

## Died And Gone To Heaven - On The "Pikkuw"

*By: Keith Graham.*

I've been fortunate enough to fish some of the worlds best known 'hotspots' but can honestly say that I have never experienced full on sport fishing action of the magnitude found on my recent adventure. It was as though time had stood still and preserved a fishermans valhalla where numbers of fish, of all species, were available in almost plague proportions. And if you think I am exaggerating read on and then make your mind up!

The Aurukun Wetlands lie fifty nautical miles south of Weipa. Access has been restricted over the years to many potential visitors, hence the reason the area is so pristine and virtually untouched. Several\_ charter operators have taken a select few clients to fish and explore this wilderness but now the area is due to be opened up by the local Aboriginal Council which in itself is a fascinating story.

Three years ago a grant was obtained to partially fund an eco friendly operation that would eventually consist of a 25 metre aluminium cat complete with two tenders ...all of which were to be in survey. The mothership would position itself strategically at the mouth of the various rivers and the tenders would zoom off with clients to explore untouched waterways not only for fishing but birdwatching, bushwalking and cultural experiences conducted by the local aborigines.



A number of skeptics said it would never materialise but now they have well and truly eaten their words as this operation is a reality, due mainly to the determination of a few passionate believers and charters are beginning to book in earnest.

The rate is approximately \$500.00 per person per day. That's great value as it includes all tackle, food, transfers and refreshments. Incidentally this operation is now a fully owned Limited Company that lease the boat from the Aurukun Shire Council and ongoing operations are funded by the Southern Trust who receive royalties from Comalco.

My workmate and fishing buddy Les Marsh and I arrived early May and were met at the airport by the Skipper of the 'Pikkuw', (which is Aboriginal for salt water crocodile), Wayne Brogan and his first mate and mad keen fishing guide Tim O'Reilly. These guys are full on enthusiasts for the project with a professional approach to their duties. We all hit it off from the start and couldn't wait to get going.

The three rivers that meet near Aurukun are the Archer, the Watson and the Ward. Our brief was to explore all three rivers from the mouth to the upper freshwater reaches checking out fishing opportunities and passing on any information gleaned. Both Wayne and Tim were with us most of the time plus a friend of Tim's from Melbourne.. .Bob Bentley who was there to fish and take photos.



First day we decided to fish the Watson River which is wide.. .deep and has heaps of rockbars. The river was dirty as heavy rain had been falling in the region for several weeks prior to our arrival but were we deterred??? Never! Wayne motored upstream in the tender for 22 nautical miles stopping on occasions to let us toss lures into gutters and creek openings but not much was happening. Then, as we approached the upper reaches larger creeks we spewing out crystal clear water creating a colour change where they met the main river. Often there were drops offs at this junction giving predators the ideal ambush point to snaffle up any baitfish swimming out from the creeks.

We tied on smaller shallow lures such as Gold Bullets and Leads jack lures .... the response was instant! Small mangrove jack savaged us...followed by archer fish.. .then tarpon and after a while working these areas barra began to chew, no doubt drawn in by the commotion. We had to work hard for our fish using the twitch and pause technique and it proved to us that even in extreme conditions this river could still produce.

It began hissing it down..just what we needed more rain! Our first day was interesting and an eye opener but.. .only a preview of what was to come.

The next morning the guys took us to the headwaters of a local feeder creek called 'Cockyella'. Their intention was to show us what a pristine creek this was and the native bee hives, built by Aurukun locals, dotted along the way. A top initiative and for those in the know 'sugarbag' is a real treat for aborigines and if you haven't tried it do yourself a favour ...it's delicious. Beyond this was their local swimming hole ...a waterfall and plunge pool they call 'The Spa'.

We jumped off the bank into this whirling white water and enjoyed a good soak before heading back to the boat ...feeling like a million dollars.

The Archer River is huge and is interspersed with islands just upstream of where it meets the Watson. We fished the main arm, which again was belting through at a great rate of knots, and managed to find a large back water. Anchoring the tender we tossed Gold Bombers and Leads Hijackers over the current and into the back water. Instant hook-ups.

Les was giving his all to a feisty barra around three kilos when I hooked up just after him on a slightly smaller model ...there were fish zooming in every direction as we tried to control them against the rivers fast flow. After eight barra, everyone of which felt at least twice it's size as they had their way with us in the current, we decided to move on. There's no doubt we could have stayed there and pulled a heap more but the enticing Archer had more to reveal.

