



House of the rising sun

Cairns is famous for its spring marlin season, but David Granville discovers a wealth of spectacular sportsfishing with barra, queenies, big GTs and Spaniards all year round at Sunrise Beach Lodge.



When you mention the word Cairns to anyone involved in gamefishing circles, images of giant black marlin launching themselves like ballistic missiles along the outside edge of the Great Barrier Reef are the types of thoughts that immediately spring to mind. And rightly so! It was this majestic fish that put the north Queensland township on the map and helped mould it into the thriving tourist mecca it is today.

While I can think of nothing better than chasing giant blacks along the GBR, this fishery is seasonal, with September to November seeing the peak of the activity. So what do Cairns-based sportsfishermen do for the other nine months of the year? Well, read on and you'll find out.

COASTAL COMMUNITY

I was fishing the coast of West New Britain in Papua New Guinea aboard the *Tsunami* when Capt Rob McCulloch started chatting about a new lodge he and his partner Ruth were going to be running just south of Cairns. Rob was telling me about the great sportsfishing around the inshore reefs and nearby islands as well as some reasonable creek fishing the area has to offer.

It sounded like a fun place to visit, so when Rob made the offer I didn't have to be asked twice. As the lodge is a female-friendly location I also decided

Clockwise from below: Grey mackerel for Robyn; The grey mackerel were great fun on light spin tackle and even better eating; Largemouth nanngai were a welcome addition to the pelagics; Robyn's first queenfish; Tim with a lure-eating shark; A colourful scaly mackerel.

to earn some brownie points by taking my wife Robyn, who was in dire need of a holiday and often complains that she never gets to go on any of my 'junkets'.

We made plans to visit in July which normally sees a very stable weather pattern over the Cairns area. Clear skies and calm seas are usually the norm for winter in the tropics so it was fingers crossed that this would be the case for our visit.

July sure came around quickly and before we knew it our Qantas 767 was taxiing to the terminal at Cairns airport. There was only one problem — it was raining and blowing a strong wind warning! What ever happened to stable winter weather?

Robyn and I were met at the airport by Capt Rob and his trusty crewman Damian Collette. Rob and Damian run the 43ft O'Brien *New Moon II* which is based in Cairns. We had originally planned to fish our way down to the lodge that afternoon and hopefully tag one or two of the juvenile black marlin that often frequent the inshore grounds during July and August. However, with the wind blowing dogs off chains we decided to take option two. The boys gave us the good news that we would be going down to the lodge by car rather than by sea due to the weather. I saw Robyn give a big sigh of relief.

The guesthouse is called Sunrise Beach Lodge and it is located at the small coastal village of Woolanmaroo South. The area is generally referred to by the locals as Russell Heads, as it is where the Russell and Mulgrave rivers meet before entering the Coral Sea.

One of the unique attributes of Woolanmaroo South is that it can only be accessed by boat. There are no roads

or noisy cars to spoil this picturesque locale. Fortunately if the ocean is too rough then you can access the Sunrise Beach Lodge via the river and this is what we ended up doing.

It's about a 45-minute drive south of Cairns to Deeral where Rob's dad runs a boat storage facility which is also the base for on-ground coordination for the lodge. From here we boarded one of the lodge's barra punts for a scenic 15-minute cruise down the Mulgrave River to the lodge with a bit of croc spotting along the way.

Woolanmaroo South is a quaint little community mainly comprising beach shacks that have stood the test of time. Apparently the blocks were surveyed way back in 1893 and most were owned by sugarcane mill workers that were working the area at the time. Most of the shacks have been passed down from generation to generation with very few blocks ever changing hands.

SETTLING IN

A tributary of the Russell River called the Anna Branch runs along the back of the houses and most have their own floating pontoons which makes accessing the area very user-friendly. Be warned though: there are a few sandflies with healthy appetites so bring your Aeroguard.

Sunrise Beach Lodge stands out among the fishing shacks; the lodge has just undergone a complete renovation. With the building situated among the palm trees right on the beach with views to the Frankland Islands and beyond, you couldn't ask for a more idyllic location.

Sunrise Beach lodge is ideally suited to two couples. It has two large upstairs



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and downstairs rooms both with their own bathrooms. If a few fishing mates don't mind sharing a room on bunk beds, the accommodation can actually sleep up to eight people.

