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Avila Beach Pier

It's back and that's good news for the beach go'ers and anglers who flock to this fairly small, three-block by three-block, beachfront town, a town that was closed for most of 1999 and 2000. Of course, I'm sure it's also fairly good news for the 300 or so residents who saw their town "destroyed in order to save it." Save it from what? Well, it seems that in 1989, a 400,000-gallon plume of oil was discovered bulging directly underneath the town, oil that came from a series of underground pipes connecting to a large Unocal oil storage facility that set just up the hill from the town (with tanks dating back to 1906). Since the oil threatened the environment, especially that of the beach area and the nearby San Luis Obispo Creek, it had to be removed. But how? Years of argument and finger-pointing eventually led to a multi-million dollar cleanup by the oil company. Much of the town, including basically the entire beach area, was closed off and dug up. The pier of course had to be closed and didn't reopen for more than a year. Luckily, no oil had leaked into the ocean or into San Luis Obispo Creek, at least as far as is known. Luckily too, most of the businesses seem to be back and, as mentioned, the town has once again become a favorite spot for locals and more distant visitors that know of its location.

I say visitors that know of its location because it is an area easily missed by travelers going full speed, north and south, on the Highway 101 trail. The beach area itself offers excellent beach facilities and a microclimate that is warmer than nearby Pismo Beach or Morro Bay (it's often sunny when Pismo is blanketed in fog). The beach is home to sunbathers, boogie boarders, surfers, and fisherman who visit the pier, one of the top fishing piers along this stretch of coast. More than any other beach along the central coast, Avila has the look and feel of a southern California beach town, albeit a '50s, or perhaps even '40s beach town; one that hasn't suffered the over development so common to towns to the south. A concern of some locals was that the town would lose its Bohemian flavor amid the rebuilding of the town; I still find it delightful. By the way, what causes people to miss this area is the fact that they must leave the highway and wind their way back to the northern portion of San Luis Obispo Bay. The short trip is well worth the effort. Once aware of this region, you will come back.

An example of Avila angling action happened to me one July night in 1990. I had arrived late, at nearly 8 p.m., and planned to fish for only an hour or so. I quickly began to catch fish but everything was small: white croaker, speckled sanddab, bocaccio (red snapper), a lone walleye surfperch, and pesky staghorn sculpin. I was just about ready to leave when a resident wandered by. He stopped, lit a cigarette, and asked how I was doing. I told him the action was fair, nothing spectacular, and that I was going to call it quits. He then said I might want to try nearshore, right under the pier. He said there was a large school of pileperch at that spot and that he had been catching them there every morning for the past week. I didn't have any sand crabs, which he said was the best bait, but I did have some mussels and decided to give it a try.

Soon my bait was under the pier in the surf area and before long, I had a bite. It was a barred surfperch, just over a pound, and plump full of baby fish ready to emerge. Another cast produced another fish, only this one was about a pound and a half. Soon, another fish, a two pounder. This kept up for the half hour or so I fished, and the fish kept getting bigger until I finally had to walk one through the surf and up to the beach before I dared pull it up onto the pier (I was using a light pole with 6-pound test line). The fish were all barred surfperch and most displayed the scrappy fight that characterizes the species. I don't know how many fish I could have caught but I kept only as many as I could use and experienced some great fun.

Environment

Water here, for the most part, is fairly shallow and the bottom is primarily sand and mud, while pilings are covered with fish-attracting mussels. Just a short distance up the beach, to the west of the pier, sits San Luis Obispo Creek. Although the bay is generally calm, it can be rough, and the pier is wide open to the winter storms arriving from the south. The El Niño-generated storms of 1983 broke the pier into several sections and it wasn't until 1988 that the pier was totally restored.

The primary fish here is white croaker. Early Department of Fish & Game studies showed that Avila had the highest fish-per-angler average of any pier in the central coast area. Of the fish counted, two thirds were white croaker. Next, in order, were jacksmelt, walleye surfperch, shinerperch, calico surfperch, barred surfperch, jack mackerel and silver surfperch. Staghorn sculpin are also numerous, in fact too numerous; I have had several trips where I could hardly keep them off the hooks.

