

Travel on trial

Spear a lionfish and spare the reef

Amber Gibson tries her hand at culling this beautiful but deadly predator in the waters off Dominica

‘Have you ever been stung by a bee?’ asks Captain Don Mitchell, a local Dominican fisherman. ‘Imagine that pain but three times worse. You’ll be crying for your mama.’ This is his way of warning me to never touch the lionfish we are about to hunt, for fear of being stung by one of their 18 venomous spikes. ‘Once I was stung under my nail, and it turned black and fell off.’

With my 5ft-long yellow pole spear, also known as a Hawaiian sling, it is easy to keep my distance. These three-pronged spears are more precise than spear guns and less harmful to the delicate coral reefs where lionfish congregate. If I miss and hit the reef, it would leave three small indentations while a spear gun could destroy a century’s worth of coral in one misfire.

Even before Mitchell mentions the poison, I am nervous about spearfishing. I’ve never tried free diving before and the most shallow area we could hunt in was 30ft deep. Mitchell is a pro though. He tells me he has caught 6,384 lionfish in his lifetime and holds the Dominican record for the largest lionfish caught – nearly 17 inches. Several times a month, he takes guests from Secret Bay, Dominica’s most exclusive resort, out to try their luck.

‘On all my lionfish tours, there has always been lionfish on the plate afterwards,’ Mitchell reassures me. He takes me to his secret spot after I promise not to share the location.

‘I call it my honey hole,’ he says. Lionfish normally feed in the morning and late afternoon and these are the best times to find them lazily nestled within coral coves.

For a decade, since the flamboyantly striped, spiky fish started to proliferate on reefs, lionfish hunting has been encouraged by the Dominican government. The invasive species has no predators, and its presence reduces biodiversity and destroys the delicate coral ecosystem. There is no limit on the number of lionfish you can catch and you don’t need a permit. Every January, locals host a spearing competition which Mitchell’s sister



▲ Spearfishing adventure? Amber Gibson didn't get cold feet

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won last year by catching 82 lionfish in two hours.

I hop in first with a life jacket to get my bearings and practice swimming with a spear. Then it is time to practice diving. Mitchell gives me several pointers – turn your brain off, ignore your instinct to breathe, lay horizontally, tip yourself down and use your fins to descend. My

first few attempts are weak. I can't get all the way down to where the lionfish are hiding and come gasping to the surface.

‘That was good, you were halfway there,’ says Mitchell. His words of encouragement are demoralising though; I thought I was just a couple of feet away. Apparently, I had no depth perception underwater. It’s the diving part that’s hard. Shooting them isn’t hard at all once I finally make it down. It is likely that lionfish inspired the idiom “shooting fish in a barrel”. They aren’t very bright, and will stare you right in the eye as you point the spear at their head. You want to get as close as possible, mere inches away, before shooting. I am more than satisfied with catch-

THE VERDICT

Instruction

★★★★
Captain Don Mitchell is the best – he made me feel safe, even cutting the poisonous spikes off for me once we had caught our fish.

Sustainability

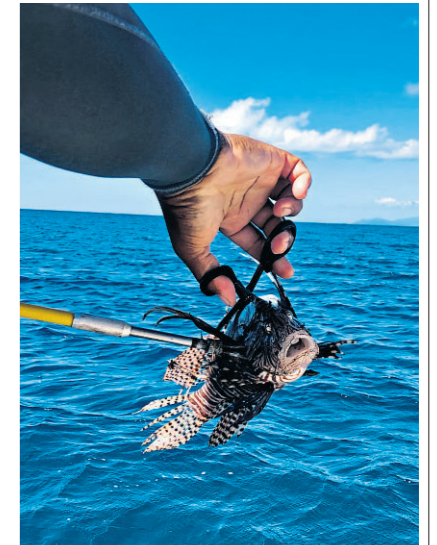
★★★★
When so many endemic reef fish are overfished, it feels good to try a local delicacy that’s also a pest. It’s a small gesture, but reminds us to be thoughtful about our food choices in everyday life.

Adrenalin rush

★★★★
The thrill of diving down so deep and facing your prey up close and personal is akin to hunting by bow and arrow. We certainly earned our lunch.

Best-laid plans

★★★★
You’ll want to book at least a day in advance, since the experience is dependent on weather conditions.



◀ Scuba divers are joining free-divers like Amber in hunting predatory lionfish, above

ing just two – enough for lunch after chef Fábio Fernandes teaches me how to debone and fillet the tricky fish.

Secret Bay was the first hotel in Dominica to launch a cook-your-catch experience and thus far its guests have caught more than 900 fish since the resort’s reopening after Hurricane Maria in November 2018. My 10-inch lionfish had just eaten lunch itself – we find a small brown chromis swallowed whole in its stomach.

They are bony and difficult to clean, and there’s not as much meat on them as you might expect. The flesh is very tasty though, firm and a little chewy when raw, delicious dressed with a simple soy and papaya sauce. Once cooked, the mild white fish is very versatile and a great substitute for grouper, cod or snapper.

