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Skyway Fishing Pier

By Paul Swider

Living around Tampa Bay, most of us have a fondness for seafood, but we don't much care how it got on our plates. Indeed, we drive by people standing on bridges and banks and can't for the life of us understand 1) how they can have that much free time, and 2) why they would spend it staring at the water with a stick in their hands. But there's that nagging feeling that maybe they know something we don't.

Where? Of course, the best fishing is on a yacht stuffed with beer, bratwurst and blonds, but that's out of reach for most of us. For land fishing the Mecca is the Skyway Fishing Pier. It's \$3 a car, plus \$2 per person, after the \$1 Skyway toll, but that's not bad when you consider what you can get.

Why there? The Skyway pier is unique in what you can catch because it's so far out that it's like being on a boat offshore. It is not uncommon for people to catch huge rays, shark, tarpon, grouper, mackerel and much more. Talking with the folks in our little corner of the pier, we counted 35 species landed that night alone.

Can I really catch fish? Sure, why not. There is technique and knowledge, but there's enough of a bounty that blind luck can bring you lunch. Last weekend was a great one for blue crabs, people scooping them up with a long-handled net as they drift by on the tide. Skill helps but the buckets of crabs along the pier show that there's plenty to catch.

Equipment: If you want to try before you buy, the pier will rent you a rod and reel for \$8. Buy your bait and you're good to go. Considering admission is for 24 hours and you can catch a week's worth of food in that time, it's a bargain.

Is it fun? Hell, yes, but don't expect the wrong thing. The place is no secret and it appeals to something other than the Starbucks set. There are teeming masses of fish under the pier but almost as many species on it. If you ever wondered about the ethnic complexity of this area, hit the pier around dusk.

This might not sound like your crowd, particularly when you see the lack of Mercedes, bikinis and martinis. These are salt of the earth people who eat what they kill. These are not gated-community types who keep nature on a leash; they grab hold and hug it. Good people.

Everyone helps each other, answering questions, making suggestions, sharing information on who caught what and how. Ethnic groups mix easily because of the common bond: the fish. They share recipes and the fruits thereof: I sampled some



Photo by Paul Swider

The Skyway Fishing Pier is cheap and you can actually catch something.

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excellent spread made from the mackerel caught hours before.

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But remember, the pier is a state park and a family fishing place, so there is no profanity, no loud music, no alcohol (like no speeding on I-275 or no political favors in exchange for money), no roller blading, no firearms, no grills, no swimming and so on. Just fish, plain and simple, like the people who catch "em.

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