

**FISHIN'**

**FOR A**

**LIVIN'**

**Text & Photos by**

**Captain John Oughton**

**H**ow hard can it be to fish for a living? Sure, spending your days on the open waters seems like the life to lead, but you better be ready to work hard and get dirty. In the charter boat industry we get all kinds of guys with all different levels of experience who want to make fishing their career. You will find guys who are just plain natural fisherman with talent that will do it because it's deep in their blood and there are others who just want to try it out for a few years. Some put themselves through school fishing summers, and others can't ever imagine being anywhere else than on the water. I am one of the latter, I am the owner/operator of the **PRETTY WORK**, a 46' Whitticar I charter out of Bud N' Mary's Marina in Islamorada on the Florida Keys from November through June. Near the end of June I point the bow north and head for Ocean City, Maryland to run charters from July through October.

Before I made the move topside to the bridge, I worked the cockpit for many years, and in many different locations as a mate, but for this article I am going to concentrate on the work involved in creating a successful trip for my customers in both the Florida Keys and Ocean City, Maryland. I normally work with one deckhand in Florida, Rick Alford, and for the coming season in Ocean City I'll have two mates, Rick and Jason Bruce. Here's a peek into my world— a full-time charter captain.



## FLORIDA KEYS

A normal day for us in the Keys starts with mixing sand chum for catching bait. This is one or two five-pound blocks of chum mixed with sand to the perfect consistency. The trick is to get the proper texture so that the sand balls, when dropped in the water, will disintegrate slowly, but not too slowly as they fall to the bottom. Next we will mix a soft block of chum that was left out overnight to thaw with a five-gallon bucket of oats for snapper fishing. Next, the live wells have to be set up. We use two live wells so we can keep our bait separated, one for ballyhoo and another for pilchards, cigar minnows or even speedos.

In the fall and winter on the Keys we are generally fishing the reef for sailfish, mackerel, and a variety of bottom fish. Next, the appropriate tackle needs to be brought out and checked over so there are no tackle failures later in the day. Once our customers arrive we welcome them aboard, introduce ourselves and load their food and drinks aboard. On the way out we discuss safety instructions—where the life vests are located, the location of the head and how and when to use it.

Before we arrive at the bait patch we get our chum bag and a bucket and load it with fresh chum which sits at the stern of the boat until needed. Once we get to the patch, the bag goes over the side to start a slick and mark our spot. We drop the hook and get started catching bait so we can go catch fish. A lot can happen on the bait patch so Rick has to be ready with the sand chum, the bag chum, and Sabiki rigs. The sand balls are for the pilchards and cigar minnows. We use the rigs on light tackle to catch blue runners, sardines and minnows while we are waiting for the ballyhoo to settle in behind the boat lured by the bag chum. Once they finally come up to have a look we get the cast nets out. We'll use a 12- or 14-foot net depending on the situation and they weigh about 15 pounds dry. After the first throw the net gets

wet and heavier adding lots more fun to catching bait.

Now that we have got bait aboard, it's time to clean up the chum, the sand, and the fish oil not to mention the scales and the ballyhoo excrement that seems to go everywhere. It's time to pull the anchor and off we go, but Rick has to be ready, because there could be three or four sailfish milling about within a half mile of the patch. So now you've got a few spinners ready for sailfish (20-pound tackle), a few with wire rigs ready for mackerel, perhaps two spinners ready for cobia, a couple of downrods ready for bottom fish, and finally your snapper rods. We must be ready for anything at anytime. Believe me, the catching part of all this work is the bonus. The better prepared we are, the bigger the reward. Our lives can be pretty easy when the fishing is good, but when it's slow, we have to work harder—much harder.

When the fish are snapping, keeping up is all about organization. I am a stickler for anticipation. Hooks, leaders, and wire rigs must be ready with plenty of back ups. We try to make the day easier on everyone by using the breaks in the action to get caught up. Now is the time for Rick to put line on reels if needed, untwist the line on the light spinning tackle reels, and above all clean up for the next round.

Towards the end of the day I try to give my guys the heads up that the end is near so they can get a jump on the cleaning. We like to back into the slip with a clean cockpit, like we never left. We are fortunate to have all the tools for this; a fresh water tank allows us to clean all the tackle and the pit on the way home. First Rick soaps, rinses, and chamois all the rods and reels used that day, then they get put away. We can then ask the customers to pop inside for a few minutes so the cockpit can be washed down. The ride home is also used to do any tackle work needed, put away bait, and reorganize for the next day. Once we hit the dock the day is still not done, we offload the

customers and their gear, take some pictures of the catch, and fillet their fish. After the pleasantries are exchanged and everyone goes away happy, we continue with the cleaning. The boat is washed down and chamois dry, we need to reload ice and ice down bait as needed. On to the inside of the boat, the salon is vacuumed, the windows wiped down, and everyone's personal favorite the head has to be cleaned.

