

Arnhem Land



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Having the opportunity to fish and explore northern Australia's most remote and rugged coastline is something many of us can only dream of. After spending three months on some of the dustiest and roughest roads around, Emma George discovers a sportfishing paradise worth the millions of corrugations to get there.

Visiting Garig Gunak Barlu National Park in Arnhem Land is a mission. Gaining permits, packing sufficient food, water, fuel and enough tackle for a week of remote fishing and camping requires thorough planning.

Travelling with our three young boys meant lugging even more gear and after getting our team of grandparents and family to the far north, we had to find some good fish!

We had been warned the road was rough and corrugated, but after traversing Cape York, we wondered just how bad could it be?

Permits in hand, at low tide our three-car convoy easily navigated the crocodile-infested East Alligator River at Cahill's Crossing. Once in Arnhem Land, none of us were prepared for the breathtaking beauty and serenity we encountered just a few kilometres away from the tourist haven of Kakadu.

The Arnhem Land escarpment dominated the landscape and we watched in amazement as a whistling kite sailed above the car, proudly displaying a barramundi freshly plucked from the Gunbalanya floodplains. After such a great wet season, water was everywhere and although we would have loved to drop a line, strict guidelines prevent visitors fishing or even stopping their vehicles prior to reaching Garig Gunak Barlu National Park.

Having heard about Injalak, which has some of the oldest rock art in the world, dating back 50,000 years, a second permit was required and a guide to show us the art sites. The rock art was incredible, with many pictures depicting large barramundi; it appeared we were heading in the right direction.

After a detailed cultural education, it was time to tackle the 260km journey to Black Point Ranger Station and discover for ourselves just how rough the road really was. Only kilometres into the trip, we came across a car towing out a boat trailer in need of a spring. Selfish perhaps, but due to self-preservation we

couldn't give up one of our precious springs, as we were just beginning the rough ride in.

Trying to source a hire company lenient enough to allow one of their boats to be towed to Cobourg Peninsula was another story, but I finally found Hooked Up Boat Hire who provide reinforced trailers and send anglers off with a bunch of spares for the notorious trip. Little did I know, we would need every spare plus junk found on the edge of the road, just to make it home.

The trip was arduous enough, and yes it was rough, dusty and corrugated, but almost better than what we expected. It took us over five hours by the time we made several trailer repair stops, replaced a spring and righted the boat after it almost rattled off the trailer.

Crossing the numerous rivers on the way to Garig Gunak Barlu was heartbreaking, with barra jumping and boofing, almost taunting us to throw a lure at them. We resisted the temptation and made it to the campground just before nightfall, settling into a nice grassy site, complete with shade sails, aluminum tables and an amenities facility with a solar hot water shower.

You could imagine our delight when the Ranger appeared on the first morning to say hello and check our paperwork, informing us we would be the only campers in the park for the next few days. He generously offered the use of a welder to repair a small amount of damage to the trailer — apparently it gets frequent use from visitors towing trailers, as does the freight company airlifting in spare parts!

The only downside was a friendly reminder about the crocodile crossing about 400m from our camp, where a couple of big crocs come out of the billabong every couple of days to catch a turtle and return back to the swamp. After inspecting the size of the slide marks, we didn't hang around the crossing too long.

After being on the road for two months, traversing from Cairns to Cape York, The Gulf and Darwin, living in our camper and moving every couple of days, our three boys were looking forward to seeing their grandparents and staying in the same place for a whole week.

As you can imagine, what *not* to take was the biggest discussion point prior to our departure, but fishing gear was exempt from the streamlining process as we carted a huge bag of tackle, lures and 14 rod and reel combos — most of which were for Garig Gunak Barlu and some game fishing gear for Exmouth on our way home to Perth.

Trying to fish the many streams and beaches of Cape York and The Gulf with just Ashley and the three boys was a struggle. We didn't have a boat and I was worried about crocs, particularly with a one-year-old who jumps in the water at any opportunity.

Most of the time, I carted Bailey in his carry pack as I threw lures and kept a close eye on our other two boys casting their soft plastics. I was very much looking forward to fishing at Garig Gunak Barlu, where I had grandparents to help and a boat to get out on the water.



