

Great Barrier Reef – 10th July 2001

It was a rather subdued bunch of anglers that boarded the **MV Aqua-cat** at 6:45 am on Tuesday morning. Whether it was the fact that all onboard had stayed up late to watch one of our Aussie hero's do battle at Wimbledon - it was a shame to see Pat Rafter lose another great contest - or whether it was just the early start. Who knows?

Our skipper Toddy (Peter Todd) was soon taking the "micky" out of everyone and had us sharpening our brain cells for the good humoured ribbing that was to be a feature of the day. Now Toddy loves nothing better than a quick-witted joust and his not-so-subtle ribbing always gets the clients on their toes. We were soon all buzzing with excited conversation as we headed out to the Great Barrier Reef to do serious battle with the reef dwellers.

The **MV Aqua-Cat** is the ideal reef boat. At 50 ft she is more than comfortable for the fifteen anglers on board and cruising at a comfortable twelve knots she would have us on the right spot in just under two hours.



The crew, Paul and Brian (Crusty) set about rigging the lines, cutting up fresh bait and generally ensuring everything was in place for the day. It's a shame Crusty didn't have a different name, Peter, Paul and Mary was much easier to remember!

Nicknames have always been a source of some amusement for us Aussies. Paul's is Gappa, because he never shuts up and Mary, er sorry Brian, is called Crusty because he never stops eating bread sandwiches all day long.

The conditions were ideal - a continuance of the excellent weather we have been experiencing since early July. A light 10-15 knot south-easter was making it very pleasant with no swell to speak of and clear skies – just perfect.

Toddy soon has us backing down on the anchor as we all gathered our tackle. Some with the standard 80-100 lb hand lines so productive for serious reef fishing, while other more sporty types chose light game tackle consisting of overhead reels matched to two metre rods and 30lb line. Now being a sporty type, yours truly opted for the rod and reel outfit.

9:00 AM 1st Stop. The anglers applied a mixture of cut fish flesh, squid and pilchard baits to the very sharp 8/0 hooks and the rig was dropped to the bottom 30 metres below. This was coral trout country and it wasn't even a minute before the first fish hit the decks. A procession of brightly colored trout, stripies, hussars and cod had the deckies constantly on the move. De-hooking fish, checking legal sizes and deflating the air bags of fish prior to release – it was all go. "What's your mark?" Paul asked – they use a series of little nicks and cuts to identify your catch and its your responsibility to know whether you have been allocated a "nick on nose" or a "one on arse" or even a "two on tail".

After over ten years of guiding it never ceases to amaze me that female anglers nearly always catch the most and best fish – bloody hell, it was happening again and boy did they and Toddy let the rest of us know about it.

It was probably a little over an hour before we wound up having landed 5 legal trout, released another 7 smaller ones, and pulled in dozens of unwanted species.

11:00 AM 2nd Stop. By now most of us had at least landed a few fish, some women had heaps, and we were getting used to the required technique. It seems we had to let the rig hit the bottom, release a bit of slack and wait for the bites. Upon feeling that first tell tale nibble, and resisting the temptation to strike at the slightest movement, let out some more slack, wait till it



came tight and then give it all you could using a hand over fist action. Phew, it was hard to remember all of that after only a few hours sleep the night before. Only 1 legal trout (several released), 4 fingermark, 2 perch and, again, plenty of little ones to throw back or use as cut bait.

12 Noon 3rd Stop. In a word, zilch! Toddy does not wait too long for action, and if it's not happening just get the hell out of there and move on to another spot. He's been charter fishing for years and is probably the most knowledgeable reef fisherman around these parts. He has literally hundreds of preferred spots and it wasn't long before we dropped anchor again. The short break gave us time to have lunch on the run; we couldn't waste precious angling time.

12:10 pm 4th Stop. We were now after prized "reds", that bunch of fish including big and small mouth nannygai, red emperor and of course coral trout, but being in deeper water of around 60 metres our prime targets were the former species. "The fish will be biting very timidly" yelled Toddy from the cabin. "Don't forget to give them a little slack, wait for the nibble, let the line come up tight and then get into them." It worked a treat and in no time I was into some magic fishing. Pumping and winding quality 3-4 kilo fish from those depths sure gets the adrenaline going.

Peering over the side to catch that first glimpse of colour, the bright red sides flashing in the sunlight followed by a quick haul onboard.

"What's your mark?" Paul screamed! It was almost mayhem and this little session offered the highlight of the day. Everyone had hooked up to quality fish and it was not long before the skipper called lines in.

These waters are Toddy's back yard; he knows them and their moods intimately. He will not let anglers destroy precious stocks by catching countless dozens of fish when the greed factor takes over normal sane people. It's a philosophy that is easily understood, and one which I can live with quite comfortably.

In just over twenty minutes we had landed 12 large mouth nannygai, 2 small mouth, a red emperor, a tea leaf trevally, 3 red spot emperors and 1 sweetlip – all legal sized fish - plus a few dozen fish of unwanted species and smaller sizes that were deflated and released. Not a bad effort! We

had one more brief stop for a few small trout and stripies, but it was time to head back to port.

Everyone was nice and relaxed – a combination of a late night, the fresh sea air, some great arm pulling action and a few beers needed to wash the salt from the throat. The journey back to the Marina passed smoothly and one very keen angler put out a bibless lure and scored a small spotted mackerel.

Back on the jetty the catch was laid out for all to admire. It was not until this moment that we all realized just how well we had done for the day. Paul the deckie called out the marks once more, "nick on nose", "one on arse" etc and we all had a bag full of fresh, prime eating reef fish to take home to the little lady. I would be allowed back into the house after all!

As previously noted, Toddy is one of the best, and the **Aqua-Cat** is a perfect reef boat offering comfort, stability and plenty of angler room.

During the day various skippers radioed in to check what was the go, one unnamed captain reported that at two o'clock they had still to land a legal size fish. It really **does** matter who you fish with.

