

## Princess Charlotte Bay, North Queensland

May 19, 2001

It was with boyish enthusiasm that the eight intrepid anglers boarded our light aircraft on Sunday morning for the one and a half-hour flight up the coast to Lakefield National Park. As with all light aircraft travel, this excitement was tinged with a little apprehension as I don't know anybody that is truly relaxed sitting in such a small flying machine.

Our trip was uneventful however, apart from the magnificent mountain and coastal scenery, and we were soon alighting at Musgrave Station.

"All roads lead to Rome" as they say and this little spot was a hive of activity. I must say that I was pleasantly surprised at the facilities available here, a runway, petrol station, kiosk / deli / liquor outlet / souvenir shop, as well as modern, clean showers and toilets. They are well trained at looking after the visiting angler, 4WD enthusiast and international travelers and offered a friendly smile while preparing our breakfast.

The next part of the journey seems to pass in a blur, the 1 ½ hour 4WD trip to the Annie River, a tributary of the much larger Kennedy was full of agonizing groans as we bounced over / through wash outs, sand flows and small water courses. Every little soak was greeted with excited cries of "Les, can we put our lure in there". Boys will be boys, and we hadn't even had a beer!



We were soon at the river's edge, unpacked the troupe, loaded the tinny and were on our way onboard the **MV Boomerang**, cruising downstream to meet the big expanse of water known as Princess Charlotte Bay.

During the summer "wet" season huge volumes of water drain from the Lakefield National Park, via major rivers, tributaries and creeks pour into this natural bay some 45 miles across to Bathurst Heads, and still the same distance and some to Cape Melville and the Great Barrier Reef.

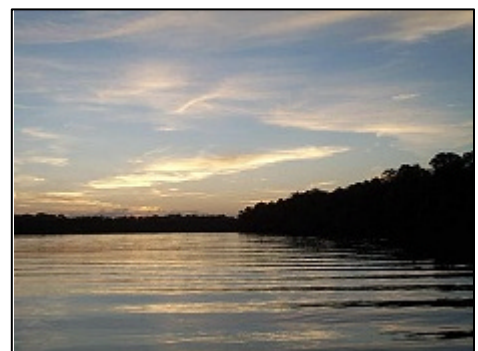


Although the weather was almost perfect upon our arrival, it was not intended to stay that way and the weather bureau's prediction of strong winds approaching by about Wednesday was the deciding factor in our fishing strategy. This region is

vast, angling opportunities are boundless.

From the magnificent tidal rivers and estuaries where barra, jacks, fingermark, salmon and queenfish abound – to the rocky headland where under right post wet season conditions monster barra to 40 lb harass hordes of bait schools – to the beautiful Flinders Island group where fishing options include fringing coral reefs, deep channels and beach fishing – to the northern extremities of the Great Barrier Reef some 30 miles further off shore.

You guessed it, our group decided that they wanted "reds" (the generic name given to the many prime coral dwellers) including the delicious coral trout, red emperor & nannygai to name a few. Unfortunately the tides were low and we had to wait a few hours at the mouth of the Kennedy before we could steam the five hours across the bay and out to the Reef.



First stop late that afternoon saw a mixture of bottom rigs and a few floating pillies hanging in the current. The bright orange balloon was a source of much comment and gentle ribbing, but when the reel growled and the

balloon popped – all eyes were on Andrew as he struggled to bring the bolting fish under control. After a prolonged and dogged fight the gaff went into one of the best spanish mackerel I have ever witnessed.

We never did weigh it but it remained the prized catch of the charter and you could not shut the lucky angler up – hell I hate gloating. But he did have every reason to do so, it was a magnificent fish and being one of the best eating fish it was duly dispatched to the kill pen, spiked and bled.

Have you ever been reef fishing and had trouble getting the hooked fish past the sharks, well this was not the problem however, we just couldn't catch anything but bloody reef sharks. Dozens of them, one after the other came over the side, tangling the lines and making it all too difficult for some of us. We had to escape into the cabin and have a cold beer or two.

