



rolling IN THE DEEP

NEWLYN CRAB FISHING:
AN INSIGHT INTO LIFE AS A
COMMERCIAL FISHERMAN

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Mike Newman/www.ocean-image.com



Life in Newlyn is all about fish, whether it is enjoying the catch of the day at the Tolcarne Inn (where chef Ben Tunnicliffe does an amazing starter of Newlyn crab, local leaves, cherry tomatoes, cucumber and chutney), or watching the fleets moor in the harbour. In a typical year, more than 50 species of fish come into Newlyn, the largest fishing port in England. With landings valued at £22 million in 2011, and around six shore workers employed in support roles for every seagoing fisherman, it can be safely said that the fishing industry keeps the town alive.

On Monday, August 26, this heritage will be celebrated at the Newlyn Fish Festival, an event in aid of the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen. Expect cooking demonstrations, a fish auction and numerous market stalls.

When visiting the festival, you are likely to see Cornish crabbers hauling pots in the harbour to give the public an idea of what their daily job is about. To really experience this lifestyle, however, you need to join them on a working day, where it turns out that commercial fishing is not for the faint-hearted.

I meet crab fisherman Mario Perry (48) from Rowse Fishing Ltd at 5am on the Emma-Louise. The crew of this 16.4m-long boat consists of skipper Mario himself, his son Ashley (24) and three Latvians who live on board: Edgars (26), Ricars (18) and Sandis (26). The men have been working 21 days on the trot, and despite the early start, they have already been working for half an hour, loading buckets full of frozen gurnard and dogfish on board to be used as bait.

Today's destination is Wolf Rock Lighthouse, four nautical miles (4.6 miles) south west of Land's End. It takes about two hours to get there - time spent sleeping by most of the crew, and smoking and navigating by Mario, who has to press the boat's watch alarm ▶

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every three minutes. Although the sea is flat as a pancake, I turn green as soon as we leave the harbour. Yet Mario assures me that with weather this good, it's the best job in the world. "However, on bad days with rain, wind and waves crashing over the side of the boat, it's like getting into the washing machine and turning it on. Then I wished I'd learned more in school," he laughs.

On average, there are only 20 days a year when the weather is too bad or it isn't worth the expense of going out. As it costs £600 a day to take the boat out (including 400kg of bait and 400l of fuel), the fishermen have to make at least £2,000 to make a profit after the wages have been split. On a good day, they do all right, but in February and March there are weeks where they barely cover their expenses. While the price of fuel and bait has gone up considerably, the price of crab hasn't increased much since Mario started fishing in 1986. This, together with the decommissioning and the £155,000 shellfish permit needed for each vessel, means there are fewer crab fishers in Newlyn; it is survival of the fittest.

Arriving at their crabber lines, recognisable by buoys floating on the water surface, Mario sets to control the winch from the wheelhouse. The rest of the crew starts working on the lower deck, dressed in wellies, yellow waterproofs and gloves, and accompanied by Russian pop music played at maximum volume. One hauls in the crab pots, which weigh between 20 and 25kg each, using the swinging motion of the rope to lift them on board. The other three men swap tasks: opening the pots, taking the crabs and the occasional lobster out, sorting them by size and refilling the pots with bait.

At times, up to ten brown crabs are found in one pot; however, most of the catch is too small and gets chucked back into the sea via a chute. This also happens with the soft-shelled crabs (which have no meat on them) and the sporadic lost starfish. All this unwanted catch is discarded alive, making this one of the most sustainable methods of fishing. Crabs that are big enough to keep get their tendons cut, so they won't be able to fight each other in the big tank under the working deck. This space is best compared with a giant aquarium; it can hold up to 14 tonnes of crab, and fresh water is pumped in every ten minutes to keep the shellfish alive.

The fishermen work together like a machine; their routine movements ensure no time is wasted. Within 45 minutes, all 85 pots on the line have been emptied, refilled with bait and stacked neatly on deck, ready to be thrown back overboard. "When I first started this job, I thought I'd die," says Mario. "You don't get many crabbers over the age of 30 - it's too hard. They either become skippers like me or leave altogether."

Apart from the fishy smell and the hard manual labour, the work is also dangerous. Commercial fishing is ranked as one of the jobs with the highest fatality rates. According to Mario, one in three fishermen will die at sea. Most accidents occur as people get trapped in the rope and dragged under when the lines are pulled back into the ocean. This happened to Mario when he was fishing in the Channel Islands in 1988. He smashed up his leg, spent a week in the hospital and had to learn how to walk again.

His son Ashley misses the top of his finger; on a rocky day he lost his balance and ➔



grabbed the winch for support. He shrugs off my concerns: "The dangers involved bother me, but not that much. You just don't think of it. It's mostly about using common sense."

The men switch intense bursts of work with breaks, in which they smoke a cigarette, check their phones, have a nap and make some coffee in the ship's kitchen as they cruise to their next spot. Divided over different locations they haul up ten more strings, all consisting of 85 crab pots and stretching for 1.25 miles over the sea bottom. The fishing is done relatively close to the shore, this to minimize the risk of losing the gear worth £60,000 to big ships; if a trawler picks up the lines by accident, they are gone. It turns out to be a straightforward day; good weather and none of the lines got tangled, which can easily lead to hours of delay.

Making our way back to Newlyn harbour, we are followed by flocks of seagulls attracted by our load, and as the sun is almost setting, we see a basking shark swimming by. Marine wildlife encounters like these are a perk of the job. "People pay money for views like this, and we get it for free every day," says Mario, recalling a day two years ago when hundreds of dolphins followed him for six miles back to shore.

Ashley eats his dinner out on deck, staring at the ocean surrounding him. "I can't imagine anything else than being at sea," he says. "I hate being stuck inside; here, there is nothing more than the open air and the occasional boat passing by. I might not always be a crab fisher, but I'll always be a seafarer."

For Mario, his occupation is more than just work: "It's a lifestyle. I love the sea, this sense of freedom when you're out in the open - you're your own person here. There are easier jobs to do, but I'll always do this one," he states.

As I leave them unloading their 1,500kg of crab and 22 lobsters in the harbour, dusk already setting in, I know one thing for sure. The next time I have fish and chips or eat a Newlyn crab sandwich, I'll do it with more appreciation of the fishermen who spend 16-hour days rolling in the deep blue oceans. They don't just provide us with delicious seafood right on our doorstep; they are also securing the future of Cornwall's fishing heritage. 🐟

Yayeri ate at the Tolcarne Inn in Newlyn (www.tolcarneinn.co.uk), and stayed in The Beach House in Mousehole. Newlyn Fish Festival takes place on Monday, August 26; for more information, visit: www.newlynfishfestival.org.uk



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