

# THE INSIDE LINE...

FAMOUS figures talk exclusively on matters close to their own hearts. This week we talk to Derbyshire-based carp holiday boss **David Keep** who runs the highly successful Angling Lines business.



THIS WEEK  
**DAVID  
KEEP**

#### Are you a keen angler yourself?

I'm a keen angler but not an obsessive. I've fished from as long ago as I can remember, going down to the Aysworth Canal, near Nottingham, from about the age of five. I got into my fishing more seriously and started doing matches with NCB No.5 club until I was about 18. I then discovered girls, like you do, and gave up until I was married, and started again when I was 24.

#### When did you get into carp fishing?

When I restarted fishing I went down on holiday to Devon and fished Slade Lake. I had a float rod out for bream, but also stuck out a leger rod with luncheon meat for whatever came along. I still remember to this day the silver foil indicator going up to the rod butt. It was a 19 lb 6 oz carp, and there was just no feeling like catching that. I haven't fished for anything but carp since.

#### Where did you start your serious carp fishing?

I cut my teeth at Higham Farm, but there's not loads of great carp waters in Derbyshire. I was working for the British Coal Board and bought a bigish motor home, and started travelling to France and fished big waters like Salagou and did all right.

#### How did you get into the carp holiday business?

While fishing those big French waters I met plenty of local anglers and they put me onto some private waters. Around 1985-86 I was made redundant from the Coal Board after Thatcher shut down the mines and I joined the big brewer, Bass. I also set up a company called Carp Lines, selling second-hand tackle, and it went on from there.

#### Was Carp Lines successful?

It worked quite well, as in those days carp tackle was expensive and there was a good market for second hand gear. Carp gear is like male jewellery and will always be popular. In 1999 I set up a website while the internet was in its infancy, as fortunately I had good computer skills. I had my first internet order almost straight



IT'S ALL ABOUT the customers – Angling Lines get tens of thousands of customers thanks to the superb French carp fishing they offer, with a real chance of a whacker such as this 60 lb-plus beast.

“ We see ourselves as the Thomas Cook of carp fishing holidays.”

away, for some Shimano Baitrunners for America, and never looked back. I then had six franchises around the country, and in 2002 won the East Midlands E-Commerce award and was runner-up nationally. But by 2005 the business model died, purely because of the cheap Far East imports. It was cheaper to buy something new than second hand. But as an aside I'd started doing two French holiday venue adverts on the

website just for a £100 flat fee – they filled up all their bookings quickly and so Angling Lines was born.

#### How many venues do you have on your books for Angling Lines?

From those original two we quickly got another four and were up to 25 by the second year and 35 by the third. We try to keep it around that figure, to keep everything manageable, but venues come and

go. We could have a lot more, but want to make sure the fishing and facilities of each are up to scratch, so anglers have a great holiday.

#### Do you own the venues?

No, we're purely agents and keep professional standards as high as any mainstream travel operator – we see ourselves as the Thomas Cook of carp fishing holidays. For the angler we make sure every venue is of the highest standards for fishing and facilities, organise the ferry and any accommodation they want at the venue if they offer it. The angler pays us before going, and in line with EC Directives we or the venue don't get paid until after the holiday, to guarantee all the money is safe. For

the fishery owner they don't have to market and advertise the venue, run websites and build up a reputation.

#### Do you test-fish the venues yourself?

I fish at our venues about three times a year, but we have a strict vetting procedure for all new venues. For a water to get onto our books they first have to fill out a long questionnaire and then there's a site visit with a big check-list of accommodation and standards from Martin Baker, who runs his own French venue called Oak View. If everything still looks good, we then send at least two different sets of test anglers to see if the fishing is up to scratch.

#### How many anglers have taken a holiday with you?

We've sent tens of thousands of anglers away and we are the biggest carp holiday firm around. I have four staff members and they are all women and all carp fish. The sales staff always have face to face meetings with the venue owners to make sure everything is running smoothly.

#### Are all the venues in France?

Yes they are. Three years ago we started offering venues in Canada, Ireland, America, Gran Canaria and Spain, but the business model just doesn't work as we can't afford to have the rigorous onsite checks we insist upon. We do carry adverts

Angling Lines is so well regarded for their professionalism that Korda boss Danny Fairbrass decided to use them as his exclusive booking agents for his own French mecca Gigantica.

on the site for Spain, Canada and Ireland, but we're not agents for them.

