

MY OLD MAN, AND THE SEA

LINEAGE THROUGH THE FISHING LINE, A FATHER AND SON BOND OVER DEEP-SEA ADVENTURES IN THE WATERS SURROUNDING MARCO ISLAND, FL.

Part
#1

by
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The memories come flooding back the moment we hit the Jolley Bridge and elevate over Big Marco Pass, the twinkling-blue inlet that separates Marco Island from the southwest Florida mainland. Much has changed since I last visited this paradise 25 years ago. The sense of anticipation feels the same.

During the family vacations of my youth, this final stretch of road signaled that the good times were about to begin: swimming under the endless sun, hunting for shells amid blankets of white sand, eating fresh seafood at dodgy-looking waterfront shacks. The fact that I've returned to Marco on this early March afternoon with my recently retired father is only adding to the rush of nostalgia. Behind the wheel of our silver Mustang convertible rental is a slightly more silver-haired version of the guy who shepherded my two sisters, my mom and me along this route multiple times back in the '80s.

What a difference a couple of decades make. Now, I'm the harried dad and my own 65-year-old father suddenly has nothing but free time. A fishing trip to Marco Island seemed an excellent way to fill his suddenly wide-open calendar—and avoid having our relationship turn into some lost verse from Harry Chapin's "Cat's in the Cradle."

Ever since he retired from his job as an electrician, my father has shown a growing interest in fishing. This is a





PHOTOGRAPH BY JEREMY FRECHETTE



NOT QUITE BIG ENOUGH TO KEEP FOR DINNER, ROD JR. IS REELED IN REGARDLESS.

significant development, for in the 40 years that I've known the man, he's never had much time for hobbies. Leading up to his official escape from the workforce last year, he and my mother have been coming to Marco Island with increased frequency. (Full-on snowbird status appears the next logical step.) And with each trip, mixed in with the vacations photos, have been telltale shots of Rod, Sr., proudly posing with his latest catch.

Driving along Collier Boulevard, a familiar breeze rustles through the palms to remind us that it's time to relax and slow down. That's easy to do, because it's peak tourist season and we're ensnared in late afternoon traffic. I don't mind, however, because the crawl gives me time to reflect on the development that has taken place on this island of 16,000 residents, a population that doubles during the peak winter season.

There was no Starbucks here in the 1980s; I can't even recall there being a McDonalds. Thankfully, the corporate logos are mixed with other businesses that I recognize like old friends. There's the massive surf shop where I bought a pair of silver Oakley sunglasses. And, coming up on the horizon, is the iconic A-frame entryway to the Marriott Beach Resort.

During our visits to Marco when I was a kid, we stayed at a relative's condo. But the Marriott was our gateway to the beach. On special occasions, we'd go to dinner at what I recall was a very handsome wood-paneled restaurant. Like the rest of Marco, the hotel has sprawled in every direction—a recent \$225 million renovation has added a spa, convention center and even more

access to the pristine beaches—but I'm relieved to see that the bones of this classic property remain.

"When you were a kid, we'd park down the block and walk all along the beach to get here," my dad says as he looks around the ritzy, marble-lined lobby. We take a few minutes to enjoy the Gulf view from our room's patio and stroll to the Marriott's waterfront bar Quinn's. As a teenager, I would order booze-free slushy drinks from the serving window; but tonight, on my first night back to Marco, my dad and I opt for a few pints of a local IPA and a mound of peel-and-eat shrimp. With the sound of the crashing surf in the background, we prepare for tomorrow's early rise and the first of the trip's two fishing excursions, this one nine miles offshore.

The sun is shining brightly, but there's a chill in the air as we wind our way down San Marco Road towards Goodland, a rustic fishing village on the southeast section of the island that's home to the Little Bar and Stan's, two of the island's most beloved "Old Florida" dive bars. It may be five o'clock somewhere, but we don't have time to stop. Captain Kevin Bellington of Sea Gone Fishing is at the Calusa Island Marina waiting for us in his rock-solid, 25-foot Parker power boat.

As we putter past dense, mangrove-lined estuaries, Kevin shares a brief history of the Ten Thousand Islands that surround us. "There's at least 10,000 of them," Kevin points out. "In the



ROD SR. GETS A NIBBLE AND LANDS A LIVE ONE, PROBABLY DUE TO HIS LUCKY NEON GREEN FISHING SHIRT AND WRAP-AROUND SHADES.

1940s, they didn't have quite the technology we have now. So I'm guessing that, at some point, they stopped counting."

