



Lakefield NP – Kalpowar booty: Archer Fish and Barramundi

From Lakefield NP we choose the coastal route via Lilydale Station and Port Stewart to Coen instead of the main road between Musgrave and Coen. According to reports received this stretch is apparently “shocking”! Our drive is a very pleasant one with hardly any corrugations even if a roadside worker suggests on the radio in passing “...*you are mad to be towing along here!*”. Having heard this before (remember the Bloomfield Track) we push on unperturbed ‘walking the rig’ over some washouts; the only occasional (minor) obstacles somewhat slowing our otherwise good pace.



***Serene Billabong on route
to Coen via
Lilydale Station***

Refreshments at Coen



Later on, in passing the Archer River Roadhouse of course one has to sample the much-talked-about **Archer River Roadhouse Burger!**



After a one-night stopper at Coen (laundry needs) and a pizza at the (S)Exchange Hotel we carry on North to **Chuulangun** where we reconnect with AOR fellow campers Chris and Carmen whom we met weeks earlier at Gilbert River. Chuulangun is an aboriginal elder's freehold amidst National Park territory. Therefore no prior booking is required unlike all other QLD National Park sites where booking arrangements for numbered locations have to be made prior to arrival. A bit tricky for anyone unfamiliar with the Cape for lack of understanding travel distances and road conditions between camps. On the upside, uncrowded spots are guaranteed upon arrival, often out of sight or

earshot from neighbouring sites. **Chuulangun lies at the croc-free Upper Wenlock River** – the water is 27C, perfect for swimming; a real bonus in this *man-eating-lizard* infested part of the world!

From here it is a 2 ½ hour exploratory drive to **Chili Beach** and (truly “back road”) **Portland Roads**. Our tasty seafood lunch at ***Out Of The Blue Café*** in Portland Roads makes the trip extra worthwhile.

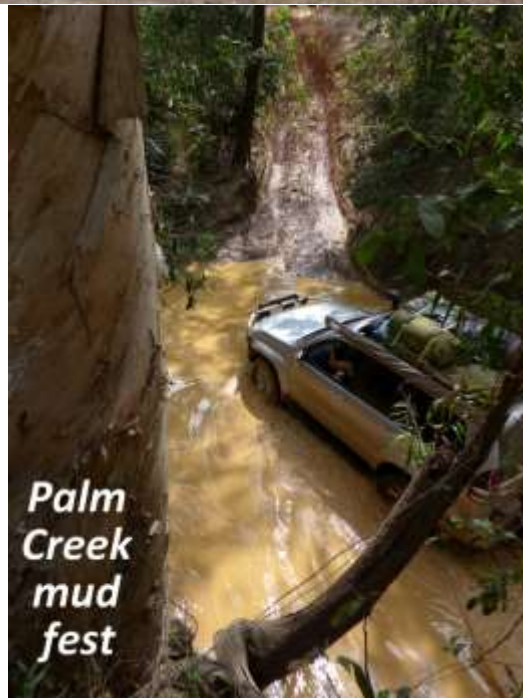


Chili Beach vistas

The following day we drive into the **Old Telegraph Track (OTT)** from Bramwell Station for a couple of hours of boundless entertainment: Watching mad machos' antics... flogging their gear.

Giving the idea of travelling any further on the OTT a miss is easy: The entry into **Palm Creek** presents an almost vertical drop off and the so called “chicken track” (by-pass for wimps) isn't much better: Very few lucky ones make it out the Northern end unassisted; most having to be winched or snatch-strapped out of their boggy predicaments after panel scratching up the right-side wall.





Miss the OTT mud bath and opt for a swim at **Fruitbat Falls** instead - a much more attractive idea!



We contemplate **Elliot Falls** a little further up the OTT but decide against the inevitable crossing necessary to reach Elliot. A nasty washed-out hole with muddy water deep enough to be washing over the car's bonnet stands in our way!



