

There's a tournament at the northern tip of the Bahama chain, where it's prime blue marlin season. So, it's little wonder . . .

Fishing days away at Walker's Cay lures anglers to picturesque island

It is fitting that the square, four-paneled logo on official correspondence from the tiny island of Walker's Cay contains a palm tree, a sportfishing boat, waves of ocean and a billfish.

The pictures just about sum up what the tropical refuge at the northern tip of the Bahama chain has to offer. You can either sit under a palm tree or you can hop on a fishing boat and troll for marlin on the shimmering blue water surrounding the 100-acre bump in the ocean.

Most visitors opt for the latter. This time of year the marlin fishing rivals any place in the world, and bottom fishing for grouper and snapper is excellent, too.

John Harmeling of Fort Lauderdale and his two companions found that out during a trip to Walker's earlier this month. The three anglers had the incredible fortune of each catching and releasing a sizeable blue marlin in one day. The feat even amazed Jim Muhs, the veteran captain of the *Sea Lion*, the boat they chartered for the day.

"The captain said he'd hooked two before in one day, but when we got the third he said it was just unbelievable. That one day we'll remember the rest of our lives," Harmeling said.

Ronnie Truitt, another Fort Lauderdale resident, got the first marlin of the day, a 350-pounder in the morning. The catch ended a long quest for Truitt.

"Truitt's got something like a marlin disease. He'll watch the ballyhoo (rigged bait) all day if that's what it takes. He's been after marlin for eight years. He'd caught sailfish but never a marlin. He was the reason we were out there," Harmeling said.

The other two anglers had a chance to share Truitt's passion before the day ended. Harmeling reeled in a 225-pounder at noon and Bubba



Craig Davis

OUTDOORS EDITOR

Bohenstiel, of Winston-Salem, N.C., snagged the biggest of the day — estimated at 375 to 400 pounds — on the way back in.

"I've never been into trolling. I'd just as soon go to Chokoloskee and catch a few trout and redfish," Harmeling said. "But it was a real thrill when those things started greyhounding. Truitt's fish blew out about 250 yards of line. These fish just get up on their tail and explode across the surface. It's an unbelievable sight."

The same lure has a fleet of some of the best and wealthiest anglers and crews converging on Walker's Cay this weekend for the 11th annual Walker's Cay Billfish Tournament, a five-day event beginning tomorrow. It is the first event of the Bahamas Championship series of four tournaments.

To hear the pros talk, Walker's Cay is a fisherman's haven.

"It's a nice little pretty out-of-the-way kind of place that's very fishing oriented. They really cater to fishermen. I don't think there's any population there other than the hotel, itself," said Rick Brady, a Fort Lauderdale charter captain whose father used to manage the hotel at Walker's.

"It's just for people who love to snorkel and fish. That's it. There's no gambling, no big hotel — that's what I love about it," said Harmeling.

"The guys on the dock sit and talk fishing all

night. A lot of the skippers come in after being out all day and go back out yellowtail fishing at night. These guys are fishing fanatics."

Though open to tourists, Walker's Cay is privately owned by Robert Abplamalp, who also owns the Precision Valve Co., in New York. It sits about 85 miles east of West Palm Beach and sticks up higher out of the water than most of the other Bahama islands.

When Richard Nixon was president, he frequently retreated to nearby Grand Cay. The accompanying media entourage stayed at Walker's. For journalists not interested in fishing it may have been a boring assignment, but at least the surroundings were attractive.

"It's got to be one of the most beautiful islands there is. And it's a first-class place," said Tom Zsak, another Fort Lauderdale captain, who will work as a mate in the tournament at Walker's this week. "It's also noted for bottom fishing; it's one of the best places for grouper. The bottom tapers off gradually around Walker's. It's also beautiful for diving."

There are two hotel units there, with a total of 62 rooms and four villas. Prices range from \$75 to \$97 for a double. Two large sportfishing boats are available for charter, as well as a fleet of smaller boats for rent, some with guides. Walker's air service flies twice a day out of Fort Lauderdale for \$115 round trip.

The Walker's tournament kicks off the Bahamas Championship series because this is prime blue marlin season there. Later events will be at Cat Cay, Bimini and Chub Cay.

"Chub Cay has got to be the best place for all-around fishing because of the Tongue (of the Ocean) there. But this place (Walker's) produces a lot of fish," said Capt. Zsak.

It would be hard to convince Harmeling and Co. there is any place better.