One larger arm of this mighty river is referred to as the False Archer. It veers off between the Archer and Watson and is often mistaken for the main river by strangers. We motored slowly upstream in this waterway passing rockbars, open savannah plains and salt pans. At one point we saw six wild horses galloping off in the distance through floodplain waters. A closer look through the binoculars gave us a great view of this spectacle.

As the river narrowed waterlillies appeared on every bend and it seemed to become deeper.. .and much clearer. This was mangrove jack country if ever I saw it so the deeper diving lures came out like Storm Tundersticks and Rapala Shadraps. The first twenty casts were made on the run as Wayne slowly moved upstream against the current with no result, unless you count archer fish up to a kilo in weight.

Then, as the water turned almost a blackish hue of crystal clear I had a mighty hit. My thumb hit the spool on my Calcutta 150 loaded with twenty pound braid ...I could hardly hold this animal! At the last minute before it reached a snag pile I managed to turn it's head and began to slowly crank it back towards us. Les shouted..." It's a jack ...a huge jack". We gently cradle lifted him into the boat and wow.... what a sight. Fangs like a mongrel dog and lit up in anger. It went 1.85 kilos on the Boga Grip .... my best inshore jack for the year, the action was just about to hot up a notch or two!



Les scored three more mega jacks using a sinking Shadrap.... all I could manage was the odd strike and hook pull outs. A magnificent river with a healthy population of jacks from hell. We were well pleased with ourselves as Wayne took us back to the Pikkuw.

Life on the Pikkuw is real cruisey. The food is excellent ...there is a Plasma T.V, if you wish to see a DVD or check out your own footage / photos taken during the day. My favourite relaxation was to sit on the top deck with an ice cold beer and watch the awesome sunsets..or...use the binoculars to scope white breasted sea eagles or jabiru's catching a feed of fish. We also put the crab pots out every night and as you would expect there are bulk muddies in these parts. The best pot we emptied over our five day trip had seven legal bucks in it did we pig out on muddies or what?

Being Eco Friendly the boat has a composting toilet that works a treat .... no smell.. .and no effluent pumped out into the river ...a brilliant idea!

A trip to the Love River had been organised with a group of the local Aborigines. The objective was to 'Open' the river after a year long closure. I learned that when someone of importance dies in the Aurukun community they often close a waterway in respect and remembrance of that person, which is why there is no fishing there for the closure. Whilst they were conducting their private ceremony Wayne took us up the Love River to check out the local barra population - a day I will never forget!



Wayne was a professional barra fisho in his early days and knows the whole area like the back of his hand and remembered one particular creek mouth that always produced. We anchored at the mouth but again the water was so dirty Les and I just looked at each other and shook our heads, however we were here now so why not give it a try. I tied on a Tropical Rogue 3" and Les opted for his old faithful Leads Hijacker as our first casts hit the water the whole area erupted in a frenzy of foam. Bait scattered everywhere and we both hooked up on barra instantly.. .both feisty fish of around 3 kilos with bright yellow tails.

They went ballistic in this shallow creek mouth and tailedanced for all they were worth! As Les unhooked and released his at the rear of the boat I moved down to release mine, giving him the chance to stand up front and keep on fishing. We did this for almost two hours and released over sixty barra ranging in size from 2 kilo to 4.5 kilos. What an experience, then, to top it all off I latched onto a decent sized king salmon... .poor old Les had to make do with another barra.



Where in this tropical world can you experience fishing like that?? Amazing stuff, and yes we had to leave them biting as we wanted to check out some other flats areas.. .and guess what? They were all teaming with barra too, some of them taking our lures in between small mangrove shoots in less than a foot of water. Incredible, unbelievable and I doubt we will ever repeat that hot barra bite.

The next couple of days we explored the Ward river with similar results ...so many double hook ups we lost count. Then we fished the flats on a run out tide near the outpour to the Gulf. Bob and Tim had a particularly good night using 3" poppers with Bob's best fish, ( and the biggest barra of the trip), going 90 cms.

We tried live baiting with mullet and caught good barra, in between the countless catfish. We caught bream up to 1.2 kilos on lure.. flathead. .and Bob managed a saratoga using a Prawnstar lure. We did it all ...and enjoyed every moment exploring these incredible Aurukun Wetlands.

Our thanks to Tony Varnes who organised this trip and not forgetting the skipper Wayne and his trusty right hand and Tim for their hospitality and good sense of humour. I feel confident that this venture will succeed.. .and at this moment local Aurukun residents are learning the ropes so they can become more involved with the day to day operations of guiding and maintenance

If you wish to make enquiries regarding a booking ring Tony Varnes on 0407 575 618 or visit the web site at [www.aurukunfishingcharters.com](http://www.aurukunfishingcharters.com)