Fun at Fruitbat Falls



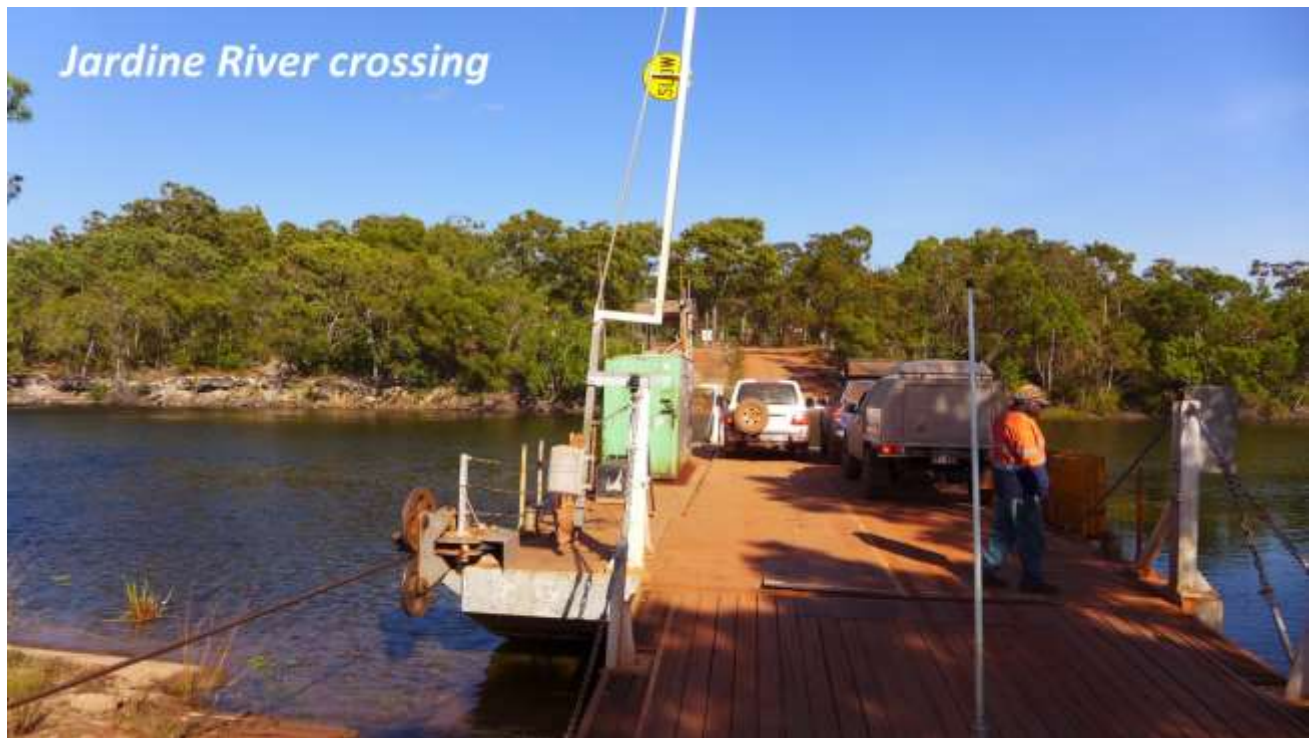
Corrugation rattled roadie's rejuvenation



Fruitbat Falls with AOR fellow campers Carmen and Chris



Jardine River welcome



Following Fruitbat Falls we are fast closing in on the Top: A short ferry ride across the Jardine River and in good time we arrive at **Alau**, a small aboriginal community just South of Seisia.

After dark we 'croc spot' with our torches – looking for that orange croc-eye glow somewhere in the black of night. Indeed, the crocs cruise about. One swims right into the beach just to remind us WHO rules here. Ludicrous to even think entering the waters anywhere around!





Palm cockatoos are the other novel residents at Alau. We wake up to their nut crunching noises early one morning as a flock of them fossick around our door step. These intriguing birds are only found on Cape York, the Northern half in the main.





