

# MacSweeney guides all Cork bass enthusiasts

**F**OR James MacSweeney it was a holiday in America which introduced him to the power and fighting qualities of bass. Instantly converted, he packed away his trout rods and the pursuit of bass became an all-consuming passion that still hasn't diminished all these years later.

Despite having caught a huge number of bass in his lifetime, he still experiences the same shot of adrenalin on hooking a good fish that he did for that first one. Now MacSweeney hopes to covert this love of fishing into a new career as a fishing guide in Cork Harbour.

"I started fishing first day when a friend persuaded me to go trout fishing with him," he says.

"I had come home from England where I had been working with horses. A relationship had come to an end and I needed some distraction. We went out on a few Saturdays and to be honest most of the time I was sleeping off the effects of the Friday night before. However, I did catch the fishing bug. "Then I was on holidays in Nantucket and tried a bit of fly fishing — more for something to do rather than out of any expectation of actually catching something.

"By pure chance I hooked and landed a 16 lb pound striped bass, which hammered the fly and stripped the line down to the backing. From then on I became fanatical about bass."

The recession has not been kind to MacSweeney and in June he had to close his butcher shop, Mac's Meat Market in Ballyphehane, which had been in the family for 42 years. Although a difficult time, the business was no longer viable and the decision had to be made.

"When my dad Paddy MacSweeney was still in school the farmers' union were killing cattle and couldn't tan the hides with the tails attached. "My father would buy the tails for a tanner, load them on a pony and trap and sell them in the English market for one and six."

It was an emotional decision to bring that tradition to an end, but between the supermarkets and the recession, it was impossible to continue.

"I still believe that meat from a butcher is highly superior and there is always some craic and banter," he says. "In the end it was very important to me to pay off my debts, that is the way I was reared, and when everything was sorted I was left with very little left over."

It was friends who suggested professional guiding as an occupation. "I have a small 4.5m rib and they could see me out in the harbour and as often as not my rod was bent into a fish," he recalls. "It is in the early stages at the moment but it is something I would love to do. I remember bringing out Rob Walsh, who was only 11 years old, last year and already he was a really tasty little angler.

"That day he caught his first bass and it nearly tore the rod out of his hands. He was so proud of what he achieved

## Karl Dixon finds out what's so special about fishing in Cobh harbour

that I actually gave him rod he was using, this is a memory he will always have and hopefully he has developed a hobby and a passion that will last him a lifetime."

Any fledgling business needs some luck and for MacSweeney the Bella Vista Hotel in Cobh, which runs six angling boats and which attracts anglers from all over the world, is likely to provide a fruitful partnership. The boats are available to hire by the day or week, however there is often need for a guide to pilot even the more experienced anglers through the intricacies of Cork Harbour.

In late December, bass have moved offshore and are hard to find, however there are other species available. As we steam out from Marlogue Marina on a frosty day on one of their fast Warrior 175s, the owner of the Bella Vista, Kevin Murphy, explains the benefits of Cork Harbour for anglers.

"Firstly it is one of the biggest natural harbours in the world and there is sheltered fishing available in all but the most extreme weather," Murphy says. "There are sandbanks, reefs, riptides, deep water and estuarine conditions and these support a huge range of fish species. Record fish have been caught in the harbour and specimens are common. During 2009, specimen bass, blonde ray, gilt head bream, golden gray mullet,

lesser spotted dogfish, red gurnard, thick lipped mullet and plaice were all caught."

Angling is now one of the biggest outdoor activities in the world. Murphy believes that angling has not been marketed well in the past and that there is scope to significantly increase visitor numbers to Cork.

