

East Kimberley carries up a cracker

By Mick Allan

It is that time of the year once again to reminisce about the Greenmount Press fishing trip. The trip this year — late September/early October — was one that will be remembered for maybe not all the right reasons. Some of these included gastro-nomic hurdles and blind faith in the top end mantra of 'she'll be right mate' — when it wasn't.

On the upside, the majority of the trip was sensational with great fishing, the best Kimberley gorge country ever, new culinary experiences that will be hard to forget, top end heli-fishing, rope climbing, remote aboriginal art sites and historical Koolama Bay.

This trip saw us leave Darwin harbour late on the Saturday night of the AFL grand final after some extensive bar work and prolonged negotiations regarding captancy, cooking, catering and charisma.

With negotiations completed we headed west to the mouth of the Daly River and Perron Islands where we tried our luck on some black jewfish. This area has a reputation for big jewfish being pulled out of the deep holes.

We anchored up over a likely spot and a few of us threw out some baited lines hoping to pick up a big jewy for dinner that evening. After a couple of sharks to clear the cobwebs — Casper was onto something big, feisty and not showing shark-like char-

acteristics. With plenty of coaching and some natural ability he finally coaxed a rather large, fairly tired black jewfish to the surface — dinner was looking pretty good.

But — as most fishermen know — the battle royal is not over until the fish is landed. Our deckie decided in his wisdom to use the gaff instead of the net: he missed on the first shot — Casper was looking very anxious. The deckie's second shot did the unthinkable and cut the line — our fish dinner disappeared into the depths which is where Casper thought the deckie should have gone as well. After some liquid cajoling all was forgiven.

KING GEORGE RIVER

With the wind starting to pick up we decided to head straight up the East Kimberley coast to the King George River where we knew there was plenty of shelter and good fishing.

This area has many attractions besides the crabbing and fishing. Some of these are gorges as good as you will see anywhere, a challenging rope climb up one of the dry waterfalls, then walking to great aboriginal art sites, and Koolama Bay at the mouth of the river which is steeped in World War II history.

We were there in the dry, but it was still quite impressive where the river abruptly meets a 100 metre sheer rockface — it would be a sight to behold in the wet with the King George Falls in full flow.

The rope climb is up the north arm of the river. It is reasonably challenging but once up the top the view is well worth it. From the top we walked for about three kilometres up the creek bed finding a number of aboriginal art sites including Bradshaw paintings. There were quite a few fresh water rock pools along the way which made for a refreshing dip.



The fish of the trip caught by Lloyd O'Connell in the mangroves of the Berkeley River.

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DOPE ON A ROPE?

On the way back down the rope climb our grip was kept nice and tight — the added incentive for this was a rather large salty who was cruising in the pool below us.

We did some internet research of this area before we left and sourced lots of helpful information from www.kimberley-cruising.com.au then go to the Kimberley Rivers button.

Koolama Bay on the western side of the entrance was where the survivors from the ship Koolama landed and where we anchored for our stay in the area. The Koolama was bombed by Japanese planes in February 1942. The captain beached the badly damaged ship on a sandbar at the mouth of the river and the passengers and crew took to the lifeboats finding their way to Koolama Bay where there was fresh water and shelter. There is a great book about this little bit of history called *The Koolama Incident* by Bill Loane.

The beach in the bay was a great camping spot but be aware of the resident croc who only came out after dark.

Back to the fishing — the river and its tidal run-offs produced some nice barra but not overly plentiful with the biggest being 68 cm. The sandbars and headlands at the mouth fired up on the tide changes with some great sight-fishing for queenies and GTs.

When leaving the King George on our way south to the Berkeley we stopped at Lesueur Island about 15 kilometres north of the mouth. The island is surrounded by reef which proved to be very productive with nice size coral trout, queenies, mackerel, GTs and other reefies being landed.

OFF TO THE BERKELEY RIVER

After an afternoon cruise down the coast we arrived at the mouth of the Berkeley River — or should I say what looked like an obvious river mouth to the untrained eye. When boating in this area things are not always what they seem — we had actually cruised straight past the mouth and were heading away from our destination. After close consultation with the GPS and some delicate manoeuvring through sandbars we found the mouth and headed up river.

Once again we were not disappointed — the Berkeley was full of Kimberley character with high, wide and narrow gorges. There was one spot in particular worth a mention where a coliseum-like opening in the side of the gorge has formed what is locally known as the amphitheatre. Even though the mouth was full of sandbars, and a navigator's nightmare, once inside it was smooth sailing with plenty of deep anchorages further upstream.

With plenty of fish-producing creeks and run-offs we were kept on the go. Barra, jacks and queenies all gave us a good workout with the fish of the trip caught towards the mouth of the Berkeley. It was an 86 centimetre barra caught by sight-casting into the mangroves. The fish then got heart rates racing by making a beeline back into the mangroves and snags — some exemplary boating and rod skills by the O'Connell brothers saw the barra safely in the esky.

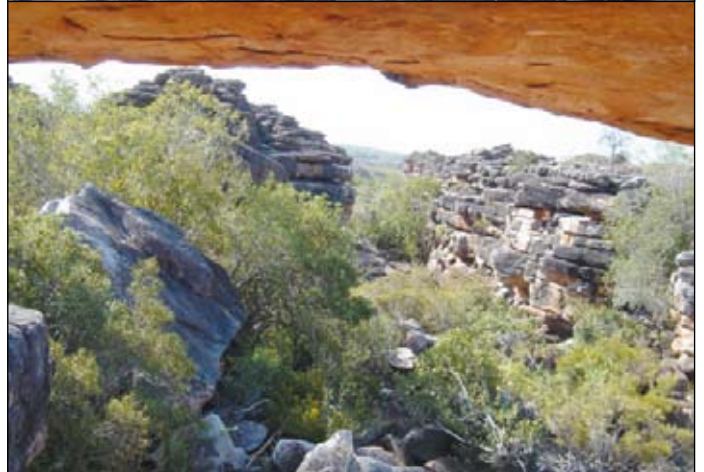
With no barriers on the river we could take the tinnies all the way up to where the fresh runs in — this was a great boat ride with tall majestic rock formations lining the river all the way.

The last day held the highlight of the trip. We had a change-over group coming in — they landed in choppers on the beach at the mouth of the river. The choppers then ferried us up river to some normally inaccessible freshwater pools. We caught more barra and jacks in idyllic surroundings as well as seeing the country from a different angle.

The next morning saw us board the helicopters for a memorable sight-seeing trip to Kununurra — the first leg of our trip home.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article the gastronomic hurdles we faced — suffice to say when surrounded by fresh barramundi and mudcrabs, curried mince and gherkins on crackers did not ring our bells — dinner or otherwise!

This trip was made all the more enjoyable with the help from the boys at Charlton Tackle'N'Bait — give them a call on 07 3818 1677 for all your fishing needs.



From the top: The challenging rope climb in the King George; the great views from the top; and, the three intrepid trekkers, Mike Goldman left, author Mick Allan and Brian O'Connell.

(Photos Mike Goldman)