

Is Don, Is Good

A remote fishing lodge with an endless list of sportfish on tap as well as top-class hospitality and accommodation makes for a trip to remember.

MICK FLETORIDIS reports.

THE NT's Cobourg Peninsula is rich in Australian history. In the 1800s this remote coastline was the scene of many failed settlement attempts by English explorers. In the early part of the 19th century the westernmost tip was named Cape Don, after English aristocrat Sir George Don who originated from Saxe-Cobourg and was the Lieutenant-Governor of the Fortress of Gibraltar.

These days a short leapfrogging flight from Darwin, 200kms away, finds you at one of Australia's remotest fishing lodges. Directly beyond Cape Don's historic lighthouse – built in 1916 and now solar-powered – is where the Timor and Arafura Seas meet. As a result the waters around Cape Don's point churn and agitate as low tides coincide with the prevailing south-easterlies. The region experiences two separate tides, one for each sea, which gives the Don's guides the luxury of working clients east or west of the tip, exploring a plethora of creeks and offshore reefs.

The region offers a rich smorgasbord of sportfish species: a UK fly-fisher with several trips to Cape Don under his belt last time round accounted for 49 species on fly and is hoping to crack 50 later this year.

On the water on our first morning of a three-day visit, we were met by a gusting south-easter and run-out tide which saw onshore waves hitting the point from different directions. The resulting whirlpools and ripping currents provided a short, slightly wet roller-coaster-ride through to smooth water. Guide Mark Everett was at the helm of the plate 6.5m centre console, steering us south in the direction of some barra creeks an hour down the coast.

Creek Three and the associated landmark of Two Hill Bay was visible from a considerable distance. Just inside the creek was a large fallen tree with branches fanning and swaying in the run-out tide. A tangle of mangrove roots jutted from the

creek banks in all directions. For a self-confessed lover of snag fishing, the place looked like heaven.

Solid, thumping strikes came thick and fast. Blue salmon, barra, jacks, fingermarks and trevally jostled for position behind lures in the milk coffee coloured flow. We dropped anchor and it was soon a fish a cast. Many were dropped before the boat and gill-rattling barras jumped and threw lures at will. The barra weren't monsters with the biggest being 65cms, but a couple jumped off appeared substantially larger.

The salmon were frantic biters, as were the queenies and trevally, and hooked fish were often followed by a swarm of others. The crazy action lasted for half an hour before a big brown whaler shark eerily cruised in and shut it down. Prior to the party pooper's arrival the lone snag produced eight barra, six or so salmon and a rich mix of fingermarks (golden snapper as they're known in the NT) trevally, jacks, small queenies and assorted others.

We pulled anchor and moved back out into the bay to fish another of the creeks spilling into the Timor Sea. We targeted snags at the creek's first bend. These consisted of a myriad of fallen trees, branches and roots poking through the surface. A drop-off was forming, visible as cleaner water in contrast to the chocolate-like froth draining away from mud flats against the creek bank. We missed a couple of fish before heading further into the creek to hook jacks, estuary cod, queenies and trevally.

After a couple of hours of plugging snags for regular hookups we again pulled up at the first bend snag and lowered the anchor for lunch. My colleague Guy Yaffa picked up a new G.Loomis prototype rod we were trying out on the trip and cast to the tree as Mark served lunch. The cooler wasn't even open and Guy was hooked to a mangrove jack that ate a blue Killalure Flatz Rat. After playing out the same scenario five casts in a row (jacks and



Big fingermarks, aka golden snapper, are commonly caught at Cape Don using a variety of techniques including soft plastics and flies.

BELOW: You can expect to experience a lot of this at "The Don" – bent rods and strong fighting sportfish. BELOW RIGHT: You never quite know what you'll turn up next. This colourful fish is a Maori sea perch, a member of the Lutjanidae family and a hard fighter!



DESTINATIONS: Cape Don, NT

fingermarks) Guy cast at the tree, gave the baitcaster a few cranks and his lure was solidly crunched. Despite applying "come back here!" pressure the lure was dragged into the snag. This was followed by a yell from Guy as limp braid dangled from the baitcaster rod's tip.

The fish kept biting during lunch. Things eventually slowed up as the run-out peaked so we left the creek and headed for a small rocky island halfway back to Cape Don.

