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Florida Fishing Fun

Mixing fishing with a family holiday can be difficult, but there is one location where they marry perfectly, claims Hardy & Greys Academy manager Andy Smith, and that's Florida!



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Many thousands of British folk flock to the US state of Florida each year to sample its number-one family attraction, Walt Disney World. And while the Magic Kingdom of Disneyland always lives up to its reputation there's another aspect to the area that is anything but Mickey Mouse, and that's the fly fishing.

Florida has a staggering 1,350 miles of shoreline to go at and the beach fishing is superb, with a long list of hard-fighting species to go at. The best part, however, is that it's also a place where you can cash in on the fly fishing twice a day WITHOUT disrupting a single moment of the family vacation, thus avoiding earache from your other half.

Snatched Sessions

I have always loved my family holidays, especially to Florida, where we've been many times in the last 20 years, but by day three I get a little restless doing nothing.

We always head west, in the direction of Tampa Bay, and from Orlando I can easily be fishing in three hours.

A favourite stop-off for my wife and I has to be a small section of coast called Anna Maria Island, about 15 miles north of Sarasota, where there's classic surf

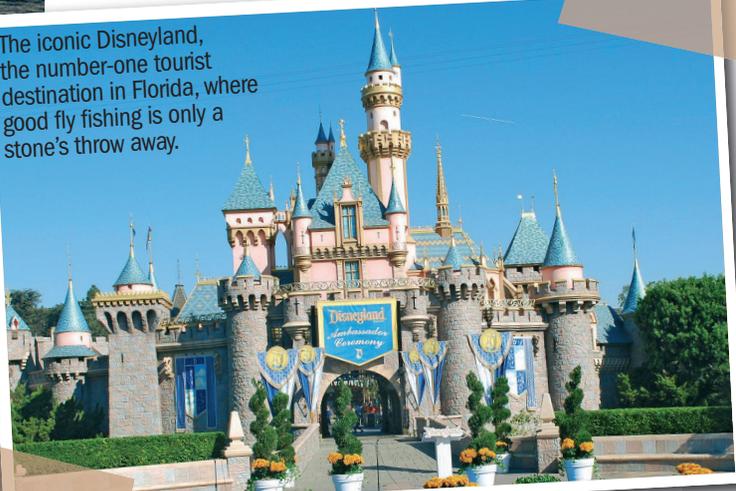
fishing right on your doorstep. I guarantee this spot will have you up before dawn every day, fishing in the surf as it gets light, yet you'll be back inside again as the family surfaces for breakfast. And after spending the day with them it's back to the shoreline at dusk for another spot of fishing.

The reason for the 'snatched' sessions is simple – first light and an hour before darkness are the only times that fly fishing seems to work with any consistency. The evenings are generally more productive, especially if the fading light coincides with low tide and little breeze.

If you do go to Anna Maria Island, head to what is called Bean Point an hour or so before dark and just wait around on the beach and keep looking along the shoreline.

Generally, look no more than a few yards or so into the surf along the edge of the beach and watch for 'nervous water'. The water will often begin to almost boil and then explode as baitfish swim for their lives, being pursued by predator species. I have actually seen baitfish in late summer in such a frenzy that they have hurled themselves out of the water and onto the sand in their thousands in an effort to escape the organised gangs of jack crevalle, blue fish, Spanish mackerel, snook and ladyfish.

The iconic Disneyland, the number-one tourist destination in Florida, where good fly fishing is only a stone's throw away.



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A selection of Clousers and small mini lures will work wonders on most things that you're likely to encounter when fishing from the beach.

Keep Retrieving

These species may not have the Hollywood status of bonefish, tarpon and permit but they fight just as well pound for pound, especially if you use a 7-wt outfit. Expect explosive takes and a fight that has more than double the power of any freshwater species you'll find in the UK. A 3lb jack or Spanish mackerel will take quite some effort and time to land and have you out onto the backing line in seconds.

When you see signs of feeding predators, cast into the middle of all the activity and then strip back at a fairly brisk pace. As your fly pulls away from the central commotion your quarry will be in hot pursuit, and if it's an evening of flat calm you will even see torpedo-like bow waves heading for you. As the fish

follows DO NOT slow down or stop, just continue to strip the fly back. If you slow down or stop, the predators will swim off. Sometimes you can find yourself in the middle of a baitfish frenzy and there are so many fish crashing around you really have no idea where to cast!

In general you need hardly get your feet wet while casting as the fish can be quite close in; however, if it's a nice sunset you will have tourists walking along the beach so it's into the water to get far enough away so as not to catch anyone with your back cast. Once you're 10 yards or so out, you can then turn to cast along the beach.

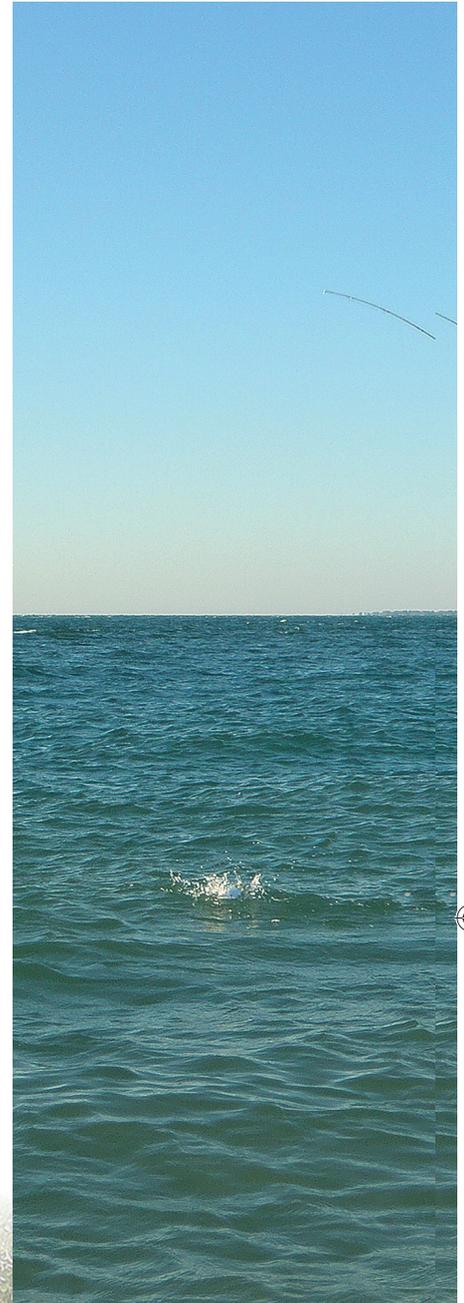
The beach fishing is all 'fishing for free' but if money and family commitments allow there are no shortages of top-rated guides for an organised trip to target large

