

Fishy Business

by Jessica Lloyd-Mostyn

It's an unspoken rule, almost a seafaring law, that those who are liveaboard, long-term, worldwide cruisers can catch the freshest, finest fish that the oceans have to offer. Any old salt can throw out a line and reel in dinner with the ease and polish of one who has made those same moves and gestures since they were a small fry. However, those of us relatively new to the cruising life, who are learning all the lessons of the sea simultaneously, have a far less stylish, less effective, and unsophisticated approach towards the obligatory fishing activities.

Neither James nor I had even attempted to fish before in our land-lubber, pre-boat lives. But the thought of catching food for our table while living on board had a certain appeal and we were keen to experiment. Armed with a few shiny, new hand reels that we bought in the Canary Islands and a simple fishing rod gifted to us by a friend, we tried our luck for the first time when crossing the Atlantic. We had a brightly-coloured and fun assortment of lures to choose from, ranging from pink toy squids to silver imitation flying fish. Much to our amazement, we succeeded in landing and identifying our first mahi-mahi, also known as dorado, and managed a quite nifty technique of reeling it in close to the boat, scooping it on board with a net, and delivering a swift blow to its head with a winch handle. It was the most delicious fish, and the four of us on board were eating it for two days.



Their very first fish. This was the first of many, but none meant as much as it did!

During the next two weeks at sea we caught two more mahi-mahi, each bigger than the last and significantly harder to land. The net broke with fish number two and as we had no gaff on board and, at that time, no functioning autopilot, our somewhat shambolic method of securing our dinner involved reeling in as much as possible by hand and then hurling the catch into the cockpit, whilst whoever was hand-steering did their best to duck. Then you were left with a wildly thrashing and angry fish at your feet while you try to dispatch it as quickly as possible. Chaotic? Yes. But, we did at least get three gorgeous fish on that crossing that fed all the crew.

In hindsight, my conclusion is that mahi-mahi are a particularly stupid breed of fish, that, although undeniably beautiful, like to follow boats on the Atlantic crossing route just to lull them into a false estimation of their trawling skills. Why? Because, upon our arrival in the Caribbean, everyone had experienced the same accomplishment, many catching far more than we did and all with little skill or knowledge involved. The Atlantic also brought the added bonus of our first encounter with flying fish. These iridescent, lovely little creatures literally fly onto your decks and get stranded meaning that for no effort whatsoever you can have fried fish for breakfast.

Just in case it wasn't apparent, I should point out that we are solely interested in catching fish for necessary food. We never attempt it if the fridge is full or with any idea of fishing as a sport.



A swift dispatch with a blow from a broken stanchion



Our biggest fish to date, caught by our crewmate Chris, who is only slightly larger than it



Gutting and filleting on deck keeps the scales, blood, and smell out of the cabin



Big fish can be a bit of a struggle to bring in by hand



Look mummy, FISH

So, after this crossing and returning back to our crew of two, it was some time until we tested our talents again. Or perhaps the fairest way to put it is that it was some time until we actually managed to catch anything again. I remember several toy squids and plastic fish being eaten by unseen fish who then promptly swam away. Our next score was in Cuba, and I was the poor soul at the helm trying to keep our course while James unceremoniously flung the fish over my head onto the cockpit floor. It was a tasty bonus and meant we could extend our stay in the southern islands but, to this day, we have absolutely no idea what kind of fish it was.

Which brings us to a major hurdle of the novice cruiser fisherman—identification. Granted, there are times when it's not too vital to know what you're catching and eating; fortunately for us that time in Cuba was one such time. But I'm only able to say that as neither of us had any ill effects from the mystery fish. We hadn't even given a thought to whether or not it might have had ciguatera, a gamble that we wouldn't take now that we're sailing and fishing with an infant.

There are times when catching food for the table is an ability that even we can carry out with total cool and aplomb. The most satisfying of these times are, undoubtedly, when you have visitors on board. Catching something fresher than your land-based friends and family have ever tasted is the climax to the cocktails-on-deck-at-sunset picture-perfect cruising holiday experience that we all relish giving to our guests, even though the liveaboard reality is often a far cry from this scene. But, far from being a smoothly choreographed procedure, I should

probably admit that we've only managed this with sheer dumb luck.

In Panama we got serious and invested in a small spear gun. Brilliant, we thought, you have a nice time on a snorkelling adventure and simply take the spear with you and then point and shoot at anything that looks tasty. It's actually quite tricky to even arm the spear underwater and then you have to adjust for everything looking magnified. So much so that you think you've caught something sizeable but it's revealed to be tiny when you resurface. Luckily, one way to practice is the local custom of shooting lionfish. These striking fish are indigenous to the Pacific and



Eight and a half kilograms of freshly-filleted fish

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A large crayfish caught in Papua New Guinea

Below: Barracuda can be perfectly safe to eat in certain areas. Not to mention very tasty.



The trusty net, before it broke!



Smaller but colourful reef fish



managed to infiltrate the Atlantic by mistaken human intervention. They eat just about anything they can swallow, but almost nothing eats them which makes them a very easy catch. They pose a real threat to reefs as many corals rely on the herbivore fish that are no longer there thanks to the lionfish. There are now huge numbers of them in the Caribbean, much greater densities than in their native Pacific waters. So, they make for a good deed and target-practice all in one. Plus, once you get past the venomous spines, they make for good eating.



A delicious crab for lunch, caught with a spear

The real snag to our all-or-nothing luck with fishing has to be that the lures we put out bear very little relation to the size of fish we eventually land. On the Pacific coast of Costa Rica we landed an 8-kilogram mahi-mahi, which we ate for a week. That was with a really simple, 3-inch metal "spoon" lure, which had only ever caught us much smaller fish before. But, to gut and fillet so large a beast on the aft deck while sliding around in a roly sea is quite a challenge. Fresh sashimi on day one became bread-crumbed fish and chips on day two, and we ended the week with fish curry. We even fried the roe in butter and had it with toast for breakfast. But, a fish that large was quite overwhelming for the two of us to consume and it took some time for us to attempt to put the lines out again. Our most recent catch, another mahi-mahi, dwarfed that one by comparison as it weighed in at a whopping 12.5 kilograms, so we donated some to other cruising families to ensure none of it would go to waste. To wrestle and kill a fish of that size isn't something we'd be keen to repeat anytime soon.

Our techniques have at least improved. But, although we now have a trusty working autopilot



Teaching our small fry our very limited skills

and a wind vane, we still don't have a gaff on board. So now the helmsman is spared the fish missile being aimed at them, but we still have the issue of how to land the thing. Happily, we've discovered that the baby netting around the guardrails stops the friskier of our catches from wriggling away and we've upgraded from the winch handle to striking the final blow with a broken stanchion. And a length of "tracer" wire attaching the lure to the line has stopped us from losing quite so many fish and lures. Though the plastic squid are now a favourite toy of our baby daughter, minus the hooks of course. We've even learned a thing or two about the best places to attempt fishing, with reef passes from deep to shallow water yielding the best results.

But, in truth, it's still total luck as to whether or not we have fish for dinner. And, in spite of everything we've learned, there seems to be no rhyme or reason about when our efforts will come off. I think our chances are much like those of finding flying fish on deck when the sun comes up. We cross our fingers, cast our lines, and hope it won't be too long until we fill our bellies.



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