From Alau we launch our final assault on **The Tip** in the early hours of **August 10 - 2017**.
A 40min drive to the Tip's car park, a short 15min walk over the rocks and we reach that famous sign!
It is **8am** – we are the first visitors of the day and have the Tip all to ourselves.

What an overwhelming feeling to finally arrive here!





For me it is quite an emotional moment as I lay my hand on that sign: I try to choke back some tears, unsuccessfully, all at the same time feeling elated, humbled and blessed for the sheer privilege of standing atop the best country on the planet!

An impromptu prayer of 'thanks-giving' goes up to the heavens as I reflect on 36 years in Australia, what this great land has done for me and how I made it so far with wonderful wife Katherine by my side. The seemingly endless corrugations to the Tip are worth enduring 1000times over – forgotten at this moment in time... definitely an achievement still... to make it this far via the overland route.



On the way back we swing by the iconic 'Croc Tent' to purchase the obligatory T-Shirts



Souvenir shopping at the Croc Tent and meeting a fellow bush pig ☺



Bush Pig Corroboree

We explore the Cape's the surrounds for the rest of the day...





Fly Point: Violent ocean current rapids amidst 40knot gusts



Pumping surf at Narau Beach



*Winter alright...
"Snow dump"
at
Punsand Bay*



*Fair
dinkum
snow balls
at 28C*

Thursday Island is also on our list to tick off. It is only 96 nautical miles from Australia's Northern tip to Papua New Guinea. Some of the northernmost Aussie territory (Torres Strait Islands) sits only 4km off the coast of PNG. **TI**, as it is known amongst locals, survives solely on tax payer's money. Some thirty six government agencies have offices here. Not sure what they all are but customs and border security is obviously the most important. This is not new... Back in 1891 **General Sir Peter Scratchley** had a fortification built on Green Hill.

Sir Peter was the appointed British commissioner in charge of all Australian colonies in 1877. The idea was to protect TI's harbour from enemy possession (fear of Russian invasion) and to secure smooth commerce operations through the Torres Strait. Only one shot was ever fired in anger in 1916 due to the suspicion of a German ship operating in Australian waters. An unflagged vessel had entered the channel which resulted in a stern request for identification by way of "shot over the bow". The ship in question apparently wasted no time in proving they were actually a "friendly"!



Thursday Island - Green Hill overlooking the Torres Strait

TI has two industries to speak of. One is *cray fish exports* worth 100million annually, mainly to China. We visit the local export facility and view their catches. One of them is a monster! While the going is good it is quickly decided '**man must not live on fish alone**' and we purchase a fine lobster tail which gets the Weber BBQ treatment the following day.

Parked outside we spot a trailer boat riddled with holes – albeit with lots of fenders tendered to the gunnels – to prevent it from sinking, obviously. We learn, this is a more recent 'invention' to transport crayfish from their catch pens out at sea to port. The "holed" boats serve as transport vessels for the cray, continuously flushing the catch with fresh sea water through the holes while under tow. In previous times they had to pump water into holds to keep the crayfish fresh. This new method eliminates the need for pumps completely. 'Keep it simple' is key once more...



Green Hill Fort - Guns guarding the Torres Strait



Thursday Island's second industry is pearl farming which, very sadly, produced a grave yard full of expired Chinese pearl divers: There are 600 graves at this heritage site but it is estimated up to 900 divers died of the 'bends' within a 60year period in the previous century – many of them before the age of 21.



Pearl Diver Suit



Pearl Diver's helmet

Up to an estimated 900 Chinese pearl divers met their early fates on Thursday Island dying from the 'bends' – most before age 21



Thursday Island's azure waters



Turtle rodeo



Camp Matrix

Seisia Beach and wharf/Cape York



Katherine is keen to fish the famous Seisia wharf known for producing fine catches of very large fish so we hang out in the adjacent camp ground for a couple of nights.

She duly lands a *Golden Trevally*, which is promptly processed into a delicious lunch before we remember to take a photo of the species!