redfish and snook from a flats boat out from the Clearwater Bay area, and that goes for just about every marina you find yourself near, all along this coastline.

Keep travelling down the coast and it's the same story for mile after mile until you hit the Keys!

Saltwater Kit

This kind of casual beach fly fishing I am describing doesn't necessarily require anything special as far as the gear goes, as it's unlikely you will be getting into any of the real saltwater giants. But if you yearn for the bigger stuff a prebooked guide with a boat will have all the right gear for you to use. Remember this is all about 'fill-in' fishing based around the family holiday and needs to be treated as such, so your normal reservoir



Mangroves provide a haven for all manner of saltwater species, but you're most likely to encounter small tarpon.

You'll be surprised at just how many fish you'll encounter when wading along the beach, targeting them with a fly rod.



trout rod will do fine, as will a modern reel providing it has a reasonable drag on it. Be sure to wash your gear straightaway in freshwater after fishing in the sea, though, or even take it into the shower with you, otherwise saltwater will damage it.

One very important thing is that you will definitely need a floating tropical/saltwater

Fly Patterns

I have found that most large white/silver reservoir fry patterns will work perfectly for jacks, but take along some standard green and white saltwater Clouser Minnows and anything you have resembling baitfish, as well as some large brown shrimp and crab patterns for the redfish and snappers.

“Drop the fly just right and it's a great thump of a take as the fish grabs the fly and heads back for cover as if turbo-charged.”

fly line. Your standard trout line will behave very oddly in 30 degrees of heat combined with saltwater. The line loses all its subtleness and goes really sticky, to such an extent that it becomes very difficult to cast with any precision or anything like your usually achieved distance. So invest in a tropical/bonefish/tarpon type of line even if it is your first time out.

Oh, and you will need plenty of backing! I recommend an absolute minimum of 100 yards, and if your spool is on the small side, investing in some super-fine gel-spun backing will give you that extra yardage.

If you do end up using your trout flies, I am afraid that you will need to bin them on your return to the UK as the saltwater will have standard hooks rusting up within days. Also, in the summer months you will definitely hit into some great sport with Spanish mackerel. These fish have razor-sharp teeth that will cut through 25lb leader in an instant, so have some knottable wire-trace leader with you at all times, plus a pair of long forceps.

As saltwater fishing can bring the unexpected, it really is a worthwhile precaution to have a gardening glove with you in readiness to handle the



fish – some of them have very sharp spikes within their fins, not to mention a lot of sharp teeth.

A fish that is fun to catch but can literally become a real pain is the skipjack. It's a ravenous feeder that will tear up your flies within three or four takes, but watch out – it has sharp spines all over and if you're not careful will give some nasty throbbing cuts. It's also advisable to wear beach shoes, for there are loads of rays.

Going Afloat On A Kayak

On my last visit to Anna Maria we drove another 130 miles south to Naples to catch up with a Larry Klein, a guide we met while fishing near Fort Myers two years ago.

We had a great day's sport fishing from kayaks in and around the estuary mangroves. We met Larry at a fantastic recreation and nature reserve called Rookery Bay.

The entire bay area is home to some great

Get the kids involved too; this is Dylan Hooley with a lovely sea trout taken on a black Clouser Minnow.



wildlife, including manatees, which pop up now and again as you are fishing, and while you are off doing your thing for the day there are organised educational kayak trips for anyone in the family who wants to see the natural bird life and coastal ecology up close as they learn about the Everglades.

Strong winds in the preceding days had messed up the water clarity for us

and on the day we were out on the water the breeze made for some difficult manoeuvring from time to time, but once out of the wind it was great fun. Fishing the mangroves really tests your casting-accuracy skills as the fish can only be found lurking around and hiding in the roots and overhangs, under ledges and in dark holes. Cast a yard or so short of the vegetation and you catch nothing!

Honestly, for every fish swimming around here, there

is always a bigger one waiting to eat it, so it's a hide-and-seek existence for all of these creatures. I have to admit that far too much time was wasted by not getting my fly right into the edge of the mangrove roots and nothing even looked at my offering. But to begin with it's hard to get used to sitting low in a kayak. Cast just a few inches too far and you're snagged in the roots on the bank, and it's a real pain to get released, especially having been carefully drifting to a spot your guide tells you will hold fish.

However, drop the fly just right and you'll catch snappers, jacks and snook. It really is a great thump of a take as the fish darts out, grabs the fly and heads back for cover as if turbo-charged, so don't use a leader under 16lb. I lost two cracking fish by going too light.

Florida really is a place where you can combine family and fishing year round. That's a fact, not a Disney fairy tale!

Be very careful when handling fish with teeth - this barracuda fell for one of the pike flies Andy uses here in the UK!

