

by

## Mate for a Day

**H**AVE YOU EVER WONDERED what it would be like to mate on a charter fishing boat for a day? We find out.

I'm squeezing the poop out of a dead fish. Literally. I pinch the fish's belly between my forefinger and thumb, slide it aft along the unfortunate critter's underside until green slurry pops out, then dip it in a bucket of saltwater to sluice the stinky goo away.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. I should be relaxing in the saloon of the 41' custom fishing boat Catch 22. I should be enjoying the break from my usual offshore fishing grind, which starts with a two-hour tow to the boat ramp, includes hours of running both the boat and the fishing lines, and ends with a massive

cleaning barrage. I've signed on to this trip as a passenger, to enjoy a day of responsibility-free fishing with my 18 year old daughter Mollie. But we arrived at the dock this morning to discover that the Catch 22 was mate-less. Thanks to a difference of opinion between the captain and his assistant just 12 hours earlier, the mate for today would be... me?

Rejecting the position wasn't an option—there was an entire crew of eager, anticipation-riddled kids sharing the boat with Mollie and I. When we arrived at the dock nine year-old Mitchell was gushing with exuberance, bouncing back and forth between the cabin and the cockpit like a ping-pong ball. Eleven year-old Delaney bubbled over with talk of dolphin, whale, and sea turtle sightings. Thirteen year-old Carder quietly inspected hooks, leaders, and lures, trying to absorb every iota of information possible on his first offshore fishing trip. And Albie, the only other adult aboard, did his best to keep the mayhem at a minimum as Captain Mitch and I talked in hushed tones.

So instead of reclining in the air condition-

ing, soon after casting off the lines I found myself wedged into a corner of the cockpit, crouching over a bucket of small dead fish as we crashed our way through the open ocean. Squeezing out the poop. Popping out the eye-balls. Sliding in the hooks. Winding thin copper wire through the empty eye sockets and back around the shank of the hook, to keep it in place.

## Zero-Dark-Thirty

The mate on a fishing boat normally starts his or her day long before the clients arrive at the dock. The fishbox needs ice, fishing gear needs to be taken out of the cabin and arranged in the cockpit, and provisions for the day need to be stowed. Then the crew has to be welcomed aboard and informed of safety precautions and any boat rules the captain may have established. Casting off the lines, which is usually the first thing we see the mate do when we charter a boat for the day, takes place a solid hour later. I got off easy since I didn't handle any of the prep work, but still had to roll out of bed at 4:30 in the morning for a 5:30 departure. In most cases, the mate's wake-up call will come closer to 3:30 or 4:00 AM.

Rigging those dead fish into trolling baits took me about an hour and a half. I'm not a pro, so it took me longer than it would have taken a "real" mate to get the job done. And many professional mates would have made the job easier by pre-rigging the baits the night before while on dry land, instead of on a rocking, rolling boat. But even with the ballyhoo on ice, the mate's chores for the cruise aren't necessarily complete. After climbing the bridge for a quick huddle with Captain Mitch, I learned I'd need to rig four spinning rods for bailing mahi-mahi, which would be our initial tactic when we reached the blue water.

Bailing for mahi is a great way to introduce kids to offshore fishing, since you can see the fish swim up and eat your baits. It's also one of the most reliable offshore fisheries around. In a nutshell, you pull up close to flotsam or weed lines floating on the surface, toss a few handfuls of cut fish or squid chunks into the water,

A rigged ballyhoo is the standard bait for offshore trolling—and it's the mate's responsibility to rig a dozen or more, every day.



and if you see the mahi swim up and eat those chunks, drop in your baited hooks.

Cut fish and squid chunks do not magically appear in your five-gallon bucket—so as mate for the day, I had to start chopping as soon as I was done rigging. The task was complete 45 minutes later, and after a thorough hand-washing, I ended up with about half an hour of daddy-daughter time before we reached our destination.

## More Blood, More Guts

When the captain spotted a weed line and pulled back the throttles, it was again time for the mate to spring into action. I reached bare-

handed into the bucket of fish-gore, threw chunks towards the float, spotted a flash of green and blue and quickly baited hooks for all four kids. I checked all the drags, cast out for those who didn't yet have the hang of casting, and tossed some more chunks over the side. I watched, I waited, I wanted with every ounce of my being for one of those kid's rods to bend over.

Two rod tips simultaneously went down. Two kids simultaneously shrieked with delight, as the green-blue missiles on the end of their lines streaked through the clear blue ocean. And for a moment, I experienced the reward that comes with being a mate. Not the monetary reward you get from any job, but the glow of satisfaction that comes with

seeing an ear-to-ear grin plastering the face of a nine year-old. The pay-back you feel in your pounding heart. The reward that most better paying, air-conditioned, desk-riding jobs will never provide.