We are invited to a local dance performance at the Seisia Fishing Club which nets us a few new travel mates. The cultural background is Polynesian rather than Aboriginal (like Thursday Island). Amazing to think we are actually still in Australia – not some far flung South Pacific hideaway.





Directions at Seisia for bathroom use are hilarious and bring smiles to our faces. Seems, man is still pointed to some fruit tree for suggestions (although the '*forbiddden fruit*' is for females this time!)



In an unanimous conclusion we decide it is time for a little vacation - seeking a "get away" from the rigors of roughing it on the road.

Roko-Island promises to offer just what we are dreaming of – camping in a tent on a spec in the ocean with palm trees swaying in the breeze... and no worries other than to catch a few fish - simply to be handed over for cooking by... Henrietta, the lovely lady owner from Tahiti who also runs the pearl farm here on Roko.

Her son Jason takes us on a very productive fishing tour the first morning - trawling for pelagics (surface fish). Not before too long Katherine is hooked up and into it – hauling in a 10kg Longtail Tuna!



I do catch one, too, but as usual it is much smaller than Katherine's...





After fishing we hammock chill for a while and hang loose in the swinging chair under swaying palms.



The island's jetty is a good place for croc spotting – every evening the resident 'lizard' comes out to investigate - often swimming right up to the pontoons. Rule No.1: Don't stick your fishy fingers in the drink off the jetty when cleaning your catch! Fetch wash water with a bucket instead lest one might lose a limb or two...



We learn the best method of opening those delicious fresh coconuts, extract the water, then grind the pulp out of the shell to make coconut flour for baking tasty coconut bread...





Host Henrietta is also a wonderful cook dishing up the most delicious meals night after night!



A pearl farm tour is part of the package – we get a live demo of seeding a pearl oyster with tools that look rather similar to dental instruments.





After three days at Roko Island we must move on – back to free camping in the bush. Mutee Head is the last camp near the top end. Upon arrival a fellow traveller points out a secret camp spot, so-called **Mutee Head East**. At first the promise sounds too good to believe: Could we have this beach, even the whole bay, all to ourselves? A short walk down the beach and around the nearest point to the East reveals... all is true! The track into this spot is just **what our Matrix is made for: To reach the “ends of the earth”** where only a lucky few will be able to venture and camp - in perfect comfort: Bathroom facilities, hot showers, bedroom with ocean views, beachside dining...





At the far East side of the bay we find a rocky outcrop loaded with **tasty oysters** – lunch is “done like a dinner” 😊😊😊



