

ON THE FLY

Backed by an upcoming documentary, a flurry of social-media activity and its recognisable skyline, LAUREL MUNSHOWER finds that Dubai is fly fishing's newest bucket-list destination



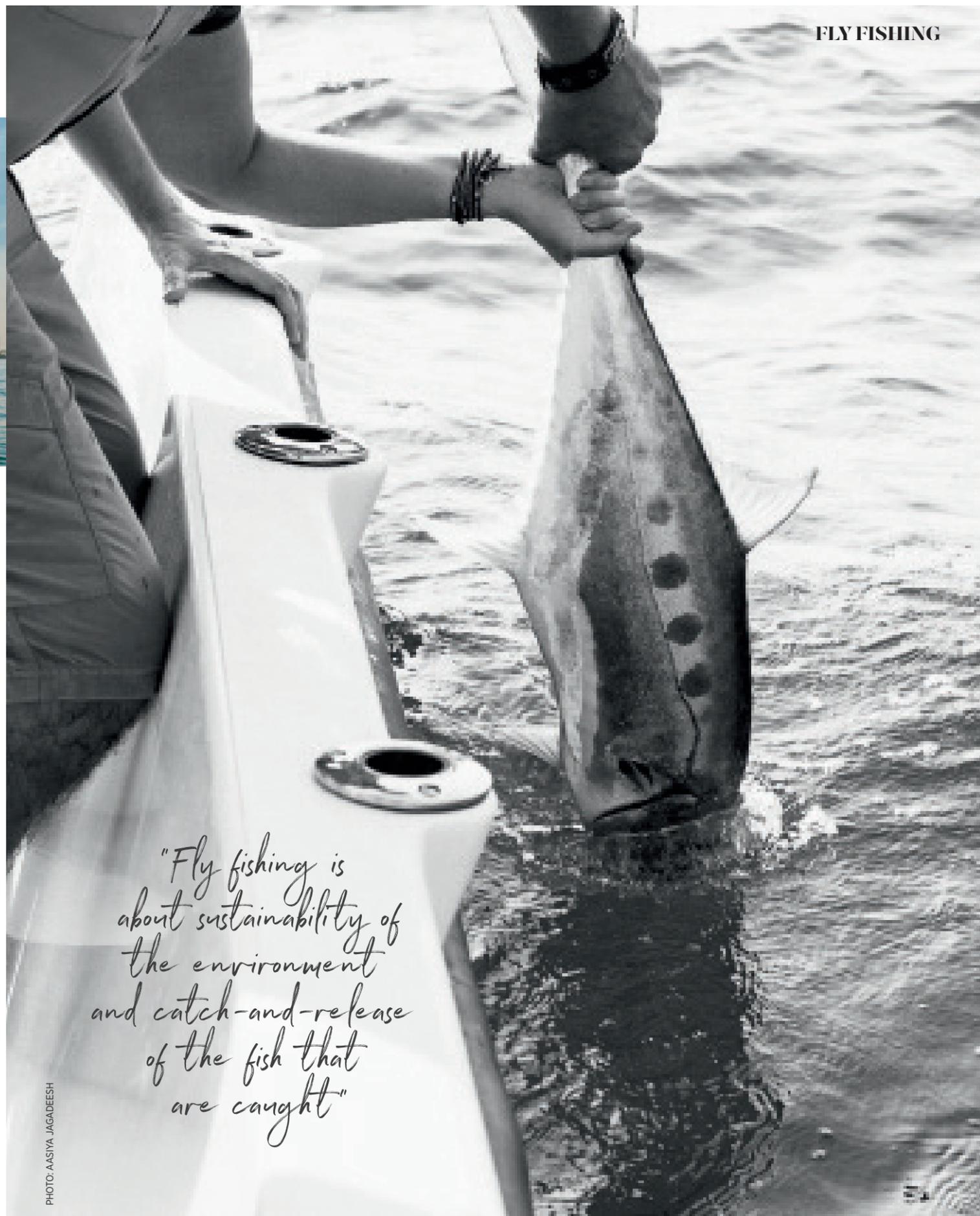
Urban fly fishing against the Dubai Marina backdrop

PHOTO: BEATTE OUTDOOR PRODUCTIONS



From left: A fly; a queenfish, common in the Gulf; Bowles takes anglers just beyond the city; shoals are often found close to the Palm Jumeirah. Opposite: Releasing a catch back into the Gulf

