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Punta Gorda rebuilds itself as fishing town

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During a fishing trip with fellow writer Craig Holt of Snow Camp, I caught my first snook and my first redfish while fishing for the first time at Punta Gorda, Fla., a small city nestled within Charlotte Harbor about 25 miles north of Fort Myers. The trip was taken in conjunction with the Southeast Outdoor Press Association's annual conference.

The snook and redfish, each weighing about 4 pounds, were small for their species, but freshwater fish of equal size are "softies" compared to the power surges of these two saltwater battlers.

Captain Jason Dill of Charlotte Harbor Outfitters (www.charlotteharboroutfitters.com) guided our outing. Dill, raised at Port Charlotte, has spent most of his life fishing Charlotte Harbor for snook, redfish, tarpon and trout.

A former major league prospect for the Texas Rangers, Dill suffered a serious shoulder injury that ended his dream of playing professional baseball. Instead, he turned to fishing for part of his livelihood.

The best fishing, as every angler knows, begins miles from the launch site. Our strategy was no different. After an early morning rendezvous at a local marina, Dill took us to gather bait, then proceeded to quiet waters a respectable distance from our point of departure.

After several places yielded only small fish, Dill retraced our watery path until we were within minutes of the marina, where we caught most of our fish from a rocky outcrop overshadowed by a pier.

Some SEOPA members booked trips for giant tarpon, one of the area's main fishing attractions, and several of them tangled with tarpon weighing more than 80 pounds.

The fishing trips at Punta Gorda were quite remarkable in that we were fortunate to be able to fish there at all.

Five years ago, Punta Gorda had been reduced to rubble following the onslaught of Hurricane Charley, a Category 4 hurricane packing 145 mph winds that ravaged the waterfront community of 16,000 residents.

More than \$3.2 billion in damage was done. Six schools, six fire stations, 399 businesses and 11,000 homes were destroyed.

Dill said the brutal storm improved the fishing by stirring up the forage, but fishermen were nowhere to be seen at Punta Gorda following the hurricane, not a bright scenario for a city heavily dependent upon fishing tourists for its economic survival. Most of the oceanfront businesses and downtown Punta Gorda had to be rebuilt because of the devastation.

But at our arrival, the rebirth of the city was evident everywhere.

Holt and I and other media guests stayed at the refurbished Best Western Waterfront Hotel, which had been partially ripped apart by Hurricane Charley. We enjoyed a welcoming reception and dinner at the Laishley Crab House, the city's newest restaurant. It was constructed of magnificent rough cut lumber transported from Tennessee to give the building the appearance of a crab shack. Some 20-foot trees served as supports for its Crab House Bar. Within this wooden marvel, hand-carved replicas of a redfish, shark and alligator gar enhanced the surroundings while fishing nets and buoys decorated the walls. A 14-foot blue crab hanging in an octagonal blue tower highlighted the structure.

The adjoining Lasihley Marina and launch site had been the departure point for our fishing trip.

During the week, our group shopped and dined at the Fishermen's Village Waterfront Mall, Resort & Marina, featuring unique shops, eateries, harbor cruises and villa vacation rentals, many of which represented investments by local residents contributing to the revival of the city.

Conference seminars took place at the recently built 43,000 square foot Charlotte Harbor Event & Convention Center.

Several new luxury hotels, including the 106-room Four Points Hotel and the swank, six-story, 63-room Wyvern Hotel, as well as 70 new buildings, a \$14.5 million Herald Court Centre parking garage, and The Ice House Pub, an authentic English-style pub, were other indications of the "extreme makeover" of Punta Gorda, a city that refused to die despite the beating it had endured.

While the materials for Punta Gorda's reconstruction came from various sources, its "red dirt" came from Cunningham Brick in Lexington.

Like many Florida cities, Punta Gorda features minor league baseball. Steve Treadway of Cooper's Marine, a former truck driver, said he once delivered the unfired brick that composes the pitching mounds and the red dust that marks the base paths at Punta Gorda and other Florida ballparks.

From its fishing waters to its baseball parks to its grand structures, Punta Gorda has revitalized itself as one of Florida's alluring piscatorial playgrounds.

Tony Garitta is the fishing columnist for The Dispatch.

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