

Des Westmore combined a family holiday in Florida with a spot of fishing; no surprise there!

Popular destination



On my previous holiday, I looked at one of those options to enable a family break to be combined with some quality fishing. For that we did a 'two centre' holiday, with the first three days dedicated to fishing. On my latest trip I decided to combine the angling and holiday with a single destination. Orlando, Florida, is one of the most popular long-haul destinations for British families. Despite not being on the coasts, excellent boat fishing can be had just a few minutes drive from your accommodation. The quarry is the large mouth bass. This hard-fighting fish inhabits lakes all over the USA and attracts a cult following, much like our bass does.

Year round fishing



West Lake Toho, Tohopekaliga to give its full name, near Orlando, probably boast more 'trophy size' fish than other. The sizes are quite similar to our bass; the lake record is 16 lbs. 10 oz., small fish up to about 2 lbs. are "Schoolies", 5 to 6 lbs. is a good fish, a double-figure is Trophy size, and so on. The fishing is year-round, with seasonal variations of size expected and methods used. We fish during the last week in November.

License to fish



The chances of trophy fish are very good at this time, though cold



We would be travelling in style

weather front may render the bass disinclined to come out and play. I made contact with my guide, Captain James (Jamie) Jackson, owner of Freelancer Charters, via his web site.

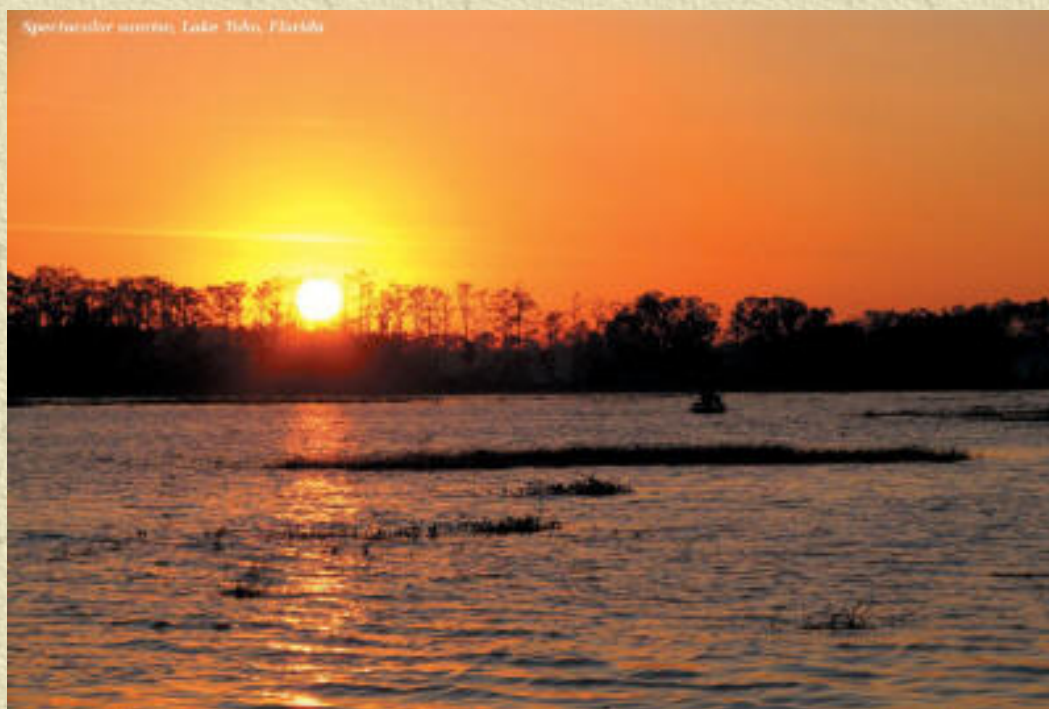
Before departure he advised that we must purchase of Florida State fishing license. A seven-day nonresident license for me and my wife

Marilyn, cost \$16.50 each. Our six-year-old, Bronwyn, did not need a license.

