



The weather wasn't great, and I swear I heard some fish laughing at us, but even that couldn't ruin our day of inshore angling on the Outer Banks. At least I filled my notebook, if not my creel. For telling fish tales, that's what matters most anyway.

Fish on the Line (And Other Lies)

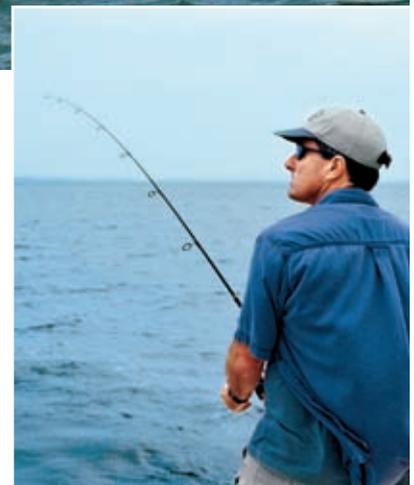
Our outing proves that even a lousy day of fishing beats the best day of doing anything else.

Some days the fish just don't cooperate. You can bring plenty of fancy gear, know all the secret spots, try every trick in the book plus what your granddaddy taught you, and still come home empty-handed. Anyone who tells you otherwise—who boasts about always catching the limit and insinuates that your problem might be, well, *you*—is telling a big fat whopper.

I experienced that kind of day recently on the Outer Banks. Mind you, it's a great place to fish. Over the years, offshore and inshore, from beaches and from piers, I've caught more fish than StarKist. This particular trip produced nothing to brag about, but I still had a great time. Let me explain why.

It's an Attitude Thing

Success can depend on your outlook. That proves especially true for fishing, which, you'll notice, isn't called "catching." For this outing a stiff northeast wind pushed through storms, whipped up waves, turned sky and water battleship gray, and apparently sent the fish into hiding. We shoved off at dawn from Pirate's



PHOTOGRAPHS: VINCE LUPPO

Cove Marina, my camera-toting friend, Vince Lupo, and I along with Manteo-based fishing guide Capt. Toby Russ aboard his 21-foot charter boat, the *T-Time*.

Most of the other boats in the departing fleet headed 30 miles out to sea, where the deep Gulf Stream passes. Folks planned to wrestle wily wahoo, feisty mako shark, and other prey.

What's Down There?

Look for king mackerel, cobia, amberjack, and striped bass during fall and spring on the inshore waters of the Outer Banks. April to September brings Spanish mackerel and bluefish. Expect croaker, spot, and flounder at any time. Offshore boats go for bluefin tuna January to March and yellowfin tuna and dolphin fish year-round. Ask at any marina to learn what's running.

To me one expanse of open ocean looks pretty much like the others, so I generally prefer to stay inshore, within sight of lighthouses, bridges, water towers, islands, and other familiar landmarks. I enjoy knowing where I am without using GPS. And the shallow-water game species in this part of Carolina include a remarkable variety: trout, croaker, spot, sheepshead, flounder, king mackerel, amberjack, cobia, red drum, and more.

At least, that is, in theory.

They Biting?

We skipped around on Pamlico Sound, Roanoke Sound, and Croatan Sound, wide yet protected waters between the barrier islands and the mainland. We trolled here, dropped anchor there, netted bait when needed, and cast our lines wherever intuition pointed. We talked, laughed, cursed our luck, counted our blessings, and waved to other anglers on passing boats who shared a similar fate.

A cooler full of cold cut sandwiches and iced-down beverages gradually grew as empty as the other cooler we'd hoped to fill with fish worth photographing, cleaning, cooking, and eating. That chestnut about a bad day of fishing beating a good day of anything else came up, helping us appreciate the surroundings and pull a sliver of positive attitude from a sackful of disappointment.

Extra Points for Effort

Captain Toby worked hard to stock our stringers. Like many fishing guides, he felt a personal responsibility to make our day, despite



printed disclaimers that no catch is guaranteed.

He paused near the mouth of Oregon Inlet to round up small baitfish. He steered us to tide-dug channels, shade-casting docks and bridges, the grassy edges of marshes, and the fish-harboring lee sides of small islands. He parked us above secret holes unseen by the naked eye but clearly indicated on his depth finder. He passed us cork-handled graphite rods already strung and properly weighted and showed us where to cast—places he'd hooked keepers before.

At least, places he claimed past success. Of course we believed him, just as he no doubt accepted as gospel my canard about catching more than StarKist. Believing each other's tales goes hand in hand (or is it tongue in cheek?) with fishing. Embellishment, after all, ranks high in angling's unwritten code of honor.

When all else fails, study the charts. It's always nice to know precisely where you aren't catching anything.

Grab the Dip Net

As hours ticked by and Vince and I became resigned to catching nothing, Captain Toby grew all the more determined to prove himself. Casting near some pilings covered with barnacles, he finally hooked something that fought back. He worked it closer, handed me the rod, and leaned over with a dip net. Up came a 21-inch striper bass, our only decent catch of the day.

"This fish gets a kiss," Toby muttered as he removed the hook and held it up for Vince to photograph. The tight smile on Toby's face held equal parts pride of accomplishment and relief at not coming up totally empty.

Okay, so we didn't catch much. But I contend that the experience of hanging out on North Carolina's inshore water is its own reward. Playing hooky from the office must count for at least as much, on the scales of time-well-spent justice, as actually hooking anything with scales. It wasn't what you could call a terrific day of fishing, but don't worry. It'll get better with a few more retellings. JOE RADA

Hook Up With Toby

To line up a trip with Capt. Toby Russ aboard his *T-Time*, based at Pirate's Cove Marina in Manteo, call (252) 423-1401, or visit www.t-timecharters.com. Fishing guides operate from more than a dozen marinas scattered along the Outer Banks. For listings, a free Outer Banks Travel Guide, and other useful information, call toll-free 1-877-629-4386, or visit www.outerbanks.org.