

# Heading North

## Australia's Remote Fishing Tip

Story and Photos by Dick Eussen



*The banana boat rules supreme on the Cape.*

The Injinoo province on the tip of Cape York Peninsula is one of the most isolated areas in Australia, but is deservedly popular with travelling anglers. *Dick Eussen* looks at some of the fishing and accommodation options.

### THE TIP

Cape York is the most northerly point of the Australian mainland. Standing on the Tip is the ambition of every visitor who travels north. As elsewhere in the tropics, the Cape is ruled by only two seasons, the Wet and the Dry.

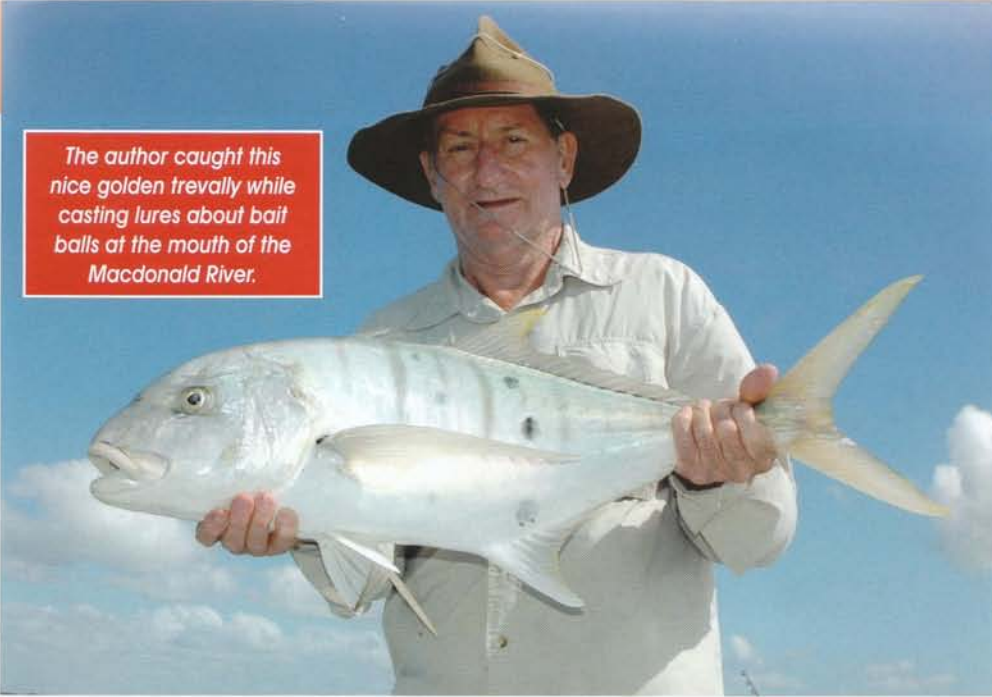
Most of the rain falls in January to March. However, the road is often closed until May, though with modern shipping and air flights, visitors now arrive at the Tip as soon as the Wet ends.

A mix of Europeans, Islanders, Aborigines, and Asians populate the Northern Peninsula Area, or the Tip, north of the Jardine River.


The people live in five different villages — Injinoo, Umagico, New Mapoon, Seisia, and the main administration center, Bamaga.

To cater for the annual influx of visitors, serviced camping grounds are located at Seisia, Loyalty Beach, and Punsand Bay to the north. Accommodation includes campsites, safari-style tents, chalets, and dongas, while the four-star Resort Bamaga caters for the up-market traveller.

Tours, scenic flights, fishing trips and more are readily available at Seisia and Bamaga, and a museum and information center is located at Bamaga.



The author caught this nice golden trevally while casting lures about bait balls at the mouth of the Macdonald River.



Flyfishing is popular particularly for anglers chasing snub-nosed dart.

Some special events in the region are worth attending. Rugby league is big and the local boys play hard, while the Island dances and other cultural events are very entertaining. The local mud derby is awesome, and to see the locals pit their Toyota 100 series against purpose-build 4WDs is unreal. The Seisia Fishing Club also puts on a weekly event with a live band for entertainment.