"The main advantage of Cork Harbour is that it is so sheltered any visiting angler is almost guaranteed fishing time," he says. "Approximately 40% of our revenue comes from angling and anglers come throughout the year when other sources of business may be thin on the ground. They come from the UK and continental Europe and many come

back year after year. "If we stopped commercial fishing inside Roche's Point we would have the most amazing tourism product. We encourage catch-and-release and most anglers nowadays release the vast majority of the fish they catch, so stocks don't get decimated like they do with

## JAMES MacSWEENEY FACTFILE

**Age:** 42  
**Biggest bass:** 16 lb striped bass in America, 14 lb bass in Ireland on a surface lure in about four feet of water.  
**Best season:** "Brilliant bass season last year — a definite sign of addiction. All but three were released."  
**Best cod:** 12 lb  
**Favourite fishing method:** "Using surface lures for bass, for cod, jigging with soft plastic lures is my preferred method."

**Favourite location:** "I am not telling exactly where, but Cork Harbour is a brilliant location for sea fishing."  
**Fishing ambitions:** "I would love to have a specialised bass angling boat and I am hoping to develop fly fishing for bass in 2011. "I still believe there could well be a record bass in Cork Harbour and if he is there, I would love to be the one who is lucky enough to catch him."



Rob Walsh, 11, with his first 5.5lb bass caught recently.



A satisfied customer, Niall Driver with a specimen with a 10lb 2oz bass in Cork Harbour.

A pod of bottlenose dolphin, including a calf, keep us company — only occasionally leaving to ride the bow waves of larger ships moving through the harbour.

For MacSweeney this is what fishing is all about even if it is difficult to cover the sense of pleasure it brings to non-anglers.

"People sometimes think that fishing is boring but your mind is continually working, trying to picture the seabed and trying to figure out where the fish are and what will catch them," he says. "I picture bass as being a little like trout, they sit out of the main current so they don't waste energy and wait to ambush prey species. It is like trying to figure out a complicated crossword and any real life worries disappear completely.

"You become completely immersed in what you are doing and time slips by unnoticed. There is a also a huge sense of anticipation, and often if you look at other anglers they are barely breathing they are so intent on what they are doing.

"When someone catches a big fish for the first time there is a tremendous mix of excitement, confusion and sometimes a bit of shock at the power

commercial fishing."

Certainly in the cold, clear Arctic air of mid-December, Cork Harbour with its wooded valleys, beaches and forts is undeniably spectacular and Cobh's cathedral and tiered terraces of brightly coloured houses can only really be fully appreciated from the sea. Although not a serious fishing trip on this occasion, it is relatively straight-forward to catch enough cod for the pot as well as the odd pollock.

of the fish. It is this buzz that keeps us coming back for more."

For MacSweeney and for many sea anglers, sea bass are the quarry of choice primarily due to their fighting qualities. Bass are particularly common along Ireland's southern counties and can be caught from surf beaches, estuaries and rocky inlets and methods vary from bait fishing through fly fishing to surface lures. They are a very slow growing fish and stocks can be quickly decimated by commercial fishing or over exploitation of stocks and there is a closed season from May 15 to June 15 each year. There is a bag limit for anglers of two bass in any one period of 24 hours and any fish over 10 lb is considered a specimen. The Irish record is 17 lbs 13 ozs.

It is a paradox of fishing that the excitement comes largely from its unpredictability, when fishing is too easy — for example when mackerel pack into the harbour — it loses its charm. It is called fishing not catching and even the best anglers in the world will have their off days. "It is a feature of fishing that you can have two guys on a boat doing exactly the same thing and one will catch fish and one won't," he says. "The next day the situation may be reversed. I

remember I was asked to take a top fishing guide out for a day and everyone was catching fish but me. I was able to bring them to the fish but wasn't able to actually catch them myself on that occasion."

He accepts that all the different tackle, fishing paraphernalia and techniques can be confusing for beginners and admits there is a lot of slugging and general piss taking among anglers.

"It can be a bit intimidating at the beginning but in reality everyone is very helpful and will always help novice anglers to catch fish," he says. "Mind you they won't necessarily show you their best spots. When I am guiding I am always aware of where everybody is and make sure everyone is comfortable and having a good time. Angling doesn't have to be expensive and for a relatively small price you can develop a hobby in the open air which can last you a lifetime and give a huge amount of pleasure."

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