Fishing Tips

Although the pier is fairly long at 1,685 feet, I have always had the best results fishing the inshore area of the pier, the first third of the pier. Just outside the breaker area of the surf will often yield the larger barred and calico surfperch and this is the only pier where the recorded catch of calicos was higher than the barred. Some warm-water years will also see schools of queenfish flock into these shallow waters. A little farther out on the pier yields large numbers of white croaker (often on every cast). Unfortunately, small speckled sanddab and staghorn sculpin (bullheads) will often fight to get on to your hook first. During the summer to fall months, this is also a very good area to fish at night for thornback rays and the fewer, but larger, skates and bat rays. Down around the pilings will yield walleye surfperch, silver surfperch and an occasional white or black seaperch.

Fishing mid-way to the far end of the pier will yield white croaker and several varieties of flatfish on the bottom – Pacific and speckled sanddab, sand sole and starry flounder. From the mid-level to the top of the water, and usually caught with bait rigs such as Lucky Luras, will be jacksmelt or jack mackerel. Increasingly though, huge schools of sardines are returning to these waters and early evening hours can see anglers filling buckets with the small fish. Once again perch can be found down around the pilings and a few pileperch and striped seaperch will be added to the other species. Also joining in the fun, but less common, are cabezon and a few lingcod which seem to be strange species for the sandy-bottom environment found at this pier.

Bloodworms, pile worms, sand crabs, ghost shrimp and fresh mussels work best for the larger perch. Worms are best for the jacksmelt, and anchovies (remember, only a small piece) are best for the white croaker. Squid is best for rays and sharks. If schools of bocaccio show up around the pier, and they made an appearance in 1999, remember that you can now keep only two of the small fish – and they must be at least 10 inches long. Some years may see other pelagics like mackerel or bonito enter the catch. Usually this will happen in late August or September, and best bets for catching them seem to be on feathers, jigs, spoons or multi-hook Lucky Joe/Lucky Lura leaders with the larger size hooks.

An increasingly common technique used by local fishermen is to head over to the nearby Port San Luis Pier, purchase a bucket of live anchovies, and bring them back to fish for halibut. Spring to mid-summer is the time for the large flatties and some days will see over a dozen legal size halibut caught by anglers with the proper know-how.

Night fishing for sharks and rays is common here. Most of the fish caught will be smoothhounds, leopard sharks or bat rays, but every year will also see some threshers caught and even an occasional blue shark. Best baits for the sharks seem to be fresh mackerel but freshly caught croakers and perch will also work. Bat rays and skates prefer a big chunk of squid.

Author's Note

My most unusual catch at this pier occurred one chilly June night in 1997 when I caught a whelk, a sea snail

that decided to nibble on the pile worm I was using for bait. Unfortunately, I hadn't purchased any garlic or wine while passing south through Gilroy. I've never had escargot out at the end of a pier (actually I've never had escargot at all although my daughter has weird tastes and likes the slimy creatures). Whelks seem to be fairly thick on the bottom here as are starfish! I wonder what a whelk and starfish sandwich would taste like? Perhaps you could have different sizes – a papa, mamma and baby star whelkich?

History Note

The town is named after Miguel Avila, the grantee in 1839 of Rancho San Miguelito, the site of today's Avila. The first pier in the area was a wharf located at Cave Landing, just east of Avila; it was built in 1855. That site proved too shallow for boats so in 1868 a new wharf, People's Wharf, was built. It set near the site of today's pier. It was the end point for a railroad which ran between San Luis Obispo and Avila Beach (in those days Avila was a shipping competitor of nearby Port Harford, today's Port San Luis).

Today, recreation is the key word, although some residents still worry about the oil found under the town's soil, and express concern about the possibility of radiation leaks from the nearby Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant.

Facts

Hours

Open 24 hours a day.

Facilities

Restrooms and showers at the foot of the pier, additional restrooms at the end of the pier. Fish-cleaning stations, benches, and lights on the pier. Free parking is available at the foot of the pier on Front St.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking but non-handicapped restrooms. The surface of the pier is wood planking with some of the spaces between the planks fairly wide and perhaps unsafe for wheelchairs. A concrete ramp leads to the pier and the rail height is 44 inches. Not posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

Take Hwy. 101 to Avila Rd. and go west; turn left off of Avila Rd. on to Front St. and follow it to the pier.

