

OUT THE BACK



The West Australian | **BOATING CRUISER WITH THE LOT**

Fishing after the storm

The wrath of tropical cyclone Monica which cut through the Top End almost a year ago has left a legacy that's resulting in a fisherman's dream, as **Barry Wiseman** reports

As the Toyota Land Cruiser weaved and dodged the mud holes and lakes on the red dirt road, the radio reports told of the death and destruction in the aftermath of tropical cyclone George as it battered the Pilbara coast.

George started out as a tropical low over Arnhemland, slowly making its way west. We landed at Darwin airport 12 hours before the non-stop deluge and lightning storms struck, dumping 400mm (16 inches) of rain on the northern-most city in four days.

The tropical low was the most severe storm this wet season and cyclone George later claimed three lives as it cut a path of destruction across the coast near Port Hedland in Western Australia.

Ironically, these freaks of nature breathe new life into the flood plains and river systems of the Top End. More exotic birds fly in, wild buffalo feed on the new green grass, the fresh water run-off into the rivers creates a fishing bonanza and the ever-present crocodiles prepare for a feast.

I'm on my way to the Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge, 15km from Maningrida, which is an hour's flight east of Darwin.

The Kunibidji people are the traditional owners of this country and the other two white men on the near-full 30 seat Brasilia turbo prop aircraft operated by North Air are workers in this 2000-strong, alcohol-free community.

Europeans need a permit to be here but all that has been taken care of for us by lodge owner, well-known Northern Territory fishing identity and publisher Alex Julius.

Lodge manager Murray Riley offered me a cool drink from the car fridge as we made our way into the



The author's personal best for a barramundi came in at 86cm.

lush green bush. "It rained non-stop for a week and it really has been the first flood this wet season which is due to end next month. When it rains it cools things down and the fish start to fire up," he explained.

We were introduced to Lance Butler, the head fishing guide, and chef Katie Butlersoon after arriving at the main lodge building, a large mud brick dwelling with fly-wire walls and a heavy duty canvas roof, nestled among the stringy bark gum trees. Mr Riley's teenage son Aaron, who has just started his first job as a roustabout, was also introduced and handed me a cold beer.

Originally from Townsville, Mr Butler has been a professional fishing guide for more than 20 years and was taught by his father — more to fill the family's stomachs than for sport.

Katie, his English-born wife, came to Australia at the age of 11

and is a chef by trade. She does all the cooking, plus has a strong rapport with the local people.

In case you get sick of fishing, she can arrange Arnhemland Aboriginal eco-cultural tours.

The Lodge offers deluxe cabin accommodation with large ensembles or safari tents at a cheaper tariff and can cater for up to 24 people.

The main building consists of a lounge and dining area, huge kitchen and store-room-cum-office, all cooled by ceiling fans. From a huge decked area, complete with outdoor bar, the vista of the floodplain below is spectacular. The lodge is on an escarpment overlooking the Liverpool and Tomkinson rivers, two of six pristine waterways feeding into this region. I could not have timed it better — both for fishing and what was about to be served up for dinner.

King prawns and freshly trapped



The Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge.

mud crabs came with a pre-dinner drink. All food and drinks are included in the price of the packages and that goes for the daily laundry service too.

I have fished for more than 50 years but I thought it best to confess I have never caught the prized barramundi or mastered the baitcaster reel.

"No worries, we'll have you catching barra tomorrow," said the polite and gentle Mr Butler, as we tucked in to our steak dinner.

After a cooked breakfast, an hour's ride across the glassed-off waters of the Arafura Sea in one of the lodge's 6m boats and a half-hour's casting lesson, we were tossing lures into the brown waters against the bank of what used to be a mangrove forest.

Almost a year ago cyclone Monica hit this area with winds gusts of more than 300kmh, leaving huge pockets of dead trees.

Those felled into the waterways now make the perfect habitat for baitfish plus their predators and I'm sure Mr Butler is a "barra whisperer". "There's no barra if there's no bait," he said as he listened in the peaceful surrounds for the splash of activity.

In two days we caught close to 150 fish of various species, mangrove jack, threadfin and blue salmon but mainly barramundi. My personal best barra was 86cm. All were released and if I told you where we fished, Mr Butler would have my guts for garters.

The Arnhemland Barramundi Nature Lodge has only been operating for 18 months and already has won the 2005 and 2006 NT Brolga Tourism awards.

Prices vary, from quad share accommodation and fishing four per boat for three days and two nights at \$1970, to seven days and six nights at \$5390. Twin share accommodation ranges from \$3560 to \$7980. Tropical safari tents start at \$1740 for the shorter stay. The more in the group, the cheaper the tariff which includes return air fares between Darwin and Maningrida, entry permits, all meals and drinks, plus the laundry service. Qantas flies daily to Darwin and Skywest have a couple of flights a week, via Broome.

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