"Can you imagine a few guys trying to count all of these little islands," cracks my dad. "Now all you need is Google Earth."

Marco is the largest island of the chain—and the only one that was ever developed. Starting in the 1950s, brothers Elliot, Robert and Frank Mackle dredged through the now protected mangroves to create a patchwork of canals and waterfront home sites for what they promoted as a "Hawaii of the East." But conservationists eventually blocked their efforts, helping salvage

provide just enough structure to attract small baitfish, which, we hope, will summon a few dinner-worthy fish.

"Any nibbles yet?" I call out to my dad.

"Nope. I think they know we're here," he says.

Nothing is biting, unless you count the grouper that keep stealing my bait. Suddenly, my dad feels a hard tug. We're using circle hooks, which conveniently insert themselves into the jaw of marine life if you can jerk up your rod at the precise instant of that first pull.

"Do not stop reeling!" Kevin yells. "You own him!"

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the habitats of the area's amazing assortment of wildlife, from ground nesting birds to dolphins and manatees.

"For the next 79 miles south, there's not a house, not a single telephone pole. It's just these mangrove islands," says Kevin. "That's what makes this such a unique ecosystem. We can set down in one spot and catch 25 different types of fish."

Kevin sports a small gray mustache and the sun-weathered look of a seasoned fisherman, but he spent most of his life working in an office. Scanning his screen on the Garmin on his console, Kevin tells us that the rock formations 30 feet below

Dad steadies his stocky frame and his reel continues to spin; he is thoroughly enjoying his battle with what is proving a very worthy opponent. A few moments later, our first catch is hoisted on deck. It's a bluish-black fish known as crevalle jack, no more than eight inches long. "Pound for pound, that's the hardest fighting fish in the Gulf of Mexico," Kevin explains.

These scrappers of the sea are fun to catch, but their bloody gray meat isn't edible. Still, we're relieved that we weren't skunked, fishermen's parlance for not catching a single fish. And that first finned creature opens the floodgates. At one point, my



YOU CAN'T GET MORE LOCAVORE THAN CLEANING DINNER RIGHT WHERE IT WAS CAUGHT.

dad can barely keep up. He lands a few more jacks, but also blue fish (another bloody, bony critter unfit for dinner) and several red grouper, which we can't keep because they aren't in season.

A few minutes later, I get in on the act and reel in a snapper that, at nine inches, is just over the legal length. "That's big enough if you want to keep it for dinner," Kevin says as he removes the hook and tosses the still-flopping fish into the cooler. Those are the words we've been waiting for all morning.

After four more hours fishing multiple near-shore and back-water locales, we end the day with a respectable haul: a couple snapper, a mackerel and a few small trout. During the ride back, Kevin, who's about the same age as my dad, shares the rationale behind his mid-life career shift. "I decided I didn't want to be the richest guy in the graveyard." He gestures out to bow of the boat. "This is my office. I can't imagine doing anything else."

I take a look at my dad, who appears to be carefully pondering Kevin's words. After surviving forty years in the work force, the look of utter contentment on his increasingly rosy Irish face makes me think he feels exactly the same way.

The next morning, we stay land-bound in pursuit of what might be southwest Florida's most revered sea creature, at least for eating: the stone crab. The road to the find best in the area takes us east down the scenic two-lane Tamiami Trail. We have just enough time for a quick jaunt down this thoroughfare,

which meanders through miles of Florida's famous Everglades and eventually leads to downtown Miami.

After 20 miles, we stop at the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk in the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park to gawk at stunning Cypress swampland. But my dad is most interested in spotting bald eagle nests, several of which we spy perched like tree houses atop towering oaks. Ten miles further, we make a right at the blinking lights at State Road 29 and roll into dusty downtown Everglades City.

The creaky, two-level wooden shack that houses City Seafood may not look like much, but people flock from miles away for their stone crab. However, when we arrive, we're crushed by the sight of the empty glass case where the prized crustaceans are supposed to be.

"This is the worst season we've had in a long time," says a girl behind the counter who appears weary of having to share this bad news. Undaunted, I snatch us two ice-cold Pacificos from the serve-yourself cooler and order baskets of grouper, gator and shrimp. For two Midwesterners, the lightly breaded seafood feast is still a treat, and we linger over two more beers, watching tourist-filled airboats sputter back and forth along the Barron River.

