

# Where the big fish abound

The angling trip was bereft of barra but Jo Hindle and her companions found other great catches in Arnhem Land

**I**F YOU had to pick up a bucket of concrete, which hand would you use?" As we mentally performed the request and our brain cogs slipped into place, Charlie put to rest a debate that had started early.

It was 8am and we were on the Liverpool River in the Northern Territory's Arnhem Land, trolling for barramundi over a submerged rock bar that crossed the 70m-wide river.

My boyfriend, Josh, his father, Vince, and I were arguing over casting techniques — they were adamant I used the wrong hand to effectively work the fishing rod.

In those few words Charlie, our guide, settled the matter in their favour, much to my chagrin. Round 1 to the blokes.

The Liverpool is one of six river systems to which the Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge has exclusive fishing rights, along with roughly 200km of Northern Territory coastline.

It's the proverbial big pond full of big fish, probably the reason hundreds of anglers fly to this remote location from Darwin each year.

We flew in shortly after Cyclone Monica had flattened the area and the ground below resembled a greeny brown rug on which someone had clumsily up-ended packet upon packet of toothpicks.

Late June isn't ideal for barra fishing — the water was about 22C, downright chilly for a tropical fish that doesn't get active until it hits about 30C.

But out here, the combination of skilled guides and pristine waters usually provides guests with some quality barra catches.

A couple who had relocated to nearby Maningrida from the Sunshine Coast for a change of pace joined us for dinner at the lodge one night and described the barra fishing situation in November.

"As soon as your lure hits the water, before it's even swimming, it's absolutely annihilated," he said, complete with accompanying pantomimes of landing a big one.

"You could throw a spoon out there and they'd inhale it," he reckoned, and went on to tell us they get hundreds of barra in a day session. It was about then the boys started drooling.

The barra Gods didn't deliver for us that morning, but whoever's in charge of the deep blue sea was smiling down for the rest of the afternoon.

We'd switched to heavy-duty rods with reels as big as paint tins and were trolling a few kilometres offshore.

Charlie manoeuvred us around a bommie (coral rocks sticking out of the water) and our first pass netted us a triple hook-up — cause for much jubilation.

We'd motored over a 300-strong school of giant trevally, and all three rods screamed as line tore off the reels as the fishes madly swam away from the boat. It took us 20 minutes to even get them alongside.

Next was a school of spanish mackerel to which we were led thanks to the pack of seagulls swooping madly to scoop up the small baitfish boiling on the surface — a sure indication that big mackerels were forcing the fiddlers to the surface from below.

Vince and Josh landed 11kg and 11kg specimens in quick succession.

I was the barracuda queen that day, reeling them in one after the other. The first was a monster about 1.2m long that seemed to grin at me with its mouth full of razor-sharp teeth as I hauled it over the edge of the boat.

After a quiet morning chasing barra, that first troll around the rocks was electrifying.



Josh broke his lure off when he hooked something decent, which took the fancy of a passing bull shark.

Charlie ordered him to cut his line — he'd had enough experience to know it was a waste of time to fight one of these monsters.

A new lure was attached, an "Elton John", so called for its pinky/fluoro flashy colour scheme.

It was brand spanking new, straight out of the packet, and

when we surveyed the damage later, it was scored with strike marks and the hooks were bent almost straight.

They fight hard, these bluewater species, and the boys had no trouble tucking the butt of the rod under their arms and letting the tackle do its job.

For me, a woman with limited upper body strength, the butt automatically anchored into my belly button; the only way I could lever the rod against the weight on the end.

I was rewarded with three well marks and some bruising to match.

Pretty good trophies I reckoned, along with the 35 big fish we hauled in that afternoon.

The lodge is superb. We slept soundly, hidden away in the bush in a breezy safari-style cabin built on to a mud-brick ensuite. As far as fishing digs go, this is seven-star.

The after-dark activities take place on a huge timber deck

that juts out over a magnificent valley — the prime spot to relax with a drink (that seems to fill itself when you're not looking) and appreciate the changing colours as the sun sets behind the buffaloes roaming among cathedral-like termite mounds below.

And then there's the food. I'm holding Mick, the lodge's super chef, responsible for the 2kg I put on.

I've spread the blame across the mammoth roast, rib eye

fillets, baked spuds and golden syrup dumplings I scoffed on the second night.

Though that's not a touch on the record — Mick tells me one bloke was there for a week and went home 8kg heavier.

But that won't stop me going back for more.

Jo Hindle works for Tourism NT in Darwin and was a guest of the Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge. She has lived in the Territory for 6½ years

## ARNHEM LAND



**WHERE:** The Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge is in Arnhem Land, about 20km from Maningrida and 300km northeast of Darwin.

**WHEN:** The lodge operates most of the year, but shuts from mid-December until the end of February during the wet season.

**WHO:** The lodge is operated by fishing personality Alex Julius and Lindsay Mutimer, one of the Territory's most respected fishing guides.

**TIPS:** As well as fishing, the lodge runs Aboriginal cultural tours and a bird-watching operation (more than 280 species have been recorded in the region).

**INFO:** Contact the Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge on (08) 8983 2167 or visit [www.barralodge.com.au](http://www.barralodge.com.au).

## TROPICAL SPLENDOUR:

The Liverpool and Tomkinson rivers meet in Arnhem Land (above left); inside the Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge (right top); and the author with a giant trevally she caught offshore

