

Life · Travel

Florida fishing trip lets guests catch their dinner

An expedition from Hawks Cay Resort involves using your sea legs to reel in your catch, cooking it under a chef's guidance and savouring it by the water.



One of the vermillion snapper caught by the group is ready to be prepared for dinner. (LINDA BARNARD)



Angie Orth celebrates catching a 25-kilogram Amberjack with the help of Tailwalker first mate Brandon Simmons. (LINDA BARNARD)



Kelsey Marcus celebrates catching a 25-kilogram Amberjack with the help of Tailwalker first mate Brandon Simmons. (LINDA BARNARD)



From left: Elise Jette, Angie Orth, writer Linda Barnard, Kelsey Marcus and Holly Zawyer arrive at the Hawks Cay Resort marina with their day's catches. (LINDA BARNARD)



Hawks Cay Resort features a saltwater lagoon, where guests can paddle and swim, as well as four pools, from the kid-friendly Pirate Ship Pool to the adults-only Tranquility Pool. (HAWKS CAY RESORT)



Hawks Cay Resort executive chef William Ryan reveals how to prepare the fish. (LINDA BARNARD)



From the sea to the serving plate in the same day — fish, with mango-red pepper-lime salsa over rice cooked in coconut milk. (LINDA BARNARD)



Tailwalker first mate Brandon Simmons displays vermillion snapper caught by writer Linda Barnard, right. Fellow angler Angie Orth, left, later caught at 25-kilogram Amberjack. (HAWKS CAY RESORT PHOTO)

By **LINDA BARNARD** Special to the Star
Thu., June 15, 2017

DUCK KEY, FLA.-I caught my dinner and lost my breakfast.

As it turned out, not a bad trade at all.

Along with four other enthusiastic —but hardly expert — female anglers, I also gained a jolt of self-confidence on the roiling Atlantic Ocean, woozily standing my ground on the pitching deck of the 15-metre [fishing charter Tailwalker](#).

The half-day, deep-sea fishing expedition set out early from [Hawks Cay Resort](#)'s marina at Duck Key, about halfway down the string of coral islands trailing 250 kilometres south along U.S. Route 1 from Miami to [Key West](#), Fla.

This kind of fishing is a long way from my earliest attempts; perched on an upturned bucket on a dock near my Nana's house on the St. Clair River, the hook on my hardware-store rod baited by my patient dad.

The diminutive vermilion snapper I caught on this trip weighed about 500 grams, the opening act for my fellow fishers Angie Orth and Kelsey Marcus. They later muscled 25-kilogram Amberjacks up from the 75-metre depths, to hoots of praise from captain, crew and the less lucky.

The basset hound-sized fish were out of season, so it was back into the ocean with them as soon as the women had triumphantly posed with their catches.

Helping to lead by example was expert fisher and Hawks Cay Resort executive chef William Ryan.

Later, he'd demonstrate how to prepare our catches, part of a new experience offered at the resort: a full day of fishing with a lesson in making the main and sides for a fresh-caught feast that's then served waterside.

Hawks Cay also offers Hook n' Cook, where the kitchen at any of the four resort restaurants will prepare your filleted catch, serving it with two sides for \$25.

But there'd be no dinner for us until we reeled in the main course.

Capt. Dave Shillinger used sonar to guide the bucking boat over an artificial reef, a favourite feeding ground for the fish. He called out when we were positioned to drop our weighted lines, keeping the boat in position.

The star of our expedition was personable, laid-back *Tailwalker* first mate Brandon Simmons, who worked the boat's stern like a guitar tech for a touring big-name rock act. Tying hooks with lightning speed, he selected bait, from live fish to squid chunks, depending on what seemed to be garnering the most interest down below.

In between, he smoothly moved among each angler, offering help and encouragement.

Simmons liked the guitar-tech comparison. "I make sure everything's ready so you guys can make the show happen," he said.

While we got the hang of it, Simmons and Ryan tended the rods until there was a strike, handing them over to us to reel in the fish. It's harder than it looks.

Simmons demonstrated how to brace myself against the side of the rocking boat for stability, how to hold the rod, work the reel and tell the difference between the tug of the lead weight and a hungry snapper.

I froze when I realized I actually had a fish on the line. With the women yelling encouragement and plenty of help from Simmons, I struggled to haul up what amounted to glorified bait.

Queasiness started to take over after the first hour — and I wasn't the only one. Simmons reminded us to keep our eyes on the bouncing horizon to steady our stomachs.

"Come over here and fish!" he said with a grin. "Keeping busy is the best way to forget about it."

It's not always this rough, I was assured, but I wished I heeded the advice of more seasoned anglers and taken a motion-sickness pill the night before. A couple of weaving trips to the head (bathroom) and I was feeling much better.

Back at the marina dock, a cup of ginger ale settled my tummy for a group photo with our catches. I was feeling fine for our cooking lesson

and dinner at the Sand Tables area near the resort's fire pit a few hours later.

We sipped mojitos in an open-air kitchen set up near our table, Ryan putting us to work making a mango-red pepper-lime tropical salsa for our fish, which nicely underscored the Caribbean vibe of the Keys.

He demonstrated how to filet and skin the snapper and slid the fillets into a marinade of olive oil, diced shallots and minced herbs for a few minutes before gently placing them in a hot pan.

What's the biggest mistake people make with fish? "Overcooking it," he said. A couple of minutes on each side is all it takes. The fish was served over arborio rice cooked in coconut milk.

With the ocean in view for sunset, we felt like sea queens who had taken on a physical challenge and triumphed. We raised glasses of chilled white wine to the day, the delicious fish and each other.

Linda Barnard was hosted by Hawks Cay Resort, which did not review or approve this story.

When you go

Fishing for foodies at Hawks Cay: Full-day fishing charter accompanied by the chef, followed by culinary lesson and private ocean-view dinner is \$9,650 (U.S.) for five people. Entertainment and alcoholic beverages extra. To book: Tara Van Hoesen, (305) 743-7000 ext. 3714.

Get there: I flew direct to Miami from Toronto on [Air Canada](#) and took the [Florida Keys Express Shuttle](#) (floridakeysexpressshuttle.com) to Duck Key. It took about two hours.

Get around: A rental car will come in handy to visit Key West, an hour's drive further south, nearby [Marathon](#) and the beaches of [Bahia Honda State Park](#). There are shuttles available from Hawks Cay. Rates vary.

Stay: [Hawks Cay Resort](http://hawkscay.com) (hawkscay.com) on Duck Key is a destination resort with a full program of daily activities for kids and adults. The downside: no beach.

There are 177 hotel rooms and suites. Rates range from \$199 to \$674 per night, depending on season and room category. All rooms are undergoing renovations this fall. Two-to-four-bedroom privately owned villas rent for \$279-\$674 per night. There is a daily resort fee of \$39 for all guests, which includes Wi-Fi, parking, program gratuities and shuttles around the resort.

There are five pools, a spa, gym, tennis and watersports, including kayak and paddleboard rentals, a sunset cruise, snorkel trips, Dolphin Connection and deep-sea charters (prices vary).

Four restaurants are on site, from island-themed casual to fine dining, plus three other locations where food can be purchased. Fresh seafood is the star. At Angler and Ale, tuna nachos with blackened rare tuna on wonton crisps and the impressive whole snapper with chili sauce were excellent. The dried chorizo-crusting cobia at dining room Alma was a standout.

Excellent service throughout the property.

Do your research: fla-keys.com

<https://www.thestar.com/life/travel/2017/06/15/florida-fishing-trip-lets-guests-catch-their-dinner.html>