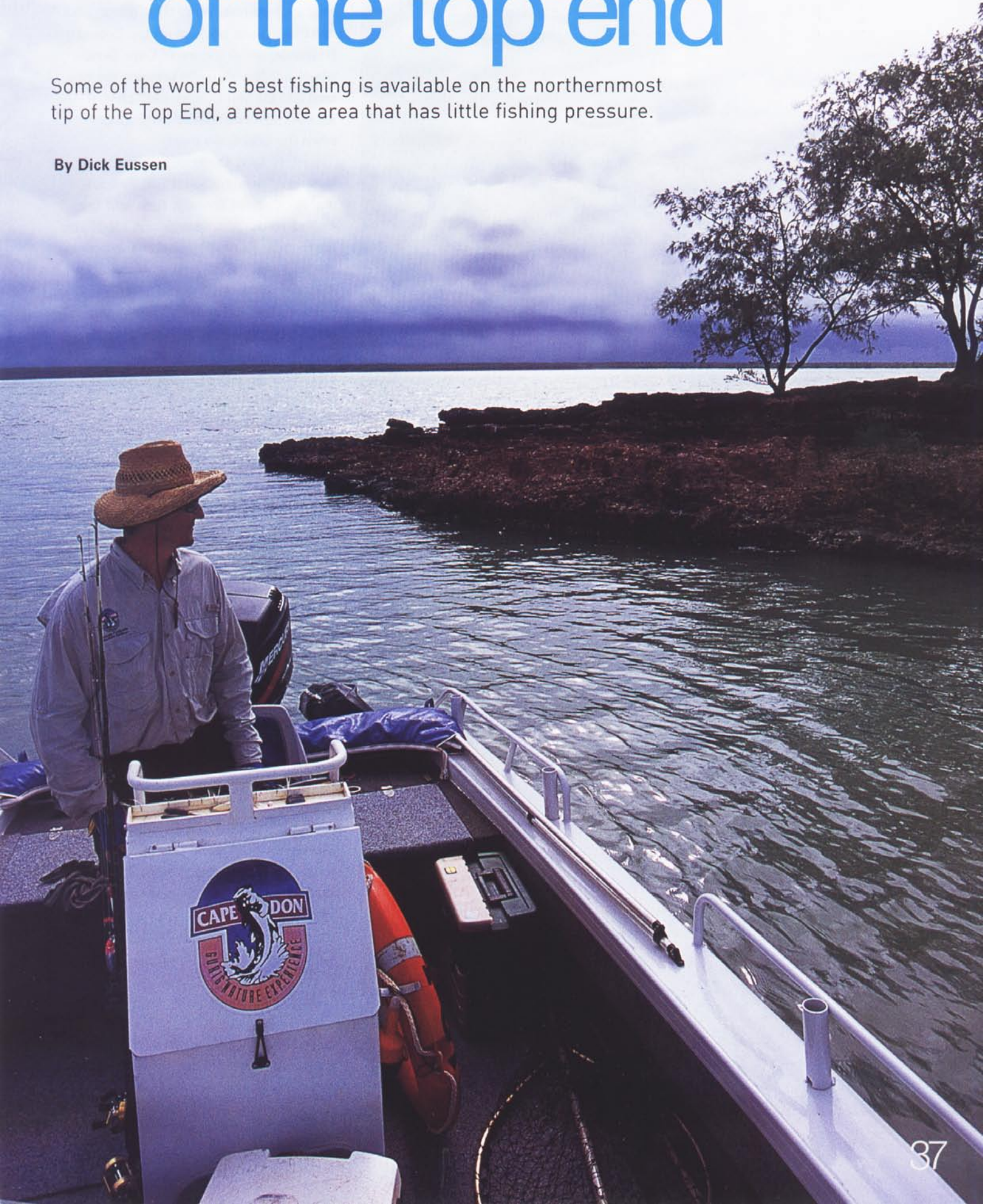


The Top of the top end

Some of the world's best fishing is available on the northernmost tip of the Top End, a remote area that has little fishing pressure.

