

FOOD & TRAVEL

A day fishing for crabs in the Outer Banks



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Plates of cooked crabs.

By Niecee Regis | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 17, 2015

WANCHESE, N.C. — “If crabs lived on land they’d rule the world,” says Marc Mitchum, a captain on the fishing vessel Jodie Kae.



Mitchum is talking about Atlantic blue crabs, a species known for its delicate sweet meat and green-blue pigmentation, which turns bright red-orange in the pot. He is motoring in the Outer Banks along Croatan Sound when he snags a trap holding half a dozen crabs tenaciously gripping the mesh-webbed sides.



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Marc Mitchum hoists a crab trap on his charter boat off Wanchese, N.C., and holds a female crab (with her red claws).

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Trim with weather-beaten skin, Mitchum, 52, wears khakis, a white tee, and a black visor pulled low on his brow. He reflects a shift in the traditional fishing industry. In response to shrinking stocks and falling prices, Mitchum has expanded his commercial shrimp and crab operations to become OBX Crabbing and Shrimping Charters, which includes hands-on 2-hour and half-day educational charters (\$300 to \$475 for groups of 6). “You do as much as you want to do. Pull up the pots. Shake the crabs out. Kids love it. So do adults.”

A hazy sky is streaked with cirrus clouds as we motor across a wide expanse of the sound between the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge on the mainland, and the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge on the tapering sands of the Outer Banks. A slight chop ruffles the aquamarine surface. In the distance, duck blinds huddle along the marshy shore. Along the way, Mitchum chats in his amiable Piedmont region drawl, pointing out local landmarks and explaining the ecology of the area. “In fall the female crabs are moving toward the saltier water to lay their eggs. We catch our biggest numbers in the fall because they’re on the move,” he says.

Depending on the season, and the charter (two or four hours), you may pull up crab pots, trawl for shrimp and fish with nets, or both. Though our tour is focused on crabs, Mitchum explains that on other charters he dumps the netted catch in a large tray and encourages guests to sort through it. “There’s all kinds of marine life in there. We’ll put it in a bucket and watch it swim around. We throw back everything you can’t eat,” he says.

Mitchum has 400 crab pots that he moves among various locations in Croatan and Roanoke sounds. With so many fishermen in the area, it’s easy to confuse who owns which pots. To differentiate, all marker buoys are designated by a signature color. Mitchum’s are blue and black. “I have all my crab pots in a GPS. I can’t work it in my car but I can work it here,” he says.

There are five landlubbers on his 42-foot boat, all outfitted with heavy-duty rubber gloves, waiting our turn to grasp a dripping trap and shake its contents onto a slatted metal table. The crabs remain above the slats (most of the time) while other marine life slips into a bucket to be tossed back in the water. We release two jellyfish and a summer flounder.

Every crab is measured to make certain it is the legal 5-inch size. Mitchum shows how to sort males from females by looking at their distinctive underbellies, and the tips of their claws (females' are bright red "like nail polish," he says).

We collect about half a bushel, not bad for a 2-hour tour. "It's not about the amount. It's the experience," Mitchum says.

As we head back to Wanchese Harbor, busy with commercial fishing and boatbuilding, we are delighted to learn we can keep our catch. Mitchum directs us to the Sugar Shack, a no-frills fish market, oyster bar, and grill located in nearby Nags Head, where cooks will prepare our crabs for a minimal fee.

We settle inside in air-conditioned splendor at a table between the fish case and the kitchen (you can also dine on the deck overlooking the Sound).

After our busy morning as crab farmers, we've worked up an appetite. While waiting for our crabs to steam in Old Bay Seasoning, we order a fried food extravaganza of shrimp and oyster po'boys, sweet potato fries, fried okra, and hush puppies. A local brew on tap is the perfect accompaniment to our lightly spiced crabs, served with sides of melted butter, which arrive piping hot on plastic platters. You couldn't ask for more.

OBX CRABBING AND SHRIMPING CHARTERS 4457 Mill Landing Road, Wanchese, N.C., 252-423-0421, www.obxcrabbing.com. Charters go out through October.

SUGAR SHACK 7340 South Virginia Dare Trail, Nags Head, N.C., 252-441-3888, www.sugarcreekseafood.com

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