

TRY IT NOW

# FAMILY *fishing day*

Susie Moss goes fishing off the *Dorset coast* and learns how to gut her catch, then enjoys a tasty fish barbecue to end off the day





Fishing in its many forms has always been one of Britain's most popular pastimes. It used to appeal to children too, but in the last few years the numbers of youngsters going out to fish has declined by 50 per cent. It could be down to the hook of instant success and easy gratification of screen-based games, mobile phones and tablets, as opposed to the more esoteric lures of fishing, in which only patience and learnt skill results in success. It's also tricky for a family when one young member wants to fish and others find it boring. However, what's not to like with a day boat fishing trip?

There is something for all with a day out on the sea; hopefully sun on faces, breeze in your hair and the odd moment of excitement as something is pulled up from the deep. With an aim to please every member of the family, we planned a day trip to Lyme Regis in Dorset. A few hours on a boat, deep-sea fishing, should be enough to keep my nine-year-old son, Marlon, enthralled, while still short and fun enough to keep my six-year-old daughter, Maisie, onboard. Combine this with the idea that we could then do a course on how to prepare the catch, and we had all the ingredients for a great family day out.

There are so many wonderful cookery schools around Britain now offering fish skill classes, but very few offer to share this knowledge with kids. In an age of fussy eaters and processed foods formed into shapes totally unrecognisable from their origins, it seems to be pretty important to show our children where food comes from and how we can cook it. If my son wants to be a keen fisherman, and we as a family all love eating fish, then we should know how to cope with a fresh whole fish, eyes and all, rather than just some nicely formed frozen fish fingers.



HAVING A GO  
Susie Moss took a family fishing trip with her children Maisie and Marlon off the Lyme Regis coast (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE)

### 8.30AM ALL ABOARD

To Maisie's delight, a pirate flag beckoned us to board our boat, *Sunbeam*. We were a motley, multi-generational crew of kids, grandparents, cousins and parents, gathered on a sunny day on the Cobb, Lyme Regis's curved 19th-century harbour. The sea was calm, sparkling and benign. Hard to imagine how ravished the place had been by storms just months before. Huge waves and force 12 winds had whipped at the Cobb, removing sections of wall and one of the heavy cannons. But we were blessed with lovely weather, a fine boat and a good skipper – Matt Stiles, working for local hero Harry May.

*Sunbeam* has spent 53 years taking people out on mackerel and deep-sea fishing trips from Lyme Regis harbour. Built in 1961 in Exmouth, she is carvel-built, mahogany on oak and 7.3 metres long. It's impossible to estimate just how many passengers have enjoyed fishing off this boat, but it must run into thousands.

### 9AM DRIFTING OVER WRECKS

It took us 15 minutes to get out to the first fishing spot where Matt instructed us how to bait and use the rods. All of us were capable of the gentle bobbing rod movement required in this relaxing pastime. We drifted over the wreck of SS



### ASK the PRO



**Simon Bennet**  
of The Old  
Watch House  
Fish Shop  
gives tips on

#### choosing and preparing fish.

'You can tell a fish is fresh by the brightness of the eyes and the gills should be a bright red colour. Try some fish you've never tried before! For example, Gurnard, a very tasty fish, is so popular in France but under used in England.

'Buy sustainably – fish caught on small day boats use rod and line techniques which is more sustainable than the beam trawled fish you find in supermarkets.

'Scissors are as useful as a sharp knife with fish; with any fish, scissor up the gut cavity and hook out the gills behind the neck of the fish to remove guts with ease.

'The best way to cook any fish is to wrap it in tin foil with lemon and butter and bake it. This will enhance the flavour of a fresh fish, rather than detract from it with too much seasoning.





*Baygitano*, a merchant collier ship torpedoed in 1918 by a German U-boat. It lies 1.5 miles out of the harbour, 20 metres down, and now supports an abundance of sealife, including whiting, wrasse, pollack, pouting and conger eels. There's a Chinese proverb that says, 'Days spent fishing don't count against your lifespan' and I could see why. Nothing was biting, but it was easy and relaxing, and wonderful to enjoy the sea smells and sounds while we kicked back with the sun on our faces.

### 9.30AM MOVING ON

Matt decided to try our luck at the next wreck, *The Heroine*, so we chugged on, enjoying views of the famous Jurassic Coast. This is the wreck of a wooden sailing barque sunk in 1852 on an attempted voyage from Torbay to Australia. Lyme Regis lost four men trying to save the stricken passengers, and it was due to this incident that the lifeboat service started in Lyme. Still no bites, so time for coffee and a chat. While admiring the beautiful, well-worn tiller carved with dolphins, I learnt a bit more about our boat. *Sunbeam* was built for Victor Homyer, an old Lyme Regis skipper and Harry's former boss. Later, she was owned by Ian Gillan of the rock group Deep Purple before being sold on to Harry, and it was Ian who had given it its unique tiller.