Management

Port San Luis Harbor District.

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Pismo Beach Pier

This pier, together with the other piers along this stretch of coast, provides both good fishing and a relief from the summer heat for those who come over from the hot San Joaquin Valley. This has been the case since the 1800s. In 1881, a wharf was built on this site and then, in 1895, a dance pavilion was built near the foot of the pier. During the summer a "Tent City" would spring up as tourists flocked to the beach and the hotels became over crowded. The result, both then and now, is that Pismo Beach and other central coast piers are often crowded June through August, and are fairly quiet the rest of the year—a fact which local anglers don't seem to mind.

Pismo Beach is the most heavily fished (an estimated million and a half people visit the pier per year) and second most productive of these Central Coast piers. However, fishing along this stretch of the coast can be unpredictable. Schooling species make up much of the summer catch and if the schools move in, steady action can be enjoyed by the swarm of tourists. If the schools don't move in, few fish may be caught. An example are the small bocaccio which, at times, will invade the shallow waters around the piers. When present, people flock to the piers to catch these "snapper" by the bucketful (although the limit is 15). Some years the bocaccio never show up at all and people will only average a fish or two per trip since they must rely on more resident species for their catch.

Environment

The current pier was built in 1924 but suffered major damage in the storms of 1983. Restoration and repair work was done in the late 1980s and today the pier is like new. It is 1,370 feet long and has several cantilevered fishing decks. It is built over one of the finest sand beaches in the state. Although there was a time when this beach was the best place in the state to dig for Pismo clams, the numbers have decreased dramatically (especially the take of large clams). Like the clams, the number of fish have also decreased. Nevertheless, fishing can still be good.

The top fish at Pismo is barred surfperch, the same fish that is caught south of Point Conception. Most of the other southern species, fish such as spotfin croaker, yellowfin croaker, and corbina, will rarely, if ever, be caught this far north. Instead, the angler fishing the surf area will usually catch barred surfperch or calico surfperch. Instead of stingrays and guitarfish, the angler is more likely to catch a skate. There are, of course, other species. Around the shallow-end pilings there can be good fishing for blackperch and occasionally rubberlip seaperch.

Further out, mid-pier to the end, one will catch barred as well as silver and walleye surfperch. Here, anglers will also catch kingfish (white croaker) but unlike more southern waters, there will be few, if any, queenfish. The far end of the pier seems best for flatfish, although I caught a nice butter sole practically in the surf one day. Most-often-caught flatfish are starry flounder but sanddabs, sand sole, and halibut are generally caught every year.

Pelagic species are most often jacksmelt, Pacific mackerel and jack mackerel, but some years will also see a

few barracuda, generally in September or October. Late spring to early summer seems the best time for halibut but mid-summer to fall are the best times to possibly hook a salmon or a couple of the more southerly species, thornback rays and guitarfish. As mentioned, some years will see schools of small bocaccio and these are usually found mid-to-late summer.

Fishing Tips

Follow the tide. Two hours before and after high tide, fish the surf area for barred and calico surfperch. Use sand crabs for bait if you can get some, if not, use seaworms, fresh mussels or clams. Use a high/low leader, size 4-6 hooks, and a sinker just heavy enough to hold your line behind the first set of breakers from the beach. For the largest perch, copy the regulars. More and more regulars use plastic grubs and they're most productive right in the surf area or in the holes by the pilings. Although these perch can be caught year-round, the best times seem to be late January through March.

If perch are not your quarry, fish out toward the end. In the winter and spring, fish on the bottom for starry flounder. From the spring to the fall, fish on the bottom for sole and an occasional halibut. Sand sole will hit a high/low leader baited with a strip on anchovy, bloodworm, sand crab or ghost shrimp. For the larger flatfish, fish on the bottom using a live bait leader rigged with a whole anchovy, small live white croaker, or small live smelt. The larger plastic grubs and lures like Scroungers will also attract a few halibut.

Perch are also found at the middle and end of the pier but here more commonly caught will be silver surfperch and walleye surfperch. Smaller hooks fished right down around the pilings often work best although the walleyes tend to school mid-depth. Walleye love a small piece of anchovy while the silvers will also attack a small piece of clam, mussel, bloodworm or squid, as well as anchovy.