The island was in the middle of nowhere. It featured a large rock ledge backing out to the Timor Sea and a series of bomboras that made dark shadows below the surface as a small swell gently rolled in. Casts and fast retrieves with big poppers produced nothing and we almost gave it away. Guy fired out a gold Halco Roosta popper that landed invitingly in the shadow of the rock ledge. As he wound rapidly the popper pushed out spray and bounced over the swell. The Roosta made it 15m from us before a couple of black-backed GTs materialised. Like torpedoes they displaced the surface water as they charged the boat. One latched onto the



Salmon, both blue and giant threadfin varieties, are often caught in the creeks that surround Cape Don.

popper almost at the rod tip, showering the boat with spray. Guy's Certate threadline sang as the GT motored for the ledge. Mark found the boat's reverse gear and Guy looked a chance as he applied pressure with his rod at full lock and palm

friction applied to the spool. It was all in vain though as the big trevally made the rock ledge, sending Guy stumbling backwards as the line parted.

Casting a metallic blue Roosta to bommies 30m closer to shore, I too



Guide Mark Everett and a barra taken by the author in Creek No.3 during a hot bite.

hooked onto the "GT express". With 20lb braid and an outfit more suited to snapper-on-plastics, proceedings didn't last as the big GT powered to the sharp rock ledge as I grunted and groaned in its wake. Sacrificial Roosta No.3 was tied on and thrown around for a few casts but the GTs wouldn't play any more.

We headed for another creek. In the

mouth we found a large lemon shark doing laps shadowed by small GTs and queenies that raced out to hit our lures.

Back at the Cape Don beach ramp the local wildlife was out in force. Three crocs were in close proximity and the largest (around four metres) cruised in to shore looking for a feed as we alighted from the boat. Sea eagles and brahminy kites vied

for cleaned fish scraps along with a group of sharks circling the shallows.

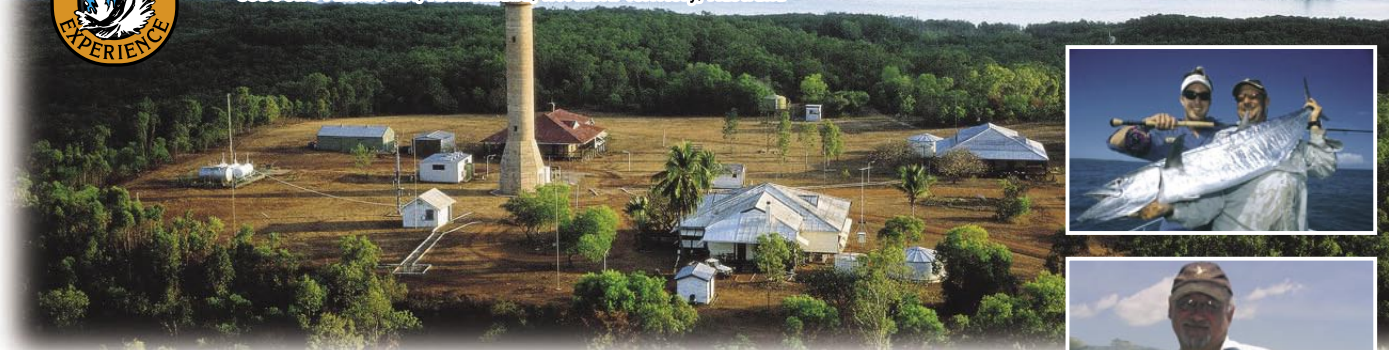
Next morning Mark pointed the boat north. First stop was an expanse of bomboras and sharp exposed rocks close to shore that dropped away to deep water. It had "fish" written all over it. Cast soft plastics and simple marabou leadheads were readily eaten by a variety of fish



CAPE DON EXPERIENCE

COBOURG PENINSULA, Arnhemland, Northern Territory, Australia

"A Fisherman's Paradise"



- Located on the north west tip of Arnhemland, Cape Don provides access to some of Australia's most remote unspoilt coastline and spectacular sports fishing.
- Sandy islands, mangrove lined creeks, fringing reef, clear flats and deep blue water provide a diverse range of sports fishing and fly fishing adventures.
- The historic lighthouse keeper's homestead accommodates 12 guests, offering the charm of the past era and the modern comforts required after an exhilarating day of sports fishing.
- All inclusive packages with aircharter, all meals, accommodation, all personal guided fishing and tackle. Fly tying station on site.
- Only a 40 minute flight from Darwin.