By Dick Eussen





Mannis lures work well on mangrove jacks.

March to May are super months to fish the Top End. They generate a lot of air and road traffic with hopeful anglers heading north to Darwin to fish the run-off of the verdant floodplains for barramundi. But the Timor and the Arufura Seas offer more than barramundi, and this is most obvious off the Cobourg Peninsula, under the lee of Cape Don, where a titanic struggle between the two seas and the Van Diemen Gulf creates unbelievable currents and whirlpools when the tidal flows meet.

Rich in bait, these currents attract hordes of pelagics - sailfish, Spanish mackerel, giant trevally, tuna and the wolves of the sea, sharks and mega-size barracuda. I first fished these waters in the mid 1980's, launching at the South Alligator River bridge and heading north to the Murgellen system and often ranging as far as Cape Don. It was champagne fishing at its very best, and the only way of doing it as there were no mother ships or lodge operations available.

But the world is changing, and the old lighthouse keeper's home is now the base for the Cape Don Experience, where visiting anglers are housed in comfort and taken out in 5m plate boats to some of the best fishing that both sides of the peninsula has to offer. The homestead at Cape Don has undergone extensive renovations that compliment its heritage listings; offering the rustic charm of a past era, but still providing all the comfort needed after a hard day on the water.

Cape Don is a noted hotspot for a diverse range of species and generally it can be fished all year round, even when the dreaded south-east trade wind blows froth off the waves. The narrow finger of the Cobourg Peninsula is marked by mangrove-lined creeks that house mangrove jacks, barramundi, salmon and a host of other tropical species, some of which are a pest in sheer ferocity when targeting jacks or barra, but hell, who's complaining!

Day One

It's late April, a time when 'knock-em-down' storms still raid the land, blowing over the ripe grasses and trees that

Allan Brahminy with a brace of mangrove jacks.



nature no longer needs - hence the name of these often fierce storms that herald the coming of the dry season.

I go fishing with head guide, Allan Brahminy, who has been at Cape Don for three seasons and knows these waters well. We blast out of Alcaro Bay into the Arufura Sea and turn north to Trepang Bay, dodging massive sandbars and coral reefs en route. The Cobourg Peninsula is generally flat and vegetated with monsoon woodlands. There are many long, yellow beaches, broken by bauxite-coloured headlands and imposing cliffs from where oyster covered rock beds extend into the shallow waters of the bays and seas.

"There is some great barra fishing in the rocks," says Allan as we drift along an imposing red cliff. "Just before and after the wet they tend to school about rock bars, especially where there is a creek inlet or mangroves nearby. Even in the middle of the dry season we catch barra, though it's not as good as during the summer months."

Trepang Bay is larger than Sydney Harbour and surrounded by cliffs. The weather is closing in on our arrival and

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rain squalls head towards us, forcing the erection of the canopy to keep us dry. We seek shelter behind the red cliffs. As a guide, Allan is involved in a lot of fishing, but does little himself because his job is to guide clients to fish, not catch them, and he appears surprised when I insist that he should fish also.

I don't have to twist his arm at all and we're soon tossing lures amongst the rocks, the splashes going unnoticed in the splattering of the rain that drops visibility down to only a few hundred metres. But the fish are not deterred and we are soon hooking small barracuda, cod and trevally.

"No barramundi," grumbles Allan, "a couple of days ago the place was alive with barra and a client caught one over a metre. Still the creek should hold a few. Jeez, another bloody cod."

It never ceases to amaze newcomers to the Top End the way guides complain about unwanted fish, in this case a cod of about 70cm long that gives a spirited fight. You get that way in the tropics with some species of fish, casually regarded as a pest when fishing for target species. But most visitors don't care; it's fish they're after and that is what they get.

During a lapse in the rain we manage to boat into Trepang Creek where a sand bar is alive with great knots, and some pelicans. The knots migrate from Siberia in massive flocks that darken the skies wherever they gather. We catch some small queenfish and trevally near the bar before we drift into the mangrove creek on the incoming tide.