Below: Be prepared for breakdowns, especially if you are towing a trailer into Garig Gunak Barlu National Park. Take plenty of tools and spares, plus someone who knows how to use them



Even on the road signs the crocodiles seemed to be smiling, and by the size of the slide marks at this crossing, it appeared they were getting well fed.



Check the tides before crossing the East Alligator River into Arnhem Land, as it's full of big crocodiles and this is one place you don't want to get stuck.





The Rocks

Tides are critical when launching and retrieving from the boat ramp, as there is no access during low tide.

Fortunately, our trip coincided with favourable tides, but after setting up camp the first morning, we had little water to launch the boat in, so decided to hit the rocks near Smith Point.

Eager to use my new Ryobi and Quantum Boca combo, I was hoping for a GT on its maiden run. Rigged with a trusty red and white Halco popper, first cast had a follow and after a couple of bloop on the second, I was on! Eager to land the first fish, I was obviously a bit too enthusiastic and pulled the hooks.

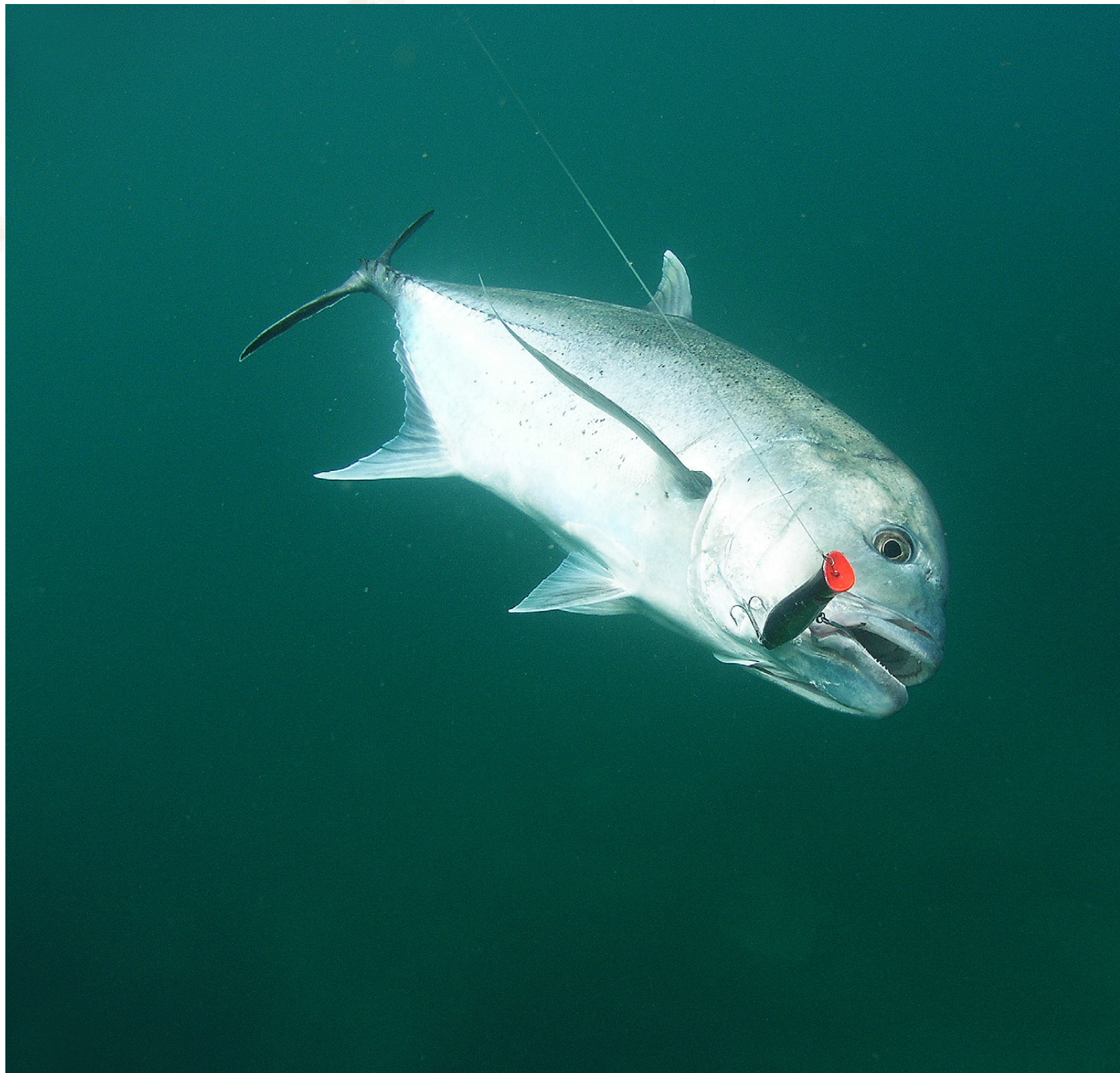
Fishing from the next crop of rocks, Ashley was also getting a fair bit of interest and within minutes he landed the first fish of the trip, a promising GT. It wasn't long before I christened my new combo with another GT — not a monster, but it was a good sign of things to come.