Jacksmelt are one of the most common fish at the pier and Pacific mackerel, jack mackerel and Pacific sardines will be caught some years. Most of these will be also caught out toward the end of the pier and most are caught on the multi-hook Lucky Lura-type riggings. I've had my best success by casting and reelin' although at times a rig like these fished under a bobber or float works the best.

If the schools of small bocaccio are present, the best bet seems to be to use a Lucky Joe or Lucky Lura outfit baited with small pieces of squid. Fish the mid-pier area; drop the leader to the bottom, then reel up a foot or so until you feel the bocaccio begin to bite. It should take only a few minutes to catch your 15-fish limit. Unfortunately the '90s have seen a dramatic decrease in the catch of these fish.

Shark fishing at night is a time honored tradition here. As long as the weather and tidal conditions are right, the pier will be visited by the shark "regulars" and often there will be quite a few. The most common sharks are sand sharks (gray or brown smoothhounds) and leopard sharks but most anglers are seeking the larger thresher sharks and bat rays. Anglers who want a little more solitude will move up to the Avila or Port San Luis piers.

History Note

As mentioned, the first local wharf was built here in 1881. It was built by a group of San Francisco businessmen led by the Merherin brothers (from nearby Arroyo Grande). Their wharf was 1,600-foot long, twenty-seven feet above the low water mark, and was primarily used as the shipping point for south county agriculture. The original cost was only \$14,613 (compared to the more than one million dollars spent to restore the pier in the 1980s). Ten years later, in 1891, the town officially came into existence. The town's character was changed forever when the Southern Pacific Railroad built a line from San Luis Obispo to Ellwood in Santa Barbara County. The railroad brought hordes of visitors to the beach and Pismo became a tourist destination. By 1895, hotels were flourishing and the "Tent City" with its \$8.00 a week rates was built to handle the excess of tourists. Located where today's Boardwalk Plaza Mall sits, the "Tent City" would last until the late 1920s.

Although today's Pismo Beach Pier is the first pier encountered by anglers heading north through central California, it wasn't always the case. Back in the 1800s, before railroads and then highways became the movers for both people and commerce, several piers existed along this stretch of the central coast. In 1876,

the Lompoc Wharf was built at Point Purisma, about 13 miles north of Lompoc. Archives report that in June of that same year "the fiercest storm ever known in that vicinity visited Lompoc." The Lompoc Record said that "waves ran twenty feet above the wharf." On December 1 and 2, 1876, new reports record the "highest tides ever known" and the distressing news that "the Lompoc Wharf was badly damaged." Again, in December of 1879, comes word that "the Lompoc Wharf was damaged by a severe storm." Inevitably, the wharf was destroyed by storms.

A similar fate would fall another wharf built for the Lompoc colony, the Sudden Wharf, which was built at Point Arguello in 1881. It was located midway between Point Conception and Point Purisma.

Two other shipping sites have been mentioned, a Chute Landing, and the Point Sal Wharf. Building dates are unknown for either but it was reported in November of 1878 that "a large portion of the Point Sal Wharf had been destroyed." However, it was still listed as a shipping point in 1883.

Facts

Hours

Open 24 hours a day.

Facilities

Restrooms and free parking is available at the foot of the pier. The signs indicate a 4-hour limit from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and no parking from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. Fish-cleaning stations, benches, lights, bait (primarily frozen) and tackle are available on the pier. Some food is also available at the pier bait and tackle shop.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking and restrooms. The surface is wood planking and the railing is 42 inches high. Posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

From the north, take Hwy. 101 to the Five Cities Dr. exit; follow Dolliver into the middle of town, then turn west on Pomeroy and follow it to the pier and parking lot. From the south, take the Pismo Beach Exit (Price St.), follow it to Pomeroy; turn west and follow it to the pier.

Management

City of Pismo Beach.

