



ALL THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT LOBSTERING

A Complete Guide To Key West Spiny Lobster Season

REEL ESCAPES FISHING CHARTERS • KEY WEST, FLORIDA

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CHAPTER ONE

How Lobstering Differs From Inshore Fishing

On a typical inshore fishing charter, the rhythm is patience: you cast a line, present bait or a lure, and wait for a fish to find you. Lobstering flips that relationship entirely. Instead of waiting for the water to bring something to you, you go out and find it yourself. There's no rod, no reel, and no bait — the primary tools become your eyes, a mask, and a mesh catch bag.

Where inshore fishing rewards reading tides, structure, and bait presentation, lobstering rewards a sharp eye and a methodical search pattern. You're swimming the reef checking ledges and crevices for the telltale sign of a lobster hiding in place — a pair of long antennae poking out from a hole. Once spotted, the work becomes physical: coaxing the lobster out with a tickle stick and guiding it into a net before it can dart for deeper cover.

A Different Kind of License

The other major difference is regulatory. A standard Florida saltwater fishing license does not cover lobster. Harvesting spiny lobster requires that license plus a separate spiny lobster permit — details on exactly what's required are covered fully in Chapter 5.

And because most of the harvesting happens at or below the surface rather than from the rail of a boat, comfort in the water matters here in a way it simply doesn't for rod-and-reel fishing. Whether that means confident free-diving or using hookah gear (covered in Chapter 7), being at ease below the surface is central to the experience — lobstering is as much a water activity as it is a fishing one.

CHAPTER TWO

Where Lobsters Go & What Time Of Year

Florida spiny lobster live a double life. By day, they are homebodies — tucked into reef ledges, rocky outcroppings, coral heads, and grass-bed structure, backed into a hole with only their long antennae left exposed to the open water. Once the sun goes down, they become travelers, emerging to forage across open sand and grass flats. That single behavioral fact shapes almost everything about how and when lobstering happens.

Key West and the surrounding Keys reef system is widely regarded as some of the best lobster ground in the state. Patch reefs sitting in 10 to 25 feet of water produce consistently for both free divers and hookah divers, and the diversity of structure — ledges, wrecks, rubble, and grass — means there's always somewhere new to search.

The Two Seasons

- **Two-day sport (“mini”) season** — the last consecutive Wednesday and Thursday of July. In 2026, that's July 29–30, running from 12:01 a.m. Wednesday to 11:59 p.m. Thursday.
- **Regular season** — August 6, 2026 through March 31, 2027. Nearly eight months of open water, with far lighter boat traffic than the mini-season rush.

Best Time Of Day

Practically speaking, early starts beat both the crowds and the afternoon chop, and underwater visibility tends to be best before onshore winds pick up later in the day. During the long regular season, a low-light dawn or dusk dive — or a true night dive with a bright light — will often out-produce the middle of a bright afternoon, simply because that's when lobster are out moving across open ground rather than tucked deep in a hole.

CHAPTER THREE

Key West Spiny Lobster vs. Maine Lobster

Ask most people to picture a lobster and they'll describe the classic clawed, cold-water crustacean of New England — the American lobster. The Florida spiny lobster found off Key West is a genuinely different animal, and the differences run deeper than looks. They shape how each is hunted, how each behaves, and how each ends up on a plate.

	Florida Spiny Lobster	Maine (American) Lobster
Claws	None — all the meat is in the tail	Large front claws plus tail meat
Defense	Long, spiny antennae and a spined shell	Claws
Habitat	Warm reef, ledges, and grass beds	Cold rocky bottom, deeper offshore water
How it's caught	Hand-caught by free divers / hookah divers	Baited traps hauled from a boat
Season	Two-day mini-season, then Aug 6 – Mar 31	Largely year-round, varies by state
Behavior	Hides by day, forages at night	Bottom-dwelling, drawn to bait

The upshot at the table: spiny lobster tail meat is firmer and slightly sweeter than Maine lobster, and since there are no claws to crack, every bit of the eating experience is concentrated in the tail. It's a different catch and a different meal — not a lesser one, just its own thing entirely.

CHAPTER FOUR

What To Expect On A Lobster Charter

A lobstering trip off Key West starts the same way most charters do — meeting the boat, running out to the reef, and a briefing before anyone gets in the water. From there, it diverges quickly. Instead of rigging rods, the briefing covers gear: how the hookah air line works, how to use the tickle stick, and how to work the dip net as a team.



The Boat

Captain Phil uses a 23' 8" custom-built Dorado Hybrid Bay boat with a sun shade and tower

Safety Features

- Floatation devices
- GPS emergency transmitter
- Enclosed transom
- Boat is not fiberglass, but a stronger, lighter composite, and takes waves well

The Equipment

Unforgettable Fishing Charters: Gear, Safety, and Flexibility

Embark on an exceptional fishing adventure with our top-tier charters, equipped with premium Bull Bay custom rods and high-quality reels. Our boat is designed for anglers, featuring rod holders strategically placed for convenience and ample storage to keep your gear organized.

Multiple large insulated fish boxes ensure your catch stays fresh, while a boat seat doubles as a Yeti cooler with a custom cushion for comfort and utility.



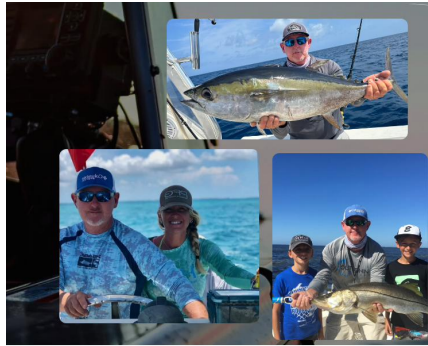
Gearing up before a Key West lobster dive.