With grandparents back at camp looking after the boys, we were enjoying the freedom of carefree fishing as negotiating the razor sharp, oyster-encrusted rocks is something you don't want to do with little kids.

Poppering for GTs is one of my favourite fishing pursuits and we were keen to show my brother-in-law David the visual and physical thrill of landing these awesome fighters. He was dedicated to the cause and after a few tips on how to create a good 'bloop' and the importance of letting your popper sit for a second or two in order for the fish to grab it, he was soon poppering like a pro.

With the rising tide forcing us to higher ground, we had caught a number of fish — GTs, gold spot trevally, queenfish and even a shark — but David was yet to score. As we didn't want to get washed off the rocks, he sent out one last almighty cast and had a good fish follow. He slowed the retrieve and sure enough the GT took it like a stream train. David ended up catching the best trevally of the day and we were happy to introduce him to the exhilaration of popper fishing.

GTs are usually found around reef structure and current lines, and these beasts probably offer one of the hardest fishing contests in the tropics.



Fishing the rocks at Smith Point during low tide provided non-stop action. David connected to one of the GTs that were present in plague proportions.



It took only minutes before the author caught her first fish of the trip, a GT from the rocks at Smiths Point.



ABOVE and BELOW: Coral trout loved the banana jigs, but unfortunately so did the sharks. It wasn't long before every one we had was missing in action.

Boating

Exploring new ground and the fishing opportunities associated with it is very exciting, especially when in a remote area without crowds of anglers and pressured fish. The only disadvantage is when you go in blind without marks, as it can take some time to actually figure out where the fish are.

Armed with a marine chart, we circled areas that had all the right ingredients (changes in depth, structure in the water, reefs and so on) and as we arrived in September, we were lucky the wind had died down sufficiently to visit some of the offshore grounds.

It didn't take long to find fish and dinner was never going to be an issue as there were almost unlimited amounts of tricky snapper — which we re-named “not so tricky snapper” — as they seemed to be in plague proportions just about everywhere.

Dropping down banana jigs was very successful, catching coral trout, emperors, the odd pesky shark and more not-so's. However, with only a handful of these jigs in the tackle box, it didn't take us long to exhaust our supply and



ABOVE and BELOW: If you love a bit of light tackle GT action, then Garig Gunak Barlu is definitely worth the trip.

we decided to troll and see what else was around.

Although the trolling was not as dynamic as we hoped, it was our first forage in unfamiliar ground and we were pretty happy with some nice fish for dinner and a good sized Spaniard.

Casting poppers and soft plastics around shallow bommies and rocky outcrops produced any amount of trevally. There were so many around that they followed each other to the boat, schooling around the motor, and all we had to do was drop over a soft plastic and we had fish fighting for our lures. There were multiple hookups, and with some ducking and weaving between the anglers, we managed to minimise severe tangles.



Garig Gunak Barlu



The ruins at Victoria Settlement have withstood cyclones and the harsh environment for over 170 years. These stone chimneys at the married quarters were constructed with ironstone, which was quarried on-site and used extensively throughout the settlement.

