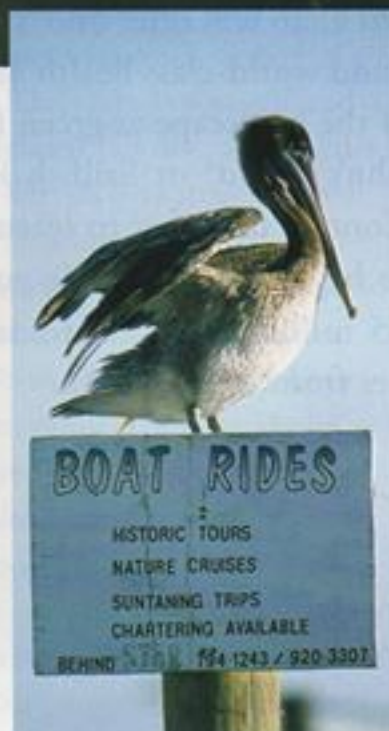


Captain Kim gives a new look to the saltwater heritage of quiet little Cortez, Florida.



The waterfront picnic tables at Star Fish Company in Cortez sit right in the middle of a time warp. Sleepy, pre-condo Florida has almost entirely faded into memory—except here.

Pelicans glide with ponderous grace above blue-green water. Boats from the A.P. Bell fishing fleet unload their cargoes and head back out into the Gulf of Mexico. A boy in a skiff putters up to the dock, his dog riding happily in the bow. Time moves to the rhythm of the tides, not the tyranny of the clock. It's a pleasant place to while away an afternoon, especially if you treat yourself to Star Fish's blackened grouper, steamed clams, and cheese grits.

Fishing still dominates the life of this village at the north end of Sarasota Bay, but the docks no longer bustle. Betty "Plum" Taylor, sitting with her husband and friends near Star Fish, remembers the way it used to be. "We would walk down on that dock," she says, "and people would say, 'Want a couple of fish? Take a mess, whatever you need.'"

These days, some of the piers and buildings are crumbling picturesquely into ruin. "I had the best generation that ever was on the west coast of Florida," says Thomas "Blue" Fulford. "I started fishing in 1947. Then along about the end of my career came the net ban." When Florida banned gill nets in 1995, partly to protect heavily harvested species, the fishing industry took a hit.

But don't count out Cortez just yet. Not while Capt. Kim Ibasfalean (eye-bus-FAY-len) is around. A 35-year-old native, she represents a new generation that refuses to give up life on the water but accepts that times have changed. She and her husband still fish commercially. But she also runs chartered trips for sportfishing, sightseeing, shelling, birding, and more. *Turn to page 158.*

BY STEVE MILLBURG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
WILLIAM C. MINARICH

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TRAVEL

All of her captains are female. It's her way of providing career opportunities so young women won't move away in search of decent jobs.

Kim seems to know everyone in town, and vice versa. Cruising around the bay during an ecotour, she rattles off breezy stories about local history and landmarks. Suddenly, without warning, she drops anchor, strips off her crisp white shirt (revealing a green bikini top), and jumps feetfirst into the water, leaving her puzzled passengers behind.

She wades knee-deep, pushing a wire-mesh scoop. Then she dumps the contents on the deck with a muddy splash. Sorting the mess, Kim expertly picks out a five-armed starfish, a few snails, various types of crabs, an elusive handful of tiny, nearly transparent shrimp, a sea horse, and a nondescript blob that she identifies as a sponge.

"Kids go nuts over this stuff," she says. This group of adults crowds around in fascination as well.

In shallow water, Kim adjusts her outboard to protect the sea grass. "People have misconceptions about commercial fishermen," she says. "We're not really out to pillage and plunder the whole ocean."

They just want to preserve their way of life. In this quiet corner of Florida, she, at least, is succeeding. 🐚

HOOKED ON CORTEZ

Cortez is at the east end of the State Road 684 bridge across Sarasota Bay, just west of Bradenton. Capt. Kim Ibasfalean, 941/920-3307 or kimscharters.com. Ecotours cost \$15 per person per hour.

- Star Fish Company, 12306 46th Ave. W., serves lunch daily and dinner Tuesday-Saturday. It's also a seafood market; 941/794-1243. Cortez Kitchen Seafood Restaurant & Retail Market, 4528 119th St. W., serves lunch and dinner daily; 941/798-9404.

- For lodging, check out Bungalow Beach Resort, 2000 Gulf Drive N. in Bradenton Beach; 800/779-3601 or bungalowbeach.com. It's a cluster of vintage cottages with contemporary amenities, right on the shore. Guests feel like pampered castaways.



During her ecotours, Capt. Kim Ibasfalean dredges sea creatures such as these starfish and snails from Sarasota Bay.

