

24 Hours in Key West

Fish smart, not
long hours, to enjoy
winter trips.

By David Conway
Managing Editor



I had to get down to see my friend Capt. Pepe after the hurricanes, but only had 24 hours to be there and a 6-hour drive each way. No problem. I knew Pepe. I knew Key West, and I knew we'd pick up some good cool weather fish.

Straight from U.S. 1, I pulled up to Garrison Bight at noon and met Pepe on his Conch 27, with his livewell topped up with pilchards from a bait run earlier. Pepe Gonzalez is a long time captain in Key West, and he writes the Spotter column for this magazine, so I know he has the pulse of the fishery. I changed clothes on his boat as we motored out

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of the bight, past the half-sunk houseboats in the City Marina, damaged by Irma, past the beaten-up docks off the Navy houses. Irma took a lot from the Lower Keys and everything from some folks. Most residents will say if you want to help out the Keys now, plan a visit, brief as it might be.

Pepe and I had a shot to get offshore before the weather cranked up in the late afternoon, which was often the pattern from January through March in the Keys. But with a livewell of pilchards and clean water reported off Sand Key from a fellow captain there earlier in the day, we had a chance at blackfin, wahoo and sails. It's only seven or so miles from Key West to the reef, so it's not a time constraint to get to the pelagics. It's the winter weather that holds most people back.

Our plan was to live bait as we drifted over a few wrecks and hope to bring up some tuna.

"You throw these pilchards in and the tuna zoom up from 200 feet down below and smash them,"

Key West's Charter-boat Row was up and running soon after the storms. Inset, Capt. Pepe with a blackfin on a quick afternoon trip to the reef zone.



Pepe said. "They see these tiny little shimmering baits up above and that's all it takes."

The dozen or so pilchards we tossed out would gather up and drift a bit behind the boat as we drifted with the current. We'd drift for 10 minutes then run back on the wreck to try to get something going. There hadn't been many boats fishing, and there were none around us, so reports from Pepe's network were few. At the end of the first drift, I saw one surface explosion about 200 yards off. Pepe didn't see it.

"That far off? Let's run up again. Maybe they're here."

The next drift we picked up a frigate bird, and Pepe saw another explosion. "That was a tuna," he said.

The third drift was the one. Pepe hooked up, and boated a decent blackfin that got tagged and barely scathed by a small shark. Next I caught a shark. Pepe just cuts the line at the hook and reties the

hook.

"I don't waste my time with those sharks," he says. "But you definitely

want to use the lightest fluorocarbon you can for this fishing, and a small hook. I use 20 foot of 30-pound fluoro, and if you're using 40-pound, I'll get way more bites than you. Also when tuna fishing there's a big likelihood of hooking kings that will shred right through your leader. With a long leader you can retie a few times. If you start at 10 feet of leader, you have to put a whole new leader. Also I suggest retying the hook after every landing. Tunas have small teeth that will damage your leader. I use a 1/0 shortshank livebait hook. Those hooks look small, and they are, but the tuna have great eyesight, and



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you want them seeing the bait not the hook.”

Those hooks aren't too heavy for the pilchards to carry with them, and you want as natural presentation as possible. Pepe hooks the pilchards just under the mouth, in the throat area, with the hook point coming in from the side. This way, the bait can swim easily and

last as long as possible in the drift. Freeline it out there to let it stay with those you tossed out to swim free. The drag of the line itself in the water should keep the line peeling out, and if it speeds up just a bit faster, that might be a bite. If you think it is, or if you think you've let out too much line, you can close the bail and reel it back in a bit.

One of the ways to offset the winter weather is to get pilchards.



You can catch mutton snapper inshore in Key West, offshore and in the channels, like this one caught on a live pilchard in the Northwest Channel.

Sometimes the tuna will strike on the change of the bait's direction. If the bait looks tired, change it up to keep it fresh.

One of the best ways to offset the vagaries of the weather on a Keys winter trip is to get those pilchards. “Pilchards will increase

your bite in pretty much any kind of fishing that you do,” said Pepe, “whether it's in 10 feet in the channels or down at the end of the bar for tuna. It doesn't matter. You have to take advantage of the pilchards in the fall and winter in the Keys.

“Ideally, I don't like to go offshore with less than 1,000 pilchards. Sometimes

you get out there and there might be a guy who's got more than you, and you want to be able to compete. Some days, I'll have 4,000 pilchards out there. The other thing you can do is work with people when you're out there live chumming. You can get close to a guy who's chumming, without getting in his way, and start chumming to keep the fish working around both of you.”