If our hours-long effort yielded only two fish, are we making any difference though? A single female lionfish can spawn more than two million eggs annually, reproducing roughly every four days. Even if we were all as prolific hunters as Mitchell, the battle seems futile. ‘We cannot win the war,’ he says, ‘but we can control them.’

Two- to three-hour lionfish-hunting experience at Secret Bay (villas from £784; secretbay.dm) £120 per couple. In-villa catch-and-cook experience £320. Flights via Barbados with British Airways and InterCaribbean Airways from £1,579pp (ba.com). Overseas holidays are currently subject to restrictions. See Page 3.



SIDMOUTH HARBOUR HOTEL & SPA

SIDMOUTH, DEVON

FROM £139 PER PERSON FOR A TWO-NIGHT STAY

DEAL OF THE WEEK

SAVE

30%

- ◆ Two-night stay in a Courtyard room
- ◆ Full English breakfast
- ◆ £27.50 per person à la carte dinner allowance each evening
- ◆ Saturday supplement and blackout dates (Feb 12-20) apply

Set in pretty Sidmouth near the South West Coast Path, this seafront hotel has tasteful nautical décor and 56 rooms complete with comfortable beds and coffee machines. The



open-plan restaurant has an impressive marble bar and enormous windows with beautiful views of the esplanade, beach and cliffs. Dine on fresh local catches including scallops, shrimp and Salcombe crab.

Suzu Bennett, *Telegraph Travel's Devon expert*, says: ‘This contemporary hotel has knockout views of the

Regency town of Sidmouth and the Jurassic coastline. There’s a spa, indoor and outdoor pools, a sunny decked terrace and a light-filled restaurant and bar overlooking the sea.’

Book by Jan 15, 2021. Valid for stays until Feb 28, 2021. Quote TELP1912; call 0330 173 2955; see terms; telegraph.co.uk/tt-sidmouth

WIDBROOK GRANGE

BRADFORD-ON-AVON

FROM £148 PER PERSON FOR A TWO-NIGHT STAY

- ◆ Two nights in a Classic room
- ◆ Breakfast
- ◆ Dinner on one night (£30pp allowance)
- ◆ Two included drinks
- ◆ Late check-out
- ◆ One dog stays free

SAVE

30%

- ◆ £20 supplement for Friday and Saturday

Set outside Bradford-on-Avon near Bath, this newly refurbished farmstead is stylish and cosy. All rooms have deluxe furnishings and immaculate bathrooms. Some rooms welcome dogs. Guests can stroll along the nearby canal or take a dip in the hotel’s indoor pool. The restaurant serves classic British fare, complemented by an impressive wine list.

Natalie Paris, *Telegraph Travel writer*, says: ‘Set up as a model farm in 1834 to encourage modern agricultural methods, this is now a small and gorgeous boutique hideaway, with a relaxed atmosphere and a frankly enormous gin list.’

Book by Dec 28, 2020. Valid for stays until Mar 31, 2021. Quote TELP1912; call 0330 060 4600; see terms; telegraph.co.uk/tt-widbrook-grange

INN ON THE LAKE

ULLSWATER, LAKE DISTRICT

FROM £240 PER PERSON FOR A TWO-NIGHT STAY

- ◆ Two-night stay
- ◆ Breakfast daily
- ◆ Glass of bubbly
- ◆ Dinner on both evenings
- ◆ Complimentary *Daily Telegraph* newspaper
- ◆ Valid Sunday-Thursday

SAVE

34%

Escape to the Lake District to stay at an award-winning hotel with sublime views. After a full ground-floor refurbishment in January 2020, the four-star property is looking better than ever. On both evenings, you will



enjoy a three-course table d’hôte dinner at the Lake View Restaurant, which has won two AA Rosettes.

Helen Pickles, *Telegraph Travel's Lake District expert*, says: ‘This family-friendly hotel has a

peerless position and large, comfortable rooms.’

Book by Jan 31, 2021. Valid for stays from Jan 1 until Mar 31, 2021. Quote TELP1912; call 0330 162 6631; see terms; telegraph.co.uk/tt-inn-on-the-lake

THE OLD SWAN

HARROGATE, YORKSHIRE

FROM £125 PER PERSON FOR A TWO-NIGHT STAY

- ◆ Two-night stay in a Classic room
- ◆ Full English breakfast
- ◆ Local gin aperitif and canapés on your first night
- ◆ Three-course dinner on both nights in the

Wedgwood Restaurant ◆ Weekend supplements apply; blackout dates Dec 24-27 and Dec 31

The ideal base for exploring Harrogate, this prestigious hotel has a remarkable history with links to Agatha Christie and Karl Marx. Rooms are traditional with modern bathrooms, and the Wedgwood Restaurant serves delicious dishes in a glorious dining room that has a Victorian glass ceiling.

Charlotte Johnstone, *Telegraph Travel writer*, says: ‘Recognised as one of the grandes dames of Harrogate, The historic Old Swan is blessed with pretty gardens and an excellent location in one of Yorkshire’s loveliest towns.’

Book by Jan 15, 2021. Valid for stays until Mar 31, 2021. Quote TELP1912. Call 0330 173 5469. See terms; telegraph.co.uk/tt-the-old-swan