Victoria Settlement

While our efforts predominantly focused on near-shore sportfishing and fishing from the rocks, Port Essington provides sheltered fishing options for species such as mangrove jack, barramundi, queenfish and golden snapper. A week was nowhere near long enough to explore the plentiful angling options.

Victoria Settlement was established in 1838 and is a 25km boat ride from Black Point Ranger Station. Although the settlement was abandoned after just ten years due to disease, lack of supplies and poor trade opportunities, it is well worth visiting.

Approaching the settlement, we saw numerous queenfish chasing bait schools and the area was teeming with fish life. We were grateful that the local tour guide allowed us to use his dinghy to ferry everyone from our boat to dry land. Only the day before, David had entered the water after anchoring the boat for the 10m sprint to shore, only to be circled by what we believe was a large crocodile. It reaffirmed just how careful you need to be in

the NT, as crocs are an ever-present danger.

Walking the 3.7km circuit around the ruins, you truly get an appreciation for the hardships the locals would have faced. We enjoyed a peaceful picnic with the kids, having the whole of Port Essington to ourselves.

Stopping at Record Point on the way home was an amazing experience. Fish were everywhere; hundreds of rays cruising the shallows, and schools of queenfish and trevally were darting from one bait school to another. Austin and Cooper were kept busy casting soft plastics on their little minnow rods, while Ashley and I exhausted nearly every lure and popper we had in the tackle box.

We had never seen such activity, yet despite spending an hour casting into an aquarium full of sportfish, we couldn't catch a thing! It was almost as if there was so much bait in the water and the fish so well fed that they just weren't interested in lures. It was an incredible place and we left feeling overawed by the experience, despite the lack of any bent rods.

Caiman Creek

Ocean Loop Drive is one if the few roads you are allowed to travel in the park. It starts at the campground and follows the eastern coastline, finishing at the main road and track to Caiman Creek.

There are so many fishy looking outcrops on this strip of coast, it was difficult to know where to stop for a few casts. Actually, it didn't really matter, as everywhere we tried there were hungry trevally and queenfish eager to devour our soft plastics and poppers.

We found fishing Caiman Creek was best at low tide, as you can access more areas and the deeper channels. The sand made it easier to scan for crocodiles and there were plenty of queenies chasing bait schools around the creek mouth. Even the sea eagles were catching their fair share of fish.

Austin caught a little queenfish and the boys enjoyed collecting hermit crabs, sea snails and splashing around in small pockets of water. It was one of the few places I was comfortable to allow them to wet their feet, as we had seen crocodiles on the beach near camp.



Soft plastics were irresistible to the local queenfish and trevally population, although most were shredded within a few casts. David caught this queenie at one of the rocky outcrops not far from camp on Ocean Loop Drive.

Home Time

Some visitors arrived towards the end of the week, and we no longer had the luxury of the park and ocean to ourselves. It was great while it lasted and after six days of fishing and exploring, it was time to start the arduous task of packing up and the big undertaking of towing the boat back to Darwin.

We left at 8.00am, allowing plenty of time to meet the low tide at Cahill's Crossing. Sure, we expected a few issues, but none of us envisaged a ten-hour trip! Between broken springs, shackles, removing the brake line and numerous other repairs, we finally made it to the Crossing and were escorted across the East Alligator by a few big crocs swimming alongside the car and boat.

Once in phone range, I made a call to Peter from Hooked Up Boat Hire to advise we would

be returning the boat very late and to let him know the amount of damage his trailer sustained (we even lost the number plate somewhere in the corrugations). He was very accommodating and didn't charge us any extra; just took the handful of broken bits and was pleased we had such a great trip.

Even if we had our own boat in Darwin, I think I would rather hire one than put it through that tortuous trip.

Getting a boat into Garig Gunak Barlu isn't easy, but with only 20 vehicles permitted in the park at any one time, you can be reassured you won't be battling crowds.

After all the planning and effort, would we do it again? Yes — in a flash! Next time though, we would plan to stay at least two weeks and bring double the amount of spares, just as much fishing gear, and a few more jigs. **F**



The mouth of Caiman Creek was easy to fish at low tide and Austin was successful using a soft plastic resembling the bait species present. Despite its size, this little queenfish performed jumps and flips, much to Austin's delight.

