well known for its distinctly Caribbean theme. Saturday night is the weekly pig roast.

### **Sloppy Joes,**

201 Duval St., Key West  
Been around since 1933, a Key West tradition. Party central no matter what day it is. Always live entertainment, and most of the time, it's interactive.

### **Conch Republic Seafood,**

631 Greene Street, Key West  
If you've caught something you want to eat, bring it here. Terry and I kept a Cero mackerel, and the chefs fried it to sublime perfection—the best single fish



meal I've had in my 38 years. Check out the 160-gallon tanks displaying grouper, red snapper and other local marine fauna. No fishing allowed, we're told.

**Capt. Tony's Saloon**, 428 Green St., Key West

A Key West landmark. It started out as Hemingway's "Sloppy Joe's." See Hemingway's original bar stool, and check out the "hanging tree" that grows through the saloon's roof. Business cards dating back to the '40s line the walls. Not much for eats here. Strictly drinking. Expect to hang out with an interesting array of locals.

Second drop in the same spot and we get another take almost immediately. After a considerably longer battle—more than an hour—Terry brings up a larger fish (255 pounds) that parts the line right at the boat. Nick Stanczyk is able to stick it with the harpoon as KJ sticks the flying gaff into it. Phew! More high-fives.

Terry looks pale and his legs are wobbly. The fish weighs 100 pounds more than he does. "How about a tuna fish milkshake?" I ask. He doesn't laugh. Then he thanks the Stanczyks and KJ profusely for putting him on the biggest, strongest fish he's ever caught.

Later that night, we eat the best whole fried yellowtail snapper we've ever had as we brag to a couple of locals about our epic day.

## Day 5: Islamorada Backcountry

The forecast is for worse weather than yesterday, so we don't set our alarm clocks. I wake at 7:00 a.m. and squint out the window. It's flat calm, not a touch of wind. Hoping we can grab a last-minute guide, I jump on the bike, telling Terry I'll meet him at Bud 'n' Mary's.

At the marina office, I ask if there are any available last-minute inshore guides. The guy behind the counter motions to an older gentleman sipping coffee and says, "You've got one of the best in the business right there." Capt. Bob Reineman looks up, saying, "Won't be much in the way of bonefish today, but if you don't mind taking a ride, we can try to find some snook and maybe reds."

We get under way in one of the original flats skiffs, a vintage wooden Willy skiff that Bob has run for decades. We run for about 40 minutes on glass, past beautiful bonefish flats and mangrove islands, until we get to a nondescript spot.

*The teeming wilderness of Florida Bay offers the world's best inshore fishing—for snook, tarpon, redfish, bonefish and more—year-round. No Keys visit is complete without a day of backcountry exploration.*

Snappers photo, COURTESY SNAPPERS





*Capt. Tony's Saloon (above left)—the original "Sloppy Joe's"—was Hemingway's favorite Key West watering hole. The red drum (above right) is another great conservation success story. Nearly wiped out by the blackened redfish craze, the species was placed off-limits to commercial harvest and subsequently bounced back.*

I'm amused that despite 60-degree temps, Bob is wearing an arctic snow suit.

He gets on the polling platform, and in a few minutes we begin to see puffs of mud. "Probably redfish," says Bob. The farther we get, the more puffs we see. After a number of casts right on top of, in front of and behind the puffs, we can't seem to buy a strike. I ditch the fly rod for spin gear and still can't stick one. I ask if we might want to change out the small bucktail jigs and try a Gulp! shrimp bait. Bob shrugs, saying, "If they're gonna eat, they're gonna eat."

Finally, *bam!* I'm into a solid fish. After a brief fight, up comes a quality red drum of about 26 inches. Terry hooks up shortly after, and from there on we have a consistent pick.

At the northern point of a mangrove island, there's a small oyster bar jutting out. As we get closer, mullet spray out of the water. I get a cast just a little beyond the bar and start working the bucktail back across the point when something slams

it. Line zings from the reel. Shortly thereafter, I'm holding a gorgeous 30-inch snook. Sweet!

The wind picks up and we make one more drift in the lee of a mangrove island. Terry comes tight, and for about 10 seconds can't stop a fish that heads for the hills, but it pulls the hook. "Probably a twenty-pound snook," mutters Capt. Bob.

We run in with a 30-knot wind at our port quarter. I'm thinking we're gonna get soaked, but the 1978 hand-built wood skiff tackles the seas with grace. We make it all the way back, dry as a bone.

## Day 6: Key West

This time the weather forecast is dead-on. It's in the low 40s and the wind is wailing out of the northwest. We take the morning to rest, then head south to Key West in hopes of tackling blackfin tuna, jacks, Cero mackerel and whatever else presents itself. It's so windy the bike rattles as we go over the 7-mile bridge.

Instead of fishing, we spend the afternoon in Key West checking out some landmarks and drinking beer at those famous Key West bars.

We finally hook up with the new owner of Key West's The Saltwater Angler, longtime guide Capt. Tony Murphy. He takes us to Fish Busterz, and we gorge on fresh steamed shrimp. A giant tarpon I'd estimate in the 200-pound range rolls not 100 feet from the picnic table where we're seated.

