

Pier Fishing in California

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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.