We did manage to land a few smaller Mac's but larger specimens were torn to bits by large bronze whalers. In a swirl of carnage, three monster sharks dissected the hooked fish in an instant, don't fall over out here I mused.



Over the next few days we did manage an assortment of reef species, coral trout (although many were small) red emperor and sweetlip slowly kept the filleting process going BUT those bloody sharks were everywhere. As the winds gradually increased in strength, our early decision to target the reef species first was vindicated and it was reluctantly agreed to return to the bay proper and try our luck on some river fish.

We did have one memorable session fishing from the rocks at Bathurst Heads. These chunks of granite situated at the mouth of the bay are literally covered in the biggest black lipped oysters you have ever seen. Razor sharp however and not a place for walking without adequate and strong footwear. The tide had almost bottomed out and the bait schools, mullet, sardines, garfish and hardyheads were nervously scurrying along the deep gutter at the base of these rocks.

Guess what, barras, jacks, cod and trevally were also patrolling this gutter in search of easy pickings and although the session did not really fire up, ten barra, five jacks and a dozen small cod were landed. The sight and sound of two 40 lb

barra boof bait within five feet of our casting spot was something I can tell you. Once you got over the shock and realized they you had not been eaten by a monster, it was a thrill to see nature and hungry fish at work. This session proved a huge learning curve for the "reef fisherman - non lure casting" members of our party and the realization that four pound barra can break 15 lb mono in a flash if you don't pay attention to knots, leaders and doubles was not lost upon them. They did learn!

Back in the Bizant River, it was great to have calm water under the keel again and we anchored up for the night. We opted to stay here for at least two days and it was a pleasure to be inside a tidal river, protected from the 25 knot south east winds blowing outside and to partake in my favourite fishing style, casting minnow lures to snags.

That morning saw the four small aluminium dinghy's launched off the back of our mother ship and we split up to do our own things. My group only landed one fair size G.T. that pre lunch session but we saw enough to stir our interest. I personally missed at least five good sized barra and saw another dozen crashing bait as the tide turned and started to ebb from the mangroves, the afternoon session should be better.



After a hearty lunch, I must say that I believed the meals on this charter were just superb and not wanting at all, David Hannay and I headed out for some serious lure tossing. Of course a few did land in the mangrove trees but we managed to land a lot just right in the slot. David was rapped when he sized up a spot, put the lure in there and had a crashing strike from a good-sized mangrove jack. Working out where the fish might lie is half the fun of lure fishing.

On the falling tide more structure is exposed, and there is also less water for the fish to swim in. Hey presto – we had a ball landing barra, jacks, cod, bream and fingermark. I think we landed five small barra, but I lost another ten legal size fish, all due to lack of preparation. In my haste to prepare for the trip I did not check the drag on my baitcaster – it was jerky – and a dysfunctional drag on big agro fish that leap and change direction

quickly is a recipe for disaster. Having been a guide for over ten years myself you would have thought I would have known better – a hard lesson but one I shall never forget.

This oversight was to cost me dearly over the next few days. I estimate to have lost at least 20 prime specimens due to this fault alone. This problem is not evident when playing small fish but on the prized monsters (some over the 20lb mark) it was a telling, sad story.

My good friend David had a ball, landed his first ever barra which was duly photographed for his son Andrew, as well as jacks, cod and some of the biggest bream I have ever seen caught on lures. These fish were on snags meant to hold barra.



Other members of our party had decided to bait fish some deep holes near the mouth of the river. They too were not disappointed and upon returning to the **Boomerang** were all whoops and jeers followed by the not too subtle ribbing of their less successful friends. King & Blue salmon, queenfish, grunter, jacks, cod and trevally had all been landed on sporting 6 kg spinning outfits and the fillet total was mounting.

But, the desire to tangle with more “reef reds” was too strong for some members of our group and a decision was made to head back outside and try our luck. Once out from the protection of the river and the surrounding heads the prevailing winds buffeted our path. The **Boomerang** however handled it with ease and we were more than comfortable in the two metre seas – I think only one of our party had to say hello to **Bill!**

Drift fishing proved fruitless, anchoring up was a disaster – sharks and more sharks sprinkled with a few quality fish was all we could manage under the conditions and a quick decision was made to steam towards the relative protection of the Flinders Island Group. It was here, on the Thursday morning that we rendezvoused with the supply barge run by Sea Swift out of Cairns and it was all hands on deck to help load supplies for the next charter. They must have been heavy drinkers as at least 30 cartons of VB cans donned our decks!

