

Check the colours in the cheeks of this lovely barra. Like so many others, this one fell for a weedless-rigged Squidgy Slick Rig body.

Words & Photos Steve 'Starlo' Starling

AUSTRALIA'S PREMIER BARRA LODGE?

It's a pretty big call, but Starlo reckons Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge near Maningrida in the Top End now has a fair claim to the title of Australia's number one barra fishing establishment



Threadfin salmon and a host of other species are on tap in these prolific waters.



The Lodge runs a fleet of E-Tec-powered Ocean Master boats.



This part of Arnhemland also has plenty of crocodiles!

GUIDED FISHING businesses, specialised lodges and live-aboard mother ship operations come and go with the passage of time. The best of them may last a decade or more, but it seems that in this tough and competitive game, all good things eventually come to an end. Guides and owners burn out, infrastructure deteriorates and, sadly, fishing conditions do change. In my 30-odd years as a writer I've watched my fair share of booms and busts in the guided fishing industry. Along the way I've learnt not to become too attached to any particular operation, but it's still hard not to pick favourites.

Back in the 1980s, the famous Barra Base on Bathurst Island, north of Darwin, had a justified reputation for being this country's number-one destination for tropical estuary and inshore sport fishing. Since the demise of Barra Base, several other establishments have vied for that title but, in my opinion, no clear front runner had really emerged... until quite recently.

If I were asked to name the premier guided barra fishing operation in Australia at this moment in history (and

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I often am), I would have no hesitation whatsoever in nominating Alex Julius's Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge. It's no accident this business has won several coveted Brolga Awards for tourism, nor that it is the first choice of many large corporations (including Toyota, Navico and Shimano) when seeking a remote, fishing-based establishment for conferences, field trips and team-building exercises.

Man behind the name

I've known the man behind Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge's success for nearly 30 years, and few readers who fish the Top End or dream of doing so could possibly fail to recognise the name Alex Julius. His pivotal role over the past three decades in putting the Northern Territory firmly on the national and international maps as a sportfishing destination simply can't be over-stated.

Today, Alex heads up a thriving Darwin-based media empire that, among other things, produces the popular *NAFA* and *Barra, Bass and Bream Digest* magazines. But for the past six or so years, the lion's share of Alex's considerable energy and passion has been directed at building the Lodge's reputation as the numero uno establishment

of its kind in the country. I think he can give himself a big pat on the back for having finally achieved that goal.

Located 20 or 30 minutes' drive outside the township of Maningrida, north-east of Darwin, the Barra Lodge itself is situated on a timbered escarpment perched above the scenic floodplains of the Tomkinson River; part of the vast Liverpool system. First time visitors are sometimes surprised to find that the Lodge is actually quite a distance from any navigable waterway, and that guests must be transported to and from their boats each day by road. However, this location was carefully thought out, bearing in mind the cultural sensitivities of the land's tra-

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ditional owners and the comfort of visitors. The end result is one of the most delightful bush camps I've ever stayed in, although "camp" really undersells the luxury of these digs. It really is a pretty special sort of place.

Long-term security

The Sword of Damocles hanging over so many fishing operations based in our remote north today is the issue of indigenous land ownership and associated access rights to prime fishing waters, especially in this post-Mabo and post-Blue Mud Bay era. The simple truth is that negotiated agreements between operators and traditional owners are often extremely fluid. Changes in the hierarchy of the various land councils, or even the death of a key indigenous elder, can throw everything into complete turmoil and necessitate extensive (and expensive) renegotiation. More than a few lodge owners or guides have simply found it all too hard, closed their operations and walked away as a result. Not Alex Julius, however. He hung in there for six long years and continued to work closely with the traditional owners of the lands known as Djinkarr, where his Barra Lodge is located.

On June 10, 2010, Alex's hard work and negotiation came to fruition with the signing of a long-term agreement with the Northern Land Council Land Trust. In addition, meetings were held with more than 20 individual indigenous clan groups, each of whom has now granted fishing rights to the Lodge's guides and clients covering a huge stretch of the remote Arnhemland coast and several of its major river systems. These families now receive regular royalty payments in return for the days fished by Lodge guests.

All the organisations and individuals involved in these long-running negotiations ultimately agreed that the considerable contributions made by the Lodge to the Maningrida community had earned it the right to a long-term lease over this unique area. The custodians of the waters fished by the Lodge also recognised that the operation carefully releases the bulk of fish caught there, ensuring minimal impact and healthy stocks for the future. The fact the Lodge had recently gained Tourism Australia Accreditation for Excellence in Delivery of Product and Services obviously didn't hurt, either.

The bottom line is that Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge now enjoys something almost unprecedented in the history of remote fishing operations on native title land in the Top End: long-term security of access and tenure. To say this has come as a huge relief to Alex, his staff and their regular clients would be a significant understatement!

What about the fishing?

