

BIG FISH COUNTRY

Whether you are on holiday or on business, America's New York State has a wealth of fishing to offer – everything from salmon to walleye and blue fish to fluke. Join Mel Russ as he tries the fishing on Lakes Ontario and Erie, then switches to Long Island where the target species are striped bass. It's exciting sport but not as we know it!

Photographs by Mel Russ and Tina Allpress

IF NEW YORK City is the Big Apple then the State of New York should be called the Big Fish. In fact, forget about the skyscrapers, Manhattan and Central Park...get out into the country and enjoy the amazing fishing experiences.

The city and the state are poles apart. Most visitors are drawn by the hum of the city that never sleeps and the awesome height of the buildings, but there is another side to this seaboard state and if you've got fishing coursing through your veins you'll love it.

I have visited New York, and its' impressive in its own way, but it's a massive city living and breathing in its own commercial world within a State so big you have to fly across it to get anywhere quickly.

If you step back and look at a map of the States it will have you grabbing for your rods. To the north there's the massive Lake Ontario with its famous Niagara Falls, with the even bigger Lake Erie, 174 meters above sea level, stretching away to the south-west.

They are linked to the sea and are veritable natural aquariums and the home to Chinook, Atlantic and coho salmon, walleye, rainbow-steelheads and smallmouth bass to name just a few.

Moving to the coast the net gets even wider with the famed striped bass, missile-like bluefish, fluke, flounders and blackfish.

This story encompasses them all, an action packed five-day familiarisation trip organised by the New York State Department of Economic Development. In a nutshell, they wanted British anglers to have a taste of what the state had to offer.

Having done it and got the T-shirt I can see many options; straight fishing holidays, family trips with everyone enjoying the angling, a mix of lake and sea fishing, focussed attacks on the striped bass and bluefish (it's more a case of them attacking you) or a couple of days fishing tagged onto a business trip. The options are endless.

So come and join me as I jet around the state enjoying a rich mix of fishing that is both exciting and enlightening.

The people of Long Island don't have the hard edge of New Yorkers. Gently spoken and friendly they could almost be English. The countryside is gentle, the magnificent houses are all built of wood with massive porches out front and everyone seems to relax in a king-size swing chair.

No this is not bustling New York, this is peace and quiet, a maritime community that has learned to pace its way of life, with many of the people making their living from the land or the sea.

We, the crew, that's Jim Midgley, of World-wide Fishing Safaris, based in Cambridgeshire, and Tina, my regular fishing mate, are heading for Orient Point, gateway to Gardners Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. ▶

Markly Wilson with the first striped bass of the day



Ken Mica and Tina Allpress with her first bass



Worldwide's Jim Midgley is all smiles



Porgies look like our black bream



A bluefish for Audrey Wigley



A first for editor Mel Russ

Our guide, Markly Wilson, from the NY marketing and tourism division, drives us to the dock where the smart Celtic Horizon is waiting at the dock.

You immediately warm to Captain Dave Lawrence; his handshake is firm, his smile open and genuine, his boat immaculate and the fishing space enormous. Standing by with the gear is crewman, Ken Mica. It soon becomes apparent we were in for a day of banter and leg pulling.

These sort of days always work out best, a mix of respect and humour among the crew resulting in a fun day's fishing. The fish almost come for free.

Celtic Horizon is a custom-built 35 feet sports-fisherman catering for inshore and offshore fishing. What is unique about her is the cavernous wheelhouse, which easily swallows angling parties up to six, her registered maximum.

The day is a mix of weak sun, light showers and heavier spells of the wet stuff, but the crew, including Audrey Wigley, director of promotions on the local North Fork Council, set to the job with a will.

Ken, resplendent in his white bib 'n' brace, is preparing the bait, a wonderful cocktail of whitebait, squid, tough flatfish strip

and coloured pork strips. The rods, what I would call heavy 50lb-plus class outfits with Shimano 25LD multipliers, sat in their pods waiting for the hooks to be baited.

Says Capt Lawrence: "Today we are starting with the striped bass, which we shall take on the drift from what we call The Race, a series of sandbars that push the tide up to the surface causing it to boil."

"Later we shall switch tactics and have a go at the bluefish, then scale down our gear and try for the fluke and porgies."

The fluke sounded intriguing, maybe they were baby halibut and porgies, surely we weren't going shark fishing with such light gear?

Like all anglers I ran my eye over the gear; don't we all do that? I could see that we would be fishing with braid down to a three-way swivel, the bottom eye being tied off with a double hank of heavy mono down to a 16oz sinker.

Coming off the swivel at right angles was a 6ft line carrying a natural bucktail leadhead that was baited with either yellow, white or green strip baits. It looked a heavy set up for fishing clean ground. Perhaps you had to bully the fish; I had no idea.

A flotilla of angling boats were already

working The Race, a ridge of wild water that made all the boats buck as they rode through the wild chop. The first couple of drifts were less about fishing but more about getting your sea legs, but it was great fun and it didn't take long for the Brits to work things out.

