



Gone fishin': Throw it back, you don't know where it's been!

One fish, two fish, forklift, bluefish

When you go fishing in the waters off Manhattan, you never know what you might reel in **By Mark Marvel**

Under a full moon—and the blades of a helicopter taking off from a nearby heliport—Captain Joe Shastay is steadying his boat. It's 9pm, and Captain Joe has just picked me up (along with two friends) at South Street Seaport's Pier 11. Anchored about 15 feet from the Battery Slip in the East River, we are now casting for bluefish and striped bass lurking somewhere beneath the pilings of the heliport. "Forget about lake fishing," Captain Joe says over the drone of outgoing helicopters. "This is the exact opposite. Out here, it's nothing but nonstop action."

At 37, Joe is something of a legend in these waters. For the past six years, he's run his private fishing operation out of Jersey City, catering to the urban angler. Most of the fisherman who board Joe's 19-foot Maco Classic are Wall Street guys whose expense accounts easily cover the \$335 charge, which includes five hours of fishing, plus bait and tackle. But Joe will take groups of up to four for the same price. So for less than the cost of dinner and a Broadway show, you can experience the romance of the city skyline from the water, the excitement of Coast Guard boats chasing you away from prime angling spots such as sewage treatment plants—and the pure adrenaline rush that comes when you catch a 30-inch fish.

"Most of the people I bring out here don't believe they'll catch anything," Joe explains as we leave the heliport and head upriver toward the Brooklyn Bridge. "Then, suddenly, they catch a big blue, and

their next question is, 'Can you eat it?'" He smiles through a moustache that looks a little like two fish fins paddling away from his nose. "Well, that's another story" (see box, this page).

Having spent nearly ten years working for the American Lateral Society—an environmental group that nets and tags striped bass for research—Joe knows more about what's floating at the bottom of New York harbor than most Teamsters do. And since it's illegal to keep a fish that's less than 36 inches long, virtually everything you catch gets released back into the water.

But throughout the evening, it gradually becomes clear that actually catching fish is only a small part of the urban fishing experience. After cruising under the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges, past power plants, obsolete smokestacks and a cement factory and finally to a spot within view of that huge neon Domino Sugar sign near the Williamsburg Bridge, we pull into a cove flanked by two huge loading docks. Across this industrial inlet, Joe points out the now-deserted factory where the harborfront scenes in *Kiss of Death* were filmed. He tells us to cast where some floodlights are illuminating a dark pool of water. I end up snagging a train track on the dock instead. Over the course of the next three hours, I also hook a piling on the ferry slip at Governor's Island, the anchor on a Coast Guard cutter and a forklift.

But there are still no fish. Not long after hooking my first train track, I feel a surprisingly strong tug on my line. Joe tells me it's probably a good-sized striper. And

he's right—21 inches. But that isn't why the captain is so excited. On the back fin of the striper is an American Lateral tag. "It isn't often you catch a tagged fish," he explains. Like a message in a bottle, the tag includes a number and the Lateral Society address. "You send the tag number to that address," he says, "and they'll send you back information on where your fish was originally tagged. Then, when the next person catches it, they'll get a little idea of where it's been."

Indeed, probably the biggest myth about New York fish, and one promulgated largely by commercial fisherman along the East Coast, is that they never leave town. The reason is simple: Fisherman don't want people thinking that the seafood on their plate might have grown up in the New York harbor. But most fish, like most people, don't stay in one place their whole lives.

Although he goes out almost year-round, the best times for fishing, Joe says, are mid-October through mid-December, and mid-April through early July. And while you reel in the occasional remnant of a bike lock, what urban fishing may lack in quality it generally makes up for in quantity. Joe tells stories of catching 30 to 40 fish in a single outing; the 15 fairly good-sized stripers we hook in the next two hours being the average for this spot. No one has yet hooked a human body.

By now it's almost midnight. Returning downriver, as an ambulance races past Manhattan's skyscrapers, the urgency of New York City suddenly seems picturesque. Even as we drop anchor by the ferry slip at Governors Island, the greed of catching fish has been replaced by the zen of just fishing.

We hook two more stripers before decamping to the other side of Governors Island. Here comes the forklift. Casting under a towline and into a trough of water five feet wide with a loading dock on one side and the hulking hull of a Coast Guard cutter on the other, I try a bank shot off the boat. First, I get nothing but towline. Then, I throw over the towline and, landing on the loading dock, I get nothing but forklift. "It's sort of like miniature golf fishing," my friend says before I finally manage to bank one off the hull, where the raised boat anchor supplies the final humiliation. But by now it's 1:30am. We've caught our fill of fish, had our fill of fish stories.

As we return to the South Street Seaport, I realize that I've completely lost all sense of time; it feels like we've been gone for a week. One thing is certain, however. I'm the only fisherman I know who can brag about the big forklift that got away.

To schedule a fishing trip with Captain Joe, call 201-451-1988.

Don't drink the water...

But it is okay to eat the fish—once a month or so

Until 1986, 200 million gallons of raw sewage were poured daily from the 125th Street Sewage Plant into the Hudson River. Today, 90 percent of this sewage is treated, and the Hudson has a clean bill of health for the first time in nine years. But the river still isn't exactly pristine. There are traces of fecal coliform bacteria in the water, and significant levels of PCBs in the fish.

Health officials say that it's fine to eat fish caught south of the Catskills (including those found in New York Harbor and the Hudson and East Rivers), as long as you don't eat more than one serving per month. If you're eating Atlantic sturgeon, blueback herring, blue crab, bluegill, pumpkinseed, shad or yellow perch,

you can eat one serving per week. But if you're a woman of child-bearing age or a child under the age of 15, don't eat any fish from the Hudson at all.

Swimming is relatively safe, but avoid going in the water after a heavy rain. According to a spokesperson at the Hudson River Foundation, the treatment plants can't handle the volume of water, so raw sewage sometimes gets discharged.

"The Hudson is relatively clean," says Beau Ranheim, a scientist at the Department of Environmental Protection. He adds, "If you drank four glasses of its water a day for 20 years, sure, you might have problems. It's not distilled water out there."—James Ireland Baker