Visitors must get used to "Tip Time". Time gets lost up here as people are laid back with an easy style and the local saying, "it's all good, mate!"

Bamaga is serviced by daily airlines from Cairns. Seisia is port to twice-weekly barge services from Cairns and daily departures for the islands. The ships also carry passengers

in comfortable quarters with all meals provided. Vehicles, boats, and trailers are also transported.

## FISHING

The Cape remains relatively free from commercial fishing pressure. This accounts for the excellent sportfishing that attracts many anglers. While barramundi fishing is not on a par with the Northern Territory, the pelagic fishing is world class.


The main targets for offshore anglers are mackerel, trevally, tuna, giant herring, queenfish, barracuda, cobia, and reef fish. Of note is the fly fisher's holy grail, the permit, or snub-nosed dart, which are increasingly being caught along the west coast.

However, there are enough barramundi, mangrove jacks, salmon, saratoga, coal grunter, and tarpon, to keep estuary and freshwater anglers happy. Many 4WD arrivals carry cartop tinnies and canoes, while others have large trailer-drawn rigs shipped up from Cairns.

The west coast rivers and creeks are truly amazing, because the flats of the Gulf of Carpentaria are incredibly rich in marine life. On the east coast, the Newcastle-Escape River Estuarine Complex, which includes Jackie Jackie Creek, is Australia's largest wetland aggregation.

The Cape longest-serving fishing and nature guide, Gary Wright, reckons there are not enough years in a lifetime to explore this amazing mangrove maze, let alone fish it all, or the clear running spring waters of the upstream rivers and creeks.

Land-based anglers fish endless miles of



The Seisia wharf is the most popular fishing spot on the Cape.

# NAFA on QUEENSLAND

golden beaches, or angle at the Seisia wharf, arguable the most productive land-based fishing spot in Australia. The bait herrings are so thick here at times that it is impossible to see the bottom.

## THE GUIDED FISHING OPTIONS.

I flew into Bamaga in mid-March as guest of Regional Pacific Airlines. I had planned to drive up, but the road north was closed, thanks to cyclones and a late Wet.

A number of resident fishing operators provide guided fishing services for visitors and I was lucky enough to fish with some of them during my three week stay as guest of John Charlton. The Cape operators are very professional and fish for pelagics out wide, tidal flats, estuaries, or sportfish the clear spring-fed upper streams that feed from the Wet Desert, the wettest place in Australia. They have a policy of catch and release — the freezer mentality is discouraged.

The local guides are long-serving residents, and most have five or more years experience on the Cape. They provide half or full day tours, extended camping tours, and mothership options that cater for all forms of fishing. All operators provide quality spin, baitcast, and fly fishing tackle on a replace it if lost, or broken basis.



Joe Spencer of Cape York Fishing Adventures with a fine barramundi he caught while luring in a tidal creek near Seisia.

## TROPIC PARADISE

Greg Bethune's Carpentaria Seafaris mothership operation does an amazing journey down the west coast as far as the

Skardon River. Greg's 19 m Tropic Paradise purpose-built catamaran is the ultimate in luxury fishing. Clients can fish all day in the tropical heat of the monsoon build-up, but are back in air-conditioned comfort at day's end.

According to American clients, the flat fishing outmatches that of the highly publicized and similar style fishing practiced in Florida and South America.

At the end of the dry season, Tropic Paradise sails directly east to the Great Barrier Reef. The fishing on the outer edge is truly amazing because few fish that far out.

## CUSTOM SPORTFISHING.

This is the longest serving guided fishing operation on the Cape and is owned by Gary Wright and his business partner, Tim Freebody. Both have over 30 years experience on the Cape.

Based at Seisia, the pair offer fully guided fishing for groups and individuals on daily or extended trips. Clients are only booked at optimum moon and tide predictions, generally the quarter moon periods.

The guides specialize in fishing the maze of the Newcastle-Escape wetland aggregation, which arguable has the best barra fishing on the Cape.

