



# 40<sup>Years</sup> of Fishing Travel

*Since the company's founding in 1969, Frontiers International Travel has opened up some of the world's most exciting fishing destinations.*

By Tom Keer

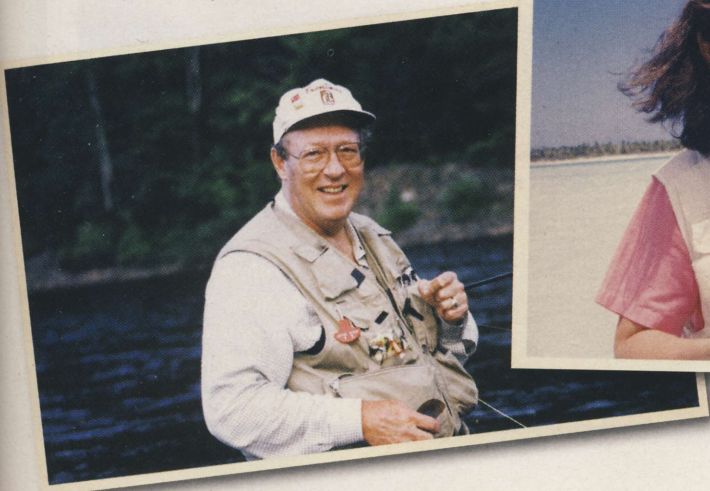
In 1969, Richard Nixon was our president. Neil Armstrong walked on the moon (“One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”) and Charles Manson and his Family made headlines in the Helter Skelter murders. A few days later, 350,000 folk headed to Max Yasgur's Upstate New York farm for the Woodstock Music and Art Fair.

Ted Kennedy and Chappaquiddick. The first ATM machine was installed. Two commercial jets debuted, the French Concorde and the Boeing 747 Jumbo. The Pontiac Firebird was introduced, as was a microprocessor that later became a computer. Bell-bottom jeans and tie-dye shirts were all the rage. Cracker Barrel, that famous Southern chain, was launched in Tennessee. Top music tracks were Come Together by the Beatles, Honky Tonk Woman by the Rolling Stones, and Sugar, Sugar by the Archies. And if you wanted to see a movie, you could have checked out *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Midnight Cowboy* or *Easy Rider*.

A new house would have cost you \$15 grand, a new car \$3K, a gallon of gas 35 cents and you probably made about \$8,500 a year. Chances are you went on fishing and hunting trips, because it was still cool to hunt and fish. And when you went, you planned your own. Most trips cost about \$10, and it probably meant that you traveled an hour away and went camping with your friends. More elaborate trips, say to Africa or Canada, would cost quite a bit more.

This was also the year that Mike and Susie Fitzgerald launched Frontiers Travel, a business that initially focused on whisking travelers to fish and hunt around the world, and establishing conservation efforts long before they became an industry standard.

The Fitzgeralds spent two years researching their new venture



Mike and Susie Fitzgerald recognized the need for fishing-travel booking back in 1969. Today, the company is one of the world's leading fishing-travel facilitators.

and creating a business plan. Forty years later, Frontiers Travel is among the elder statesmen in the fly-fishing industry. To a large part, Frontiers has shaped the current fly-fishing view of the world, and for many of us who travel to fish, we owe the Fitzgeralds a debt of gratitude. Happy 40th birthday, Frontiers. Here's to many more.