FLY FISHING



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Lazy afternoons along a sun-dappled river somewhere in the verdant American wilderness: this, partly in thanks to the Nineties film *A River Runs Through It*, is the classic setting that many take as canon when talking about fly fishing. Yet setting off from Dubai's marina early one morning, fly rod in tow and hoping to reel in a big one, the reality is that the sport is far more diverse – and increasingly attracting an affluent crowd with a thirst to chase not just the fish but the sport's next hot bucket-list destination. Bolivia, Papua New Guinea and Mongolia are all exotic spots sought after for fly fishing, and trips can come in at AED 37,000-100,000 per person. The Seychelles, too, is a hotspot and Dubai, ever the global layover, is where many fishermen – often successful American businessmen – transit before reaching the Indian Ocean. Lured by its urban backdrop and modern luxuries, the emirate has been infiltrating the social-media feeds of the international fly-fishing community, making it one of the sport's fastest-growing holiday destinations.

This is how RA Beattie – angler, cinematographer and founder of Off The Grid Studios (offthegridstudios.com) – initially zeroed in on the city as the focus of his upcoming fly-fishing documentary. "I knew pretty much what the average person knows about Dubai, but I didn't know there was fly fishing – I was kind of shocked," says Beattie. "The way that the fishery was explained to me was really interesting from a photography standpoint: the water's so calm, the skyline's right there, the fishing's tremendous, so we felt it would be an amazing place to film." His documentary will shine a light on Dubai's attractions for the international fishing community, presenting it as a "surreal place where you're skiing and golfing and fishing in a 24- to 48-hour period", while also showcasing the city-adjacent fishery, which is one of the healthiest in an urban environment that he's seen.

The past two years have seen fly fishing in Dubai flourish, though strictly recreational given its level of sophistication and its environment-conscious philosophy. Nick Bowles, founder of Ocean Active (00971-50-153 5371, oceanactive.com), which offers trips in Dubai and Oman, says: "Fly fishing is about sustainability of the environment and catch-and-release of the fish that are caught. There is a deep respect, and a majority of fish caught fly fishing are released with only a single one being kept to feed yourself or family." He sees the region's fly

fishing and marine tourism set to sharply increase in the coming years thanks to a number of new marinas being developed, a constant influx of VIP business travellers with a taste for the sport and – contrary to popular perception – the continued development of man-made islands positively effecting the marine world. "The Palm has created a much better ecosystem where fish come to breed and spawn. It has encouraged a lot of coral growth and allows currents to flow better, all benefitting the marine environment and offering more opportunities to catch fish." He says they used to have to fish up to 22km out, but now rarely have to go as far as 11, often finding shoals much closer, in the shadow of Dubai Marina and the Burj Al Arab Jumeirah.

And so it is that, at 6AM, just as the sun is starting to peek above the horizon and between the skyscrapers, I find myself meeting Bowles next to Address Dubai Marina (where he puts up his guests booking five-star fly-fishing packages) to try the sport for myself. Heading out, we watch for flocks of birds diving for bait fish and the water's surface ripples with the activity of shoals just beneath. This morning, they are on the move, making us work for our catch in a zippy game of cat-and-mouse that out here is referred to as a "run 'n' gun". Almost as soon as we reach the activity, casting our lines out without hesitation, the shoal has moved on, and off we speed to the next. It's exhilarating – a far cry from the classic and sedate riverside scene. We arrive at a particularly active spot and my line quickly goes taught. At first I'm almost disappointed with how easy the fish is reeling in. But the closer it comes, the more fight it gives, and I'm struggling to make progress. Eventually it appears – a good-sized queenfish. The crew deftly lift it on to the boat and remove the hook, handing the (heavy, slippery and still fighting) fish to me for the customary "grip 'n' grin" photo op before slipping it back into the sea and watching it swim away.

I can see the appeal, and it's not only the sport of it. Both Beattie and Bowles have guided celebrities, CEOs and VIPs aplenty, but on the water, status or culture ceases to matter – everyone's on common ground. "There can be two anglers from different sides of the planet who would usually never meet – but they go fishing and have the same passion, the same language, they value the same things and look for the same patterns in nature," says Beattie. "It's that human connection." ☺

PHOTOS: BEATTIE OUTDOOR PRODUCTIONS

PHOTO: AASIYA JAGADEESH