Alarming start

It is, as they say, "Always early in the angling" and Toho is no exception. You need to be at the chosen spot at first light. I had warned everyone, but that did not really help when the alarm went off at 4 AM. We had a 5:45 a.m. rendezvous with Jamie at Jerry's Tackle & Bait shop. By car, this would take about 40 minutes, as we were staying on International Drive. For anyone staying in the Kissimmee area the drive could be under twenty minutes.

Shiner or Valium



Are bait for the day would be live shiners. Commercially caught, these are delivered to the tackle shop and kept in three impressive, tanks. A sedative chemical (with a telltale green color) is added to the water for transportation and also to stop disease etc. The calming effects of the chemical must be allowed to wear off before use as a bait; no one wants a shiner

on Valium! Hence the need for three tanks; one for the next delivery, one with shiners recovering and the last containing the shiners that are "Good to go". Incidentally, a Shiner is a roach in the UK.

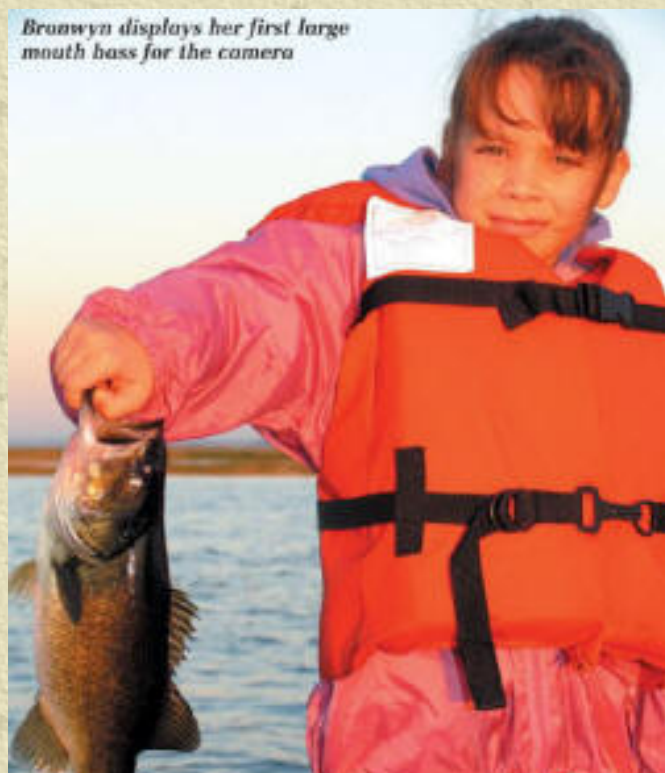
Hurricane reminder

Big Toho Marino was just a few minutes from Jerry's store. Typically American, it was well equipped with toilets, parking, immaculate landscaping and plenty of launch ramps. Closer inspection did reveal some twisted railings, and a sunken pontoon - damage from the 2004 hurricanes; during one, Toho suffered 115 mph winds! A couple of big 4x4's were already launching their craft ahead of us - you just don't see small car struggling on slip ways in the States. Another thing you see little of its small outboards. Jamie's is no exception. His 18'3" Skeeter ZX 180 has a 150 horsepower Mercury bolted to the transom and on the calm like conditions, can achieve motorway-like speeds of 70 mph.

Speeding

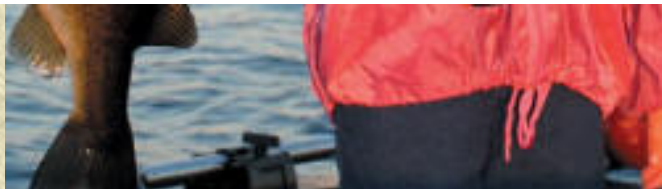
Chatting with Jamie in the dark I learnt that two of the boats ahead of us were employed by him. Jamie himself has been a guide for 25 years, originally in partnership with the founder of Freelancer Charters, Ed Chancey. Ed, who died in 1989, caught the 16 lbs. 10 oz. record bass. We left the dock at 6:20 a.m., speeding across the lake at probably the fastest I have ever traveled on water. Bronwyn and Marilyn thought it was terrific, and it certainly woke us up. On arrival at Jamie's chosen spot, he threw into anchors, fore and aft. I waited for the ropes to tighten in the current, and then remember I was on the lake; fool!

