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ST. GEORGE ISLAND FISHING IS FANTASTIC

Accomplished fishermen will tell you that the claim that “St. George Island Fishing is Fantastic” is actually an understatement. We simply couldn’t find the appropriate word to describe one of the greatest “fishing holes” in the United States. What the heck – in the entire world!

Just think about it, how many places are there that offer just about every type of fishing you can imagine and also provide exceptional results even for the neophytes. Within a handful of picturesque miles we are talking salt inshore, offshore and flats fishing (and spear fishing if you prefer) plus a variety of fresh water fishing on no less than seven rivers in Franklin County alone.

You could try a different type of fishing each day of the week for a week and still not have tried them all.

TRADITIONAL GEAR

First, let’s talk about what most folks consider “traditional” tackle –you have a light rod and reel plus live or artificial bait. But have no boat. Equipped with this combination while on St. George Island you (and your ice chest, naturally) can head straight to just about any spot on the 28-mile-long beach and surf fish to your heart’s delight. Or slip over to the bay side of the island and do the same from a slightly less sandy (with more shade) location.

If you happen to be in the nine-mile-long St. George Island State Park (east end) you could decide to wade out into Apalachicola Bay a bit and you just might find yourself in a never-ending school near the mini oyster bars and grass flats. As a general rule, early or late are best. Or if on the other (west) end of the isle in the exclusive Plantation section you may try your luck at Sikes Cut. The water moves pretty fast here so adjust appropriately.

Just your luck the old (built in 1965) St. George Island Bridge started falling down a while back and they left portions of the old one (ya, it’s safe) after building the new one. The entrance to the pier is located on the east side of the bridge as it touches down on the island. It goes on and on some 600 feet into the bay.

If you are from out of state you must get a fishing license. If you are from Florida, you know your rules.

WITH A BOAT

If you don't have a boat and wish you did, you have two choices. Rent a boat or charter one, complete with captain.

If you have your own small boat you can launch in the state park (fee to get in) and at the free St. George Boat Ramp next to the fishing pier. There is ample free parking. You are now just minutes from dipping a hook in one of the most nutrient rich bays in the country – thanks to the Apalachicola River. You might even bring along your camera and get a shot of the local oystermen plying their harvesting trade in the bay.

You likely won't take long to decide that manually raking a sixty- pound bag of oysters (and then culling them) for \$25 per oyster sack isn't exactly a glamorous life. By the way, you can hire a local company to take you and your family on an oyster harvesting experience in the bay. A great way to teach your teenage son the value of a dollar.

In general, Apalachicola Bay is not very deep – some six to nine feet. And has some boat bottom scraping oyster bars. And lots of big fish waiting to prey on little fish. It's up to you to interrupt the cycle. Trout, flounder, redfish and speckled trout await you with baited breath. Fish with the tide and depending on the clarity of the water use soft plastic baits such as DOA, Gulp and the (salt) bass assassin. If they aren't particularly attractive today try switching to alternating presentations of live bait and fresh dead bait. Try jigging around the outside edges of potholes.

Some occasional recreational fishermen are under the common misconception that the biggest fish are always in the deepest water in proximity to your boat. Wrong! Do you know how deep the water has to be in order for a monster fish to swim in it? Try just three feet, even one or two.

Some of the finest "skinny water" guides in the country operate out of Apalachicola Bay and area waters. They will stealthily pole you within few yards of some of the finest fishing you will have ever experienced. It is worth every dollar you spend and if you are a quick learner you can do the same in a year or two. Just kidding, maybe!

Now, if you really want another true fishing experience, tear off that old, heavy line and try the lightest line you can find. You'll quickly find out what kind of fishing "feel" you have. Snap!

DIFFERENT KIND OF CHALLENGE

Now, for the ultimate fishing challenge, trade your current tackle for a fly rod. Make lazy circles in the sky and then plunk your bait in front of the nose of your quarry. Watch him gobble it up and instinctively fight to get away. Even a fish of only a few pounds is a worthy challenger on this gear.