## The Early Days

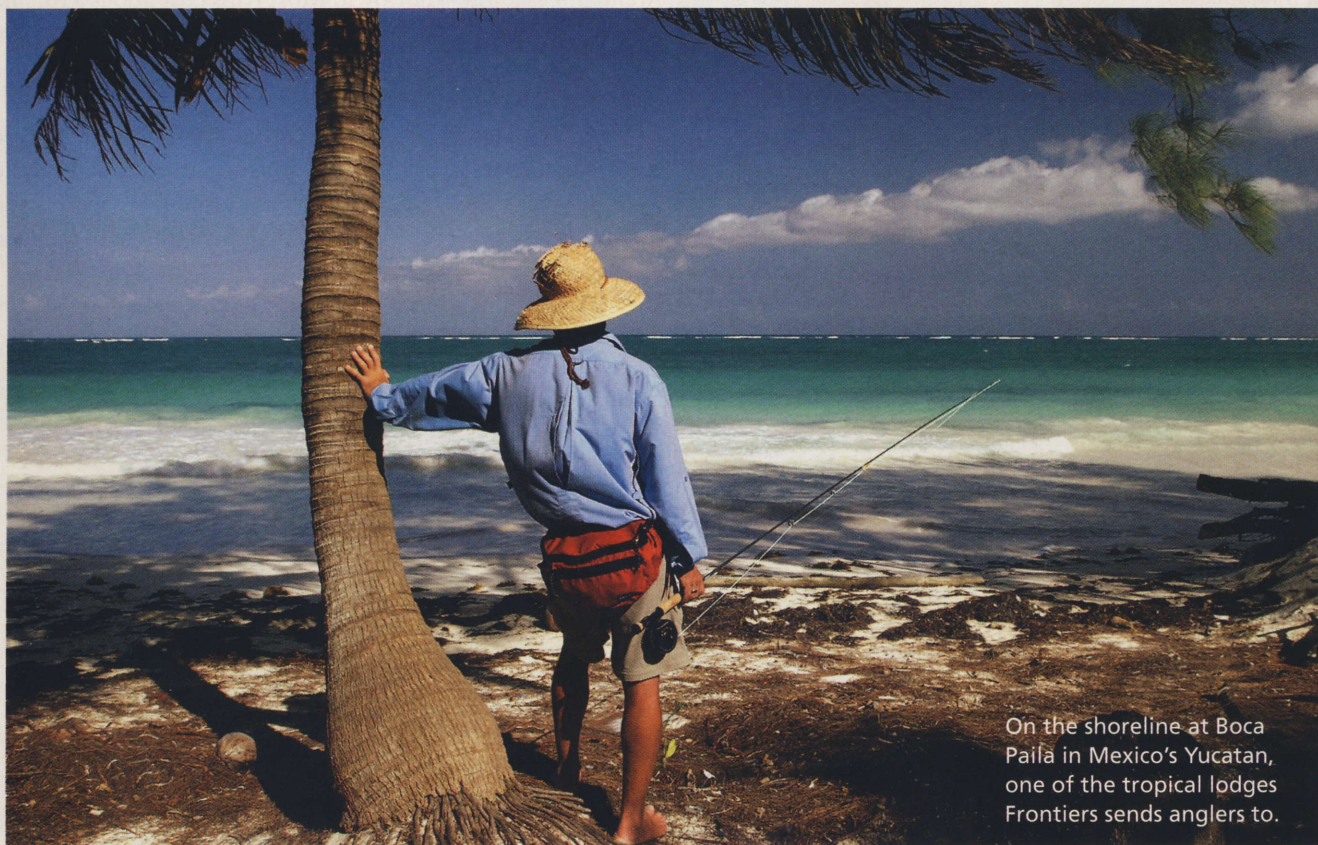
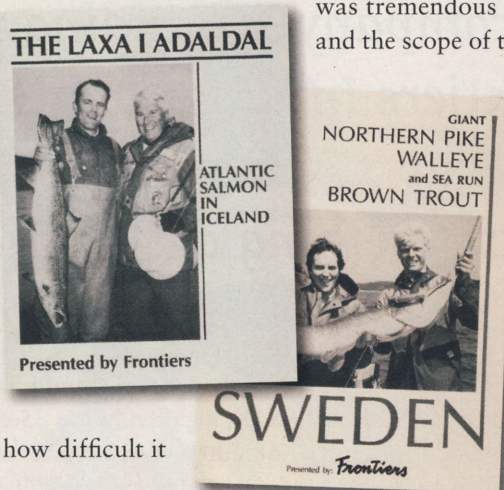
If 1969 seems a long time ago, dig this: Mike Sr. and Susie have known each other since second grade. The Columbus, Ohio, natives were friends and classmates, all the way through high school. In 1967, they moved to the Pittsburgh area after Mike finished dental school with his plan: Mike Fitzgerald, DDS, and Mrs. Fitzgerald, school teacher. Instead, they threw caution to the wind.

"We were both from families who fly-fished and hunted," Mike Sr. says. "While I was looking at setting up a dental practice, Susie and I got into a conversation about how difficult it

was to find a good place to go fishing or hunting. There were a few places that booked sporting travel, such as the original Abercrombie and Fitch and Winchester. But aside from Roman Hupalowski and Jim Chapralis at Pan Angling, both of whom are now out of the travel-planning business, the only place you could rely on for some information was Air Canada with their Fin, Fun & Feather Club. And they were more interested in selling (airplane) tickets.

"[Susie and I] always worked well together, and a travel business seemed like a natural fit. There was little competition, there was tremendous upside, there was an excitement of the size and the scope of the project, and we'd have the opportunity to develop a company together. Catching a peacock bass in Brazil seemed a bit more exciting than filling a molar. Some friends had says it was too risky, but for Susie and me it was an easy and natural decision. We have had a wonderful life, with more tremendous experiences than we ever dreamed of."

The Fitzgeralds charted out places that they thought would be worthy of exploration. They began with a thorough review of existing locations, and especially looked



On the shoreline at Boca Paila in Mexico's Yucatan, one of the tropical lodges Frontiers sends anglers to.

for new trout and salmon opportunities. But they also knew that anglers would naturally want to visit new venues and to catch exciting species of fish. What resulted is a major pioneering effort to open and popularize: Iceland for Atlantic salmon fishing; Russia and the Ponoï for Atlantic salmon fishing; Tierra del Fuego, South America, for trout, sea trout and wing-shooting; Boca Paila on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula for bonefish, permit and tarpon; Los Roques, Venezuela, for bonefish, permit and tarpon; Christmas Island for bonefish and trevally; Alaska for salmon and trout; the American West for trout, wing-shooting and big-game hunting; the Seychelles for bonefish and milkfish.

