



Don't Be Misguided



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I've spent most of my life fishing and most of the entries in my list of contacts are guides, licensed Captains, angling media and tackle manufacturers. We've become friends because we've fished together for dozens of years, helped build each other's careers and shared our private lives. On occasion I've even been mistaken for a guide.

A Canadian lodge asked me if I'd guide muskies for them, a saltwater outfitter offered me a job guiding along the Northeast coast of the U.S. but I had to decline. My reason was, guiding would get in the way of my own fishing. There was a time I regularly booked five different guides in a year for stripers and Florida flats species and spent the rest of the time fishing American rivers. I've owned four fishing boats, the current one is a Maverick flats skiff I've owned for fifteen years.

I've spent years writing for magazines and working with guides and spent four years filming **Hunt for Big Fish**, with Larry Dahlberg, where we also worked closely with guides. This was one of the highest rated fishing shows in the U.S. in the 1990s. Larry himself guided on a Wisconsin river for twenty three years. I've always respected the word and advice of a good guide. I've learned what an angler should expect from a guide and how an angler should behave to have a productive, enjoyable trip and earn their guide's respect.

The first thing to understand is who the trip is for; the guide or the customer?

The answer should be, for the customer, but he should not be disrespectful to, or inconsiderate of the guide. I've humorously classified guides into three types. The first guide is very competitive with fellow guides and consider their anglers to be teammates who try to outscore other guides with their catch. This type does everything they can to almost force their angler to succeed, except cast for them. This type is probably excitable and sometimes yells when you're trying to compose yourself. If this behavior is not enjoyable to you, say goodbye Captain Bligh!

The second type is a passive guide who sometimes knows where the fish are when no one else does. He'll take you to the fish in almost any weather condition but won't actively teach you how to succeed. His flies and equipment might be inappropriate, or in bad condition, if he offers any. This guide likes fish more than humans, and might be a drinker. If you want to succeed with this one, you'll have to bring your own stuff and know how to use it. Sometimes, this guide is an asset.

The third type of guide is trying to help you learn through helpful insight, demonstration and positive reinforcement and isn't mad if you don't catch fish. They will however, show elation when you make a good presentation, catch, or even hook, a fish. They're joyed when you learn something on your own or they've taught you. They often enjoy your company and enjoy the wonders of nature. If this third type shows you lots of fish and ties good flies, I'd continue fishing with him.

Paul Arden and I were talking about the expectations a fly angler should have when engaging a guide. He even mentioned this information should become part of the SL definitions. I'd like to express some thoughts I've had to get the conversation rolling. Firstly, a guide or Captain should have extensive local experience and should specialize in a home area to be considered expert; whether year round, or seasonal. For example, I have a friend who guided in the Florida Keys from fall through spring and trout in summer in North America. They should be fishing the area prior to your trip so they have up-to-the-minute information on conditions and what should work when you arrive.

A guide should hold required or optional licenses for safety and or professional certifications. Licenses often include Red Cross and First Aid training, including CPR. Others require knowledge of boat handling, safety and navigation. Guide organizations are interested in sportsmanship, stream

etiquette and conservation practices. Having casting certifications from organizations like the IFFF is helpful in teaching customers. As a lifetime student of fly fishing, I have my CI, MCI and am pursuing my THCI certification. Operators should have insurance wherever required, or voluntarily when possible.

Anglers should be provided a price quote in advance specifying where the fishing will be conducted and the start and finish time of the trip. In addition, the expected running time to fishing grounds on big water, like an ocean. Don't book a trip on a slow boat that takes all day to get to the spot, leaving little time to fish.

The guide should ask about customers' health and fitness when a trip is physically taxing and also previous experience and tackle or presentation preferences. If the guide thinks a trip is beyond an angler's capabilities, he should inform him and recommend instruction or other trips for experience. The disposition of any potential catch should be established before a trip is booked and in compliance with regulations, private management etc. Most fly fishing is catch and release. A guide should not even make a cast toward the water during a trip unless a client consents to a demonstration or offers the rod to try out.

Customers should be advised in advance if the trip goes in all weather, or about any un-fishable conditions and any rebooking policy. Some outfitters and guides require deposits, so this policy needs to be communicated and understood. If the trip might be in rough seas, the guide should disclose this to all passengers and anglers. The provision of food, water, equipment, flies, leaders and other personal gear should be understood by both parties in advance.

Guides may discourage but shouldn't prohibit customers from using their own outfits, flies and leaders unless they pose a hazard to humans or fish. I have great equipment that I'm well practiced with but guides sometimes order me to use their rods because of a brand conflict with their sponsorship or manufacturer's guide program. That's not my problem, nor should it be yours. If their outfits are good but they've got special rigging or more appropriate lines, then it's best to use what they offer. I almost always let guides provide their own flies and leaders, since that is part of their local expertise.

Once you agree to a booking, ask for an email confirmation of dates and all details. If you book with a specific guide and he is substituted when you arrive, there better be a good reason. Email is the most practical way to communicate and good for accountability should there be misunderstanding or a breach of agreement. I always provide my cell phone number a couple days before a trip and ask for the guide's in case something goes wrong. I usually call guides at 8:00 pm to confirm morning meeting places and weather conditions. Good business practices are important, but safety is imperative.

Footwear traction, waders and cold water comfort should be discussed in advance for wading. Guides should not let you handle large or dangerous fish, or swim in the water with them, unless they approve your ability to do so. And maybe not then! Sharks keying-in on tiring fish can be a hazard in such instances. For fish to be released, guides should help minimize the time fish are held out of the water.

If you listen to your guide and achieve some success and rapport, you might be surprised by some extra information, amenities or opportunities they offer. I've been given the names of obscure restaurants, secret fishing spots, special flies and recently, bottles of homemade liquor. One trip my wife and I took was with guide Randy Brown of Ennis, Mt. We were floating the Madison in August and had a sudden cold snap arrive with snow covering the high peaks. My wife started shivering so bad, Randy beached us and built a fire so she could warm-up. I'll never forget that thoughtful gesture.

Guides appreciate your fishing effort, good preparation before the trip and your gratitude for efforts they make above the norm. If a guide is professional, show your appreciation and give them a tip in keeping with local practices. You'd be surprised how many days income are lost to bad weather, no-shows and boat or vehicle failure. This is probably another reason I leave this to the pros.