By the way it's ok to shoot and release. Shoot a picture and release your catch. Conversely, if you and your brood are downright hungry, there are area restaurants that will cook up your catch.

Now that we have you fly fishing in Apalachicola Bay, we might as well go for the gusto. Tarpon fishing! The Silver Kings love to get in hot water and migrate to the Forgotten Coast in mid-summer. Come upon a school of a dozen or so Tarpon scattering a school of bait fish and your heart will skip a beat. Make the perfect toss in front of the bait pool with live bait or Bomber-type plastics and you are about to experience one of those special moments in time.

Within seconds you are wondering if you caught a fish or a fish caught you. Thirty minutes seem like several hours. The average Tarpon weighs in at about 100 pounds. You won't be able to judge the weight of yours until he starts dancing across the crest of the water. OMG! That thing must weigh 175 pounds and I'm battling him with a fly rod. Now that's a fair fight!

If you get him close enough to the boat to take a snapshot, you're the worthy winner. And because he was a most worthy opponent, he is released to fight another day.

OFFSHORE FISHING

Now let's do some offshore fishing. Do you mind if we charter a boat? Yours looks a mite small and, besides, let's get a captain who can put us on fish so we can catch enough to last us for most of our vacation.

What are you most likely to catch off St. George? A smorgasbord of saltwater species including snapper, grouper, triggerfish and a variety of reef fish in deeper waters. You may also wake up some king mackerel and cobia close to the surface. Your bait will most likely be live pinfish and blue runners or frozen cigar minnows, squid or Spanish sardines.

If you want to be a sport you can try and use light tackle but for all practical purposes (after all, we are presupposing that you are meat fishing) the heavy duty variety is appropriate.

Initially offshore fishing, or deep sea fishing, as we used to call it, appears to all fun. But as the hours pass, it can actually be hard work. Be wary of taking disinterested youngsters on a long, full-day trip and ruin their zest for offshore fishing forever. Maybe try a half-day charter first.

FRESH WATER FISHING

All of this fishing and we still haven't dipped a hook in fresh water. That can be cured quickly. The mouth of the mighty Apalachicola River is just four miles north of St. George. And it goes on forever.

What kind of gear are we using on this trip – conventional rod & reel, fly rod or a good old cane pole with a red and white bobber?

You say you have never used a cane pole and bobber? The first order of business is to stop in Sopchoppy (Wakulla County) and pick up some good, old-fashion earth worms. Captured the old-fashion way – by "grunting". A stake is placed in the ground and a rasp like device is rubbed across the top of it and the good vibrations send the earthworms upward to the surface. No, we aren't kidding you.

Spit on the worm and place the worm on a hook. Then dip the hook beneath a tree limb or on the other side of a fallen tree trunk. Perhaps in the center of some shoreline vegetation. And get ready to rumble. There must be at least a thousand varieties of bream or sunfish in the Apalach and its tributaries. They are plentiful and fun to catch. But even more important, it is the ideal, peaceful family outing. And think how much money you saved on fishing gear.

You can cook these fish the traditional way or do what the bayou people have been doing for eons...scale, gut and behead 'em; throw them into a hot bucket of grease; and eat 'em bones and all.

Franklin County has seven fresh water rivers. Besides the Apalachicola, there's the Carrabelle and Ocklockonee plus the Brothers, New, Jackson, and Crooked Rivers. Think you can find a "honey hole"?

A fly rod and "popping bug" or wet fly will quickly put a dent in the small fish population but this gear will surely put you to the test if you latch on to a fierce bass.

If you want to take a break and enjoy a family picnic, there is even a beach up the Apalach.

There you have it – at least a dozen variations on the fishing theme. All on or in proximity to St. George Island. See if you are up to the challenge of trying them all. If not we can recommend some excellent fresh seafood markets.