It takes a little bit of know-how to get the pilchards around Key West. You not only have to know the locations where they're gathered, but you have to know the terrain to be able to motor in there and not run aground. You have to put in some time. But it makes the difference between having an amazing day, Pepe says, and pretty much having nothing.

“Everything will eat them,” he says, “mackerel, cobia, tuna, snapper, sailfish, dolphin, wahoo—all of which are here in the winter if you can draw them out. You can also get one of the hottest bites of the winter, the tuna and sailfish, on live ballyhoo, on threadfin and on some finger mullet.”

A lot of guys will search for pilchards and get them off the south side of the island off the beaches. They're also found in the shallows off the keys to the west of Key West. Sometimes there will be huge schools of pilchards around Boca Grande. That's a long way to go if you don't know that they're there though. They're also sometimes found around the keys to the north and east of Key West.

On the next drift, we got another tuna, but

the sharks were on the prowl. Another frigate bird came around, hovering over the wreck. I hooked what fought like a tuna, and it dove down, like a tuna, got it halfway to the boat, and it got cut off, likely by a shark. As I was letting out my next bait, a decent blackfin skyrocketed 10 feet behind us and arced 5 feet into the air. It saw us with its big black eye and must have known something wasn't right.

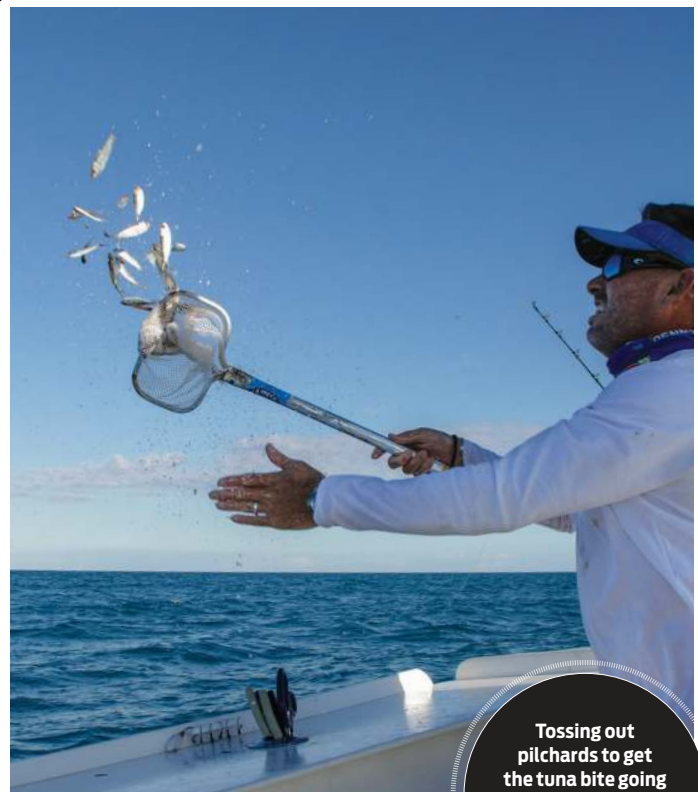
It's tough to chase these tuna, they're so skittish and fast. You might be able to troll some up, but if you're drifting, you pretty much have to hope they'll find your free-swimming baits and then come closer and catch a hook. I find it more pleasant to drift rather than troll on a nice cool day anyway, especially when the seas are up a bit.

We got tired of the sharks so Pepe made the call to try another wreck not far away. Nothing going on there, and with the sun about to start dropping, we called it a day. There is no quiet like the sea's at sundown in winter. It has a certain quality that renders all the meaningless things about life on land absolutely meaningless.

Night comes on fast in the winter in the Keys.

In the morning, I stopped for coffee and breakfast at one of my favorite shops, Old Town Bakery. It's the best bakery in the Keys, if not in Florida. The wind had cranked up, as forecast, and I knew what the

Night comes on fast in winter in the Keys.



Tossing out pilchards to get the tuna bite going also works for other pelagics like wahoo and dolphin.

plan would be from the old days. Northwest Channel, or if it got really bad, just stay in the harbor and pick away at snapper and maybe a permit or cobia would come by.

I met Pepe at Garrison Bight and we headed out to get the pilchards. "This time of the year, honestly, I don't even really want to fish if I can't get the pilchards. Even if I have to take two hours to get plenty of them, I'll do it. Sometimes, all



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it takes is one throw of the net.”