Later, Tony shows us around the shop. He's not optimistic about tomorrow's weather, but says we'll give it a go whatever the case.

We party hard that night with a women's flag football team that happens to be staying at our hotel. I forget to call my wife. Oops. She's not amused when I check in with her at 2:00 a.m.

## Day 7: Key West

We're under way at 6:00 a.m. Tony's 31-foot *Contender* cuts through the chop like a warm knife through butter. I really want one of these. I

## Where to Stay

Great places to put up your feet after fishing

### Dove Creek Lodge, Mile Marker

94.5, Key Largo; 3-night packages start at \$525 per person; 800-401-0057; [dovecreeklodge.com](http://dovecreeklodge.com)

*Deluxe one- and two-bedroom suites with full kitchens. Plush and very comfortable. Have your catch prepared at Snapper's, located next door.*

### La Siesta Resort, Mile Marker 80.2, Islamorada; rooms start at \$189 per person; 305-664-2132; [lasiestaresort.com](http://lasiestaresort.com)

*Roomy villas and suites, each with a full kitchen. Also three- and five-bedroom oceanfront houses. There's a boat ramp on premises.*

### Doubletree Grand Key Resort (above), 3990 S. Roosevelt Blvd., Key West; rooms start at \$219 per person; 305-293-1818; [grandkeyresort.com](http://grandkeyresort.com)

*Connecting double-queen rooms and luxurious king suites.*

*Complimentary shuttle service to Duval Street.*



consider what I need to send two kids to college in 2027 and quickly forget about the idea.

We look long and hard for bait, but pilchards are nowhere to be found. No matter, we head northeast for a bit and run into showering ballyhoo. I grab a spinning rod with a popper on it and wing it out in the general direction. A Cero mackerel leaps 10 feet out of the water, knocking the popper with it. As soon as it hits the water, another one takes it.

I grab the fly rod and stick a bunch of mackerel before the bonito move in, then I stick a bunch of them. We're into backing on just about every fish.

After a few hours, we head farther offshore to see if we can't pull some grouper on butterfly jigs. Tony takes us out another few miles to 200 feet. We drop the 5-ounce jigs to the bottom, then work them back up. Terry messes around with some small mahi that have surrounded the boat.

On the second drop, I'm into a solid fish. I start pulling it off the bottom when I feel a solid thump, then deadweight. Then there's another solid thump and the rod doubles over and I almost go over with it. After an extended fight, the line parts. "Big hammerhead," Tom says. Yikes! This happens two more times before we realize that our efforts are in vain. We head back to port.

That night we meet up again with the women's flag football team. They invite us to a wet T-shirt contest. Purely out of politeness, we oblige. Terry goes home early. I end up as the guy with the bucket of water. Priceless. I remember to call my wife early this time. I leave out the wet-T-shirt details.

## Day 8: Homecoming

I arrive in New York in the afternoon. It's unseasonably warm. My wife is larger than life, with her

# Fish All Year

Plan your trip around peak seasons for the species you've always wanted to catch

INSHORE		
	WHEN TO FISH	WHAT TO USE
<b>Permit</b>	March–October	Live crab or crab patterns like the Merkin.
<b>Bonefish</b>	May–October	Live shrimp or small shrimp flies, such as the Crazy Charlie.
<b>Tarpon</b>	May/June	Soft-plastics like Slug-Gos or Hoggys, or flies such as the the Cockroach.
<b>Red Drum and Snook</b>	Year-round	Small bucktail jigs, DOA shrimp or Clouser-minnow streamers.
OFFSHORE		
<b>Sailfish</b>	Jan/Feb/March	Live bait only—can be caught on the fly, but it's very, very difficult.
<b>Swordfish</b>	Year-round, but winter can bring in bigger fish.	Squid and butterflied baits only.
<b>Blackfin Tuna</b>	Jan/Feb/March	Live bait is most effective, but they can be chummed up to the boat and caught with any minnow imitation fly or plug.
<b>Bonito and Cero mackerel</b>	Year-round	Small-lipped plugs, spoons or minnow-imitating flies. They'll also hit surface plugs, poppers and Crease flies.
<b>Snapper/Grouper</b>	Year-round; mind closed seasons	Chum, cut bait, live pinfish and jigs.
<b>Mahi mahi</b>	April–October	Trolled ballyhoo and mullet, live bait, plastic trolling lures and jigs and flies when a school is chummed up by the boat.

bulbous belly, as she gets out of the car to greet me. The realization that my son and daughter are in there hits me like a ton of bricks. But I'm stoked about it now. The cabin fever's gone, perhaps for good, and at this moment, as I'm holding the full-size version of my wife in my arms, everything seems right in the world. ▲▲▲



*Capt. Tony Murphy has fished for every species known to man in Keys waters, but he especially loves bluewater fly-fishing for Cero mackerel (pictured), tuna and mahi. These speedsters strike so hard, they pull the fly line right out of your fingers.*

**For more information,** check out [fla-keys.com](http://fla-keys.com) or contact **Florida Keys & Key West Tourism Council** at 800-FLA-KEYS.