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Cayucos Pier

Don't believe everything you read (except on this site). I once read that the fishing on this pier was poor and so I avoided it for years. I would drive right by the town as I headed north to San Simeon or south to Morro Bay. Boy, was I wrong! Surprisingly, it took a trip on a boat to teach me the fallacy of my belief. In late July of 1988, I had stopped at Morro Bay for a little twilight fishing on the party boat "Mallard." I experienced some excellent fishing on the boat, but what intrigued me the most was the story of the deckhand who claimed anglers with know-how were catching dozens of large halibut daily off of the Cayucos Pier.

The next morning I was out on the pier! The deckhand was right, but that was only part of the story. Anglers fishing near the surf were catching large surfperch, both barred and calico, in quantities large enough to fill buckets. Halfway out on the pier, the fishermen were catching small bocaccio two to three at a time – as well as walleye and silver surfperch. At the far end, anglers were catching shinerperch (and some anchovies) and then using these as live bait for halibut. Laying on the pier were several halibut – each of near gunny sack length. Evidently the halibut were spawning around the pier and anglers with the proper technique and gear were having the kind of action more common out on the boats. I was lucky enough to catch a few of each of these; unfortunately, I could only stay a brief time. I do not know how many more days the halibut continued to spawn in the shallow waters around the pier. I do know the deckhand had said the halibut had been biting for over a week. By the way, the deckhand managed to avoid working on the boat that next morning – he was out on the end of the pier just for the halibut.

Environment

The pier is located near the north end of Estero Bay, and the shoreline cuts due west to the right of the pier. There is a creek just to the north of the pier and the shoreline on both sides is fairly rocky but mixed with sand. The bottom around the pier is mostly sand but, again, there are some rocks near by. Finally, during much of the year, there can be a good growth of kelp near the pier.

Although the pier is 953-feet-long, this is primarily a shallow-water pier with most of the species common to such environments. The inshore area is dominated by the larger surfperch—barred surfperch and calico surfperch. Joining that duo are an occasional starry flounder and a few skate. Some years, generally during the summer to fall months, anglers will also see concentrations of queenfish, a fish more common to the south. They may also encounter two more southern species, thornback rays and shovelnose guitarfish. These will be found just past the surf line out to the midpier area. The midpier area generally sees the largest concentrations of the smaller perch: walleye, silver, spotfin and, of course, shinerperch. The end spots will yield all of these, but also more pelagics such as Pacific and jack mackerel, Pacific sardine, bonito and barracuda – the last two only in some years and then normally in the fall. Best action for halibut, and smaller flatfish such as soles and sanddabs, seems to be at the end of the pier. White croaker are abundant most of the year and good concentrations of jacksmelt add spice when they appear. Schools of young bocaccio appear during some years and when they do, anglers will flock to the pier to catch bucket loads of the small fish. Sharks and bat rays will be caught at the end, usually at night. Of interest is that this is the only pier where, to the best of my knowledge, a sizable number of swell shark have been caught— isn't that swell.

Fishing Tips

Fishing here can be very good or very bad. The best advice is to call ahead if in doubt. Best bait for the nearshore species is live sand crabs, fresh mussels, pile worms or small pieces of shrimp. Farther out, small strips of anchovy seem to work best although pile worms fished near the top can yield jacksmelt, and pieces of anchovy or squid can yield white croaker and, at times, a few queenfish. The smallish Pacific butterfish also visit the pier some years. Best bait for these seems to be small pieces of mussel fished on size 6-8 hooks a few feet under the surface of the water.

Flatfish such as flounder, sanddabs, sole and small halibut will usually strike a small strip of anchovy fished near the bottom – especially if cast out and slowly retrieved. The larger halibut seem to prefer live bait, which you will have to catch yourself.

Most pilings here have a good growth of mussels and fishing under the pier, near the pilings, using mussels for bait, will occasionally yield a blackperch, striped seaperch or rubberlip seaperch. Less frequently caught are pileperch and rainbow seaperch. If schools of bocaccio are present, snag lines or lucky Joe/Lucky Lura type outfits will yield excellent results. Fish mid-pier, drop your line to the bottom, and then start a slow retrieve. Usually you will have fish on your line by mid-depth.