Out at one of the backcountry keys, standing up on the bow, holding his 12-foot castnet, Pepe pointed the direction where he saw the glimmers of the pilchards. With the motors slightly raised, I gently moved us into the shallows, around a point, looking. We took our time, and found the baits. With

“Once the water cools, snapper come in.”

three throws, Pepe had enough baits for the morning. Some of them were what’s called Sand Key pilchards, big as your hand, good sailfish baits. The bait run took about an hour.

I wanted to get some yellow jacks, an underrated fish that makes fine sushi, and Northwest Channel is a great spot for them. In fifteen minutes from the bait spot, we were slowly motoring up the Northwest Channel, looking

on the screen for Pepe’s exact spot.

“Once the water cools down past a certain point,” Pepe said, “a lot of the snapper will be coming in shallow to the patch reefs closer to the islands, and that can also make a great bite. It can make a windy day when you can’t get offshore into a fun, productive day filled with all kinds of action. Some days, no matter what the report says, you think you can’t get out to the reef, but you can. Other days, you think you can, but you can’t. So it’s always important to have some patch reef locations as a fall back plan.

“On a strong northeast wind, you can also go through the Lakes Passage to Boca Grande Channel, where you’ll be almost on the

leeward side of that wind, and there are always fish out there.”

We found the rocks and anchored upcurrent and started chumming. It’s all a matter of playing the current in these locations. You’ll either freeline baits on a light, light jig, or when the current really gets moving, drop the baits down on bottom rigs. Sometimes, you can choose the right egg sinker weight to bounce along the bottom and keep moving. Anywhere on the bottom, grouper will come by and try to rock you up quick. That bottom fishing takes a bit of a touch, knowing how to let the fish take the bait long enough to commit to it, but not too long to rock you up.

“It’s entirely possible that you could get a 20-pound black grouper in here,” Pepe said. “And they’re smart. Also nice muttons, yellowtail, and in the winter, plenty of cobia come through here.”

We started off with good-size mangrove snapper. Then Pepe took a nice mutton. Then we got into the yellow jacks, pretty good-size fish, about eight pounds, and my day was complete. The current really started ripping, and we used heavy sinkers to stay down on bottom, and it was about a 50/50 hook up ratio between losing baits, getting rocked up, and landing a decent fish.

By high noon, we were finished. On the way back to Garrison Bight, Pepe penned up the rest of the pilchards at a friend’s dock, and before too long, I was back in my truck, with fresh fish in my cooler, for the ride back to the mainland.

Twenty-four hours in Key West, two vastly different trips, a bunch of good fish, and a brief visit to see friends. How could winter in Florida be better? **FS**



Where to Stay

The New Town area has many hotels, including 24 North right on Roosevelt Blvd., away from the crowds in Old Town. It’s about a 5-minute drive into Old Town. Also nice, the hotels on the south side of Key West overlook Smathers Beach.

I stayed at 24 North, which is new, with modern design touches. Rooms are equipped with a 48” LCD TV, microwave, refrigerator, bath with granite counter tops, and new, comfortable beds. There’s a nice pool area with a bar/restaurant on grounds and there’s a free shuttle down to Old Town so you don’t have to have a car with you. The hotel is located at 3820 N Roosevelt Blvd, (786) 504-0690, www.24northhotel.com.

Tackle for the Keys

You’ll want to be ready to go to the backcountry, the patch reefs and main reef, and given the weather, to the blue water for wahoo and other pelagics. Even green water just beyond the reef will hold big kingfish this time of year. To narrow down your tackle options, Capt. Pepe gave his recommendations for three primary outfits to have with you on a Key West trip.

For backcountry action, including the flats, channels and the mangrove shores, the Penn Spinfisher SSV 4500 reel with a 7-foot fast action rod. “This outfit allows me to cast in the channels and backcountry, jig in the wrecks and freeline for yellowtails. This outfit performs great in many different scenarios.”

For bigger game like sharks, muttons and tarpon, Pepe goes with the Penn Slammer 3 reel paired with a 7-foot Penn Carnage 2 rod with medium action. “I use this outfit for live baiting for tarpon, sharks, and pitching baits to sails. You can even troll with it if you had to.”

For tuna, wahoo and for dropping baits down on the wrecks, he’ll use the Penn Torque 30 conventional reel and pair it with a Penn Carnage 2, 7-foot rod with medium action.

“**My line of choice** is the blue camo Stealth by Spiderwire. I spool the SSV with 15-pound line, and 50 for the Slammer 3 and Torque. The water down off Key West can be pretty clear even in the winter, so don’t forget your Vanish fluorocarbon leader. It makes a big difference in getting the bites.”



Light tackle guides in the Keys are ready with a wide variety of outfits for all the opportunities.