



Mexico Beach

MIXED BAG

Their idea of a “high-rise?” Fish condos in 60 feet of water. Gotta love this Gulf Coast town.

On a map it’s little more than a dot on Highway 98, between Panama City and Port St. Joe. And yet Mexico Beach has big ambitions when it comes to fishing.

Imagine a town that maintains its own dredge to keep the inlet open. Whose citizens back regular artificial reef deployments. Where small inns offer overnight accommodations, and one marina ties it all together.

It’s a praiseworthy community, for sure, and the fishing here is nothing short of world-class. Offshore, this corner of Florida’s Gulf Coast is renowned for April 1 runs of giant cobia just off the beach. Kingfish spend summers fattening up here before heading south for the winter. Strings of scientifically placed artificial structures abound with a variety of snapper and grouper; they eventually give way to deep water featuring wahoo, dolphin and billfish.

A glance at a marine chart (FS Chart No. 22, for instance) reveals why quiet Mexico Beach is so popular with offshore fishermen. By Gulf Coast standards,

By Jerry McBride



the bottom drops quickly into deep water; shorter runs burn less fuel, and leave more time for fishing.

On a spring trip with Bill Mulligan, a co-owner of Mexico Beach Marina, we enjoyed a great day of bottom fishing despite brisk winds. Within a few miles of shore, our very first drop produced a fireball of a red snapper—a good sign for the upcoming summer snapper season, which opens June 1.

Mexico Beach has gone out of its way to accommodate fishermen taking advantage of the topography. As mentioned, the city maintains its own dredge to keep the narrow inlet free of sand shoals, and a new launch facility features multiple paved boat ramps and trailer parking. A refurbished Mexico Beach Marina provides convenient dockage, fuel, repair services, tackle and bait just inside the pass.

Mother Nature also got an assist in

Author with Tyndall waters redfish. Above, Cheryl Little launches on St. Joe Bay. Opposite, sunrise at Mexico Beach fishing pier.



terms of providing fish habitat, but this was no accident. The commitment of the Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association (MBARA) has all but guaranteed success for anyone who can read a GPS.

Since 1997, the MBARA has constructed over 150 reefs. The group has also built an easy-to-use interactive website (www.mbara.org) that fishermen will love: Click on a reefsite, and up pops not only construction materials and accurate coordinates, but also fish counts, pictures and perhaps even underwater video.

Yet a conversation with founder Ron

Childs leaves the impression that building new fish habitat now vies with other priorities as the area suffers through what knowledgeable locals view as questionable fish management policies.

“The constantly changing rules are insane,” Childs complained. “With snapper and grouper closed virtually all year, we have members trading their offshore boats for 15-footers so they can chase trout and redfish instead. We were ignored for years when we told fish managers that our gag grouper could use some help. But our red snapper counts are un-

Mexico Beach



Reef fishing is incredible in this part of the state, but regulations are daunting. Red snapper, above, are closed most of the year, open only for a limited period beginning June 1. That's the same day greater amberjack (left) season closes for a two-month stretch. Circle hooks required for both species and other reef fish, when using natural bait.

precedented. Fish management needs to be based on good scientific data. We have a loud extreme left and extreme right, but I think we lack a reasonable scientific voice."

That's where the MBARA comes in. Beyond building reefs, their charter calls for research and education.

"We collect data on the effectiveness of various reef construction and placement. Those fish counts, pictures and videos," Childs explained, "are available to researchers through our website, and we try to post new articles every day to educate the public on the science and politics behind fish management policies. We encourage people to get involved. We can either be a part of it or watch it happen around us."

Inshore, lush grassflats are inundated with white sand-edged potholes. In vast St. Joe Bay, an easy commute just to the east, military bombing practice reportedly contributed to the creation of some of those fish-holding depressions. A few miles west of Mexico Beach, the Air Force's commitment to fish habitat inadvertently continues. Giant Tyndall Air

Reef Innovation

IN APRIL 2012, the John Thompson Memorial Reef is scheduled for deployment off Bell Shoals, 3.4 nautical miles southwest of the Mexico Beach Canal.

The reef system will comprise three different prefab designs, from Walter Marine in Orange Beach, AL (see photos). Thompson, who is survived by his wife, Bonita, was a longtime resident of Mexico Beach. He was a supporter of the Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association (MBARA) since its founding in 1997, said Bob Cox, MBARA president.



