

Beat the Winter Erie Blues - Hit the Keys

Fishing with Captain Bob Brown of Sundance Charters

by
Rick Kubb

The Great Lakes region has had one of the coldest and snowiest winters in some time. As I look out over Lake Erie (in February) a solid sheet of ice can be seen stretching to the horizon. Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron and Erie have been 90% covered with ice this winter.

A small number Lake Erie charter captains do take advantage of ice conditions and offer ice fishing charters. What do the other Lake Erie captains do in their 'off season'? Many captains charter part-time and they have their regular jobs to attend to. The majority of the full-time captains take some much deserved time off during the winter to re-charge their batteries as chartering is hard work and can be very draining toward the end of the regular fishing season. A number of captains head south to Florida to fun-fish. A chance to relax in the sun and fish for themselves with no hassles and no customers to have to satisfy.

Then, there is Captain Bob Brown. There's no idle time for him during the winter months. Instead, he charts full-time down in the Florida Keys. Captain Bob Brown of Sundance Charters works out of Channel Grove Marina near Port Clinton from

operation. A quick trip to the Florida Keys for some sun (and fish) sounded like just the right thing to beat the winter blues. I wasn't going to pass up this opportunity!

We flew to Fort Lauderdale on a Thursday afternoon, picked up a rental car and made the short 2 ½ hour trip to Marathon Key. It's an easy drive from Fort Lauderdale, taking the Florida Turnpike around busy Miami to US 1. Once you enter the Florida Keys the drive is very scenic. The Florida Keys are measured in Mile Markers beginning at Mile Marker 0 at Key West. Marathon Key is at Mile Marker 50.



Captain Bob Brown with a good sized Amberjack taken off of Marathon Key in early March. He'll soon be heading north to charter the waters of Lake Erie.

May through October, then each year he heads south in November and through the middle of May he charts in Marathon Key, Florida.

Captain Brown and his wife and first-mate, Anne invited my wife Karen and I down to fish with them and learn about their winter

We checked in to our hotel at Coconut Cay Resort and Marina (more on where to stay in the keys later) and after a relaxing dinner at the Barracuda Grill just down the street, we retired for the evening. The next day we stopped by the 7-mile Marina, where Captain Brown keeps his



Karen Kubb, Captain Bob and wife Anne back at the dock with 'schoolie' dolphin fish. These are good eaters!

boat so that we would have a good reference point as we were to report early on Saturday morning for our fishing trip.

We spent Friday relaxing in the sun over at Bahia Honda State Park, a beautiful park with numerous swimming/snorkeling beaches, changing facilities, boat ramps and available dockage. We joined a group snorkeling trip to one of the famous Florida reefs. The reef was beautiful, teeming with hundreds of species of fish. Barracuda were numerous too along with a few reef sharks.

Friday evening we had an easy dinner at the 7-mile Grille, next door to the Marina. A family run diner, the food was very good, not fancy, but very reasonably priced. Many of the locals dine there.

Saturday morning came early and we reported to the Marina at 8am. Captain Brown and his wife (and

first-mate) greeted us at their dock. We went aboard and the captain explained to us our plans for the day. He explained that the past few days the bite had been slow and that we'd do a combination of bottom fishing near some well known wrecks and then drift and slow troll for dolphin and possibly sailfish.

Soon we were underway and headed out for our first destination. Just outside of the 7-mile Marina we passed under the 7-mile bridge. Captain Brown explained that the 7-mile bridge is a favorite among captains for tarpon fishing which would be starting to heat up in April. Some of the best tarpon fishing is between the pilings of the bridge where there is current. Since it's only a 5 minute run from his Marina, Captain Brown often runs two or more Tarpon trips in a day.

Just past the 7-mile bridge we met

up with another captain who kindly shared with us his morning catch of live Pilchards and Pinfish baitfish. After filling the bait wells we were off to do some bottom fishing and a short time later we arrived over the first spot, a wreck in about 200 feet of water.

The winds kicked up and seas were quickly 4-6 feet which made bottom fishing difficult. The wind and current would drift us over the wreck in only a few minutes, not giving us ample time to sit over the fish. We would then pick up our lines and Captain Brown would re-position us over the wreck. His Garmin 180 chart-plotter made this a relatively easy thing to do but was time consuming as we needed to repeat this every few minutes.

The bite was slow. We had a few nice hits but couldn't land a fish. We then headed to another wreck location and dropped our lines again. It wasn't long till I had my hands full with a 20 pound Amberjack, which we released. Nice fish. Again, conditions were not conducive to bottom fishing because of the wind and current. We then decided to head off shore another 10 miles or so to deeper water (400-500 feet) to look for dolphin (also called Mahi-Mahi).

