

Pier Fishing in California

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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.