

# SPORTING CLIPS

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# Travel

By John Ross



**F**lowing north for more than 300 miles, the St. Johns River shadows Florida's Atlantic coast before dumping into the sea at Jacksonville. It is a river of bass, mainly, but snook and shad and crappie and fat bream form a supporting cast. There's nothing secret about the river

*Who else but Bass Pro Shops would own and operate Florida's best bass-fishing lodge, on one of the nation's best big-bass rivers.*

rocket scientist to figure it out. Common sense prevails. Many anglers head for Rodman, some of the best water in these parts. Once a 90,000-acre swamp, the reservoir basin was left uncleared before the dam was closed, and today, countless stumps stud its surface. The tops of these trees have



or its fishing. Marinas and fish camps abound. However, a growing number of economical flights into Orlando and Jacksonville via AirTran and other cut-rate carriers make these waters quite accessible. The rental cars are more reasonably priced in Orlando than in many other markets. Here, a fly-drive-fish vacation won't break your bank.

But where to fish the river? If big bass are your meat, and you're not too proud to fish with bait, consider a junket to Welaka, Florida. Roughly ten miles downstream from the mouth of Lake George, this dot on the map is two hours north of Orlando and an hour south of Jacksonville. The St. Johns is swelled

with the flow from the Ocklawaha River via Rodman Reservoir and constricts a bit as it flows around Turkey Isles. On the west the river is bounded by Ocala National Forest. To the east rises the high bank of the coastal plain, and along its run you'll find a number of fishing lodges. The best of them is the Floridian Sports Club, owned by Bass Pro Shop's John L. Morris.

First, the fishing. The St. Johns is not as easy as it appears. Every foot of this waterway looks bassy. But that's a deceptive perception. Bass concentrate in some places and not in others. The trick is in knowing where, but from what I've seen, you don't have to be a

*The Floridian Sports Club is the standard bearer among bass camps on the St. Johns.*

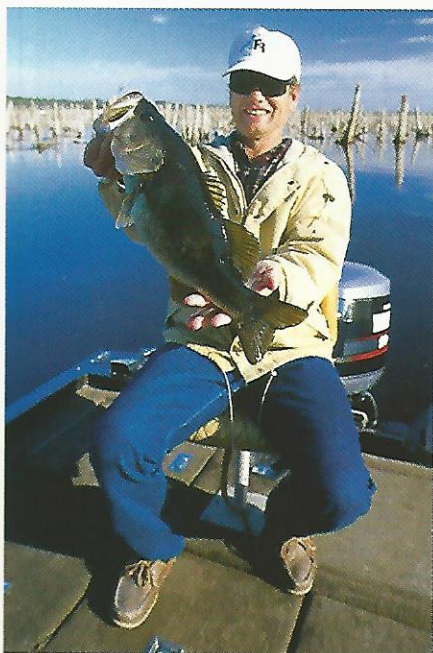
rotted and fallen into the water, and their branches tangle the shallow lake floor like jackstraws tossed by the devil.

When you fish these waters is less important than how you fish them. May and June will probably yield the most fish; fall and winter, the biggest. Anglers who insist on using lures will have the most success fishing beds in March and April. If you're fleeing a Yankee winter, try to time your fishing for the two or three days in advance of a cold front, and avoid the high pressure



immediately behind it. Your odds of hooking a behemoth of ten pounds-plus are greater in winter. From Hanukkah to George Washington's Birthday – which more or less signals the beginning of the spawn – big ol' bass are interested in one thing: They want the most for their money. Drag a seven-inch golden shiner in range of their lateral line, and you're likely to have a customer.

Gramme Chennell, who guides out of Palatka, is a shiner fisherman to the core. For 200 days a year, he guides anglers hot for a trophy largemouth. During his off-hours, he hurls a cast-net for shiners.



Suffice to say, Gramme knows the river and its tributaries as well as anyone living. Behind his easy smile is a man who's driven to put his clients on good bass. "You have to produce," he says, and to do that you need to know where the bass are – and where they aren't. He looks for floating cover – patches of hyacinth, water lettuce and pennywort. Even in the most sluggish of rivers, some current flows and Gramme seeks it out.

The combination of moving water and aquatic vegetation denotes water with slightly higher oxygen content, and that's where baitfish congregate. With baitfish come the bass. The typical largemouth caught in these waters is three to four pounds. Some females will top ten pounds (males rarely run larger than five.) An eleven-pounder gives you braggin' rights. The biggest bass that Gramme knows about was an eighteen-pounder caught in a cast-net by a guy gathering shiners. He let it go.

Uncounted springs feed the reservoir and in their channels flows a steady, clear current of two or three knots. Mats of floating greenery drift in eddies and below hang the largemouths. You can fish this cover with lures, but you'll catch more big bass with shiners,

*Gramme Chennell hefts a big St. Johns largemouth. Below: Great bass fishing is only a short cast from the Floridian's dock.*