Grouper Reef module, 600 sq. feet.



Florida Limestone Reef, 8 feet tall.



Ecosystem Reef disc assembly.

The Thompson Reef will join a number of other structures built in honor of local citizens, many of whom were (or still are) involved in the association or local sportfishing: Pat Mulligan, Raymond Miles, Tennessee Chuck McKibbin. In fact, the MBARA offers a Memorial Reef option (starting at \$1,200) for any family wishing to dedicate a vital piece of new fish habitat to the memory of a loved one. An urn containing cremated remains, and a memorial plaque, may be permanently integrated into the concrete-and-limestone structure.

The Association continues to be instrumental in supplying a big variety of structure along the otherwise sandy slope of the northern Gulf of Mexico. The group works closely with the City of Mexico Beach, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, U.S. Army Corps of Engineer, NOAA, U.S. Coast Guard and Florida DEP. The Walter reefs shown here integrate natural Florida limestone, which has the optimal pH and hardness for marine growth attachment.

Sportsman's Challenge!

At the front of this magazine, we provide four new sets of numbers every month for our ongoing GPS scavenger hunt. Readers who e-mail us (sam@floridasportsman.com) a photo of their plotter screen showing the sonar profile and lat/longs of these spots receive a free Florida Sportsman Fish Chip. Among this month's numbers is the Raymond Miles Memorial Reef off Mexico Beach: 29-55.063'N, 85-32.577'W. The reef is composed of 1 Ecosystem and 4 Florida Limestone modules, deployed May 5, 2011. It's in 58 feet of water with 8 feet of relief.

Force Base encompasses both sides of Hwy. 98/30. The development that has overwhelmed some Panhandle beaches to the west will not happen here. Some of the area's best redfish and trout waters are readily accessible to the public even within base boundaries.

Treelined shores and barrier islands protect these waters from the worst of winds, creating a kayak haven that is surprisingly under-utilized, according to Cheryl Little, a fishing TV hostess who is also the most devoted kayaking fanatic I've ever met. We saw one kayaker—and very few boaters—in four days of stalking redfish, trout and flounder from Panama City's West Bay to St. Joe Bay.

Not that kayak fishing near Tyndall's Crooked Island is as tranquil and serene as the unbroken spartina and pine shorelines would suggest. Fishing virtu-

ally beneath the landing pattern, low-flying fighter jets (Tyndall is home to the Air Force's new F-22) complemented the outstanding trout and redfish bite with a distracting air show.

Thick seagrass is the first thing you notice once on the water. But that's only half of the fish-locating equation. Fortunately for a newcomer such as me, this fishery mimics virtually every other in-shore venue in Florida: Concentrate your efforts where seagrass abruptly gives way to a sand edge. That's what the fish do. There are plenty of those edges easily evident here, whether fishing the sheltered creeks near Crooked Island or the expansive St. Joe Bay. Hard sand potholes, ideal for slipping off the kayak or other shallow-draft boat to wade-fish, stand out against the dark grass that marks softer bottom in the creeks. In deeper, clear St.



WHERE TRADITION MEETS TECHNOLOGY



CALL 727-560-7688
SHIPOKEBOATS.COM

Worldwide Winning Innovation



new for 2012

Sebile Softweight SwimBait Rig is equipped with a treble hook for open water presentations

Soft Weight System

Fine tune the action, speed, depth of any soft plastic worm, swimbait, shad, curly tail, grub, craw, tube, minnow, creature or stickbait. Tungsten gum rubber weights are reusable. Easy on/off allows on-the-water adjustments to fishing conditions. Weights hold where placed on the hook. Change position to give a lure different falling and swimming actions. Includes ultra-sharp, super-strong hooks. Sizes: 1/0, 2/0, 3/0, 4/0, 5/0 and 6/0.

Magic Swimmer Soft

Durable jointed soft lure swims as life-like as a real baitfish. Can be used from shallow to deep water. Plus, it can be rigged weedless. Baits are designed with a hook envelope in belly, hook recess on top and hook holes molded into nose and back. Comes prerigged with Sebile Soft Weight System or use a Texas rig, Carolina rig, dropshot rig, shaky head rig or jighead to fit any fishing conditions. Sizes: 4", 5", 6-1/4" and 8".