"We'll fish the snags first," suggests Allan. "There are good jacks in this creek with barra always present. Yep, there is more where this one came from," he grunts as a jack slams his Reidy 'Little Lucifer' lure.

It sets the pace for most of the day and we round up a large number of jacks, trevally, barramundi, estuary cod, and queenfish that are holding on almost every snag in the system. There are also some huge metre-long threadfin salmon hunting the shallows, but we couldn't entice them to take a lure in the clear water as they are far too spooky.

We head back to the lodge, arriving there in the late afternoon after running the gauntlet of several storms that whip the seas into rolling waves; exciting stuff, but the storms are the harbinger of an early trade wind that lasts for a week and we are not impressed with the turn of events.

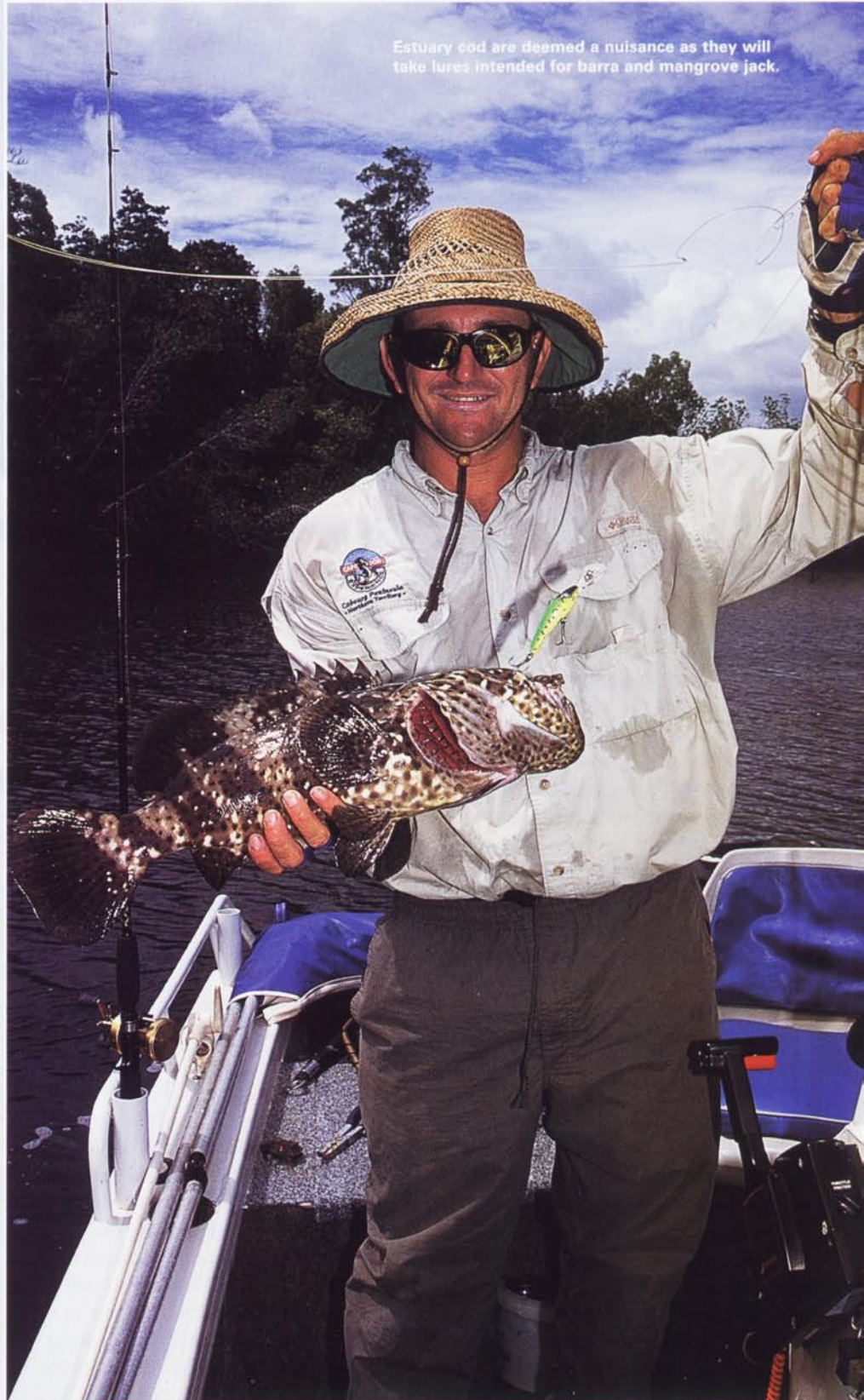
Day Two

Below Cape Don are some of the most severe tidal currents anywhere, and it's our first destination as we hope to troll for a few pelagics, but the currents and whirlpools are too strong and we give it away and turn for Popham Bay to the north. We had originally planned to fish an offshore ship wreck, but the unexpected early arrival of the trade wind prevents this.

The bay is relatively calm as much of the north-west section of the peninsula escapes the wind. The cliffs on the east side have extensive rock bars and mangrove fringed sections and we commence fishing at the bottom end, letting a slight breeze carry the boat past our target zone.

In some three hours of fishing we catch a smorgasbord of 60 odd fish - mangrove jack, barramundi, trevally, queenfish, cod, barracuda and fingermark. Nothing is overly large, but the fishing is exciting and constant, and in the crystal clear water we are able to target them. In the early part of the morning small minnow lures are

This region is the home of giant estuarine crocodiles, as well as dolphins, whales, turtles and awesome manta rays



Estuary cod are deemed a nuisance as they will take lures intended for barra and mangrove jack.

The clean waters of the Cobourg Marine Park are home to hordes of queenfish schools that hunt the beaches for the masses of baitfish that congregate there.



favoured, but as the day gets hotter, we switch to jigging with feathered, lead head jigs with resounding success.