We arrive back in Marco just in time for Happy Hour at the Snook Inn. Located on the northernmost, "Old Marco" section of the island that dates back to the 1880s, this legendary seaside eatery was originally named the "Snook Hole" in honor of the fish that could be caught off its docks facing the Marco River.



SIDLING UP TO THE CHICKEE BAR IS A PASTIME FOR ANGLERS AND SNOW BIRDS ALIKE—CRACK INTO A MORSEL OF CRAB OR FRIED GROUPER FOR A TASTE.



“This place certainly hasn’t changed much—and that’s a good thing,” says my dad. I couldn’t agree more. Walking towards the entrance, I’m immediately transported back to 1987. I recognize the bright-blue canopies, the nautical-themed table cloths and, most of all, the screened-in dining room where my sisters and I would let our breaded shrimp go cold as we waited for dolphins to leap from the Marco River. We sidle up to the “chickee bar” just as the signature, palm-roofed outdoor hut starts filling up with old-timers, most of them spinning their own fish tales. Eventually, I bring my beer to the docks and spend a few minutes staring out at the water. I see a dolphin break the surface and snap a picture; when I get home, I’ll show the blurry photo to my daughters and promise them they’ll see the chickee dolphins in person.

After conquering offshore angling, we’re ready for an even bigger challenge: the backwaters of Estero Bay near Fort Myers Beach. The hour-long drive from Marco takes us north past Naples and then veers west to the Gulf of Mexico crossing breathtaking causeways surrounded by nothing but water. After winding past the Cypress forests of Lover’s Key State Park, we arrive at the Fish-Tale Marina and climb aboard Captain Rob Modys’ 22-foot Skeeter bay boat for a half-day charter with his operation, SoulMate charters.

Rob, who’s dressed like a snowmobiler ready to combat the morning’s brisk 48-degree air temperatures (three layers, a scarf over his mouth, but, in true Florida fashion, still wearing sandals), has been fishing these waters since he was a kid. Other guides tune in to his weekly show on the local ESPN radio station for tips on where the fish are biting.

“Ready to do some ice fishing?” my dad asks with a smile as we cruise headlong into the wind. But the chill doesn’t diminish the scenery around this immaculately green sanctuary, which transfixes us both as we ride.

With the water barely reaching 60 degrees, we need all the tools at Rob’s disposal. “This cold water is making the fish finicky,” he tells us. We spend an hour casting near the brush line with nary a nibble, so Rob takes us a mile or so deeper past the bay, to a crystal clear waterway known as Hendry Creek.

Rob instructs us to drag our baited lines over the jagged oyster beds eight feet below and give a sharp yank if we snag onto anything. “A lot of times that’s all it takes for them to hit,” he says. “It creates a puff of dust that looks like a crab or something else is escaping from under a rock.”

While we diligently follow his advice, Rob, a youthful 59-year-old, tells us about how his business has been picking up outside the peak tourist season. “There are more hardcore snowbirds coming here in October and staying until May,” he says.

“I could be that hardcore,” my dad says without hesitation.

As we scan the water, the only sound breaking our concentration is the church chime melody of the wind blowing through the lines of the spare fishing rods. We cast and drag until finally my dad feels a yank on his line.

“Let out the bale and let it run a little further down the waterway,” Rob advises. A few seconds later, my dad confidently reels in an eight-inch red fish, which brings our total species count from our two days of fishing to 12. But the trip was not without danger: After nary a complaint after lodging a hook in his hand during our previous excursion, this time out my dad pulls in a stingray that he dangles perilously close to his leg. Rob, who’s been stung before, can’t get the prehistoric-looking creature back into the water quick enough.

Soon, the fish start hitting and we collect a couple snapper, a whiting and—my best fish of the trip—a 16-inch trout. “That fish is definitely dinner-worthy,” says my dad. No mat-

ter how many years go by, it still feels good to make the old man proud.

Back at the marina, Rob cleans and guts the fish and hands over a bag with our catch, which my dad places in an ice-filled cooler in the truck of our car. That evening, we eat dinner with my dad’s brother and his wife. My uncle fires up the grill, and my dad cooks a few of our smaller trout whole while I pan-fry some snapper filets in butter.

It’s the first time I’ve ever eaten something I’ve caught with my own two hands. The flaky white meat tastes delicious, but the most satisfying part is the fact that the meal is a collaboration between two would-be fishermen, a father and son. In fact, the fish is so good that I can’t help but think that another family fishing trip is in order. Next time, we’ll need a bigger boat to bring my daughters along. I think we can reel them in. ●



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