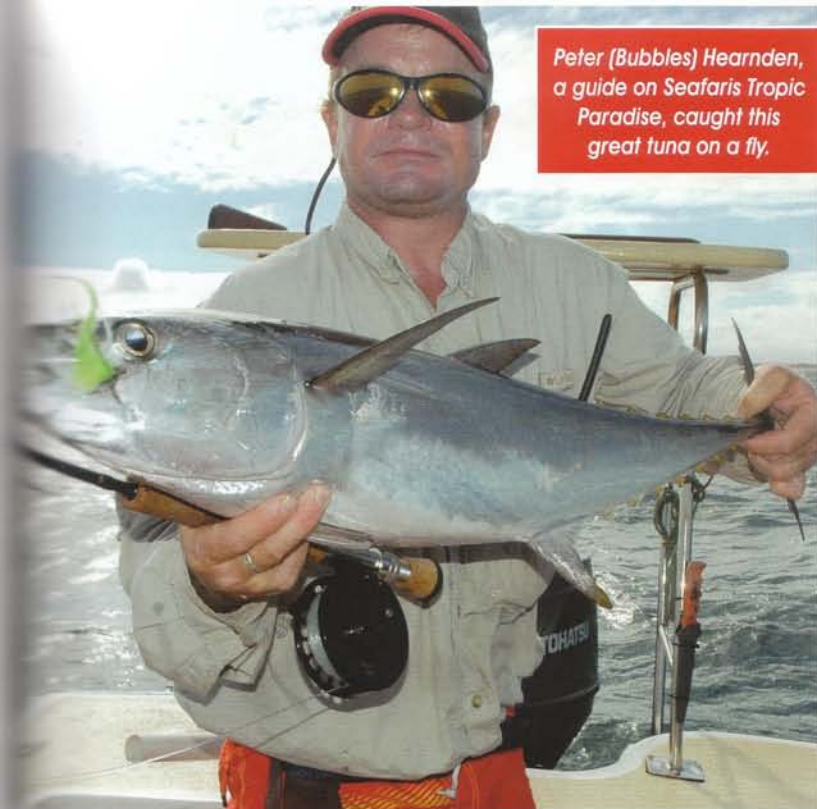
## JOHN CHARLTON'S CAPE YORK ADVENTURES

Based at Seisia, Cape York Adventures visit uninhabited islands, remote beaches and reefs, river wilderness exploration and fishing with nature-based tours, bird watching, and historical destinations for special interest groups.

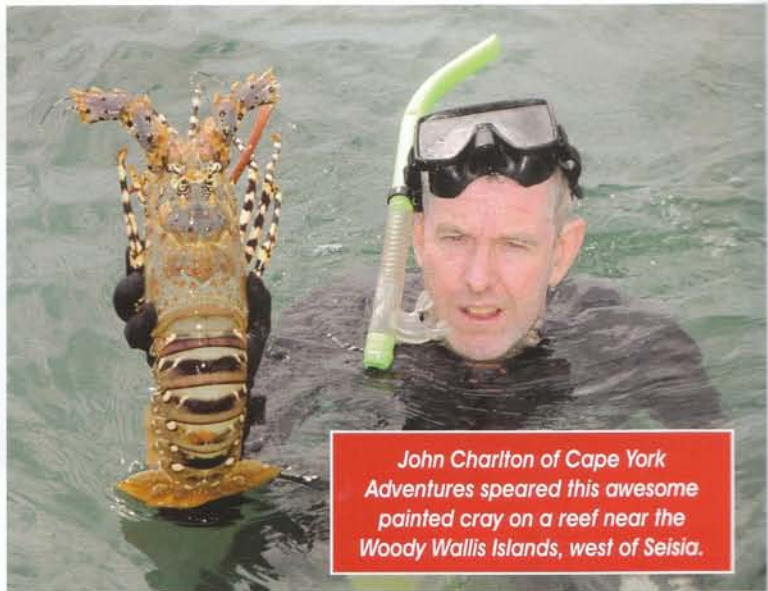
John has an intimate knowledge of local

Casting for permit from a purpose-built pole/casting platform on a Tropic Paradise skiff near the Skardon River.





Peter (Bubbles) Hearnden, a guide on Seafaris Tropic Paradise, caught this great tuna on a fly.