First mate Ken buzzed about the party making sure our rigs were working properly and that we were baited up the Orient way. It was then that Markly got a hit, his rod slamming down on the uplift. Ever smiling, his facial expression changed in an instant as he was taken off balance.

Striped bass, their season lasts from mid-April through to mid-December, don't warn you they are coming. Feeding in such turbulent waters, they see and sense the lure and hit it at high speed. Whether or not you stay attached depends on how good an angler you are.

Markly hung on, the tip of his short beefy rod dipping down over the gunnel, but he held on in the lively water as Ken came to the rescue with the landing net. But it wasn't that easy. How can I explain? Striped bass have the attacking speed of our bass, the belly weight of a cod and the runaway speed of a mullet. Mix all three together and you understand why Markly had his hands full.

Once in the net, you can see why the Americans love them; they are such handsome fish. A white scaled fish, small black lines run down their flanks, the head is very bassy and so are the spikes, so beware.

The American Fisheries Service are red hot on conservation and have comprehensive seasons, size and possession limits for

all fish. Aboard party and charter boats the size limit is 28in and the bag limit is just two fish. Get caught with anymore and you are in for a stiff fine.

We continued to fish and Jim was next to get a hit. He has boated yellowfin tuna to 200lb, so he knows all about getting his line pulled. I could see he was working out what the fish was doing below the waves and enjoying every minute.

Audrey showed her hands were skilled on the rod as she tamed fish and was there the odd little shriek when a fish tried to charge away?

I'd never caught a striped bass in my life, but I woke up from daydreaming when a bass whacked my bucktail out of the blue. I was boat watching, working the lure automatically, but as I tried to lift the rod it went in the opposite direction.

The heavy rod suddenly felt light as the fish fought unseen below the boat. This was a fish that didn't give up all the way to the net and, as usual, I admired it as Ken slipped his net under the deep body.

Everyone had caught, so Capt Dave called: "Up lines, we are going after the bluefish."

I joined him at the wheel as we steamed inshore, while Ken changed the lures for something smaller and then turned out a bag of whitebait onto the baiting table.

Dave said: "We can offer a whole range of fishing, including offshore trips for tuna and sharks, while our speciality is night fishing for bass. That's real fun fishing."

If anyone reading this story has caught a dorado or dolphin fish, then you will know what I mean when I say bluefish fight just

like them, despite being smaller. Boy, do they scrap.

We were fishing just half a mile from the coast, our baits were a mix of anything you wanted to put on the hook and you worked the rig just the same as for bass.

The bite was more like a big bang and then the fish charged off in all directions. All you can do is keep pumping and winning line because the fish doesn't stop flying about and even goes berserk when it's in the net. See why I liken them to dorado?

To end the day Ken pulled lighter rods out the rack and attached long flowing traces carrying a circle hook.

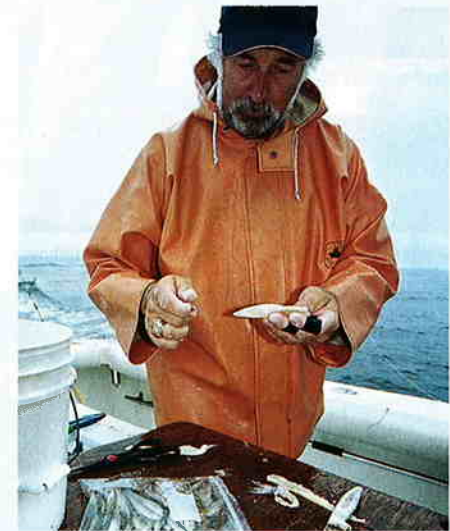
"We are going to try for fluke close to Gardners Island," said Ken.

Was I to see a small halibut? Bait appeared to be anything you liked off the bait table. After lowering the rig to the sea bed, you just twitched the bait until the fish twitched back. The bottom must have been paved with fish because they came thick and fast, so a sort of competition developed on deck to see who could catch the most.

I didn't keep count and I didn't see any halibut because the fluke turned out to be daddy flounders, big-hearted fish that fought hard all the way up. Evidently they can be caught to 5lb plus...wouldn't that be a catch from a British beach?

What about the sharks, the porgies? Sometimes local names for fish can confuse you. Tina swung in a fish that looked remarkably like our black bream.

"That's a great porgie," said Ken, somewhat shattering the illusion as Tina, Jim and I just laughed. ◆



First mate Ken Mica prepares the bait



Celtic Horizon II in Orient dock



Baited bucktails work best

"The bite was more like a big bang and then the fish charged off in all directions"

For full details on fishing trips to New York State, contact Worldwide Fishing Safaris, Bridge House, The Causeway, Thorney, Peterborough, Cambs, PE6 0QQ, tel: 01733 271123. E-mail: peter@worldwidefishingsafaris.co.uk. Web: www.worldwidefishingsafaris.co.uk.