

Travel and Adventure: Chartering a fishing boat is a fine way to get together with friends

by Alison DaRosa

ABOARD THE RENEGADE - At around 10:30 p.m. on a sultry summer night, we chugged away from Seaforth Sportfishing in San Diego, pumped with the prospect of catching fish - big fish - lots of them.

VICTORY AT SEA - Heading back to San Diego, fishermen hang out at the stern of the boat, rehashing and savoring the day's glories. CNS Photo by John Gibbons. **FRESH FROM THE SEA** - Crew members will filet the fish you catch. Sample sashimi aboard and take the rest home for the barbecue grill. CNS Photo by Alison DaRosa. **WATCHING THE WATER** - Jeff Lambert, a San Diego plumber, charters a boat each summer so that he and his buddies can catch big fish. CNS Photo by Alison DaRosa. I'd joined a gaggle of longtime buddies - plumbers and construction workers, mostly - on their annual summer fishing charter. My ticket to membership in this exclusive club was the only other female aboard: the mother of the young man who charters the boat each summer.

Jeff Boyer, who confirmed his identity on a cap labeled "Cap 10," went over the safety drill and made a stop at the Mission Bay bait barge to load 4,000 or so sardines into the Renegade's bait tank.

But the evening was mostly about hooking up with old friends.

"We wait for six, seven, eight months for this day to get here," said Steve Shirk, who carried 11 fishing rods aboard - "just in case."

Shirk's nephew, Jeff Lambert, first chartered an overnight fishing excursion for himself and some plumber friends about six years ago.

"My grandfather used to do it," Lambert recalled. "The first time he invited me along I was 12. It was cool. I still remember grandpa catching a 60-pound bluefin tuna. I'd never seen a fish that big in person - only in

pictures.

"I was the only kid on the boat," Lambert added. "We got to stay overnight. I was hanging around with all those older guys - feeling really grown up. It was something special."

It still is.

THE RENEGADE

The Renegade was built in 1980 - but owner/co-captain Doug Reed has it looking spit-shine new. The 65-foot vessel can accommodate 30 in rows of triple-deck bunks. Foam mattresses, sheets, blankets and pillows are provided. Berths are comfortable enough, with blue curtains that can be drawn for privacy.

As visions of behemoth bluefin danced in our heads, we fishers drifted off to Dramamine-induced sleep - lulled by the easy hum of the Renegade's engine and the rocking sea.

We were awakened by the soft hint of early morning light seeping into the bunk room. The aroma of bacon sizzling on the griddle in the galley reinforced the wake-up call. Cook Jeffrey Ackhoff was taking orders: breakfast burritos, eggs to order, French toast, omelets. Nobody's guaranteed a fish on Renegade trips, but a good breakfast is a sure thing.

By 6:30 a.m., we were all on deck. It was cool and overcast. We were maybe 30 miles south of the Mexican border, about 40 or 50 miles out to sea, somebody guessed. There was nothing in sight but the flat, inky horizon.

About two hours and 100 or so cups of coffee later, Boyer shut down the Renegade's engine. That silence boomed like a starter pistol: Lazy conversations stopped midstream; big, brawny caffeine-fueled men clambered over one another, elbowing their way out of the galley, in a race to their rods and prime fishing positions at the stern of the boat. The stopped engine meant Boyer and his fancy deep-sea-scanning sonar had spotted fish.

In seconds, lines were in the water. Seconds later, we had our first strike. Richard Henkel, a retired electroplater from New Jersey, hooked a big feisty dorado. The fish's iridescence was almost as bright as Henkel's smile.

Keith Waddell, a structural framer who came with his arm in a sling, four weeks after rotator cuff surgery to repair a previous fishing injury, snagged a yellowtail.

"Doctor Clapper doesn't know I'm here," he confided, handing his rod to his son, Kurtis, who was celebrating his 26th birthday that day. "Here's your birthday present," he said.

Minutes later, Louis Luz, a burley plumber whose father and grandfather were commercial tuna fishermen in San Diego, reeled in another big dorado.

"The trick is patience," said Jake Luz, Louis' 11-year-old son. "You've got to wait till it bites. Tuna are faster, but dorado fight harder."

It was Jake's third trip with the group. He hauled in a dorado almost as big as he is - and he did it all by himself.

Eleven-year-old Ben Copeland, out with his dad on his first fishing trip, wasn't having as much luck.

"Uncle Louis" Luz put his arm around the boy and murmured the unvarnished truth: "That's why they call it fishing, kid, not catching."

'IT'S YOUR FISH NOW'

Ben's father, Dane Copeland, was out to catch more than fish: "For me, this trip is about bonding," the senior Copeland said. "Ben doesn't understand what that word means. He's just out with his dad having a good time."

It was early afternoon when Ben's good time got immeasurably better. We were on our third or fourth set of the day, when a crew member hooked something big - and handed his rod to the boy. "It's your fish now," the crewman said.