Sebile
INNOVATIVE FISHING
www.sebile.com



Mexico Beach

Joe Bay, sneaky boaters can view trout, redfish and sheepshead stacked along the meandering sand mazes.

Perhaps more than any other venue along Florida's lengthy Gulf Coast, St. Joe Bay's rich grassflats excel in producing big spotted seatrout, flounder and scallops.

"Presnell's Marina used to have a club that recognized catches of 6-, 7-, 8- and 9-plus-pound trout," Capt. Allan Duke told me. He has guided out of Presnell's for 18 years, and recently took over management duties.

From March until June, Duke anticipates big trout venturing into the warmest water to incubate their eggs. That means shallow, dark grassbeds that absorb heat.

"The big females move up into 6 to 18 inches of water," Duke says, "and gradually

drop back into six to eight feet of water as summer bay temperatures climb."

But don't expect the smart old specks to be pushovers.

"A bunch of people standing on a boat won't catch these big trout consistently because they make too much noise. But if you know where to look and approach them quietly, they're here."

Scallops are a lot easier to sneak up on. Captain Duke says that at any given time during the July 1 to Sept. 10 season, there may be 1,000 people chasing the tasty little bilvalves around St. Joe Bay. In other words, make your reservations early.

"I might launch 100 to 150 boats a day at the marina on weekends," he told me. "It gets crazy around here."

The topic of scallops brings up a final point about Mexico Beach: The west bank of the Mexico Beach Canal—as the town's manmade Gulf inlet is known—is the westernmost point of Florida's approved bay scallop harvesting waters. The scalloping extends south to the Pasco/Hernando county line. **FS**



Gulf flounder are very plentiful, and quick to pounce on slow-moving soft plastics, such as this shrimp.

Small Town F-L-A

Mexico Beach's leadership has limited the town's development under the premise that bigger isn't necessarily better, which would be treated as heresy in most of coastal Florida. The population barely scratches 1,000 residents, and a 4-story height limitation keeps buildings from encroaching on the immaculate sugar-sand beaches. There's no stop light or fast food chain restaurant; this is a town designed for a stress-free, toes-in-the-sand vacation.

One of the biggest events of the year is the Mexico Beach Artificial Reef Association Kingfish Tournament. The party draws more people than inhabit Mexico Beach. Registration and rules are posted at www.mbara.org.

Keep this in mind when fishing in the Mexico Beach and St. Joe Bay area. The Eastern/Central time demarcation line lies in between—Port St. Joe is Eastern, Mexico Beach is Central. So whether meeting a guide or making dinner reservations, make certain all parties are clear on whose clock is in charge.

Check the city's new Web site (www.mexico-beach.com) for the surprising range of restaurants, hotel accommodations and shops. Besides water-related activities, Mexico Beach hosts art and wine festivals, weekly waterfront concerts at Sunset Park and other events. For further information, contact Kimberly Shoaf at the Mexico Beach Community Development Council (850-648-8196).

—J.M.



Mexico Beach city boat ramp. Below: Driftwood Inn, one of the author's favorites.



The IGFA just confirmed Ande the #1 line in the world in all line categories Salt Water, Fresh Water and Fly Tippet

IGFA just announced ANDE the #1 Line in the World for Salt water, Fresh Water and Tippet. 2,300 Current World Records recorded by the IGFA. No matter where or what you fish, give ANDE a chance to help boat the "Big One". ANDE has provided the Best line at a Reasonable price for over 50 years. If World Champion Anglers the World over use ANDE why would you use anything else?

ANDE, "the Line of Champions"

ANDE MONOFILAMENT

5409 Australian Ave., West Palm Beach, FL 33407
561.842.2474 Fax: 561.848.5538
E-mail: andeline@bellsouth.net Website: andemonofilament.com

AMERICA'S #1 BOAT BRAND.

BUILT TO GO ANYWHERE, DO ANYTHING.™

Carolina Skiff

It's the sneak up in skinny water fish stalker.
It's the high-performance, fuel-sippin', best boat money can buy.

Made and loved by red-blooded Americans.
It's the original Carolina Skiff.

www.carolinaskiff.com