Like many piers along this stretch of coast, Cayucos sees an active shark fishery at night. Most anglers use heavy gear, and the most common bait is a freshly caught small fish (perch, white croaker, small rockfish) which is either cut in part diagonally for bait or given several diagonal cuts in the skin to allow blood to attract the sharks. A fairly common technique is to chum with cans of generic cat food (which are cheaper than the publicized brands). Holes are punched in the cans and then the cans are lowered into the water (20 feet from the surface of the pier) using a mesh bag on the end of a rope. Most commonly caught “sharks” are brown smoothhound sharks, leopard sharks, bat rays, big skates and shovelnose guitarfish. One night, in April of 1991, I witnessed a bat ray of just over a 100 pounds being landed on the pier. Unfortunately, the angler butchered the fish pretty well before releasing it back to the water. He had good intentions but did not know how to handle the fish.

Fairly rare, but interesting, was a “run” of soupfin sharks which invaded the pier’s waters for over a week near the start of 1997. Most of the fish that were caught were small but one was a 65-pounder which measured nearly five and a half-feet in length. That may have been a record soupfin for the pier but the action wasn’t over. March saw a good run of shovelnose sharks (guitarfish) which are far more common in the late fall, warm-water months, and then in April, a 30-pound angel shark was caught, one of the largest of that species ever caught at the pier. It kind of makes you wonder what might be caught this summer—especially if El Nino conditions develop as some are predicting.

Special Fishing Tips

At times, when the bocaccio are present, you will also catch small illegal-sized lingcod. Please handle them with care and return them to the water unharmed. The same can be said about undersized halibut; let them grow to become legal-size fish.

Special Recommendations

Cayucos Beach, adjacent to the pier, is the northernmost beach in California with grunion runs. If you’re staying in the area during the appropriate times (nighttime high tides which occur during the spring and summer, and which follow the first three to four nights after the full and the dark of the moon), go down to the beach and see if you can catch some of the elusive smelt with your hands. And no, they really are not the ocean equivalent of snipe, they’re just little sex crazed fish.

Another thing you might do is look for Snowflake, a harbor seal that seems to have adopted the pier (or at least the water around the pier) as his residence. At times he can be a nuisance (for example, when he steals a fish from an angler’s line). But that is fairly rare and most of the local anglers look forward to Snowflake

sticking his speckled head up above the water. If you see him, throw him a fish or two.

History Note

The name Cayucos apparently derives from the Spanish word cayuco which means a fishing canoe. It was a Spanish rendering of the Eskimo word kayak and apparently referred to the bidarkas of the Aleuts who were employed in hunting sea otter along the California coast. The town was laid out and named in 1875.

That same year saw the construction of a 940-foot-long pier by Captain James Cass, a pier which quickly became a regular stop for ships of the Pacific Steamship Company. The current pier replaced that original pier and was built on the same site.

Facts

Hours

Open 24 hours a day year round.

Facilities

Benches, lights, and fish cleaning stations are found on the pier. Adequate free parking is found near the foot of the pier along with restrooms and showers. Near the entrance to the pier is the Tidepool, an excellent source for bait, tackle, and refreshments. Be sure to stop in and say hi to Glenda, she provides the monthly fish report for the pier.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking but non-handicapped restrooms. The pier surface is wood planking with a rail height of 39 inches. Not posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

Take Highway 1 to either Ocean Boulevard, which is the main street and will take you past the pier, or take the Cayucos Drive exit which will take you straight to the pier.

Management

San Luis Obispo County.

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Port San Luis Pier (Harford Pier)

Just up the road from the Avila Beach Pier sits the Port San Luis Pier, a pier with a different environment and a totally different feeling. The Avila Beach Pier looks and feels like a southern California "beach" pier; it is as much home to blondes and bikinis as it is to anglers. Port San Luis is where the sportsmen come to launch their boats, or where one buys a ticket for a day of bottom fishing, salmon fishing, or albacore fishing on one of the boats out of Patriot Sportfishing. Here the angler is king. For many, angling right off the dock is both productive and satisfying.

The pier is also the spot where I had one of my most enjoyable nights of fishing. I had arrived at Pismo Beach around 7 p.m., checked into a motel, and had a quick bite to eat. Since I had never fished the Port San Luis Pier, I decided to drive over and give it a short try. I only planned to fish a couple of hours since I needed to be on the road early the next morning. Arriving about 9 p.m., I bought some frozen anchovies to go along with the mussels in my ice chest. Fishing midway out on the bottom, using anchovies, I began to catch white croaker. I had a bite nearly every cast!