#### Has the recession affected anglers going on fishing holidays?

Big time. We've had a 30 per cent drop last year, but this year we're doing a lot better at just ten per cent down on two years ago. But everybody has felt the downturn and a carp fishing holiday isn't a priority with wives and girlfriends.

#### You offer a FlexiPay scheme – does this help anglers afford it?

Yes, it has helped, and we work hard to allow people time to pay for the holiday. We'll take a deposit of just £50 and then allow the payments to be spread. All money has to be paid ten weeks before the trip.

#### You offer family carp holidays as well – is this a growing trend?

Yes they are, and we have 14 venues that are suitable for families. Four even have swimming pools and they are getting more and more popular. Some guys book a serious carp trip in the spring and then go back out on a more family orientated holiday later in the summer.

#### Are the holidays complete holiday packages, drive and survive or a mixture?

We offer one venue – Roseau – where we pick you up in Dover, but for the rest we book the ferry and you make your own way to the venue. About 40 per cent also offer food packages. What anglers like about us is that we can give exact matches to their requirements of type of lake for size of fish or runs, accommodation, family, winter, economy and the like.



# THE INSIDE LINE...

## WHAT I LAST BOUGHT

A lightweight 42 in. Fox landing net.

## WHAT I LAST CAUGHT

This 50 lb 6 oz mirror from Genets on my last French trip in September. It was a family trip so I just fished days and had others of 38, 34, 31, 21 and five doubles.



David Keep is a carp angler, but bagged this 154 lb catfish from Spain in 2006.

### Do you offer van hire?

Yes we do, and we can also arrange for a chauffeur option, which is proving to be remarkably popular with anglers. Despite the extra expense, it totally removes any hassle and worry about who does the driving, and the anglers can relax and have a good holiday experience.

### Can you supply bait on site?

At least two thirds of venues do, with about half offering Quest Baits. It works for everyone as the baits goes into the venue more and becomes more of a food source, becomes more successful and the fish also pack on weight. Quest's new Chilli Chocolate is doing very well this year.

### Do anglers tend to use fishmeal or fruity baits?

Most anglers tend to favour the savoury option, and over the past few years Quest's Rahja Spice and Special Crab have been the biggest sellers. Also, pellets are getting more and more popular, especially as some French fishery owners top up the natural food source with these in quieter angling periods.

### Do anglers have unrealistic expectations of catch rates?

It used to happen more than it does now. In the early days anglers thought you just had to turn up and you'll be catching whackers all day, but anglers are a lot more clued up now. You have to remember, some of these venues are now more pressured than English lakes... but they offer better quality fishing, with a much better chance of catching big fish.

### What are the biggest mistakes anglers make going abroad?

The most common mistake is putting too much bait out on arrival and then get disheartened too quickly if they don't catch. It's best to be cautious with bait until you start catching lots of fish.



Angling Lines' website is one of the best in British fishing.

### Your website – [www.anglinglines.co.uk](http://www.anglinglines.co.uk) – is a great site. Did you design it yourself?

We now have a PR company that looks after it, but the design and content is ours. We've got so much information on the site now that anglers can really choose what they want. We get nearly 30,000 unique hits a month, and 600 for the blogs on a daily basis. We have about five new articles on there a week, so there's a lot of time spent on it.

### Are the new forms of media helping?

Yes, most definitely. We're also on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter and get a good response from that. We're the agents for Danny Fairbrass's lake Gigantica and had his 72 lb carp video clip put on You Tube and had 1,000 views straight away. And another of our prime waters, Sapphire, had 500 hits in just 24 hours. But feedback from customers is the most powerful medium to secure bookings. We have catch reports from each venue and they are normally on by Monday for the previous week, so anglers can see exactly what is happening. We don't change anything on the online catch reports, so anglers can see exactly what is or isn't being caught – we don't hide anything away.

■ David Keep was talking to Thomas Petch



French carp fishing isn't all about roughing it in a bivvy – accommodation and luxuries such as swimming pools mean the family can also come along.