## OCEAN CITY, MARYLAND

Now in Ocean City, Maryland our day is a little longer. We start by waking up at 3:30 a.m. and getting to the boat and ready to leave at 4:30 a.m. This year Jason is going to show Rick the ropes up north. These guys will have to start their day pretty early. First thing in the morning we bring out all the trolling tackle mostly 50 and 80 wides, that's about 14 to 18 rods. For each of those, the wind on leaders will have to be checked, the hooks sharpened, and the sea witches changed. Jason ties his own witches (as if he doesn't have enough to do). The bait has to be checked to make sure we have enough, and those that have been slowly thawing must have their eyes popped and de-popped. They are then placed on a stainless bait tray which is laid over ice.

Just about this time the customers arrive and the guys help load them, their coolers and all their food on the boat. As we make our way out of the inlet, the rules and safety instructions are given as well as the most important instruction—if you get sick, do it

## OVER THE SIDE!

The part I miss the most about being a deckhand is the opportunity to go inside and catch another hour of sleep. On a two to three hour ride there is some time for napping. The next thing you know it's time to get ready for fishing. There's nothing better than looking into the pit and seeing ballyhoo everywhere. Just

before we put our lines in the water the guys will go over the drill with the customers— proper angling techniques, the way to lower rig pins, and things like rigger position. The more the customer understands about our operation, the better for all of us. Sometimes, it's a struggle to get everyone on the same page, but I try to get the guys to stay on top of the anglers, I find persistence is best. By the time I have slowed the boat; the guys have the baits pinned up in the riggers and ready to go. We set to trolling speed and the rest of the 12 to 16 baits hit the water. It takes time and accuracy to put out a spread like this, one mistake and things can get ugly real quick. It is up to the deckhands to let back the bait without getting tangled, put out a spreader bar if being used, and make sure all baits are swimming correctly.

While we are fishing, there is no rest for the mates, anything can and does happen. In O.C. almost anything can jump in your spread and make a mess of things. A double header blue marlin bite can wreak havoc on the most experienced fishing crew, not to mention what damage five or six whities can cause. After any of these lucky encounters, minutes are wasted repairing the spread. The guys have to be on their toes and ready for almost anything. When we do get "the bite" everyone has to react, that means turning their attention to the anglers, whether guiding one to the chair or directing others reeling in lines. The deckhands also have to be able to act as a coach, in which case good people skills are a plus. Most of all, they need to anticipate what could happen, blue ones, white ones, tunas, wahoo, or dolphin, there is a possibility for any or all of those bites on any given charter day. These guys need to have pitch baits ready, plenty of rigged flat line baits, maybe a shark rig on a 50 wide—little things like that can go along way. Because

there is so much to do and be aware of, I encourage my guys to get the customer to help, most people are more than willing and enjoy being included. While the mates have to re-rig baits and clear lines, the customer can direct the fighting chair or shag grass.

Slow trolling makes for drowsy days. When conversations run out and there hasn't been a bite for two hours anyone can turn sour. It is important that the guys stay busy, trying different things, changing colors and different spread positions. Jason may try a planer rod or a new, soon to be famous, sea witch. We want the customer to see that we are working hard for them. If there is still no bite they can always check on tackle supplies like crimps, swivels, and hooks.

The trip home into O.C. offers plenty of time to get all those rods and reels soaped, dried and put away. The pit is soaped and washed, the fish box checked for ice because cold fish are happy fish. I usually snag a nap on the way home, it gives the guys a chance to wind down, and have some space so Jason drives us home. Once we are safe in our slip we help unload the customers and their belongings, although they have a lot less food now. We unload their fish and take them down to the fish cleaner and show them where to wait for their catch. Meanwhile, the boat gets rinsed and dried, ice gets replenished from the fish house, and baits put out to slow thaw. Oh and it's only 7:00 p.m.—just enough time to eat, shower and get to bed to start all over again tomorrow.

We put in long, dirty days in Florida and Maryland, but when you throw that catch on the dock it's worth all the blood, scales, and fish spines. It's not an easy job, but what's that old saying? "A bad day of fishing is better than a good day at the office." Man isn't that the truth! 🐟

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### CAPT. JOHN OUGHTON

spent most of his early life in South Miami. In his teens, John started mating on local charter and day boats, cutting bait and cleaning fish. Back then the most important thing to him was being on the water every day; fishing, chasing lobsters or crewing. In the 1980s he found himself working on a few six-pack charter boats like Capt. Bob Egger's SPUNKY and Capt. Keith Burnett's OBSESSION out of Toms River, NJ. He also worked almost fulltime as first mate aboard Capt. Ron Brauen's MISS MICHELLE II & III, 65-foot charter boats sailing from Manasquan Inlet. Today, Captain John utilizes the knowledge and experience gained during those formative years as owner/operator of the PRETTY WORK, a 46' Whitar. He currently charters out of Bud N' Mary's Marina in Islamorada on the Florida Keys. For further information visit Capt. John's website at [www.prettyworkcharters.com](http://www.prettyworkcharters.com).