

WOODS & WATERS

Capital place to fish

The Florida Keys village of **Islamorada** has almost 'every species of fish that swims'

By STEVE WATERS
Staff writer

If you've never been to Islamorada, you might think it presumptuous to call itself "The Sport Fishing Capital of the World."

But if you've ever fished the waters surrounding the Florida Keys village, you know that it lives up to that name.

Where else in the world can you go offshore and catch swordfish, sailfish, snappers and groupers, then head to Florida Bay into what's known as the backcountry and catch bonefish, redfish, permit, snook and tarpon, all in the same day?

In addition to great fishing, Islamorada also offers uncrowded scuba diving on its coral reefs, kayaking and hiking at Indian Key Historic State Park, bird-watching in Florida Bay and numerous galleries, many featuring marine artwork.

But for many of the residents of Islamorada, which comprises six islands, the fishing is what brought them here.

"I came here to visit a friend in January 1970," Capt. Vic Gaspeny said. "It was 75 degrees and tarpon were rolling under the bridge."

Gaspeny went back home to Virginia Beach, finished college at Old Dominion University and moved to Islamorada in 1973. He became a light-tackle fishing guide in 1979, specializing in tarpon and bonefish, and later helped pioneer daytime sword-

fishing.

"One look at this place and that was it, there was no dilemma where to spend my life," Gaspeny said. "It's not what it used to be, but it's still a lot better than whatever's in second place."

Gaspeny fishes out of Bud N' Mary's Marina, which looks as old-time Florida Keys as it gets: rustic, weathered and welcom-

ing, with a skilled fleet of offshore and inshore fishing guides, and the Miss Islamorada party boat.

"It's one of the iconic marinas in the Keys," said Bill Boyce, the host of the "IGFA Anglers Digest" TV show who was in Islamorada last month to tape an episode of catching swordfish, dolphin and tarpon with acclaimed marine artist Guy Harvey. "Every time you go by it, it looks fishy, fishy, fishy."

Richard Stanczyk, who bought the landmark marina 37 years ago and has turned down several offers to sell it to developers, first came to Bud N' Mary's in the late 1960s.

A charter captain at Miami's old Pier 5, Stanczyk had met Harold Adler while fishing in the Bahamas. Adler later hired Islamorada's legendary Jimmie Albright to run his boat in a Keys sailfish tournament. When the boat's engine blew up, Adler asked Stanczyk to bring his boat down for the tournament.

"That was my first exposure to the Keys," Stanczyk said, who added that using 12-pound line to catch sailfish was shocking to a guy who routinely used 50-pound line on his charters in Miami. "I was overwhelmed."

Several years later, Stanczyk casually asked owner Jack Kertz if he ever thought about selling the marina. Kertz said he'd just sold it and was waiting to close on the deal. A month

later, Kertz called to say the deal didn't go through and he'd sell the marina to Stanczyk, who bought it in 1978.

Stanczyk has enjoyed all the fishing the area offers, from fly fishing for bonefish on the shallow oceanside and backcountry flats to fishing the depths of the Atlantic Ocean for swordfish.

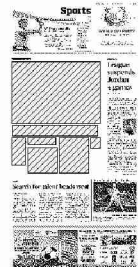
"I went from fishing in 2 feet of water to 2,000 feet," said Stanczyk, 68, who, along with his brother Scott and Gaspeny, were the first to catch swordfish on the bottom during the daytime in Florida, a tactic that has spread throughout the coastal United States, except they do it only on rod and reel.

Stanczyk also enjoys fishing for Spanish mackerel in the Gulf of Mexico, catching snook and redfish with his son, Capt. Rick Stanczyk, in Everglades National Park, which is a nursery for numerous species, and catching dolphin, swordfish and tilefish with his other son, Capt. Nick Stanczyk.

Within view of Alligator Light, which marks a coral reef where the USS Alligator sank in 1822, anglers catch yellowtail, mutton and mangrove snappers, groupers, kingfish and cobias.

"The reason Islamorada is what it is has to do with its location," Stanczyk said, noting its proximity to Florida Bay, the Gulf and the Atlantic. "All those bodies of

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water created a place that's home to virtually every species of fish that swims. You can fish somewhere 365 days a year and you can catch every fish in this hemisphere on all types of tackle."

David Curry, a hotel developer from Fort Smith, Ark., who owns the Islander Resort, which recently became a Guy Harvey Outpost, shares Stanczyk's love of fishing and the old Florida Keys.

Instead of leveling the Islander after buying it in 1999 and building a new resort, Curry patiently restored the buildings and all of its rooms to keep its vintage Keys look and atmosphere. The Islander has 114 ground-floor suites and villas on the ocean and 25

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townhome cottages with 14 boat slips on Florida Bay.

"What he did that I respect," Stanczyk said of Curry, "is that when you go to the Islander, you feel like you're in the Florida Keys."

"We talked with locals and with guests and that confirmed it was the right thing to do," said Curry, who also owns a Doubletree Hotel in Key West, and who last month caught and released his first swordfish with Stanczyk.

If you'd rather rough it,

you can book a tent or RV campsite with electricity and water just south of Islamorada at Long Key State Park (floridastateparks.org/longkey), which offers wade-fishing for bonefish on its flats and trails for kayakers, canoers and hikers.

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IF YOU GO

Islamorada is about a 2-hour drive from Fort Lauderdale. Construction of a sewer line can make for traffic on weekends.

Where to fish: The iconic Bud N' Mary's Marina (budnmarys.com) has offshore and inshore guides who catch everything from swordfish and snappers to bonefish and tarpon. It also has rental boats.

Where to stay: The Islander Resort, which is a Guy Harvey Outpost (guyharveyoutpost.com), retains its 1950s Florida Keys look and feel, but with modern amenities.

Other activities: Divers can visit coral reefs or hunt for lobsters offshore or inshore. Art lovers can visit the galleries of Pasta Pantaleo (artbypasta.com) and David Wirth (davidwirth.com).

Information: Visit fla-keys.com.

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Capt. Vic Gaspeny

This is one in an occasional series of day trips for outdoor enthusiasts.



BOB KRIST/FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU

The flats of Islamorada are home to bonefish, tarpon and permit, which are pursued by anglers from around the world.



STEVE WATERS/SUN SENTINEL

Capt. Charlie Scoble with a gag grouper caught off Islamorada. Alligator Light, at left, is a landmark for boats fishing offshore out of Islamorada.



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Bud N' Mary's Marina in Islamorada has retained its old-time Florida Keys feel thanks to owner Richard Stanczyk.