

Arafura action — sailfish, barra and much much more

By Mick Allan

You know you are in for a blinder of a fishing trip when within the first two minutes of fishing, your mate has his reel spooled and your own line starts disappearing at an alarming rate. Luckily, our guide quickly fired up the out-board and chased the offending monster spanish mackerel to allow me to retain my line and catch a great fish. In fairness to my mate he is a once a year fisherman and it all happened so quickly — when the dust

settled and the cobwebs cleared, he managed to hang onto most of his other catches. The scene was set for a very impressive week's fishing.

Eight very satisfied fishermen have just returned from the annual Greenmount Press fact finding/fishing trip. Instead of heading for the west Kimberleys as we have for the past seven or so years — we decided to try our luck in the Arafura Sea south of Groote Eylandt. Our charter boat

was the Iron Lady skippered by Dan Bergamo and his capable crew.

As described in the first paragraph — this part of Australia has the most sensational and varied fishing I have experienced anywhere.

We spent the first four days of the trip at the aptly named Billfish Bay.

The Iron Lady Wilderness Safari experience comes with a 28 foot game boat called *Saltshaker* plus four well equipped tenders. Our plan of attack at Billfish Bay was that four of us would fish for sailfish and the odd stray marlin for half a day on board *Saltshaker* followed by mackerel, GTs, coral trout, queenies, etc. the rest of the day in the tenders — swapping with the other four fishermen at lunch time.

CATCHING SAILS

For the first-timers to game fishing — which we all were — it soon became obvious that catching sailfish is a team effort. There are a number of elements you need to have working in your favour to get that elusive hook-up.

Firstly, an experienced, knowledgeable skipper and guides are essential — Dan and his capable crew took care of that. They were uncanny at spotting baitschools and reading the feeding birds directional



A very excited author (right) with guide little Mat and a beautiful Arafura Sea sailfish caught on the edge of a baitschool out the back of this 16 foot tender.

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habits — this is where the sailfish and marlin were.

Secondly, tantalising teasers. Teasers as their name suggests have no hooks and are designed to excite, bring up and keep fish on the surface. They are all different but have a common theme of a long line of shiny rattlers, bright plastics of varying sizes, brushes, corks and aquaplanes which splash, duck and weave on the surface imitating a school of baitfish. The bellyflap of a mackerel, stitched into a cylindrical shape, and skipped along the surface was also a successful teaser.

Thirdly, you need a quality rod and reel, rigged and ready to go with fresh bait such as live herring. A circle hook is used which sets well and in turn allows for quick releases — reducing the stress on the fish.

This is how it works

The game boat trolls a series of teasers set at different intervals behind the boat at about seven knots, concentrating around bait schools and working birds.

Here's the theory. The teasers excite the sails and attract them to the surface. As

soon as fish are sighted and chomping at the teaser, baits are dropped out the back and the teaser is pulled out of the water. With the teaser gone, the sailfish sees the baits skipping across the top of the water and goes after one of them as there are normally two fishermen on strike. If the teasers have raised more than one fish, they become very competitive and aggres-



The very comfortable Iron Lady with the gameboat Saltshaker at its side.

sive trying to get to the bait first.

The amazing part of all this is that it actually worked. After missing a few fish, our eight novice gamefishermen started to bring them to the boat. In four days we landed (and released alive) 31 sails and one marlin and raised about 60 others.

This is great action and double hook-ups are not uncommon. We also had a couple of tandem hook-ups where the one fish takes both baits leaving two fishermen on the one sail — some colourful debate would follow as to whose fish it was.

Voila! If everything goes to plan you should be thumbing the free-spooling reel to stop overruns as your sail heads towards the horizon with the bait. After about four seconds the skipper calls "Lock it up!" and you push up the drag lever or drop the bail arm, the circle hook takes hold, the rod starts to get a serious bend in it, the reel makes that howl we all love to hear and you have a sailfish doing spectacular aerobatics out of the water about 200 metres behind the boat — you are in fishing heaven

So far it has been a lot of concentration, a little bit of luck and huge rush when you know you have finally hooked up. Now

you can stand back and enjoy the ride for the next 20 to 60 minutes depending how feisty the fish feels. A foul hook-up can add another 20 minutes plus.