Then, as it began to darken, a school of mackerel moved into the water around the pier. They seemed to strike any lure or bait which I threw at them. It was soon time to go, but I kept trying for just one more fish.

Finally, I did begin to leave but on the way out I decided to see what might be available by the rocks at the shore-end base of the pier. Using mussels and fishing right up against the rocks, I had a hard strike as soon as I dropped my hook. I missed the first strike but not the next. Fishing that spot yielded several kelp rockfish, two of which weighed nearly three pounds. I had fished far too late (because it was nearly 1 a.m. when I finished), but I had caught quantity and quality and experienced a terrific time fishing in the shirt-sleeve weather late at night.

Environment

The pier is 1,320-foot-long, sits at the north end of San Luis Obispo Bay, and is fairly close to and protected by Point San Luis and the breakwater which extends from the point. Due to its length, the pier extends out into fairly deep water. Most of the bottom here is sand or mud, although there are quite a few rocks inshore around the foot of the pier. Most summers will see a good growth of seaweed all around the pier and the pilings themselves are covered by barnacles, mussels, starfish and polyps. At the far end of the pier it is possible to fish under a roof, the only pier to have this distinction in the state and a good place to be when it starts to rain or the wind comes up. However, most anglers fish midway out on the pier for the normal variety of fish: white croaker, jacksmelt, Pacific mackerel, jack mackerel, sardines, silver and walleye surfperch, flatfish and an occasional small rockfish. Some years the bocaccio still invade the local waters and when they do it is common to catch two, three or even more fish on every drop if you're using a bait rig. Remember that today the limit is three bocaccio so fish for something else (even though I will admit that there are times when you almost can't keep them off a hook). Inshore, you will find perch and rockfish (and sometimes schools of sardines and jacksmelt almost up to the rocks).

Unfortunately, the pier isn't as angler friendly as some. It is a commercial wharf; some areas are off limits to anglers, and crates, equipment, trucks, etc., can also block access to open areas. Finally, there are often quite a few boats and buoys anchored in the water around the pier. These, together with their ropes, can interfere in casting and make it hard to bring in some fish. However, there are also some interesting activities on the pier. For example, just past the Patriot Sportfishing office are a number of saltwater tanks with live fish and crabs awaiting shipment (which you can peek into); quite often there will be interesting fish such as sheephead, rockfish, and a variety of sharks. For a number of years, next to this was "The Fish Lady," a business which proclaimed by way of its sign that it was "The Home Of The Original Thresher Shark Soft Taco." It is history today; however, out toward the end of the pier is an excellent restaurant, The Olde Port Inn.

Fishing Tips

During the hours around high tide, bring some seaworms or fresh mussels and try fishing by the inshore rocky area; a catch of rubberlip seaperch, blackperch, calico surfperch or kelp rockfish will often result. Fish as close to the rocks as possible and look for the natural channels between the rocks which often are filled with food and attract fish. Put your bait into those channels and don't be afraid to let it be washed into crevices between the rocks. Do however keep a tight grip on the line and be prepared to strike as soon as a fish grabs the bait. You will lose some tackle but once you get the hang of the technique, tackle loss should be minimal.

Fishing further out on the pier, using cut anchovy on the bottom, should yield white croaker and several varieties of flatfish including sanddabs, starry flounder, sand sole, and occasionally a halibut. If you really want halibut, go to the Patriot Sportfishing office, buy some live anchovies or sardines, and use these with a sliding leader on the bottom. If live bait isn't available at the shop catch your own. Small white croakers make good bait and will last a long time on the hook (assuming no crabs grab them). Halibut in excess of 30 pounds have been caught at the pier. Reports also say some halibut are taken on Scrounger lures and similar lures. Fishing the mid-pier area, but casting out away from the pier can also yield barred and calico surfperch; for these, try bloodworms or fresh mussels. Fishing straight down by the pilings with worms or mussels should yield a few blackperch, striped seaperch, rainbow seaperch, and even an occasional rubberlip seaperch.