The lodge is stylishly appointed with all the modern conveniences including telephone, internet and cable TV. The community even has its own water supply so a hot shower after a day at sea is not a problem.

Unfortunately the rain and wind persisted for the first couple of days of our trip and while Robyn was happy to lie in bed, relax and read a book, I had to go fishing. It was too rough to go offshore so I convinced Rob to don the wet weather gear take me up the creeks and try for a barramundi or a mangrove jack.

July is probably the worst month to try to catch barra as the water is quite cool and the fish are generally lethargic. This didn't stop me trying, but after a few hours and about 3000 casts we decided to call it quits. We were actually slow-trolling minnows up the Anna Branch and were about 50m from the pontoon at the back of the lodge when Rob's rod buckled under protest of a feisty little barra that took to the air before throwing the lure.

You had to laugh and I made sure I gave Rob a hard time: we'd been all over the countryside attempting to catch a barra when we could have done it standing on the back pontoon.

The next day the weather wasn't much better and the river was even dirtier from all the freshwater runoff. Rob had arranged for me to do a day of creek fishing with ex-barra-guide Peter Haynes. Peter is a bit of a legend in these parts and Rob is aiming to drag him out of retirement so he can do

some guiding at the lodge.

I hope the plan succeeds because Peter is an excellent guide and he taught me a lot about barra fishing that day. Although the fish were quiet, Peter was a laugh a minute and I had a great day regardless of the lack of fish. I did manage to catch three little barramundi under Peter's tuition — which is three more than he thought we were going to catch in those conditions! Now that I've learnt a few tips I can't wait to go back in the warmer months when the barra are really biting.

MACKEREL METHODS

The next day the weather finally settled down enough for us to get offshore so we headed out to fish the nearby wrecks and inshore reefs. We fished from the lodge's 8.6m Cairns Custom Craft, *Sanity*. The boat has a single diesel sterndrive which is ideal for crossing the shallow bar at the river mouth.

Rob invited along Tim Staudinger, better known as Bumpa-Bar Tim. Tim makes the Bumpa-Bar metal lures and I've never met a man so passionate or confident about his product. Bumpa-Bars are versatile lures that can be cast, trolled or jigged and according to Tim there isn't a fish that swims that you can't catch on one. I got to have a flick through Tim's photo album and, by the looks of it, there aren't too many he hasn't caught himself. Tim also has a bunch of records to his name.

The first place we stopped was the wreck of an old trawler, anchoring just up-current of wreck to work the Bumpa-Bars over the top. There was nothing glamorous about the technique: simply drop the lure to the

bottom and crank it back fast.

The method worked well and nearly every drop resulted in a mackerel of some description. School or doggie mackerel in the 2-3kg bracket were the most prevalent but we did also manage to boat a couple of six-kilo grey mackerel which went on ice for dinner that night.

Robyn nearly ended up with more than she bargained for when a big giant trevally tried to eat her two kilo mackerel mid-fight. She also managed to catch a little whaler shark on a Bumpa-Bar, which I think even surprised Tim.

JUMPING GIANTS

When we got bored of catching mackerel we headed out to Gibson Reef to chase a few GTs. Most of my GT fishing in the past has involved blind casting at bommies and along reef edges — generally a lot of hard work for very little result. Capt Rob, though, made us save our casting arms until he located a school of fusiliers rippling on the surface. It was amazing: every time we lobbed a popper or Bumpa-Bar in to a school of fusiliers it got nailed instantaneously by a big GT.

Most of the GTs were in the 10-15kg bracket and great fun on medium-spin tackle. You only got one shot at each school of fusiliers however, and if you hooked a fish you then had to move on in search of the next school.

I recall pulling up at one school and the second my popper hit the water it was engulfed. Tim followed my cast with a big Bumpa-Bar and made it a third of the way back to the boat with half a dozen big GTs head and shoulders out of the water after his lure before one finally caught it. The

"AT 30KG IT WAS THE BIGGEST SPANISH MACKEREL I HAVE EVER SEEN."





