

FORK IN THE ROAD

Don't overlook Alabama's coast

**STORY AND PHOTO BY
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GULF SHORES, Ala. — "I haven't found a seafood I didn't like," Al Sawyer said. That's saying something for a 60-something who has spent his whole life on Alabama's coast catching, selling and cooking seafood.

"When I was a boy, my father took me out to Bon Secour Bay, and we snucked oysters right there in the water," he said. "That was the first seafood I ever had, and I fell in love with it."
He hopes you'll love it too.

After a career in sales for a local fishery and a couple of stints working in restaurants, Sawyer and wife, Diane, opened their own eatery. It's the sort of man-and-pa place you might pass by without a second thought — until you see the line of hungry people waiting outside.

The small, white, one-story building with royal-blue roof and awning looks like it might have been a 1960s gas station or fast-food joint. Popular with locals and visitors in the know, King Neptune's Seafood Restaurant serves up some of the most critically acclaimed platters of seafood on Alabama's 32 miles of coastline.

And it's a bargain, too, with a \$4.95 lunch special. You'll find Sawyer's beloved Bon Secour oysters and some blue crab on the menu, but 60 percent of the orders are shrimp, he said. Neptune's is known for its royal reds: shrimp almost as big as a banana and as succulent as lobster.

Ask the locals about their favorite seafood spots, and they'll reel them off with ease: Neptune's, of course, but also Gulf Shores Steamer, Live Bait and Tacky Jacks (with a gift shop selling souvenirs a bit, well, tacky). They all do shrimp, oysters, crab and a panoply



Al Sawyer serves up platters of seafood at his King Neptune's restaurant in Gulf Shores, Ala.

of fish, much of it fried.

"This is the stroke belt, everything is fried down here," quipped Capt. Skip of Sailaway Charters, a certified nature guide who will show you how your seafood meal was caught during his two-hour nature tours. The tours are very enlightening, especially for those who have never tossed a line in the water. Seafood, after all, does not come from a menu.

Capt. Skip, aka John William Beebe, sailed to the Alabama coast from San Diego through the Panama Canal, stopping off in several countries along the way, including Guatemala, where he met his wife-to-be, Janet. He and Janet take kids and curious adults onto the bayous and back bays off the Gulf Coast,

departing from the dock off their home in Orange Beach, Ala.

Cutting the engine of his pontoon boat, he moved to the back, grabbed what looked like supersize salad tongs and plunged them into the bottom of the bayou. Up came a couple of oysters, nasty-looking things covered in muck. They're actually little cleaning machines, filtering several gallons of water per hour, Capt. Skip said. The state of Alabama tests the waters where they are harvested for bacteria and shuts down oystering if water quality drops, such as when, for example, heavy rain causes runoff from farm fields. Commercial oystermen must document where each oyster is taken to ensure it is harvested

from approved waters.

Out in Wolf Bay, Capt. Skip stopped again and pulled up a wire cage in which a nice blue crab skittered about. Every three months a crab molts, then doubles or triples in size, he said. Those menacing claws make good eating, order them steamed at Tacky Jacks, he recommended.

Capt. Skip fired up the engine again and eased the boat into a speed approaching a fast walk as he let out his shrimping net. At that pace, the net skims the bottom of the bay, where shrimp feed. Under Alabama law, recreational shrimpers can drag their nets for only 18 minutes. This limit is designed to protect the "bycatch" — other marine life inadvertently caught in the net.

As porpoises jumped along the starboard side and sea gulls screeched overhead, Capt. Skip dumped the contents of his net into a big aquarium. There were the shrimp — real beauties — but also squids, eels, tiny crabs and an assortment of fish the length of a pencil. We took a good look before they all went back overboard to swim another day.

For bigger fish that you can keep and cook, you'll have to catch your own. Though Alabama's footprint on the Gulf is minuscule compared with neighboring states, it has more than 100 charter boat captains operating from its marinas. An artificial reef created when the state dumped its obsolete voting machines a few miles off-

If you go

- Restaurants**
- King Neptune's Seafood Restaurant, 251-968-5464, kingneptunesseafoodrestaurant.com
 - Gulf Shores Steamer, 251-948-6344, gulfshoressteamer.com
 - Live Bait, 251-974-1612, livebaitrestaurant.com
 - Tacky Jacks, 251-948-8881, 251-968-8341, 251-981-4144 and 251-621-8988, tackyjacks.com
 - Ship's Harbour Grill, 251-981-9891, shippshourrestaurant.com
- Nature cruise:** Sailaway Charters, 251-974-5055, sailorskip.com
- Charter fishing boats:** AAA Charters, 251-609-2625 or 251-948-2525
- National Shrimp Festival:** Oct. 10-13; 250,000 visitors, two stages of live music, 250 food and retail vendors, nationalshrimpfestival.com
- Visitor information:** Gulf Shores and Orange Beach Tourism, 800-745-7263, gulfshores.com

shore makes a decent habitat for marine life.

Take a four-hour inshore charter, and chances are you will hook a Spanish mackerel at 2 feet in length or king mackerel a yard or so long. Go farther out into the Gulf on a six-hour offshore charter, and you may land triggerfish, amberjacks, bonitos or highly prized groupers and red snappers. The crew will clean them for you.

If you're renting a condo, you can cook your catch yourself, or you can take it to Ship's Harbour Grill, one of half-dozen local restaurants that do "hook and cook" meals. They will turn your catch of the day into a gourmet platter with just the right sauces and sides.

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