When dolphin fishing, captains search for 'weed lines', long stretches of floating weeds that can stretch from several hundred yards to over a mile. They also search for any floating debris. The smallest flotsam whether it be a small log or plastic milk jug amazingly can hold fish. In the open ocean there is little cover for small fish and the smallest fish will congregate around anything that

floats. This is the start of a food chain and at the other end of the chain can be a large Dolphin or Sailfish.

As we moved along a well-established weed line we were all on the lookout for floating debris and what might lie beneath it. We trolled using a number of presentations. We did a fast troll (around 10 knots) using Ballyhoo and artificials and did slow trolls (3-4 knots) and drifts using live Pilchers for bait.

While trolling we ran four rods, two off the back and two off the outriggers. We were trolling for about 2 hours when we got our first hit, a small 'schoolie' dolphin. Then all heck broke loose with 4 schoolies hooked up at the same time. Anne mentioned that it's like a 'Chinese fire drill' when you get into a school of small dolphin. Boy it was fun. While the fish were around us, the captain threw in a handful of Pilchers for chum and we kept one schoolie dolphin on the hook swimming beneath the boat to attract more fish.

The next 10 minutes was fast and furious, with a dozen or so hookups and landing 6 dolphin in the boat. Then, just as quickly as it began, the fish had moved on. These small dolphin run in large schools. When dolphin reach maturity they normally travel in single pairs. We were hoping to find a large bull or cow dolphin but it wasn't to be on this day.

After our run-in with the dolphins we headed back for port. Back at the dock, we chatted while Bob cleaned our fish. Captain Brown has been chartering in the Florida

Keys since 1980. He normally heads south from Lake Erie in November trailering his 29' Stamas, an excellent sized fishing boat for Florida waters. He typically will run 150 or more trips in the winter and early spring season, sometimes running two half-day Tarpon trips each day. This works well as Tarpon fishing is best both early in the day and late in the early evening (Dawn & Dusk Fishing).

Captain Brown offers 'reef/wreck' bottom fishing where he will fish off of the shallow reefs as well as off the deeper reefs and wrecks in waters up to 200' feet in depth. There he targets Grouper, Snapper, Amberjacks and other bottom fish. He fishes mostly live-bait including Pinfish, Pilchards, Ballyhoo and Mullet. Cut bait Squid and Shrimp are also used.

His offshore fishing targets Sailfish, Dolphin, Wahoo, Kingfish, Tuna and an occasional Marlin hook-up. Trolling baits include Ballyhoo and artificials, mostly soft plastic squid.

The Marathon area offers some of the best fishing in the Keys because of the close proximity of deep water to the shallow reefs. There is a shelf that runs along the reefs that quickly drops off in depth. You can go from 20 feet of water to 250 of water in only a few minutes of running. Many species of both bottom and offshore fish run along this shelf and it's within easy range for the fishermen.

Sundance Charters run \$550 for a full 8 hour trip and \$375 for half-

day trips. Tarpon fishing is priced at \$350.00. Captain Brown's and first mate Anne's customers are typically couples or families. Usually 2-4 customers are on board a single trip. He doesn't run the typical '6-pack' charters one sees on Lake Erie in the summer-time. Captain Brown will clean your fish and freeze them for you, should you wish to take some back home.

As we were leaving the dock and heading for the 7-mile Grille for dinner I asked Captain Brown when he would be heading back north. He mentioned that his last Florida charter was the second weekend in May and his first Lake Erie Charter was the following week and that he was going to have to hustle back for that first trip. No rest for the weary, I guess.

At Captain Brown's suggestion we headed back over to the 7-mile Grille where they prepared our dolphin (Mahi Mahi) catch. What a deal. They cooked our fish to our liking (grilled, fried or blackened) and included all the sides for only \$8.00. You can't beat that. Some diners will do this and others will not, citing health regulations and insurance issues.

After dinner we checked in at our second accommodation, the White Sands Inn. The following day we headed down to Key West (a short 50 mile jaunt) for a day of sight seeing. We had breakfast just a block from the Ernest Hemingway House at a place appropriately names Ernest's Diner. After taking in the sites, we headed back for a relaxing final day. Monday would mean back to work!

When visiting Key West I suggest you go early in the morning, before the masses arrive. Key West is 'bumper to bumper' cars any day of the week in the afternoon and it gets really hectic in the early evening as people from everywhere go to watch the famous sunset. My wife and I agreed that we would beat the crowds and enjoy the sunset from Marathon Key. The views are just as nice there with a few thousand fewer people!