Anti-clockwise from left: Peter Haynes works the river mouth for queenfish; Walking the bank casting lures is a relaxing way to pass time; Sunrise's custom river punt; The 8.6m Cairns Custom Craft, *Sanity*, provided a great sportsfishing platform; *Sunrise Lodge* is located right on the beach and is a fantastic place to spend a week of fishing and relaxing.



double hook-up that ensued put anglers and tackle to the test but we were triumphant in the end.

RECORD HOPES

The next day was our last day of fishing so it was back out to sea in *Sanity*. We commenced our fishing day by trolling a few Halco Laser Pros around High Island which is just six miles from the lodge. High Island is renowned for its big Spanish mackerel but also for its commercial net fisherman so they get hammered pretty hard.

We didn't have to wait long for a strike and Robyn was happy to wind in her first queenfish. We continued to troll along the western side of the island and just before we got to the northwest corner a rod loaded up with a screaming run. We all expected it to be a big Spaniard but as the fight drew on and the fish got deeper in the water column we started to think differently.

Robyn has had some long fights in the past but at the 45-minute mark you could see the pressure was starting to take its toll. Not long after, we got a glimpse of the fish; it was a huge giant trevally and this gave Robyn the will to battle on. A little thumb pressure on the line and some good boat maneuvering by Rob saw us have the fish to the boat in just over an hour.

At 25kg it was a great capture on 6kg mono and at the time had me wondering if it was a record. We took a few photos then let it go. It wasn't until we got home that I checked the record book. Sure enough: it would have broken the female 6kg Australian record for giant trevally convincingly. Just goes to show you should always have a copy of the GFAA Journal

onboard the boat.

We headed further east and gave another trawler wreck a work over with the Bumpa-Bars and managed a few trevally and mock tuna but nothing to get too excited about so we continued out to Sudbury Reef. We trolled the reef edge in search of a big Spanish mackerel and although we had a couple of strikes from Spaniards, we failed to hook-up. Robyn succeeded in dragging another nice GT out of the bommies on 6kg mono before we decided to go and have a bottom bash so we could take home a feed of fish.

Tim had the marks for a little lump that regularly produces good numbers of reds (jargemouth and smallmouth nannygai) so we dropped the anchor and soaked a few baits. It didn't take long for the reds to come on the chew and we had a good feed of 20 nice fish to take home in no time.

HOMEWARD RUN

Rob still had one mackerel spot up his sleeve before we had to head for home so we re-deployed the troll gear and did a loop around the shipping marker on Stagg Patches.

As if on queue a rod loaded up and line screamed off to the unmistakable sound of a mackerel's first run. I picked up the rod and as Tim went to clear the gear his lure also got smashed in a massive surface strike.

My fish came to the boat pretty quickly and turned out to be a nice little Spaniard about 8kg. I looked over to see how Tim was going and couldn't believe the size of the massive Spanish mackerel he was connected to. We quickly got rid of my tiddler so we could have the gaff ready for Tim's

fish. Damian only needed one swipe with the gaff to find its mark but it took three of us to drag the massive fish over the covering board. At 30kg it was the biggest Spanish mackerel I have ever seen. It was also Tim's personal best, and yes, he caught it on a Bumpa-Bar.

With the photo shoot out of the way we headed for home and it was an awesome way to finish the trip. As usual time went all too fast and when we woke the next morning I couldn't believe it was time to leave the lodge already.

Considering we only got to fish outside two days we encountered some spectacular fishing. And I'm sure the creeks fire up in the warmer months also. Having access to three different boats for three different purposes really opens up your options at the lodge; no matter what type of fishing you like to do, they can accommodate you.

Rob and Ruth were the perfect hosts and really treated us like royalty. I had a hard time convincing Robyn to come home when she was just starting to get used to being waited on hand and foot.

Our experience at Sunrise Beach Lodge proves that Cairns isn't just about giant black marlin fishing. If you can't make it up there between September and November, don't worry, there is still plenty of great fishing to be had in the cooler months, and the weather is usually much more pleasant then as well.

For more information or to book a stay at the Sunrise Beach Lodge, contact Rob McCulloch and Ruth Henessy, tel (07) 4067 5022, email info@sunrisebeachlodge.com, or surf to www.sunrisebeachlodge.com.