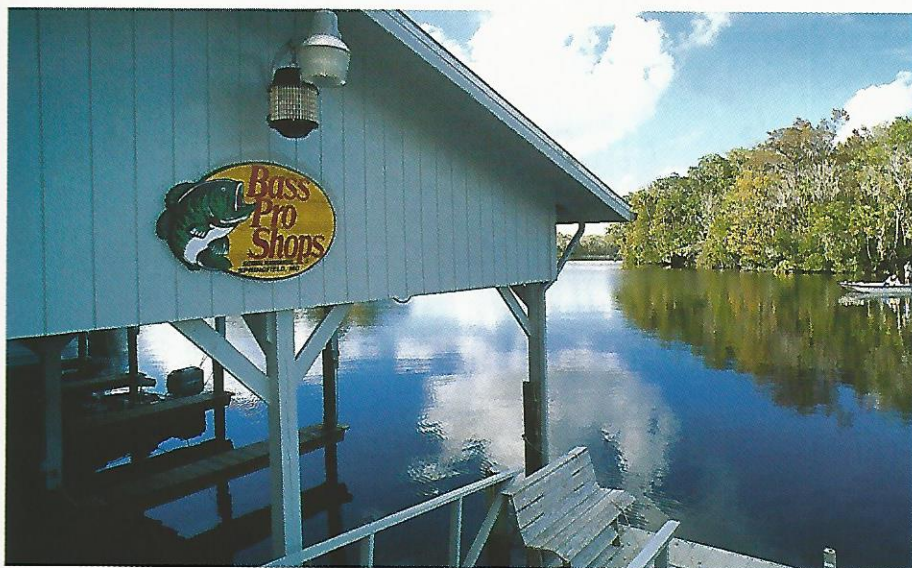
hooked through the lip and nostril and trailed fifty feet behind a slowly trolled boat. Use weedless hooks on rigs with 25-pound test lines; slide a floating bobber on one and leave the other bare so it runs a little deeper.

By watching the float, you can tell whether a bass or pickerel (yep!) is chasing the bait. Reels are set to free-spool, so when a fish strikes, it can swim off with the bait. If the run is choppy and you can feel bumps in it, more than likely it's a pickerel. What you're feeling is him chewing on the shiner. But if the run is steady and smooth, you've probably found a bass. After fifteen seconds or so, give the reel a crank and begin to draw in the bellied line. When you think it's tight, rear back and hit the fish with everything you've got, then reel like hell.

Most anglers who fish Rodman and this section of the river stay in lodges. Many of these river-front motels are children of the 1950s and are showing some age. But not the Floridian Sports Club. Set in arboretum-like grounds beneath venerable liveoaks and sweetgums, draped to be sure with Spanish moss, the club's oyster white stuccoed cottages rim a modestly high bluff overlooking Welaka Spring, where snook and manatee play in winter.

Standard rooms in the Floridian include a pair of queen-sized beds and baths with Jacuzzis. Wet bars, fridges, coffee-makers and stove-tops are typical fare as, of course, is air-conditioning that's quiet and efficient. If there's more than two in your party, consider either the two- or three-bedroom cottages. And if romance is on your card, ask about the special suite with the sauna and private screened porch.

Guest rooms are separated from the main lodge by a gently curving, flower-lined walk. Climb the steps to the lodge's shady front porch. Open the French doors. Paneled walls carry mounts of gargantuan bass taken with tackle of years gone by. Beneath a row of windows runs a long wooden table, where dinners and breakfasts are served family style (unless you opt to dine in your room). If it's chilly, this is the place for the day's postmortems. Otherwise, take your





libation out on the porch, sink yourself in one of the wicker rockers beneath a lazy ceiling fan and watch the rises in the lagoon down the hill.

If you arrive with a bassboat, you can launch it nearby and moor it in one of the Floridian's covered slips. There's a.c. to charge your battery, plenty of freshwater to sluice down your gear, and a couple of handy canoes if you can't ignore the snook splashing in the dusk. Guides are available, of course.


Winter rates for weekdays run from \$104 for a standard room to \$289 for the three-bedroom cottage; weekends the rates are \$150 and \$359, respectively. From mid-June through September, rates drop considerably. Guide fees are additional. For more information, contact The Floridian Sports Club, PO Box 730, Welaka, FL 32193; 904-467-2181.

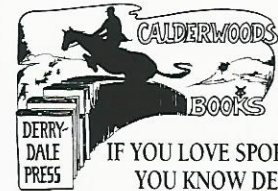
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In the last half of 1999, the Department of Transportation required all U.S. passenger airlines

to file customer service plans. The plans were supposed to make flying the commercial skies more friendly. Don't bet your farm.

Despite the ballyhoo, there's not much here that guarantees significantly better service for passengers, except that the airline's liability for checked baggage lost or damaged on domestic flights has increased from \$1,250 to \$2,500 per piece. On international flights, \$634.90 is the limit per bag. Still uncovered are fragile and expensive items like cameras, though firearms and fishing rods are generally not excluded.

Before you travel, ask your airline for a copy of its new customer service plan and a list of items NOT covered by its baggage liability coverage. Get it in writing on their letterhead. That way, should a dispute arise between you and an airline agent, you'll have the company's info at your fingertips. Why is this important? Often ticket and other agents ad lib the rules, and unless you can prove otherwise, what the agents say goes. 



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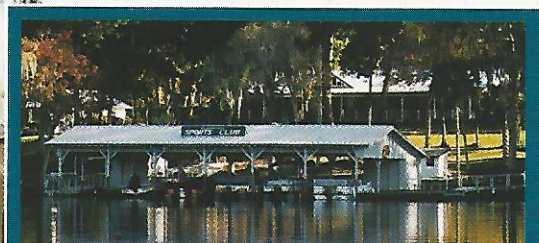
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