The arms start to feel heavy after about 15 minutes but that is replaced with adrenalin as you start to win the battle and your mates and the crew tell you to hurry up (they just want their turn on strike).

These fish put up a gutsy fight on 15 kg gear with lots of leaps and powerful long runs before you get them to the side of the boat. The trusty guide/deckie then steps in to help by grabbing the leader and bill and, with your help on the tail, bringing the sailfish on board for a quick photo and then back into the water for a few minutes recovery swim beside the boat before being released to fight another day.

One of your mates then steps up for his turn on strike and you watch it all unfold as a thirsty spectator.

The third dimension

All the above was pretty exciting stuff on the *Saltshaker* — but to add an extra dimension we caught quite a few sails out the back of the 16 foot tenders. This was sensational fishing.

When you are not in the game boat chasing billfish, you are in one of the tenders catching anything from mackerel to coral trout. If you happen to see the birds working a baitschool and you have some live herring rigged, you can race over and sight cast a bait to the sails “balling up” the baitfish.

Most times the freespool would take off — then it was here we go again with drag on, rod bending, reel howling and sails jumping. In one session we caught five sails and one marlin between two of us by sight casting — from a tinney. Another day saw us both hooked up on the same fish — there was never a dull moment.

Where to from here?

Well, as mentioned earlier, when not chasing sails we still had a great time catching a variety of very big fish.

The GTs give you and your gear a real workout. You just had to troll past any good looking structures out from the headlands of the many islands and it was hang on — if you didn't get busted off, 20 to 30 minutes later you finally landed one of the toughest fighting fish out there. After a couple of mammoth GT struggles one afternoon we were all looking for a bit of a break and give the arms a rest.

The shallow reefs in close were very



A few of the barra that made it to the dinner table.

inviting — with our guide on lookout duties we donned the snorkelling gear and had a memorable experience getting up close and personal with some of the locals. These reefs are up with the best anywhere in Australia.

Another afternoon saw us up to our elbows in queenies. Our guide took us to a rocky headland at the end of a long sandy spit which was alive with queenies and barracuda. Every popper was attacked with plenty of fish landed. This went on for about 45 minutes until the sharks arrived. With the sharks taking a chunk out of each catch we decided to give it away and head back.

This was the general theme of fishing for the four days we were at Billfish Bay — you name it and we caught it — and they were all big fish.

BARRA TIME

We left the billfish while they were still biting and headed across to Blue Mud Bay on the mainland for the final three days of our trip. This area has a reputation for good barramundi around the many shallow rocky points and inlets.

The bay lived up to its reputation with over 140 barra caught and released. The majority of these were around the 60–80 cm mark with the best fish of the trip coming in at 93 cm.

We had three first-time barra fishermen who had a ball. Everyone caught good fish with one novice catching 14 in one session and winning the coveted ‘Best Barra Fisherman’ of the trip. It should be mentioned that our guides were excellent at finding fish and turning novices into good anglers.

Most of these fish were caught by casting shallow lures such as Gold Bombers and B52s to exposed rocks in shallow

water. These lures were working with a very slow retrieval and a stop then twitch, twitch, twitch action — it worked a treat in the shallow waters.

Some barra were caught in water only centimetres deep with the lure landing nearly on top of them. These fish would strike as soon as the lure hit the water, engulfing it — making for solid hookups with the lure firmly inside their mouth, not on the side like most barra strikes.

The three days went very quickly and once again good guides make all the difference. They know the area and would put us onto the fish most times — if there were no strikes within half a dozen casts it was move on to the next spot. Once onto a productive area it was good for anything up to 30 fish between three of us.

All good things...

A great fishing trip has to come to an end. What makes a trip like this special is the very well equipped and comfortable boat, excellent cuisine provided by chef extraordinaire Freddy, the unrivalled expertise of the skipper Dan and his two knowledgeable guides (big Mat and little Mat).

This fishing experience is very accessible from anywhere in Australia with daily flights into Gove (Nhulumbuy) and Alyangula — the two ports where Iron Lady Wilderness Safaris can depart from.

There is nowhere else in Australia where you can catch sailfish until your arms ache and then toss lures down the throats of barramundi for a change of scenery. The Arafura Sea south of Groote Eylandt gets the thumbs up from eight very satisfied fishermen.

If you want to experience some sensational fishing give Dan Bergamo a call on 0408 762 276 or 0145 199 256.