It was a short-lived compensation. The fish crissed, they crossed, the lines became tangled, and one broke. A moment later, the other went slack as the fish shook free of the hook. To make matters worse, no more fish appeared from underneath the weeds and we couldn't locate any other flotsam in the area. A few days earlier a forest of weeds had topped the ocean waves for miles on end, but the unmerciful ocean currents had robbed us of our sure thing—we wouldn't spot anything else on the water's surface for the rest of the day.

## Back to Work

With no mahi-mahi in the box, no flotsam on the horizon, and four disappointed kids onboard, the captain decided to set out our trolling spread—which meant it was time for me-the-mate to get cracking. I had to un-bait the spinning rods, and swap them out for trolling rods. Each needed a rigged ballyhoo leader clipped onto a swivel at the end of the line. Then each line had to be deployed, with four set on outriggers and two in the corners of the cockpit. Finally, a seventh line was set back in the center and the rod handed up to the captain, to be run from a rodholder on the bridge.

With the trolling spread set, one would think the mate could kick back and relax for a bit. No such luck. The captain was ready for lunch, so there were sandwiches to be made and shuttled up to the bridgedeck. Then one of the ballyhoo snagged an errant piece of seaweed, had to be reeled in, shucked clean, and re-set. Another ballyhoo, which the captain noticed was swimming on its side, had to be pulled and re-rigged.

While all of this was going on, one by one the kids and Albie retreated to the air-conditioned cabin and fell asleep. No such luck for the mate. No, he had to remain in the cockpit, awake and alert, in case a fish struck one of the lines.

When it happened, there was no warning. A rod simply bent from almost vertical to almost horizontal in the blink of an eye. The drag started singing its adrenaline-inducing tune and I started shouting for a kid, any kid, to get out on deck. Carder was the first on the scene, so I handed him the rod then started cranking in the other lines to get them out of the way. I



With vivid colors and a spirited fighting ability, mahi-mahi are an excellent target when you have kids aboard.

glanced up just in time to see a six-foot white marlin launch itself out of the water, thrashing its head with an urgency created by the unfamiliar feeling of fear in an apex predator. I shifted my gaze to Carder, and again got a mate's paycheck. Teeth gritted, eyes bulging, the intense look on his face told me he was well beyond having fun or being excited. It revealed the electrified thrill that people lucky enough to go big-game fishing hope for, the charge that comes from knowing you're going toe-to-toe with a wild beast that hunts for a living. A creature that's so different from what you see on a day-to-day basis, it may as well be from a different planet.

Another part of the mate's job is coaching inexperienced anglers, and once the lines were all clear I shifted my attention to Carder and the fight. But truth be told, he needed little advice. Fishing for smaller species closer

to home had conditioned him well, and he knew to keep his rod tip up and his line taunt. Mollie danced around the cockpit snapping off pictures, Mitchell and Delaney cheered at the top of their lungs, and Carder drew the fish in close. Soon it was time for yet another of the mate's jobs: landing the fish.

Pictures taken, fish released, adrenaline subsiding, we went back to trolling. One by one the kids quietly made their way back to the cabin, until eventually, I was once again alone in the cockpit staring at a rocking transom, unmolested baits, and endless waves. Oceanic highway-hypnosis set in. Then the captain called down from above, ordering the end of our fishing trip.

I cranked in the lines. I yanked off the uneaten ballyhoo I had so painstakingly rigged, and tossed them over the side. I washed, cleaned, and stowed gear for the next hour, all

the while looking forward to a short nap in the air-conditioning. It would be denied—one of the kids had flipped the lock shut on the cabin door, and peeking in through the window I could see they were all sound asleep.

I worked for 12 out of the 14 hours we were at sea. I didn't make a dime. I got slimed. I got bloodied. I ruined my shirt, my pants, and my favorite pair of boat shoes. Thin copper wires poked holes in my fingers, fishing lines cut through my skin, and ballyhoo poop lodged under my fingernails. But I'd do it again in a heartbeat—because no monetary paycheck can match the one you earn by being mate for a day.

Many anglers, myself included, don't usually boat a billfish. The marlin is brought alongside, the hook removed, and the fish swims off to fight another day. This being Carder's first marlin on his first offshore trip, however, we decided to bring it aboard for a photo. And my paycheck got even bigger—an image to remind myself of what it was like to be the mate for a day.

