

Guidelines for Guides and Anglers

When looking for a fishing guide or charter captain, the first question that may come to mind is, "Does he know how to catch fish"? I can assure you that he catches his fair share. But, in my opinion, that alone is not the most important attribute of a professional guide.

There are a number of qualifications that one should consider when planning to hire a fishing guide. Of course, there are many factors that he, or she, cannot control such as weather, sea state, the fishes' appetites, etc. But there are many elements that go into a trip that can be affected, and I have fished with enough guides - several who stood out, some forgettable - to develop a perspective as a client as well as a charter captain. The following outlines some of the basics you should expect from your guide, as well as, what he expects from you!

The best way for an angler to find a guide, or for a guide to acquire business, is mostly the same as finding any other professional, such as a good doctor, or plumber. No, not Angie's list, it's usually by a recommendation. But that is not always possible, particularly if you are traveling to fish, so you may have to make some calls or surf the net to find your pro. So start with the basics.

Essentials:

Any captain in the US, and some Islands, must have a license to take passengers for hire (if fishing from a boat in the marine environment or upon the great lakes). This license is issued by the Coast Guard, not by the state. A light tackle guide that takes you out to the flats on a 16' skiff has the same basic license as a charter captain that takes you out to the reef on his 55' fly bridge sport fisher. Navigation is navigation, and you know if the person at the helm is licensed they have reasonable qualifications, and their vessel is likely up to date with safety equipment.

This "ticket" is fairly easy to check, but it's not a bad idea to ask. The license expires every 5 years and must be renewed. The renewal is not difficult, but it is time consuming, involves comprehensive physical examinations, and is not cheap when all is done. I have heard there are skippers around that are fishing "sans license." If it's true, my guess is they run a very low budget operation and you will get what you pay for.

The other permit varies state to state, and that is a charter fishing license, or license to guide. CT requires a specific license for ANY charter boat no matter how small, and the owner must display a marker plate, similar to a motor vehicle plate, "prominently" on their vessel (shore guides, and boat guides with no more than two anglers, are now also required to purchase a license to escort their clients in CT). There are no examinations involved in getting this license; just a little more...you guessed it, money. We're talking several hundred dollars, which is why some *may* be operating without it.

This is significant, and you should look for this license plate when you board for good reason. Firstly, your guide's fishing license entitles you to fish without a license as long as you are fishing on his boat (with him or her), saving you a couple of bucks if you are visiting, or don't plan on purchasing a salt water license if you are a resident. More importantly, if Cap does not have a license he/she may be subject to a fine, and so may **YOU!** Look for the plate, or ask before you book. (Note: if you are fishing with a guide limited to two anglers, you must have a valid CT fishing license.)

Expectations:

The following attributes are not bound by law, but by courtesy and professionalism. I'll start with pick up and finish with drop off.

If your trip starts at 0600 your ride should be at the dock or pick up point on time or slightly ahead of time. Guide boats can break down without warning (so can our trucks), that's what cell phones are really for. But barring the unforeseen, Cap should be waiting for you to arrive, not the other way around.

The rig may be impressive, or functional, but it should carry sufficient fuel to run the trip without a stop. It

should be reasonably clean, and clean of obstructions. I cannot believe the clutter and mess I have seen on some boats. Including nasty old lures or hooks just lying on the deck waiting to pierce a sandal; rods rolling around that could be in rod holders, filthy rags, etc. If the rig is well maintained, it should not break down, get you dirty by sitting on it, or skewer you while fishing on it.

We all get up early to fish, but you should expect your host to be reasonably clean, sober, and polite. Basically, a little prep the day before and a little effort to show you a nice day on the water.

Any guide that's been around for a few years will show you where the fish are, and do his best to get you hooked up. But instruction should be delivered judiciously. Nothing ruins the serenity of being offshore like the drone of constant casting instruction, or reprimands. That doesn't mean you shouldn't be coached a little if you are missing the point. But it's about your good time and a good guide should adapt to your level of experience to make the best of the trip. He should be informative without being overbearing. He can show you how to cast, but not show you up. Too many guides think their job is solely to catch fish, or they have a big ego or a chip on their shoulder and forget the trip is really about recreation. We are sort of in the "fishing" business, but we are also in the "have a nice time" business.

Of course you may not know if your host is the "nudgey" type until it's too late. So what can you do? Take a break. If you take a break, perhaps Cap will too. Just tell him you're a little out of practice and you need to rest for a few minutes. This will help to control the tempo and tenor aboard. You are paying so you are entitled to let your host know that you are aware of your short comings but you are there to have fun trying, and not so concerned about your technique.