During warm weather months, check the far end of the pier to see if anglers are catching mackerel, bonito, barracuda (late fall) or salmon; some years will see some or all of these. Most mackerel are taken on multi-hook leaders fished under a balloon or Styrofoam float. Bonito tend to hit a bucktail-type feather trailing behind a cast-a-bubble and barracuda fall for jigs or spoons. The majority of salmon that are hooked are attracted by a whole anchovy fished under a bobber. Down around the pilings by the end will yield white croaker, several varieties of perch (mainly walleye and silver surfperch), and an occasional gopher rockfish, cabezon or small lingcod.

Although the pier does not seem to get the same number of shark fishermen as other local piers, some sharks are caught. Most of the sharks that are landed are smoothhounds and leopard sharks along with the closely related bat rays and skates. However, swell sharks (locally called puffer sharks) seem fairly common here even though they are rare at most piers. In June of 1997, a 12-foot thresher shark was landed at the pier (body six feet, tail six feet), so sharks are around, and some are good size.

Less interesting to catch are the starfish which sometimes seem to cover the floor of the adjacent water and are quick to grab hold of a stationary line. More interesting was the catch and release of a two-foot-wide sea turtle in September of the warm-water year of 1997. Another interesting catch was by 15-year-old Rusty McCord on March 30, 1999. After buying and being shown how to use a small-hook bait rig, he preceded to go jigging behind the tackle store on the pier. The result was a 9-pound starry flounder, a huge flounder for any pier and doubly interesting because it was caught on a bait rig. Go figure!

Author's Note

In July of 1999 I visited the area and the bocaccio had invaded the waters around the pier. People were catching the small rockfish, two to five at a time on bait rigs, and almost any bait on the bottom would result in the catch of one of the "bigmouths." It reminded me of an earlier visit when I had caught over a hundred of the small fish in two hours time, basically just to see how many I could catch (and all were released). Looking back, I'm embarrassed by that earlier catch since it shows a total lack of sportsmanship. Today, adult bocaccio

are becoming rarer by the year, and the state passed a new 3-fish limit in 1999. Tacked to several different locations on the pier were notices telling of the three fish limit, notices which had pictures of bocaccio. Nevertheless, a grandmother and her grandchildren next to me were catching and keeping all their bocaccio. I told the lady the limit was three and that she faced a fine if caught with the fish. She acted as though she didn't understand my English. I then told the kids who were jabbering away in English that they could only have three fish each and that they should tell that to their grandmother. Still no luck and the fish continued to be caught. Finally I moved down to the bait shop and mentioned that they might want to call Fish and Game as to what was going on. Turned out that the Fish and Game had already been called and had indeed made several trips to the pier and written tickets. It's unfortunate that people refuse to obey the law but when they do they should be prepared to pay the penalty.

History Note

A 540-foot-long wharf was first built here in 1873 by John Harford. Steamships would arrive several times a week at Port Harford (today's Port San Luis), where they would load and unload cargo and passengers. A narrow-gauge railway ran two trains a day to the pier. The cars (drawn by horses) would go out to the end of the pier where a canopy (the roof you see today) sheltered the railroad's warehouse. Eventually, a steam railroad which had ended at Avila was extended to this wharf. The increased business resulted in a hotel being built on the site (Hotel Marre) and the length of the pier being extended out to 1,500 feet by 1876. Two years later, in 1878, the wharf was destroyed by a tidal wave. The pier was rebuilt but additional repairs were required in 1915. Later, as inland rail routes were developed, the port area deteriorated. When oil was discovered near the Santa Maria River in the 1940s, a new boom started. Today that prosperity continues, but it is due to fishing, both commercial and recreational.

Facts

Hours

Open 24 hours.

Facilities

There is ample free parking near the front of the pier and limited parking on the pier. Restrooms are available adjacent to the pier, as are fish-cleaning stations. Lights are on the pier but no benches. Bait and tackle is available on the pier and a boat hoist is available near the front of the pier. There is also a restaurant on the pier.

Handicapped Facilities

Handicapped parking and restrooms. The pier surface is wood planking with a rail height of 35-42 inches. Not posted for handicapped.

How To Get There

Take Hwy. 101 to the Avila Rd. turnoff and head west; follow the road to the end and the pier.

Management

Port San Luis Harbor District.

