



Todd Gerry and Todd Gates with a reef fish

Tarpon on the hook matches tarpon t-shirt

Fishing Fun

By Anne Bulloch

Naples builder and businessman Todd Gates' wall of fame isn't filled with the numerous awards his company, Gates McVey, has accumulated over the years. Nor is it decorated with the articles touting the company's many successes. Instead, the wall, which Gates faces while sitting at the desk of his busy Naples office, displays trophies of a different sort – snapshots of the champion fish he's caught.

There's one of Gates landing the big one, its body arched identically to the special edition Guy Harvey shirt Gates is wearing in the photo. There's a framed letter that Guy Harvey, the legendary angler and artist, sent after seeing that photo. And there are numerous other snapshots of a proud Gates showing off the ones that didn't get away. (He releases the fish shortly after snapping photographic proof.) And there's the record fish that did get away – a "massive tarpon" that took he and former business partner James McVey nearly 90 minutes to land. "We were so concerned about getting it back in the water, we didn't measure it," Gates says, noting a friend would later make an earth-shattering

estimate that no angler wants to hear. "Based on the photograph, he figured it was a world record fish that we threw back," he laughs. "It could have meant \$1 million in endorsements."

A faded photo on the wall bears proof that Gates has been an avid angler since childhood. He takes annual fishing excursions, often with friends in search of a specific species, and tries to get out on the water at least once a month. Fishing, he says, grounds him. "I like the philosophy of it; the chance to get back to nature, away from people, phones and pagers. My favorite place to be is anywhere on the water when the sun is coming up," says Gates. "It's peaceful and spiritual."

Fishing has taken Gates to some exotic and interesting locales. In addition to regular excursions to Key West, he includes two international fishing expeditions on his calendar each year. He recently returned from a trip to the Pearl Islands in Panama in search of marlin (the one fish that has gotten away all this time) and has fished the Caribbean, and Central and Latin America, including fishing for sailfish in Iztapa, Guatemala, a spot known to hold every record for the species. He hopes to one day fish the Great Barrier Reef and the Galapagos.

Photography courtesy of Todd Gates



But one of Gates' favorite getaways is close to home. "I love the Everglades. It's where I go to feel like I'm in Jurassic Park," he says. "There's a place that's so far east you can catch a large mouth bass or an eight-foot hammerhead because it's saltwater and freshwater."

The varied fishing – everything from flying fishing to back-water sight fishing and deep-sea fishing – attracts many anglers to Southwest Florida year-round. It's a pastime that can take anglers to quiet back bay waters around the Everglades and Ten Thousand Islands and offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. Tarpon and snook are among the big draws, according to Kevin Mihailoff, who leads mostly advanced anglers throughout Everglades National Park and the Ten Thousand Islands. "Tarpon are one of the most prized game fish because they're big and hard to catch," says Mihailoff. "They're moody, they jump and pull hard."

For anglers unfamiliar with Southwest Florida's unique ecosystems, hiring a guide provides the best chance of understanding it. "You can be an expert in Michigan or South Carolina, but you come here and fishing is a whole different experience," says John Bunch, captain of Giddy Up fishing charter out of Pine Island. "You have to understand the big picture – the tide movement, moon phases, wind direction and bait fish. There are so many variables people don't understand."

Considered one of the top pro guides in Florida, Bunch, a former Marine officer and IBM executive, is frequently in the company of celebrities, star athletes and even world leaders – folks who he says become ordinary people when out on the water. "This is their time not to be a movie star or a former secretary of state," he says. "People find peace on the water. That's why they're fishing."

Todd Geroy, one of Gates' frequent fishing guides, has been leading fishing expeditions for more than 26 years. For a time, Geroy was the youngest captain in the state, having earned his stripes at the tender age of 18. "The first kids I ran into when I moved here were heading out to fish," he says. "From then on, I had the fishing bug."

Most of Geroy's clients are full-time residents or regular annual visitors, and most, he says, come in search of the "Silver King" – tarpon that can easily reach 180 pounds and put up a good fight in the process. His specialty is coastal and inshore fishing

along the inland bays south of Naples to Marco Island.

For Southwest Florida anglers (and outdoors enthusiasts) the arrival of the mega-chain Bass Pro Shops in Estero's Gulf Coast Town Center ushers in the area's growing prestige as a fishing destination, even attracting shoppers from as far away as the Bahamas, says promotions manager Janet Courtney. The 123,000-square-foot store, though smaller than many other Bass Pro Shops, is a veritable Candyland for anglers. Never mind the two-story waterfall or enormous salt- and freshwater aquariums, the custom painted murals depicting life in the Everglades or the Big Cypress National Preserve; it's the hundreds of reels, lures and bait options that get even the most jaded angler salivating. The store, one of 58 stores either open or under construction, even has experts on staff to hand-tie flies. It also sells powerboats and kayaks, the latter a popular vessel for fishing, says Courtney.

Gates himself has been wowed by the store, spending a morning and a good part of an afternoon browsing through the Lauderdale location. "I'm not a shopper but I lost all track of time in there," he admits. "It's a mecca."

Getting to know Southwest Florida's hot fishing holes is as simple as visiting local bait shops or hardware stores. "These are the people really up to date with what's going on," says Geroy.

Or rely on the expertise of a guide. Bunch, who also specializes in tarpon – a species he likens to red-headed women – praises the insight of a former client. "He spent six hours having me show him the different areas I like to fish," Bunch recalls. "He had me explain how to fish in these areas and what techniques to use. He wanted to know from me what made me successful and what to look for on the water."

If you do opt to go it alone, tread lightly, says Mihailoff: "Take it slow and don't rush into areas you're not familiar with or you could damage grass beds, run aground or tick off the guy in another boat. You're out there to enjoy yourself. That's what fishing is all about."



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