### 10AM FISH AHOY!

Just before the 'I'm bored' sirens started, fish began to bite. We hooked an interesting mix of pouting, mackerel and herring between us, and a baby pollack that we had to put back. Then the kids got really excited, 'I've caught a shark!' cried Marlon as he hauled up, with a bit of help, a remarkable creature, thrashing from side to side. Maisie caught one next, and hot on her heels was Granddad. They were, in fact, small spotted catsharks,



commonly known as rock salmon. With creepy, black marble eyes, a pointed face and spotted skin, they were an exciting catch. Matt showed us how its skin was smooth to stroke one way but peculiarly rough the other. They're pretty common in waters around Britain and generally discarded by commercial fishermen, despite having tasty, firm flesh, but we were all well pleased with such a formidable catch – not to mention the kudos back at school of saying, 'I caught a shark!'

### 11.30AM BACK ON LAND

Returning to the harbour satisfied, we got to steer the boat and feed some seagulls. Later in the season they become more adept at diving and eat from the hand. Matt says on lucky days pods of dolphins have joined them or they've stopped to watch gannets dive. We felt lucky to have experienced such a beautiful morning out at sea and now had a good catch to bring with us to our next stop.

### 12PM HANDS-ON FISH SKILLS COURSE

In 1934 Victor Homyer turned the harbourside boating shed and former coastguard hut into The







Old Watch House Fresh Fish Shop. Simon Bennett meets us there with a big smile and guides us to the back courtyard. He's been working with fish since his teens and has run the shop since 2002. As well as selling a huge range of fresh local and sustainable seafood, he now runs hour-long intensive fish skill classes. As a keen cook and pescetarian, this was the part of the day I was looking forward to most, but it was how it captivated six-year-old Maisie's attention that surprised me.

We began with a lesson in dressing crabs. Simon carefully explained each stage and the kids got stuck in and hands-on, pulling the best parts of the flesh out, bashing claws with hammers and relishing discarding the toxic 'dead man's fingers'. They scrubbed the shell and finished with a presentable whole dressed crab. It took us at least 25 minutes to complete, where it takes a professional just five. I guess it'll take us a lot more practice to get to that speed!

Next Kian and I were shown how to skin a Dover sole and how to gut a sea bass. We all start to wince a bit at this gory stage, but nine-year-old Marlon remains

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM Skipper Matt Stiles feeds a fish to some gulls; Matt unhooks our first catch; Marlon with his spotted catshark OPPOSITE, ABOVE Learning about the array of seafood on the counter. Simon Bennett makes an excellent and fun teacher ABOVE A lesson in dressing crabs; Maisie and Marlon get stuck in ABOVE RIGHT Maisie, Marlon and Simon with photographer Kian BELOW RIGHT Time for our fish supper. Marlon barbecues our catch



unfazed and focused. Carefully he learns how to use Simon's super-sharp scissors to cut 'from the poohole to the head'. Simon is great with the kids throughout; patient and clear, he makes an excellent and fun teacher. Lastly, we fillet a John Dory, which I find incredibly fiddly and can see I've got to practise lots before I can present a decent fillet at home.

We cover a lot in an intense hour and learn loads, but I'd happily return for more. On our way out, Simon guides us through the wonderful array of seafood on the counter and tempts us to return to broaden our skills.

Back home, we barbecue our catch, satisfyingly caught, and gutted and skinned by our own hands. It's fragrant, smoky and delicious. We've made a start on learning more about the food on our plate. I can only hope the fish finger phase won't last, but that evening we were all happy with our treasures from the sea and enjoyed our fish with healthy appetites from a great day out.

## NEED to KNOW



### HOW TO GET STARTED

Day boat fishing trips are very popular and can be found all over our coast. We used Harry May in Lyme Regis (07974 753287, [mackerelfishinglymeregis.com](http://mackerelfishinglymeregis.com)).

Mackerel fishing trips last one hour and cost £9 per person. Deep-sea fishing lasts three hours and costs £25 per person. All rod and bait included and as much tuition as needed. Dress warmly and wear waterproofs in case of wet weather, and for longer trips bring snacks and drinks to share.

Harry or Matt will even gut or fillet your fish so it's ready to eat. Alternatively, learn to do it yourself – we had an hour of intensive training with Simon Bennet of The Old Watch House Fish Shop ([theoldwatchhouse.com](http://theoldwatchhouse.com)), £12.50 per person, kids go free when accompanied by an adult. No equipment or experience required.