Okay, enough of land rights and the sometimes tangled politics of fishing access in remote areas! What you really want to know is; what's the fishing like? I'll answer that question with a single word – brilliant!

I've been fortunate enough to visit the Lodge four times now during its lifetime and I've had a ball on every occasion. Certainly, the calibre and style of fishing has varied, largely dependent upon tides and weather conditions, as well as the different stages of the season. However, there has always been something exciting on tap, and I've come away from each visit with lessons learnt, new personal benchmarks set, or different takes on long-held angling ideas and theories. You can't ask for much more from a fishing trip.

My latest visit, during late May this year, was definitely my best to date. In just three-and-a-half days on the water I personally landed around 80 hard-fighting saltwater barra up to 94cm in length, every one of them taken while

One of the reasons so many anglers love catching barra is because of the way they perform on a line!

They're not all monsters. However, the average salty barra around Maningrida is a fish in the 55-75cm class, and they all give a great account of themselves.



GETTING THERE

A visit to a premier guided fishing operation like Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge may well represent the trip of a lifetime for many anglers. Others save their dollars feverishly and do their very best to get to a place like this every second year or so. The Barra Lodge has many regulars who fall into this latter category. Whichever camp you belong to, you can find out more about pricing and other details by contacting Roger Sinclair at the Lodge's booking office in Darwin. Roger fishes and guides at the Lodge himself several times each year and really has his finger on the pulse of things, so you know you're talking to a fair dinkum fisho who'll give you straight answers, not just a travel agent! You can email him at roger@nafa.com.au or phone (08) 8983 1544. It's also well worth checking out the Lodge's excellent website: www.barralodge.com.au.

Airnorth flies commuter services from Darwin to Maningrida several times each day using modern, fast turbo-prop' aircraft, and they have no issue transporting rod tubes up to 2.1m in length, though there are strict all-up weight requirements for baggage. Find out more and check their flight schedules by visiting www.airnorth.com.au.

This better-than-average javelin fish grabbed a snag-proofed softie intended for barra. Note the light spin tackle.

A trap-jawed salty barra eyeballs the snag-proofed lure that brought it undone.

PRO TIPS

LODGE LORE

- While the Barra Lodge has a full range of excellent tackle for clients to use and a broad range of lures on hand, many keen visiting anglers like to take at least a couple of their own outfits and a selection of their favourite lures and flies.
- If you take your own gear, be sure to pack a light/medium spinning outfit based around a 2500-size threadline reel and a 2m light-tipped spin rod. Spool the reel with 8-12kg braid and take some spare line. A rig like this is very versatile!
- When it comes to packing lures, don't go overboard. The Lodge's guides are experts at recovering snagged lures, so you shouldn't lose many. However, pack at least two of each model, size and colour you choose. There's nothing worse than finding the hot producer and then losing it!
- Pack a spool of your favourite 20-30kg tough nylon or fluorocarbon leader material and a couple of pairs of good-quality braid scissors. The guides have all this gear, but it's really handy to have your own for evening rerigging sessions back at the Lodge.
- If you're into fly fishing, pack an 8-10-weight outfit. Slow-sinking intermediate lines are the best all-round choice, but a floater is great for popping and a high-density sinker is handy offshore. Clousers, Deceivers, Pink Things and a few poppers cover most bases.



Jack Wheeldon with the sort of chrome-plated saltwater barra that Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge is so famous for.

casting and retrieving lures, all but a few on snag-proofed soft plastics fished off relatively light spinning tackle. That is more fun than I can possibly convey to you here in words!

I had strikes from at least twice that number and actually hooked well over 100. There were also plenty of threadfin and blue salmon, trevally, queenies, cod, javelin fish and finger-mark (golden snapper) in between the barra. Then there was the company of like-minded anglers to enjoy it all with, and the shared thrill of their multiple captures, not to mention awesome meals (including a couple of truly decadent mud crab feasts!) and some great late-night beer-and-bull sessions around the Lodge bar. Sometimes these peripheral aspects are as memorable as the fishing itself.

I chose not to do any offshore fishing because I was working on some barra tactics for a string of magazine articles and some new directions in soft-plastic design. So, the mackerel, giant herring, cobia, GTs and mega queenies these waters are well-known for escaped my attention. That's okay. In Arnie's immortal words: "I'll be back!" Perhaps next time I'm due for a



The Lodge's affable booking manager, Roger Sinclair, gets out to Maningrida a few times each season to keep his finger on the pulse of things.

fly-only trip. I couldn't think of many better places to do it. Maybe I'll have to join one of Peter Morse's intensive, week-long fly fishing workshops based at the Lodge. Hmmm... the next one is in December. I think I'll jump online right now and see if there are any spaces left! **MF**

Even smaller barra don't give up easily when boat-side and ready for netting!



"Sometimes the peripheral aspects are as memorable as the fishing itself"