Confident bass



Bronwyn displays her first large mouth bass for the camera

The morning breeze felt surprisingly cool but provide a ripple on the lake which is good for the fishing; it breaks up the light patterns in the water, making it harder for the shiners to spot the bass. Consequently, the bass are generally more confident and less finicky. We appeared to be near a small island, but the depth of the lake is a pretty constant 5 ft. and the lake's 'islands' are actually the maiden-crane and gator grass which grow up from the bed of the lake. The water, the color of brewed tea before you add the milk, is actually very clean, the color being due to the tannic acids from the grasses. The bass lie in wait using the grass for cover and ambush the shiners near the margins. After the bass has scooped the Shiner, the first thing it will try to do is get back in the cover. This necessitates the use



of stout tackle and it will only be brute force that keeps a fish out of the snags.

Tackle

We were using Shimano Catala reels and Star rods. 25 lb. mono was used to enable us to lift weed as well as fish if needed. As the fishing was at relatively close range, mono works better than braid, the stretch giving you the buffer to stop the hook being torn out. We fished three rods and end tackle was very simple; A Gamakatsu weed-less hook fished 2' below a pike float. A spectacular sunrise made the early start worthwhile (for me anyway - I didn't ask Marilyn). Jamie offers three trip durations; four, six and eight hours. Originally he had indicated that six hours was optimum. He now suggests that a four-hour trip would be better, as the best of the fishing in the previous week was early on. Very honest advice seeing as he would lose two hours pay!

Routine strike



It didn't take long for us to see our first rod bent to the struggle of a bass. Unfortunately it was on one of Jamie's other boats. However, when this had happened a few more times, with no bites for us, Jamie did that slippery thing and moved- only 50 yards- but it made all the difference. Soon my float was moving away as my Shiner panicked. When the float went under, Jamie instructed me to give it line - all the reels weren't free spool. At the right moment, Jamie told me to hit it as hard as I could and start reeling. I missed my first take. I have been using circle hooks a lot at home and striking so hard had become alien. Luckily,

my next cast was rewarded with similar interest. Again, I follow the same routine of allowing the fish to move off and then strike.

Warm bass

This time, there were no mistakes and I could feel the bass. Not a big one, but at least we had got what we came for. Whilst unhooking it, I noticed the fish felt warm. The lake's temperature was higher than the morning chill would have you think. As things got going there were more takes. It was great fun watching the float dart about as the bass circled, waiting for it to disappear under the surface. This visual style of fishing really helped to concentrate Bronwyn's attention. It was not long before both Bronwyn and Marilyn had fish.

They made no mistakes hooking theirs (I was used to circle hooks - honest!) Bron' did need a bit of help reeling, though. The bass were living up to their scrappy reputation, not only pulling hard but jumping and leaping out of the water to evade a capture.

Trophies

Captain Jackson holds up a nice large mouth bass



Though they can be eaten, nearly all the bass caught our returned. The catch a big trophy fish, your guide can measure it for you and give the measurements to Jerry at the bait store. A fiberglass replica can then be made. I went on to hook the fish that wasn't a bass - a chain pickerel, the smallest of the Floridian pikes. This was a mini success for me - my first ever pike. Not to be outdone, Bronwyn soon caught one too. It was certainly not going to be a

day where I proved to be the master. True enough, it was Marilyn who caught the best fish of the day, a thickset fish of around 7-8 lbs. Unhooking this one certainly showed how the largemouth bass got its name. With our four hours up, we had taken about 15 bass and two pickerel.

Recommended

By the time we were back at the dock the temperature was decidedly more Floridian and we could then go shopping, theme-parking or whatever. The fishing had been incorporated seamlessly into the holiday. High on their success, Marilyn and Bronwyn were well up for another trip. Alternatively, it would be possible to fish by yourself and still be back with your family by midday. Our trip was straight out of the Virgin Holidays' brochure, staying at the Holiday Inn on International Drive. This was our third time at the hotel and I can thoroughly recommend it. It is only minutes from Seaworld and also the gigantic Bass Pro tackle shop, both of which are 'must-sees'.

For more information on the fishing, go to Captain Jackson's web site, www.orlandobass.com