You may be paying for local knowledge and express delivery to a few hot spots, but you can't buy the weather (pity). Weather can be a big issue particularly in the early spring, or late in the season when the water, and/or the air is cold. If it's rough it can be really uncomfortable and possibly dangerous. Cap should always have a plan B if plan A means a rough trip. If you think there is a potential issue with the weather, ask what happens if....?

Of course the day can start calm and deteriorate, but there should always be an eye, or ear, on the weather and an exit strategy. If you are uncomfortable, speak up. Someone who spends hundreds of hours on the water each year may have a higher threshold for salty spray than you, and not realize you've been breathing sea water for the last 5 minutes. However if it starts to get dicey they *should* ask what your comfort level is and explain what the "options" are. There is no shame letting Cap know you are not as seasoned as he is and to please head for safer haven.

Eventually it will be time to "head for the barn". But many pros don't watch the clock that closely and are willing to continue fishing a bit, adding a little extra time to your tour. This is a nice gesture; however he should not run another 10 or 15 miles to catch one or two more fish if you need to be back at the dock within the hour. If you have to get into the office by 10:00, or need to pick up the kids at soccer practice, be sure to let Cap know so he can plan accordingly.

Assuming you hired a seasoned veteran, had no issues, and overall had a nice time, it's time to discuss what *the angler* should bring to the trip.

Client expectations:

Even though you are the paying client, you are a guest onboard and should consider a few fundamental courtesies if you are new to hiring guides.

Just as your guide should be on time, so should you. Most of us are so excited we have no trouble getting to the dock on time. But plan ahead; bring the directions and your cell phone. Have enough gas in your car so you don't have to stop on the way. If you are going to stop for breakfast, leave enough time to stand in line for your coffee and doughnuts. An exceptional client would bring one for Cap too. Even though it's your trip, your host may have another trip after yours and may not be able to make up your lost time on the back end of the trip.

Most charter boats and their contents are a hefty investment. Try to be respectful of that investment and

the equipment offered to you. Don't show up in work boots you wore on the job site yesterday, or used to muck the stables. Wear shoes that will not mark up the decks. It's ok if you don't have the latest fashion in nautical footwear, just wear a non-marking (white) soled sneaker, mock, or sandal.

Try your best not to damage the boat with your flies and lures. If it's windy, or you're having trouble, move to a corner where your line is outboard or downwind.

Don't smoke! Fewer people smoke than years ago and this is rarely an issue. But it can be tempting to light up while relaxing on a trip. Ask Cap if it's ok, he may not mind or may have a metal boat. But it is best to just hold off. No matter how careful you think you are not to let ashes get on the boat, the breeze will eventually burn you, and a hole in the deck. How would you like it if someone dropped ashes on your Rang Rover's leather seats? Moreover, there is a lot of fuel rocking back and forth creating fumes that are escaping through a vent just a few feet from you. Leave the stogies at home!

Don't throw anything overboard, period.

Your guide will do his to best show you what it takes to get bit, and may suggest a "local" technique you are not familiar with. This may feel foreign at first, but it is in your best interest to give it a try. If there is something that you really don't like to do, such as trolling or using live bait, let Cap know when you book so there is no confusion.

Being mindful of a few simple preparations will show your guide you are ready and get you his best effort and a successful outing. Which brings up the question, do I tip for the trip?

The Gratuity can be confusing if you have not fished with many guides. For those who do not tip I suppose there is no confusion, but it is common practice gauged similarly to the way you would reward a waiter, limo driver, or other hospitality service. Here are a few rules of thumb regarding gratuities:

1. If you are fishing with a captain and a mate, you must tip the mate. There are a couple of ways captains compensate their mates, but it is usually minimal because mates are counting on the gratuity. The going rate is about 10% – 15% for good service, between 15% - 20% for a standout. If you are keeping fish and the mate cleans them for you, plan on the latter.
2. If you are just fishing with a single guide, he is the business owner but he does it all for you. He boats your fish, ties your knots, cleans the boat, pulls your flies from under your skin and sometimes from under his; show a little love.
3. If you lose or break off any tackle it should be reflected in a dividend. Even though it's part of the game and happens to the best anglers, and guides too. A good lure is easily ten to fifteen bucks, plus tax and the time it takes to go and get a replacement. When I lose a plug, or send a few flies into the mangroves, I add a Jackson to the invoice.
4. Even if you did not catch a lot of fish, if your guide burns a lot of fuel trying a number of locations, and gives you some extra time at the back end of the trip, these efforts are worthy of a baby bonus. Keep in mind a rig burning 8- 10 gallons an hour, at \$4.50 - \$5.00/gallon at the dock, is eating up 20% of gross, well before you start smacking the gel coat of his boat with Clouser minnows.

The best tip of all is a return trip and my repeat clients are always welcome to a little extra time. Hopefully these rudimentary parameters will provide some insight into your future fishing expeditions and lead to a rewarding guided experience.