Free-diving and snorkeling gear cover the basics, and hookah — a “supersnorkel” setup — is available for divers who want to go deeper and stay down longer. A gas-powered air compressor on the boat feeds a tethered air line down to roughly 70 feet, letting a diver search methodically without surfacing every breath. One compressor unit can typically serve up to three divers at a time.

You'll wear a swimsuit and dive shirt, get fitted with gloves — spiny lobster earn their name — and be shown the two-person technique before entering the water: one diver eases the lobster backward out of its hole with the tickle stick, while a second diver waits with the net positioned behind it, ready to fold it over the moment the lobster darts back.

Every Trip Is Different

That's part of the appeal. Some days it's a quick limit before the trip is even half over. Other days test patience, weather, or nerve. Real accounts from the water — the smooth days and the occasionally hairy ones — are collected in the Key West Lobstering Stories series on the Reel Escapes website, including firsthand trips like *The Atlantic Shelf Jackpot*, *The Lobster Hole*, and *The Missing Lobster Diver*.



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Captain Phil Pegley — 25+ years on the water out of Key West and Tampa Bay.

CHAPTER FIVE

Laws Governing Lobster Catching

Florida takes spiny lobster regulations seriously, and enforcement is heaviest right in the Keys during the two-day mini-season. The framework below reflects current Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) rules — always confirm the latest details at myfwc.com before heading out, since regulations can shift from year to year.

- **License & permit** — anyone 16 or older needs a valid Florida recreational saltwater fishing license *and* a spiny lobster permit, an additional stamp typically around \$5 on top of the license fee.
- **Bag limit** — 6 lobsters per person, per day in Monroe County (the Keys) and Biscayne National Park; 12 per person elsewhere in Florida.
- **Minimum size** — carapace must measure larger than 3 inches, measured in the water, before it goes in the catch bag. A measuring gauge must be carried at all times while diving.
- **Whole condition** — lobster must be landed whole. Separating the tail from the body while on the water is prohibited.
- **Egg-bearing females** — harvest or possession of any egg-bearing lobster is prohibited, no exceptions. Release immediately if eggs are visible under the tail.
- **Legal gear only** — hands, tickle stick, net, and snare. Any device that could puncture, penetrate, or crush the shell, including spears and hooks, is prohibited.
- **Dive flag** — a properly displayed divers-down flag is required whenever anyone is in the water; boaters must stay at least 300 feet clear.
- **Closed areas** — harvest is prohibited at all times in Everglades National Park, Dry Tortugas National Park, no-take zones in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, and the Biscayne Bay/Card Sound Lobster Sanctuary. John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park is closed specifically during the two-day mini-season.

CHAPTER SIX

What Not To Do

Most lobstering mistakes aren't malicious — they're the result of not knowing the rules, or assuming a habit from somewhere else carries over. The list below covers the most common ways divers run into trouble.

- **Don't pool your catch.** Bag limits apply per licensed person actively harvesting, not per boat. “Extra for a friend” is a citation waiting to happen.
- **Don't guess on size.** Measure every lobster in the water. Bringing one up to check it on deck, then releasing it if it's short, still counts as harvesting.
- **Don't keep an egg-bearing female,** even a large one. Check under the tail before it goes in the bag.
- **Don't use a spear, hook, or gig** on lobster, even if it's the same rig used for lionfish. Puncturing the shell is illegal regardless of intent.
- **Don't touch, stand on, or grab coral** for leverage while working a ledge. The reef is what's holding the lobster in the first place — damage it, and there's less habitat for seasons to come.
- **Don't dive at night in Monroe County during the two-day mini-season.** Night diving is allowed during the regular season, but specifically prohibited during those two days.
- **Don't tamper with commercial traps,** even out of curiosity. Molesting a trap is treated as a serious offense regardless of whether anything was taken.
- **Don't skip the dive flag,** and don't assume nearby boaters will see divers without one properly displayed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lobster Equipment

The gear list for lobstering is short, purpose-built, and largely provided aboard. Here's what does the work and why.

Hookah / Supersnorkel

A gas-powered air compressor sits on the boat, feeding a tethered air line down to the diver. This allows dives to roughly 70 feet without the bulk of a scuba backpack, and lets a diver stay down searching methodically instead of surfacing for air every minute. One compressor unit can typically serve up to three divers at once.

Tickle Stick & Snare

A slim aluminum rod used to coax a lobster backward out of its hiding place. Most versions include a built-in manual snare on the opposite end, giving a second method of catching without needing to switch tools mid-dive.

Dip Net

Positioned behind the lobster as it's tapped out of its hole. Spiny lobster instinctively dart backward when startled — positioning the net correctly turns that reflex into the catch.

Dive Gloves

Spiny lobster are covered in sharp spines, and their antennae can cut skin easily. Heavy-duty gloves protect hands during the catch and while checking the underside of the tail for eggs.

Lobster Gauge

Required by law, on your person, at all times while diving. Every lobster gets measured in the water before it's ever placed in the catch bag.

License & Permit

Not physical gear, but every bit as essential — the saltwater fishing license and spiny lobster permit covered in Chapter 5. Sort this before stepping on the boat.

READY TO GET IN THE WATER?

Captain Phil runs Key West lobster charters through the mini-season and the full regular season. Gear, guidance, and 25+ years of local reef knowledge included.

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