



Catch AND COOK

Nothing tastes better than freshly cooked seafood – especially if you’ve caught it yourself. Nicola Smith travelled to Cornwall to experience fish at its finest

As we motored out to sea, watching the pretty Cornish harbour of St Mawes grow smaller behind us, the boat owner, Gareth, apologised for the mess. The deck was awash with nets and pots, not to mention fish and salt. It was, after all, a working fishing boat, and Gareth’s livelihood – not some polished gin palace where tuxedoed Italian men feed you lobster as you recline in your bikini.

No, we were embarking on a hardcore fishing trip where we would catch our own fish before returning to the idyllic Luggier Hotel to be shown how to prepare and cook our haul, before devouring the fruits of our labour in the hotel’s AA Rosette restaurant. I say hardcore, but actually Gareth had done most of the hard work, putting the nets and pots out the evening before. My friend Fiona and I were going with him to do the less arduous (and more exciting) bit – pull in the nets and see what delights we would be enjoying for our dinner. After just 15 minutes we slowed to a halt to pull in the first of the pots, strung 30ft below the sea and baited with dead fish. The pots were bursting with crabs, a healthy dollop of kelp and a few ugly (and unmarketable) dogfish.

Gareth’s gloved hands measured the crab to ensure they were big enough to eat

(ones under 140mm must be thrown back). His expert technique ensured their claws didn’t nip him, and as he disarmed them by holding their claws aloft, we bravely ran our fingers over their surprisingly soft shells.

Net gains

Pots pulled up, we moved out towards St Anthony’s lighthouse to tackle the nets. Seagulls circled overhead, but it was the seals that Gareth was worried about as they are notorious for ripping the nets and helping themselves.

We didn’t see any seals, but there was evidence that they had dined there overnight. As we hauled in the tangled nets, Gareth was amused at our growing excitement. He warned us that seagulls can get caught in the net, which tempered our enthusiasm slightly, but fortunately none had suffered this fate. Instead the net was alive with fat shiny sea bass and silver mullet – a white fish that is technically called grey mullet, but many restaurants now call it silver because it sounds more appealing!


Once the fish were on the boat they flipped around in a disconcerting fashion that had us acting like, well, girls. I was brave and picked a couple up to put them in a bucket, feeling their slippery bodies as they looked at me with wide, glistening eyes.

Fresh feast

With a generous haul, we potted back into St Mawes where Gareth put our catch out of its misery with a sharp bang on the head. He then deftly gutted and filleted the fish we’d caught with a knife, spilling their guts into the blue water, and sent us off rather unceremoniously with a carrier bag, bursting with fresh seafood. We drove 15 minutes back to The Luggier – sat on the tiny beach at beautiful Portloe – and proudly presented the bag to Didier, the hotel’s renowned head chef.

After marvelling at the views from our room and freshening up, we joined Didier in the steamy kitchen as he worked his magic with our bag of offerings. He boiled the crabs for three minutes and left them to cool, before deftly descaling the impressive sea bass, drizzling it with oil and sizzling it in a frying pan as it turned opaque, before transferring it to the oven for three minutes. Didier is a master at multi-tasking. With the crab cooled, he picked out the meat and mixed it with crème fraîche and lemon juice, before filleting the silver mullets and pan frying in butter for about three minutes on each side. It smelled wonderful and we watched admiringly, our hunger acute. Didier’s philosophy is clear: fish, at its best, is cooked simply and quickly.

Salivating, we were ushered through to the picture window dining room with a cold glass of Sauvignon Blanc and seconds later, as if by magic, our seafood platter arrived – looking far more appetising than it had in the carrier bag. The crab, renowned for its low-fat, high-protein and vitamin-rich meat, was creamy and delicious – with a citrus zing – while the sea bass and silver mullet was crispy on the outside and tender inside, accompanied by the kick of a chilli sauce and new potatoes. It really did taste fresh – and with less than three hours from sea to stomach it was!

We reclined in the lounge after dinner, watching dusk turn to night with nightcap, our cheeks still glowing from our fishing trip. OK, it wasn’t like an episode of *Trawlermen*, but you have to start somewhere – and this is definitely more my style. 

The Luggier Hotel is offering a two-night stay, including breakfast, one dinner and the fishing experience, from £220 per person. Visit www.luggierhotel.co.uk or call 01872501322.