

Great Australian Bites

Buckle up: some of the world's best sports fishing is found in the Northern Territory

Words Ivan Smith

Here's how to get on the right side of a Northern Territorian.

We sit in a small fishing boat not far off the coast; the water is warm and inviting and I ask the skipper if I can jump in for a swim. He doesn't even look up from the hook he's baiting. "Yeah, no worries," he says. "If you don't mind the current taking you away." Righto. "Or the jellyfish stinging you." Uh-huh. "Or the crocs getting you." Yup. "Or the sharks eating you." OK.

The Territory is a beautiful place filled with horrors, of which the residents are secretly proud. In their understated way, they want you to get how awesomely serious it is. How life here is bigger and nastier than whatever soft-arse place you come from. Most of all, they want you to fish.

There are more concrete boat-ramps per head here than anywhere else in the country. The Territory is the place where they actually stopped commercial fishing in many rivers and harbours, so ordinary Joe could take on each fish one by one. You walk into any pub, cafe or hotel and there are shots of grinning anglers clutching outsized sea-life to their chest, like someone carrying a suitcase through a turnstile. Only happier. You can do this, is the message. All you have to do is get up, really, really early...

Spick and span, and full of expensive vehicles sprouting aerials, Darwin's Cullen Bay Marina at 6am is the land of the dead. Paying customers drape themselves over benches and wait for the coffee to stop burning their lips. Chirpy deckhands cart boxes of bait on board, then cart you on board. Blink and you're out through the lock in a 4m swell. Blink again



Catch 22: A happy punter holds up another one.

and the sun's up. Suddenly you feel more alive than dead.

Let's not mince words: we are in one of the world's premier fishing spots. The place is coming down with fish: giant trevally, Spanish mackerel, red emperor, golden snapper, coral trout... all of them willing to be your suitcase. King of them all is

the barramundi. The famed barra is a huge, aggressive, smart beast, which lurks lazily in the easy picking of river estuaries. Get one of those on your line and you'll know all about it.

With the sun burning a hole in my hat and the rolling boat parked in seasickness jail, the catch of choice today is a black jewfish. This big, solemn battler is hauled in from 40m down, making every run in a straight line, until it lies exhausted on the surface wondering what the hell. Gaffed over the side, the jewfish hangs spitting and puffing, all 15kg and 1.2m of him, its expanded insides lolling from his mouth like Jabba's tongue.

Fishing here is a sophisticated, streamlined enterprise. There are 12 paying customers on board, and all want to go home with stories. The crew will bait your

hook (pilchard will get your classy fish, rubbery squid for those who'll eat anything), untangle your line, serve you lunch and do everything except dive in and tickle it out of the sea for you. If nothing's biting, it's quickly on to the next site, where sonar equipment further puts the odds in your favour. Needless to say, the only thing I catch is a little Spanish flag, which looks as surprised as me at this turn of events.

Spanish flags - otherwise known as stripeys - are the idiots of the sea. They're like the kid at the back of the class who chews glue. Only, rather more damagingly, they chew every piece of bait they ever see. On the second day, off the coast of Dundee south of Darwin, we can't move for them. Other fish can barely get a look in for all the stripeys. One finds itself reeled aboard for a third time, at which stage it looks like the pub dartboard.

Dundee is part of the coast that hasn't been tamed yet. It's a two-hour drive from Darwin, or for a collective price of \$750, you and your mates can charter a 20-minute flight across rugged country, where bushfires still burn in untended glow-worms, a long way from any road.

I say "mates" advisedly, because this is dedicated fishingville. Fly-by-nights and tag-alongs could find it all a bit gritty in Dundee right now. There's a local store and cafe, a few accommodation options, and if you're lucky you'll get to stay in the JimLori airconditioned home-stay. It's the kind of town where the mayor's the guy who tractors your boat down to the sea, and the skipper, inevitably, is called Mick (you see, from Dundee...). But mainly you're in Dundee to charter a small, fast boat, point your rear at the coast and head for the horizon at 60 knots with a fishing rod in your hand.

Here, 50km out, with no sound but the clank of the anchor chain, you can hook your half-pilchard through its glassy eye and unspool your line through fathoms of bottle-green sea until the sinker bounces softly against the seabed with an unseen cloud of dust. Reel it back half a notch, and you're ready for the stripeys, those morons.

Barra Boys

Dundee is good for both blue-water sports fishing and estuary barra fishing, but if you're going mainly for the barra, you've got to be careful when you make the trip. Sometimes the Finnis River tides are too big and muddy for the fish to see your lure, making them harder to catch. Phone ahead before making the trip, or have a look at local tide charts. Call Anglers' Choice on (08) 8928 0370 or Northern Territory Tourism on (08) 8951 8471.



Feeling towy: Getting ready to fish off Dundee.