"You couldn't just pick up a catalog, read about a lodge and pick up the phone and dial. So, we spent an incredible amount of time exploring those areas and setting up a solid travel program that removed the fear and insecurity associated with a new culture for our sportsmen. We also had to do the same for our hosts," Mike Sr. continues. "It goes without saying that each time we've entered into a new country or region we've encountered governmental resistance. In a way, our efforts through fishing and hunting have been an excellent form of foreign relations, with conservation serving as an integral part of our company's fiber."

In the 1970s and 1980s, fly-fishing was viewed as a secondary or tertiary business at most fishing outposts. Commercial fishing was usually a country's primary economic base. "In order for Frontiers to lead trips to a specific region, we needed to first prove that the destination-travel business could suitably replace the existing commercial operations," Mike Sr. says. "Most of the venues we visited had long-established commercial fisheries. There was an incredible bias against recreational fishing, mostly because it was never practiced before. For us, our most important step was getting local commercial fishermen to see the increased economic value associated with traveling anglers. Once we gained their trust, we could work on creating catch-and-release programs that worked all the way around. In most every instance, the new travel/tourism economic base exceeds the commercial fishing businesses.

"Take the Ponoï, for example. Historically, the salmon were commercially netted. Over-fishing was common and we all know the issues associated with by-catch. But, we saw incredible fishing potential for the river and the region. So we went to work. First, we needed to build a model that was sound

from a conservation perspective. Then, we needed to create a sound and viable business plan. After that, we needed to prove to government and local officials that the plan would work. Finally, we needed to work with airlines to add or reroute flights. Today's fishing on the Ponoï is a perfect success story, and we have an ongoing fisheries research program. There are similar stories at Christmas Island, the Alta River, Tierra del Fuego and others. Those are the underpinnings of the company that many anglers do not see."

The pioneering efforts rolled on. "In the 1970s, we focused on trout and salmon. Most anglers don't realize that we moved into the saltwater markets as early as we did, but we entered into agreements in the Bahamas and Venezuela in the 1970s. During that time we also explored Siberia for char, India for mah-seer and many other areas as well. We added catch-and-release on the Alta River in Norway in the 1980s, then again on Russia's Ponoï, and on the Rio Grande in Tierra del Fuego and Christmas Island, too."

Today, Fitzgerald says: "We're working on



A brother and sister team, Mollie and Mike Fitzgerald Jr. are the next generation of fishing-travel pros in the Fitzgerald family.



fish studies with Fernando de Las Carreras in Tierra del Fuego for sea trout and also with the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust on a bonefish program in the Bahamas and Mexico."

"One of our early customers booked an African safari trip to Botswana in 1974. Halfway through the trip we were getting ready to change camps, all pre-determined, and three of the guests mentioned over dinner that they had never had a passport before. And, that this was their first time staying in a hotel. Susie and I love that story, for it means that we met our goal of providing a high-quality, reliable sporting trip from a company that customers respect."

## Next Generation Growth

The Fitzgerald kids, Mike Jr. and Mollie, both had options to pursue other careers. But if you were in their shoes, what would you want to do? **[Continued on page 57]**

“When my sister and I joined Frontiers in the 1980s, we pretty much knew how responsibilities would be divided,” says Mike Jr. “My dad and I have a macro-view, with a strong focus on organizational management, marketing, financials and human resources. My mom and sister are very focused, have incredible attention to detail and forge strong relationships with venues, customers, conservation and travel groups, you name it. We complement each other.

“Forty years ago all we had to book trips was a phone and the United States Postal Service,” Mike Jr. says. “The process was much slower than it is now. After identifying a venue we’d then work with airlines to make sure we could get our customer’s flights, and then we’d create ads and brochures to market the venues. There was a tremendous time delay compared to now. Some of my objectives were to make strategic improvements in technology, in streamlining reservations and ensuring that we match a venue with a customer’s tastes and preferences. Four decades ago we had file folders about each customer’s travel preferences. Now it’s all online.

“We’ve expanded significantly over the years. Our current staff is more than 80 employees in three separate office buildings plus a UK office. A five-person team oversees each customer’s trip. There is a department head, a program manager, airlines and accounting specialists and an administrative

assistant. We also offer 24/7 live customer service contact to ensure each trip comes off perfectly. Many customers think there is an additional charge for our detailing and customer service, but it’s just what we do. Clients pay the same amount for a trip if they go through Frontiers or direct to the venue.”

## The Present and the Future

“We’ve weathered some tough times,” Mike Sr. says. “There was the 1974 Oil Embargo, just five years following our launch. Recessions, wars, 9-11, and Wall Street boom and busts. We’re no different from any other American business, and we’ll have to work as hard as we can, just as we’ve done in the past.

“But for anyone who can sneak away, there are tremendous opportunities and inexpensive airfares,” Fitzgerald says of current fishing travel. “There always are during recessions, and it’s a perfect time to get relief from the doom and gloom on the news. These are exciting times, particularly since we’re exploring a few new venues that are sure to knock every fly fisher’s socks off. Just wait and see.”

Tom Keer is a frequent contributor to this magazine. He lives on Cape Cod. Go to [flyrodreel.com](http://flyrodreel.com) Travel section to read interviews with Frontiers travel team members and a partial list of lodges represented by Frontiers.

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