

The Lure of the Daly River

By Mick Allan

My colleagues and I were fortunate enough to be part of a team which was recently invited up to the Daly River NT by Preston's Inland and Coastal Fishing Charters for four days chasing and hopefully landing plenty of barra.

We weren't disappointed. The river was still up (12 metres above the Daly River crossing) from the many cyclones this season with the locals experiencing the biggest wet they have had in many years. This slowed the fishing a little but enhanced the scenery and wildlife no end. The amount of water running off the floodplains would have filled many a farmer's thirsty dam in no time flat. The quantity and varied species of birdlife and wildlife that make this river home was well worth the trip alone.

Go with a guide

One of the many highlights of the trip was to be guided by Preston and Ben who know the river and fishing spots like the

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The author with a nice barra — guide Ben looks on.

inside of their tackle bags. No matter how many times you go fishing there is always room for improvement and Preston and Ben coached the best out of us which in turn resulted in more hookups and fish in the landing net.

Things like keeping the lure in the strike zone longer and jiggling the lure a bit differently to give it a more enticing action made all the difference.

A bit of history

For those who have never been to the Daly it is a big diverse river with a catchment area of over 52,000 square kilometres. This equates to massive amounts of fresh water coming off the ranges and floodplains into the river after the annual big rain events created by the cyclones and monsoons.

These conditions make it ideal for barramundi fishing as the food chain suits their feeding habits. The small baitfish gather where there are run-offs and feeder creeks to feed on the small insects and nutrients flowing in from the floodplains. In turn the barra who are basically a lazy fish sit in the eddies and snags where these fresh water run-offs and feeder creeks enter the main river having a great old time gorging themselves on the plentiful baitfish.

THE FISHING

When conditions are like those I have just described the fishing is sensational. Big healthy salt water barra really hit the turbo button when caught with a lure in these conditions.

On our first day's fishing our guides took us towards the mouth of the river where they suggested we have a few casts at a small feeder creek. A couple of us hooked up on our first few throws which impressed us no end — although they were only very juvenile barra.

This was to set the trend for the rest of the day with the fish getting bigger as the day went on.

One memorable catch for me was when we were fishing the mouth of a fair sized feeder creek and next minute I'm on to a nice size barra who was really turning it on — it didn't take us long to see what was sending it ballistic. A shark was right up his clacker and after a couple of minutes was attached firmly to its tail.

The barra had lost its sting by now but the shark was not letting go of something this good. After quite a while I got the



Sit back and enjoy was the order of the day as we cruise to a new fishing spot.

barra to the side of the boat with the shark still firmly attached and our guide Ben used some great moves to net them both in one swoop — it was a hell of a lot of fun.

The rest of the day was spent fishing the river, lurching under shady trees up pristine creeks and finally heading back to our digs at the Daly River Hotel with a cold beer in hand to prepare for the next day's outing.

Perron Islands

Day two saw us up before dawn as we had a long trip ahead of us out to the Perron Islands. They are a couple of kilometres off shore from the mouth of the Daly.

The fishing here was mainly over shallow reefs and headlands. Our tally was a mixed bag with everything from barramundi to queenies to trevally and so on.

These islands are well worth a look — not only for the fishing but a walk around turned up some interesting sites. Some of our party walked to the top of a small hill on one of the islands where there is still evidence of a World War II spotters' lookout. It would have been a hot and lonely existence watching and waiting for the enemy to appear.

From the top of the same hill we could see quite a large fresh water billabong which we also explored.

We fished the mangrove creeks at the river mouth, on the way back. The barra provided us with multiple hook-ups — with the barra winning most of them as it wasn't far to get back into the mangroves.

Queenies and trevally also provided some excitement on the mudflats. They were chasing baitfish all over the place with baitfish landing in the boat on a couple of occasions.

We finally headed back to the pub for the night. It is quite an experience to travel on the river in the dark. Both Preston and Ben's boats are fitted with powerful head-

lights which light up the river very well.

One side effect is that the bright lights attract zillions (not millions) of insects. You need to wear special goggles and cover your mouth and nose because you are travelling at about 40 kilometres per hour — and when the insects hit, they stick. A good shake-off when you get off the boat and you are as right as rain.

Day three saw us back down the river fishing some of the creeks we missed on the first day. For some reason the fishing was not as good as the first two days. It was not from

a lack of trying — we all fished hard, catching a few each with a couple ending up on the barbie back at the pub.

One thing I did notice about the river was that we only caught barra with a couple of the aforementioned sharks thrown in. This is because of a strictly patrolled closed season and a no-fish zone which makes the river a great breeding habitat for barramundi.

The river dropped a couple of metres overnight so we decided to head upstream for our last day. The fish were feeding on the surface of the water at most run-offs we stopped at. They took a bit of enticing but with a few lure changes we started to pick them up on shallow divers. This was exciting stuff with plenty of visual strikes.

As we had to be back in Darwin to catch our plane home it was an early finish to the day.

One option we didn't take up was fishing with live bait. This was popular with the locals as the river was falling. It consisted of floating a live bait about one and a half metres below a balloon float.

The finer points

The beauty of a trip like this with Preston and his crew is that they will pick you up from Darwin Airport and have you fishing that afternoon, provide you with a number of excellent accommodation choices, all fishing tackle, show you a lot more than some fantastic fishing, great lunches and then have you back in Darwin whenever your trip finishes — basically you just have to turn up.

My advice is that if you get to Darwin — give them a go!

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