Tourism Award Winner

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FISHING THE DON

THE sportfishing lodge at Cape Don is very professionally run by owners John and Kate Kerr who do their utmost to make sure all of their clients' needs are met and their stay is always memorable. This unwritten policy obviously works as many clients return more than once, a testament to the hospitality, catering, comfort and great fishing on offer. The lodge's chef, Glenn, is very passionate about what he does and it shows with the meals he serves – he's also a super-keen fisho, an activity he indulges in any chance he gets.

The accommodation at Cape Don is in the homestead lodge and is first-rate for such a remote location, with its spacious dining/lounge area, pool table and outdoor spa which is a great place to unwind watching the sunset with a cold drink after a frantic day's fishing. The lodge caters for up to 12 clients at a time

and as well as sportfishing groups is also now available to service corporate/incentive groups. Three, five and seven day charters are available and a 45 minute flight from Darwin is included in the package.

Three professional fishing guides service Cape Don's clients: Mark Everett, Scotty Matthews and James Braunt. All three are very keen and experienced fishos who work extremely hard to get their clients connected to the region's rich array of sportfishing species.

Three aluminium boats powered by Mercury four-stroke outboards are on hand and can cater for up to five passengers at any one time. The largest of the fleet is a 7.3m custom built plate aluminium boat that regularly fished four clients during our stay. Guy and I fished out of a 6.5m custom plate boat which



had plenty of room but was a little on the "wet" side thanks to the strong prevailing southeasters of the dry season. The lodge's remaining 6.5m boat plate boat catered for Tasmanian visitors, Bill and Cheryl, during our visit.

For more information on Cape Don contact (08) 8979 0030; email: info@capedon.com.au; website at: www.capedon.com.au

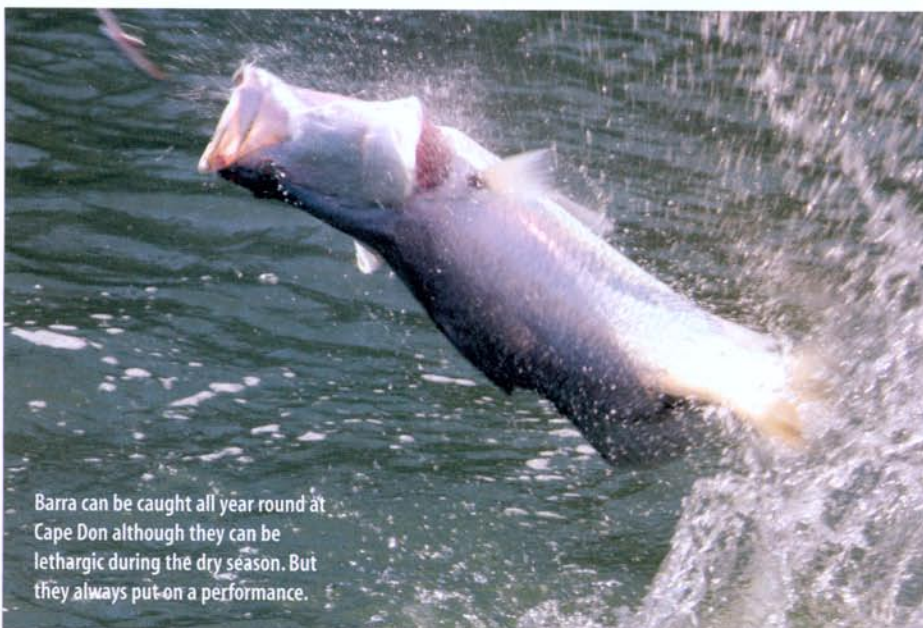


Queenfish are encountered in many areas around Cape Don.

including small trevally (giant and golden), queenies, coral trout, cod and a colourful fish that featured yellow fins and brilliant metallic gold and light fluoro blue spots and striping; later confirmed as a Maori sea perch, a member of the lutjanidae family which includes mangrove jacks, fingermarks and New Guinea bass –

appropriately it pulled hard.

