

Catch a trio of fishing options on Alabama's Gulf Coast

By KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Special Contributor

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ORANGE BEACH, Alabama — Judging by the number of bites fishermen are getting, last year's BP oil spill is but a memory on the coast of Alabama.

During my visit in October, they pulled in grouper, trigger fish, mackerel and amberjack. Snapper was out of season, so those red beauties were thrown back.

Alabama's Gulf Coast is just 32 miles, but it boasts one of the biggest charter fishing fleets in the region, with more than 100 inshore and offshore captains. For those who'd rather cast from solid ground, it features the second-longest pier on the gulf.

Texans are no strangers to the area. Fishing captain Robby Walker says he gets a lot of business from Texans amazed by the clarity of the water, which is attributed to a sandy bottom rather than silt.

The nation's largest artificial reef program and the only trolling alley in the gulf — created when the state sunk obsolete voting machines — mean something is biting year-round.

Tracy Redding of AAA Charters says fishing caters to all ages and both genders, factors she considers when matching customers to a boat and captain. She can also put together small groups to hold down costs.

On charters, customers fish off the captain's license, and the bait and equipment are provided. Sunscreen, a hat and sunglasses are a must. On boats, coolers with food and drink (no glass bottles) are permitted; it's considered polite to bring enough for the crew. Expect to tip 15 percent in addition to a fish-cleaning fee.

After you call it a day, ship your catch home, cook it in your rental or take it to one of a half-dozen restaurants that offer "hook and cook" meals.

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OFFSHORE CHARTERS

These vessels head the farthest into the gulf for charters of four hours to two days and are large enough for groups. They feature a kitchen, toilet and sleeping facilities.

BEST FOR: Hard-core fishermen book the longest trips. Shorter charters are good for beginners and experienced fishermen alike, as well as families.

WHAT TO EXPECT: My six-hour charter took me 12 miles from shore on captain Ben Fairey's 62-foot Necessity. We trolled and bottom-fished off the boat, while crew member Shawn O'Neal assisted with tackle. Before departure, eat a light breakfast, and if you're prone to seasickness, take medication well in advance, though O'Neal will rig up pressure bands for wrists to ease the queasies.

PRICE RANGE: \$100 to \$600 per person

CONTACT: 251-747-5782, www.captben.com; 251-609-2525, www.aaacharters.net

INSHORE CHARTERS

These smaller vessels stay in back bays or bayous, but if the water is calm they may head a mile offshore to the reef. Typical charter lasts four hours. There is less of a chance of seasickness on these charters, which do not have toilet facilities.

BEST FOR: Couples and groups of six or fewer. Lots of personal attention makes it good for novices and families. Kids should be at least 7 or 8 years old.

WHAT TO EXPECT: Captain Robby Walker's 24-foot outboard took us to the reef, where we joined a cluster of other boats. Later, we bottom-fished just outside the entrance to the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.

PRICE RANGE: \$300 for two people, \$50 for each additional person

CONTACT: 251-233-3017; 251-609-2525, www.aaacharters.net

GULF STATE PARK PIER

The pier, which opened in 2009 to replace a pier destroyed by Hurricane Ivan, extends 1,540 feet into the gulf.

BEST FOR: The budget-conscious, beginners, families and seniors will enjoy the pier. It is wheelchair-accessible.

WHAT TO EXPECT: The pier is open to anyone who wants to drop a line, though regulars take fishing seriously, towing custom-made wheeled rigs for their gear. The pier ends in a 65-foot octagon extending over the second sand bar. Toilets, picnic tables and a snack bar are available, and alcohol and cooking are prohibited.

PRICE RANGE: \$8 per day to fish for those 12 and older; \$2-\$3 to sightsee; \$1.50 an hour for rod and reel rental. Bait and license are sold at the pier. A nonresident license is required for those 16 and older, \$11 annually.

CONTACT: 251-948-7275, www.alapark.com/GulfState/

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