John Charlton of Cape York Adventures speared this awesome painted cray on a reef near the Woody Wallis Islands, west of Seisia.

### CAPE YORK FISHING ADVENTURES

Joe Spencer is a young man who was brought up in the isolation of the Cape York wilderness at a remote Temple Bay cattle station. He learned to fend for himself in the bush at an early age, a trait that has served him well in his chosen career as a fishing guide.

### CAPE YORK FISHING SAFARIS

Neil Pryce fishes out of Seisia in a Cairns Custom Craft aluminum 23 ft long boat that makes him a bit of a maverick, as other guides have a preference for fibreglass boats. Neil has a few years up his sleeve on the Cape and knows the local waters well, especially the saltwater scene. He also contracts for Loyalty Beach campground and Fishing Lodge.

conditions matched to wind, currents, and moon phase, something that has served him well when it comes to finding fish.

Catching your own fish and eating it on a remote beach while watching dugong, turtles, and porpoises gambol out front is what makes John's fishing and exploring trips so special.

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## CAPE YORK ROD & RIFLE SAFARIS

Warren Stevens loves to fish remote, and away from everyone. He has set up a unique bush camp under shady casuarinas that overlooks a large river and the Gulf. The site is secret to protect it from thieves and wannabees wanting to experience the rich fishing the river has. If I told anyone exactly where it is, I could vanish on my next visit!

If you want to hunt one of the legendary Cape boars and add a set of trophy tusks to your trophy room, Warren is your guide for all seasons.

## LOYALTY BEACH CAMPGROUND & FISHING LODGE

Located in a bush-beach setting just north of Seisia, Loyalty Beach offers complete package fishing tours with well-known Townsville-based guide Steve Jeston and local Neil Pryce, both well versed in estuary and blue water fishing. The comfortable lodge overlooks the many islands of the Torres Strait.

## PUNSAND BAY CAMPING RESORT

This is Australia's most northern beachfront campground and lodge accommodation, being only a few kilometres from the Tip proper – the esplanade on Cape York. Punsand Bay has its own resident fishing guide "Bat." I did not meet Bat, but according to his peers, he is a top guide and angler.

Punsand Bay is remote, but well serviced with comfortable campsites, safari-style tents, and air-conditioned lodge. Meals and alcohol are available at the lodge. Ferry services and tours to Thursday and Horn Islands are operated by Dato's Ventures.

## SEISIA HOLIDAY PARK

This campground is only a hundred metres from the Seisia wharf, service station, and supermarket. It has its own take-away and booking office. Comfortable seaside campsites with shelters, air-conditioning lodges and units, make a stay in the Seisia Holiday Park a memorable one. Seisia-based fishing operators generally base clients in the park.

## RESORT BAMAGA

At an RAA 4-star rating, Resort Bamaga has all the comforts of home and than some. It is a real revelation to find such a resort in the



*Regional Pacific Airlines uses modern propjets for the Cairns to Bamaga flight.*

isolation of Cape York. 4WD hire, tours, fully appointed rooms, restaurant, swimming pool, and lush gardens makes it an ideal spot to escape to after a hard day on the water.

## FISHING THE FLATS

For some reason or another, Australian anglers have always associated flat fishing with Florida and parts of South America. This is sad, as flat fishing is and will always be part of our local scene, a fact that has escaped some fishing writers. Aborigines were fishing the tidal flats before the Dutch discovered the west coast of Cape York in 1606.

I first fished the tidal flats of the Mossman and the Daintree Rivers in 1959 and have fished many flats since, either actively sight-hunting in dinghies, or walking the shore. The Arnhem Land and Cobourgh Peninsula tidal flats have many memories for me. I hunted trevally and queenfish from a 3.7 m tinnie throughout the 1980s, armed with a fly rod or baitcaster.

But nowhere else has flat fishing become more specialized than on the west coast of the Cape York Peninsula from Seisia down to Weipa. Pioneer, Greg Bethune, has exploited it for all that it is worth. Greg has purpose-built skiffs, which are similar in design to those found overseas, and they have proven to be ideal for sight hunting fish in the shallow Gulf waters.