Ever mindful of tidal movements Mark steered us toward the perimeter of a reef ledge that drops away into the Arafura Sea. The sounder displayed some good fish near to the bottom. Guy sent down a 125 gram Raider that was eaten before it hit the bottom. He locked up on the heavy spin



Barra can be caught all year round at Cape Don although they can be lethargic during the dry season. But they always put on a performance.

gear only to see the rod's thick tip bounce violently in time with the movements of an unseen beast attached below. Despite maximum pressure, Guy – who's not a little bloke – couldn't budge the fish an inch and was dusted off on the reef.

I dropped over a 3/4 oz jighead and a 125mm Squidgy Flickbait. A couple of jigs off the bottom, the plastic was slammed as a powerful fish tore off for the reef ledge as the tight drag squealed in protest. A few seconds later the pressure was off as the 6/0 jig hook had cleanly snapped at the shank.

Another dropped metal Raider saw Guy hooked to a screamer. The fish raced from the depths stripping line at will. It passed the boat at speed and looked like breaking the surface. The sea then exploded as a 25-30kg Spanish mackerel rocketed two metres skyward. On re-entry the mack hit the afterburners and line spewed from the Thunnus's spool as the fish's tail found traction. A spooling looked imminent before a dark shape was spotted shadowing the course of the disappearing braid.

"Oh no!" Guy grunted doing his best to steer the mack away from a frenzied whaler shark hot on its tail. For 30

seconds the shark was kept at bay and the mack sounded. Soon after a couple of thudding bumps were felt up the line as the shark's teeth bit home. That was that.

Next stop on the destruction trail was a sunken wreck, the tallest parts of which made shadows in the water and were visible from 50m away, despite the rolling swell and strong wind. Bait showered frantically in all directions around the wreck perimeter, obviously being targeted by resident predators below.

First cast saw all three of us hooked up on queenies and manageable GTs. Casting a huge popper around enticed some bigger GTs out. Throwing Berkley Power Minnows, Gulp Pogies and Snapbacks at the trevally unfortunately only resulted in more straightened or broken jig hooks. At

FISH & TACKLE

THE waters surrounding Cape Don are host to a huge range of sportfishing species, depending on the season and time of year. Lodge clients have the option of fishing the many creeks on offer for the usual suspects including: barra, mangrove jacks, fingermarks (golden snapper), threadfin or blue salmon etc. All of which can be caught year-round. The rich reefs and offshore grounds provide numerous fishing opportunities for a variety of tropical species. In the warmer months (especially November/December) a mind-blowing run of Spanish mackerel and longtail tuna occurs. Giant herring, big queenies, black jewfish, car bonnet size giant trevally and many others are readily available year round. The diversity of fish species available at Cape Don is a big drawcard for visitors worldwide.

Tackle wise, 6-8 kilo baitcasting or spin outfits are perfect for the local creeks while any of the new generation of powerful spin reels matched to gutsy 15-24/37kg rods capable of throwing large poppers/plastics/metal jigs covers most heavy fishing likely to be encountered. An 8-10kg spin outfit makes for a very versatile outfit around the waters of the Cobourg Peninsula. Cape Don has a variety of tackle for clients who don't wish to transport their own, on a replace if lost basis, and fly fishers are also greatly welcomed. Fly outfits are also available for lodge guests to use and a fly-tying bench and vice is set up if the making of late night creations takes your fancy.



The offshore reefs and rocky outcrops in the region can be relied on to turn on some GT action. Guy Yaffa with one of only a few manageable fish landed during our visit.

6-0 in favour of the fish we left them to it.

That day some lodge clients had landed some big golden snapper (fingermarks) on both baits and Snapback plastic lures – at times all four on board had been hooked up at once. On our last morning we were keen to hook a couple ourselves. The guides had quite a few GPS marks between them and it was just a matter of finding which spot would produce for us before we had to hop on the plane out. After trying a few proven marks it was clear the snapper weren't everywhere,

despite us seeing four bent rods on one of the other boats 50m away! After encountering a number of smaller fish and a few of the wrong variety Guy finally landed a solid fingermark of the calibre the other guys had been pulling in hand over fist. It was a great way to wind up an eventful few days. It had been an action-packed and all too brief visit. In two and a half days we'd experienced the sort of fishing many anglers don't see in a year, which is why one visit to a place like Cape Don is never enough!