Tired of the winter fishing blues? Then head on down to the Florida Keys. You're likely to experience some of the best fishing in the world! If you want to fish with Captain Bob Brown of Sundance Charters travel between December and Early May. If you arrive in late May you'll miss him as he'll be tackling walleyes on Lake Erie by that time!

You can contact Sundance Charters by visiting their web site at www.sundancesportfishing.com or by calling (800) 282-1712.

Where to Stay in the Florida Keys

While in the Keys we stayed at two great locations, both of which are 'fisherman friendly' and close to the several Marinas on Marathon. **Coconut Cay Resort & Marina** is located at mile marker 50.5 and just a few miles east of the 7-mile Marina. Coconut Cay offers the comfort and charm of a Bahamian style resort, quietly tucked away from the busy highway on the bayside of Marathon. Accommodations include 7 waterfront cottages that sleep 6



Coconut Cay Resort (above) and the White Sands Inn (below) are both "Fisherman Friendly" and reasonably priced resorts close to area marinas and charter fishing opportunities.



persons. Each cottage has a private patio and barbecue grill alongside a scenic canal with dockage right outside your door that can accommodate boats up to 22' in length. Additionally, there

are 17 individual rooms and one suite that includes a living room area with sleeper sofa.

Each unit boasts different combinations of bright Bahamian colors. All units have cable TV. Coconut

Cay also has a very nice swimming pool with a view of the bay front waters and the Marina. There is also a nice area called Sandy Point with lounge chairs and hammocks nestled among Coconut trees with a very nice view of the famous Keys Sunsets.

The Owner, Jim Rhyme explained to us that he purchased Coconut Cay in May of 2002 and just opened in September. Everything has been totally redone, from plumbing to paint. He plans to expand the property and add another 40 or so rooms.

Fishermen are welcome and can bring their own boats. Smaller boats can be accommodated along the canal wall and larger boats can be docked at the Marina where several 'live aboards' dock year round. Those that want to stay longer can dock their boats at Coconut Cay for around \$600.00/month.

Rates at Coconut Cay vary depending on the season. The cottages are typically \$179-\$199/night) and the single rooms are \$79-\$99/night). Discounts are given for weekly stays and stays during off peak times from September through early December.

The staff at Coconut Cay are all very friendly and were very accommodating. The manager Chris Dungca went out of his way to make our stay an enjoyable one. You can contact Coconut Cay by visiting their web site at www.coconutcay.com or by calling their toll-free number, 1-877-354-7356.

The **White Sands Inn** on nearby Grassy Key I also highly recommend. White Sands is owned by Janice Stephens and managed by her daughter Rachel Price. They purchased the property 4 years ago and have done everything right. The White Sands Inn is on the Ocean-Side of the keys.

There are 11 units each a little different from the other. Last year the owners purchased the adjacent property which they call the Sunrise Beach House. This house contains 3 nice rooms, each with different appointments and accommodations from 1 to three bedrooms and all have a view of the ocean. Amenities at the White Sands include a private sandy beach, private pier, boat ramp, Tiki Hut, Bar-B-Q grills, a very nice heated pool with a nice view of the ocean. Guests can also enjoy the use of a paddle boat and ocean kayak. Rachel is a Justice of the Peace and offers special wedding packages at the White Sands.

Room rates at the White Sands range from \$75/night to \$250/night depending on the season and the room, since each room has different qualities and accommodations.

Although there is no deep water dockage available, the property is located on the famous 'flats' area where fly fisherman come from all over to fish the shallow area for bonefish, reds and other flats fish. The former owner of the property (formerly named the Golden Grouper) would hold fly fishing and flats fishing seminars. Rachel explained to me that they have many repeat fly-fishing customers that come down every

year and enjoy the nearby fishing grounds.

You can contact the White Sands Inn by visiting their web site at www.whitesandsinn.com or by call- ing (305) _____ 743-

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List based on survey conducted in fall 2002 of Lake Erie Charter Captains

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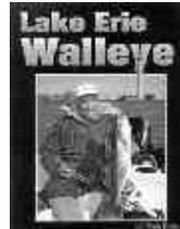
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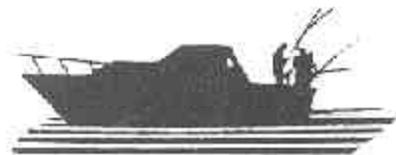
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