The Flinders Island group offers one of the most protected waters on the entire east coast of Australia, it is a designated cyclone anchorage and it was a beautiful, unspoiled paradise. I could not wait to try my luck from the beach and after a late breakfast the deck hand dropped David and I on one of the most pristine beaches I have ever had the pleasure to fish from.



The water was crystal clear, the seas flat calm and the shore of the little bay had it all. There were rocky outcrops, white sandy beaches, a small creek mouth and even stands of majestic mangroves. Millions of small baitfish, sardines and hardyheads, were bunched hard up against the rocks and shoreline. Wherever you looked these fish were nervously hugging the shore and the intermittent crash of marauding predators was all that broke the silence.

The senses were primed, the scenery superb, the bait was nervous and the predators on the job. Due to the shallow, shelving nature of the foreshore a deep diving lure was a no no. I opted for a small chrome slice – just as a tester really – but on the third cast it was crunched by a good G.T. The hooks pulled out however (that drag

again) but I knew plenty more opportunities would come, this setting was just too fishy.

I walked along the shore, fished from the sand, the rocks and in between mangrove roots. All of a sudden a major crash immediately to my left and within ten feet actually startled me. Peering into the clear water I spied a school of trevally patrolling the shore no more than three feet from my perch. These fish were all about 6 lb, great sport on the light tackle I was using but how do I get them to eat my lure – they were too close – or were they.

I did an underhanded flick and landed the chrome slice about five feet away, just in front of the school and within a half a turn of the handle I was on. Bloody amazing stuff – sight casting to good fish at your feet is not the norm but hell I enjoyed it. I landed that beauty, carefully removed the trebles and sent her on its way. I was busted off on a much bigger fish under nearly identical circumstances, landed 16 fish of five varieties, saw some amazing natural feeding patterns in one of the most beautiful places I have even had the pleasure to wet a line in.

I was stoked and when the deckie returned to pick me up at 12.30 pm to return to the **Boomerang**, I had a grin from ear to ear and I can truly say that I was completely satisfied and at ease with the world.

Other members of our party had also done very nicely. Fishing from the bigger 4m dinghy they anchored in a deep channel near the tip of the island. Shelving rock, rubble bottom and fringing reef are all prime angling location and when they all come together in the one compact location – well, you should catch fish shouldn't you!

They had had a ball on coral trout, nannygai, sweetlip, cod, trevally and queenfish – they too received their fix and the fillet count was mounting.

It was with mixed feelings that we headed back for the early morning run into the Annie River, we were forced to anchor in the bay late that night due to the low tides and an early assault up stream was required. The party had seven boxes of mixed fillets, we had experienced some memorable fishing, viewed some spectacular scenery, cruised rivers, bays and ocean – wined and dined in good company.



The vessel however experienced some unusual, if not rare set, of breakdowns that did hamper the enjoyment of our trip and necessitating the call of a refrigeration mechanic from Cooktown. The owners of the Boomerang, Allan & Barbara Southwood have had over thirty years of boating experience and although under extreme pressure due to the circumstance handled the situation well. The vessel is quite comfortable, very seaworthy, normal facilities more than adequate and offers great value for money.



As the ten seater left the airstrip at Musgrave, my mind flashed back over the week's activities. The highlights for me were the sessions spent luring the Bizant, that monster spaniard on the first morning, fishing such a pristine beach on the last day our and Oh Yeah – trying

to eat the biggest most succulent fresh mud crabs you have ever seen. We caught over thirty of them in one day; all were big bucks and not one undersize. Makes you wonder about more populated regions doesn't it.

And the biggest disappointment – not taking a photo of those crabs as they came from the chiller and not preparing my gear properly prior to packing. You'd think and experienced guide would know better – I know, I'm a goose!

Regards,

Les