At that moment, Ben's father was so ecstatically thrilled he might have cried - except that real fishermen don't cry, especially not in front of their sons.

Ben's fish put up such a fight that the boy and his dad teamed up: Dane held the rod; Ben did the reeling. Together, they fought the monster for nearly half an hour - from stern to bow and back again, time after time. When they finally brought the huge dorado to the surface, the rest of us whooped.

At lunch, Ben's arms were so tired, his hands so shaky, he could hardly hold his cheeseburger. It was as close to heaven as an 11-year-old boy can get - and dad was right there with him.

REACHING A BOIL

The 28 of us passengers were happy and exhausted when Capt. Reed said it was time to turn the Renegade around and head back to San Diego. Together, we'd landed 32 dorados and four yellowtail. We didn't want to quit - but we were a good seven hours from home. It was time to wrap up.

Then, all hell broke loose.

"Bluefin!" the skipper shouted. "Big ones! Get your big stuff! Now!"

There was mad, glorious mayhem as fishers scrambled for their heavy-duty tackle. The sea all around us was alive, frenzied, roiling with mammoth tuna fighting over the sardines a crewman furiously chummed, fighting over the sardines at the ends of our fishing lines.

Men danced over, under and around one another, struggling to keep their lines from tangling. Rods bent. Lines broke.

It was too good to stay secret. Like oversized magnets, other fishing boats appeared on the horizon and quickly drew closer - including a tuna seiner that dropped a skiff to encircle the school.

Stevie Shirk, a bartender in San Diego, had one of those fish on his line and was determined to keep it.

Shirk hunched over his rod, fighting hard as his fish fought for every inch of line that stretched between them. His taut, burning muscles glistened with sweat as he pulled up on his stick, before reeling fast on the downward motion.

When the fish muscled away, taking yards and yards of hard-earned line, he groaned. "If I lose this fish, I'm going to Henry's (market) and spending some serious coin. I'm having fish tonight - good fish."

The battle endured about 40 minutes - but in the end Shirk won. "I can't hold anything," he said, when his fish was finally aboard - though he did manage to hold the can of Budweiser a buddy handed him.

His bluefin tuna was a beauty, weighing in at 70.4 pounds.

It was Shirk's fish - but all of us had been there with him, fighting the good fight: Cheering, encouraging, maybe even praying a little.

After the high-fives and photos, crew members fileted the fish and the cook put out two plastic bowls: one with soy sauce, another with soy and wasabi. Shirk took the first ceremonial bite of 30-minutes-from-the-sea bluefin sashimi. Then, the rest of us moved in.

The fish was eye-rolling superb.

Fresh sashimi-grade bluefin sells for \$20 to \$30 a pound when it's available at Point Loma Seafoods. We consumed at least \$100 worth.

For young Ben Copeland it was another first. "I liked it," he said of the fresh, raw bluefin.

"I liked fishing," he added, addressing his father. "I liked being on the boat. But most of all I liked being with you, dad."

The boy's father savored his catch: "This bonding thing. I wasn't really sure how you do it. But I guess it worked."

Copley News Service Get your reservations in now

If you're interested in chartering a fishing boat this summer, now is the time to act. "We're booking up fast," said Mike Gauger, a staffer at Seaforth Landing on Mission Bay in San Diego.

Rates for charter trips vary, depending on the size of the boat and length of the trip.

Overnight single-person fishing trips on "open-party boats" are available at San Diego landings for \$160-\$200 a person in summer.

Ship charters for half-day trips on a 36-foot, six-passenger craft would cost about \$700 for the entire charter, while a three-day trip on a 75-foot boat accommodating 25 could run more than \$16,000.

Aboard the 65-foot Renegade this summer, overnight charters with one full day of fishing will cost \$5,300 on weekends, \$4,250 weekdays. Two-day charters will run \$10,600 on weekends, \$8,500 weekdays. The boat accommodates up to 28 passengers.

A 50 percent deposit is required to confirm a booking. Most boats will wait for the balance until the day of the trip. The charter fee includes services of the captain and crew and usually includes the cost of bait.

Fishing licenses cost extra (\$15 if you head to Mexico, \$12.10 for fishing in U.S. waters.) Most summer trips out of San Diego are in Mexican waters, but you won't know for sure where you'll be fishing until you're headed out. Wait until you're aboard to buy your permits.

Meals generally cost extra, though on charters of two days or more, meals are usually included in the charter price.

If you don't own your own gear, the landing will rent you a rod for \$16. Crew members will clean and filet any fish you catch, usually for \$1 to \$5 each, depending on size. Expect to spend \$5 to \$10 per day, per crew member, on tips.

Get more information on Seaforth Sportfishing charters at www.seaforthlanding.com or 619-224-3383. Point Loma Sportfishing also arranges fishing charters: www.pointlomasportfishing.com or 619-223-1627.

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