Flat anglers do not wait for their quarry, but stalk it as a hunter does a wild boar. The flats are rich feeding grounds that attract many fish. Sand is agitated by lapping waves, which disturb nutrients from the bottom, attracting



*Clients on John Charlton's Cape York Adventurers with a trio of barracuda caught of the Woody Wallis Islands, west from Seisia.*

crustaceans and small fishes.

There are few parallels, analogies, or comparisons between flats fishing and other fishing styles. It is a case of hunting fish in turn being shadowed by the angler. The flats fisherman uses stealth and closely follows bait schools, instantly responding with a well-aimed cast when a target fish is sighted. Once hooked up, a sizzling run explodes across the shallow flats, often exposing line from reels that has not seen daylight since the spool was filled.

Snub-nosed dart, or permit, are highly sought after by flyfishers — some do nothing but stalk them when on the Cape. These waters are very rich with dart, growing to a very respectable five kilos or more.

Flat fishing is what sets Cape York apart from other styles practiced elsewhere. The Cape is largely composed of sand, the reason the rivers run clear into even clearer seas. It is place of sunshine, golden sands and cobalt blue seas. However, most of all there are few places anywhere on this planet where a greater variety of fish species occurs — either in freshwater, estuaries, or in the restless sea that laps these sandy shores.



*Seafaris uses specially designed skiffs and Slinger long boats to fish the rich waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria.*



# Rain means good

**T**he Northern Territory had some awesome wet season rainfall in 2006 and 2007. Both years were notable because the rain fell in a short, late deluge.

The Top End rainy season in years past has been from about late November to March.

Cyclone Monica followed the NT coast from east to west in May 2006 after a dry January, February and March. She dumped so much rain that many northern rivers ran hard into the dry season.

A slow-moving tropical low pressure system hit the Top End in early March 2007. The rain that fell over three days left a bigger expanse of water over the Kakadu, Mary River and Adelaide River floodplains than Cyclone Monica.

The 2007 low pressure system then moved west to the Kimberley and formed Cyclone George.

Most run-off season action across the Top End is in March/April - that's when fishing tour guides are usually fully booked. But it rained hard through these months in 2006, and never stopping long enough to provide an extended window for run-off fishing.

As I write this it looks like the 2007 wet season might pan out better, with "top-up" rain following the big flood which should keep feeder creeks flowing for longer. More barramundi will therefore be caught. Another thing is fairly certain - the big floods should ensure good recruitment of young barramundi into billabongs, and fast growth rates.

The irony of the cyclones and big floods is that they are welcomed by northerners who love barramundi fishing, yet

they also bring heartache. The community of Oenpelli near the East Alligator River was flooded in March 2007. A bridge on the Arnhem Hwy into Kakadu was damaged and there was much damage to roads. All will likely be fixed by the time you read this.

Tiny Goat Island Lodge on the NT's Adelaide River was hit hard by both the 2006 and 2007 floods. Its future was uncertain at publication - if it remains open, you can help by dropping in and spending a few dollars on a beer and a meal, or stay overnight in one of the air-con cabins.

The big wet seasons bring brilliant fishing, although we would be better off if the monsoon started earlier and fell more consistently instead of one big, late hit.

Heavy rain also clears waterholes such as Corroboree Billabong of lillies, and trolling lagoons for barramundi in 2007 will never be easier. Finding saratoga might be more tricky without the usual lilly pad cover they love.

Interestingly, 2006 was one of the best black jewfish seasons Darwin locals can remember. Big jewies were about in hundreds and anyone with a tinny was heading out to Charles Point to get them. The big rainfall seemed to fire up the inshore food chain and bring the jewfish in. I predict 2007 will be the same.

Take a look at some of our wet season aerial photography of Chambers Bay below Shady Camp to get an idea of the volume of water that flowed into the sea in 2006 and 2007.

In other news, the Federal Court decided in March 2007 that NT Aboriginal Land includes the sea down to the low

**North Australian Fish Finder 2007/08**  
 Published: April 2007 (biennial 7th edition)  
 Produced by: The Editor's Office Pty Ltd,  
 PO Box 3195, Darwin, NT, 0801.

Editorial/advertising: Matt Flynn  
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