Jigging is all the rage nowadays with soft lure enthusiasts, but it has been about in one form or another for a hundred years. Not many guides can afford to use soft lures as they are easily destroyed by toothy fish and become very expensive at the end of the day. A hard-bodied lure, though initially dearer, runs out cheaper as it's used over and over again, unless of course it's lost.

Feathered jigs offer a compromise and perform as well as any other lure on saltwater fish. Jigging has several forms, but essentially is a matter of casting the jig and letting it sink to the bottom then retrieving it in an erratic fashion in order to deliver a wounded fish-like swim to it. High speed retrieval is often a major component, especially in clear water, or when fish are shy, whilst braided line is very helpful.

But off the Cobourg Peninsula we have no such problem as the fish just keep on chasing the feathered imitation minnows and pay for their mistakes by being hauled out of the water and released. It's fun fishing at its very best and makes the morning's outing a memorable event.

As I have a plane to catch, we head back to the lodge in the early afternoon. Flying is the

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only way to reach Cape Don and its exciting estuary and blue water fishing. The cape is part of a shrinking world that I found difficult to reach in the 1980's, but is now available to everyone by charter flight from Darwin.

Fishing on the Cobourg Peninsula

The whole of the Cobourg Peninsula is covered by the Garig Gunak Barlu National Park (formerly Gurig National Park). It is the only mainland national park in Australia surrounded by a marine park, the Cobourg Marine Park.

Whilst weather conditions dictate the best fishing in the Top End, sea species bite all the year round, though barramundi fishing can be down once temperatures plummet below 20 C at night.

September-November has exceptional fishing and gets better as water temperatures rise, and vast schools of bait hang off the beaches and headlands, attracting hordes of hungry predators. It's also a time when barramundi schools appear as the spawning time commences. Giant, metre-long barra are not uncommon about the peninsula coast and some of the largest breeding schools are about the islands in the Van Diemen Gulf, though the north coasts are not lacking in barra numbers at that time of the year with many caught each season in Port Essington and by anglers roaming out from Cape Don. It's a rare new fishing ground that so far has escaped too much attention from the masses, probably due to the strict permit conditions which prevail. **SWF**