A Barracuda Afternoon

by

*Eyes Right*

**Marathon, FL –** The wind had been blowing hard for the past 4 days, and I was beginning to wonder if I would be able to go fishing on a charter boat in the Atlantic here in the Florida Keys. I had experienced several cancellations due to high wind, and it was blowing again as I woke up today. The previous afternoon a fellow named Hank at Sea Dog Charters put me on his standby list to go fishing on a boat named *Barracuda*. He told me that he would call or text me in the morning if they were going out. At about 10 AM I received Hank’s text saying, “It’s a go….be here at 12:30 to sail at 1.”

First some background. Renting a charter fishing boat in the Keys is not inexpensive. Most captains charge $800 to $1000 for a party of four for half a day of fishing offshore. Some will take you out for six hours for the same price. An “all-day” excursion will set you back at least $1200. I like deep sea fishing, but NOT THAT MUCH. I had talked to some captains and requested a call if another party was looking for a single to join their group, but no one called.

Sea Dog Charters runs a party boat operation. In fishing terms, that does not mean a boat full of drinkers and Jimmy Buffett music, but rather a boat dedicated to fishing with 15 to 30 anglers aboard standing next to each other with their lines dangling over the sides. When I called Hank following his text, I was very happy to learn that there would be only 9 of us on this trip – a very comfortable arrangement, particularly since the cost was only $69.99 per person with the same extras as on the $800 boats (water, bait, rods, reels, and assistance from a mate). With taxes and a gas surcharge, the final tab was $83.21.

When I arrived dockside, I met Corey, the mate. He was a large, scruffy looking dude in his mid-20’s with various piercings, but a friendly attitude. Corey’s head was surrounded by about 3 inches of red hair and a matching full beard, but no mustache. The image conjured up thoughts of a young, fallen Mennonite. It also came to mind that I would want Corey on my side in a bar fight. His attire was a dirty gray tee shirt and matching dirty Levis. Our boat, the *Barracuda*, was about 32-36 feet long, with a flying bridge for the Captain and two sets of flat seat cushions in the shade of the bridge. There were at least 15 rods and reels in holders ready for use when we got to the fishing area. I was a bit concerned because the two inflatable lifeboats had the boat name misspelled, but I got over this quickly once I saw the close-by location of the lifejackets. Propulsion came from two rather powerful diesel engines.

There was indeed only 9 of us on the trip, not counting Corey and the Captain, an older likeable fellow who went by “Captain Bob.” Soon we were underway to our first fishing spot about 5 miles offshore in 25 feet of ocean. As soon as we dropped our lines, we began to catch fish. Some were legal size, others we threw back trying not to pitch them too close to the flock of seagulls who trail every fishing vessel looking for a handout. Because I have a bad back and now use a cane, Corey offered me a portable chair to use while I fished. I readily accepted.

We visited two other locations during our 4-hour adventure and ended up with 39 fish total. Two customers, a Thai father and his son, quickly became seasick and spent the entire trip holding on dearly to matching barf buckets. His daughter and other son had no problems. So, 7 of us caught those 39 – I did my part with 8. By the time we headed back to Marathon, the wind had died down and we were rocked by gentle swells.

Before we debarked, both Corey and Captain Bob reminded us that the mate works *only* for tips and that “roughly 20 bucks each is the typical tip, although it is not required.” Because Corey had been kind to me with that chair, I gave him 30. It turned out that Corey’s real gift to us was cleaning those 39 fish and bagging up a portion in a plastic bag for each person. He did this under the watchful eyes of about 6 pelicans (4 adults and 2 juveniles) who begged incessantly for any scraps. My thought while watching Corey skillfully wield a very sharp knife to clean and filet the fish was that I also wanted him on my side in a knife fight.

I took my bag of fish (porgies, grunts, and snappers) about 100 feet west to the 7-Mile Diner where they cook your fish however you request (I asked for blackened) and provide soup or salad and a side for $19. The fish were delicious.

What a day, what a meal!

I thought you might like to know.

E-R