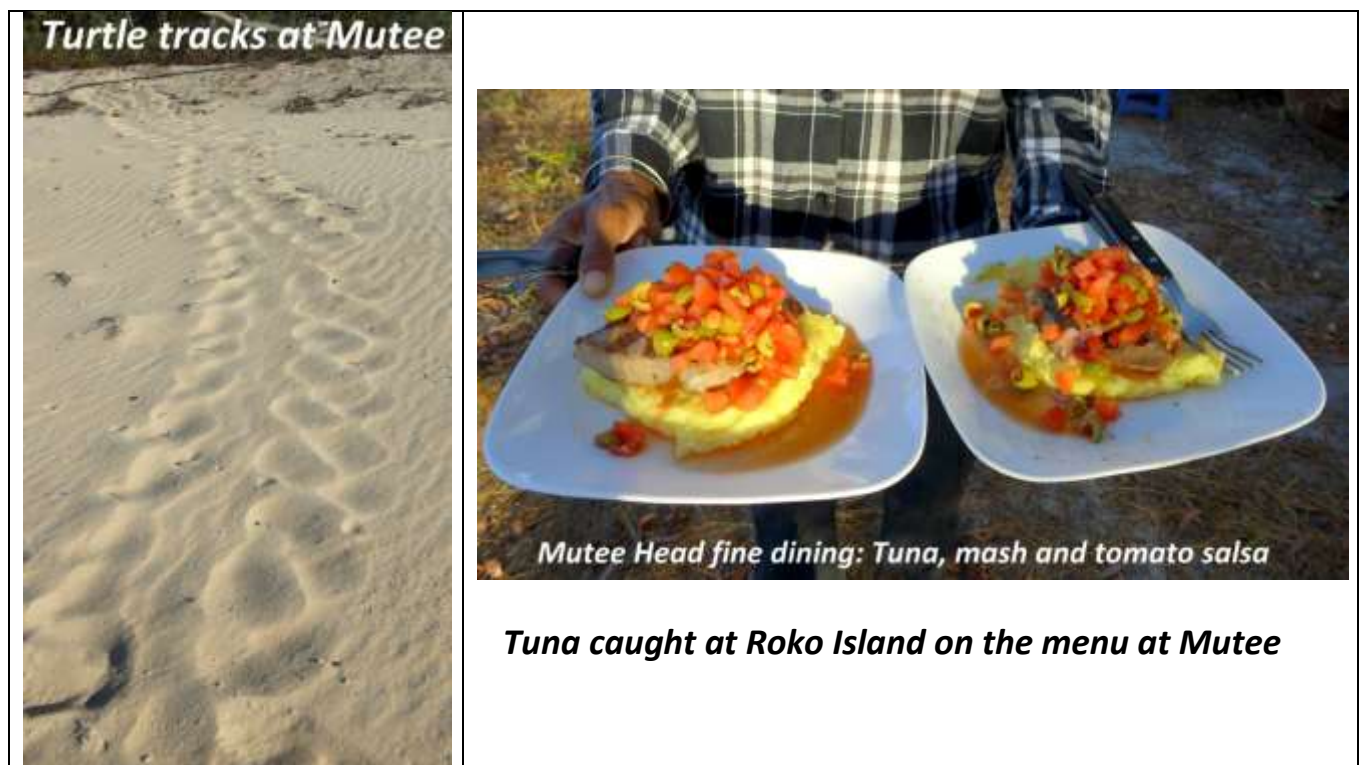


There lies a peculiarly shaped piece of driftwood on the beach:
Looking like some dragon from ocean's deep!





Locals told us the turtles have started laying eggs at Mutee Head. We find their tracks in the sand but despite keeping a watch every night we never get to see these elusive creatures in the act. Must be like winning Lotto to actually witness turtles burying their eggs in the sand above waterline.



Sadly the time has come when we have to turn our backs to the very top end of Oz. We so enjoyed our time up here... reaching the Tip, the friendly folk, the camping at Alau (Umagico), Seisia, Punsand Bay and Mutee, our island stay at Roko and the daytrip to Thursday Island, the fishing and the croc spotting. Not to mention the wonderful (winter) climate – divine temperatures during the day followed by balmy nights without fail. Certainly a place we have very much learned to love, one we will dearly miss...



So we must head South again on the so-called PDR (Peninsula Development Road – the main drag). We feel a little short-changed about the alternative route, the iconic **Old Telegraph Track (OTT)**. Though, according to latest reports this route is badly washed out and deteriorated this season. The track has not been maintained for many decades, albeit hundreds of adventurers take on this historic track for its sheer challenge, trying to prove it can still be driven... and they do – “a sizeable mountain to climb” for man and machine!

So we decide we must have another look: This time we choose “**Gun Shot**”- one of many iconic obstacles along the OTT treasured by devotees. The Matrix is duly left behind at the Ranger’s Station: Even the side track to meet up with the OTT is murderously corrugated!

One drives through astonishing bush nothingness being shaken to the bones for an hour in from the PDR (main road) to find, surprisingly at ‘Gun Shot’, dozens of people milling around with cameras in hand, spectators to a hive of activity: Crazy drop ins, cars and trailers water wading through the creek, getting bogged in knee deep mud holes on the way out, teams of helpers in mateship bonding efforts perform heavy duty winching and hauling everywhere you look. AMAZING what these guys do for holiday fun; we are instantaneously fascinated and join the crowds with our camera.

Best to let the pictures do the talking...





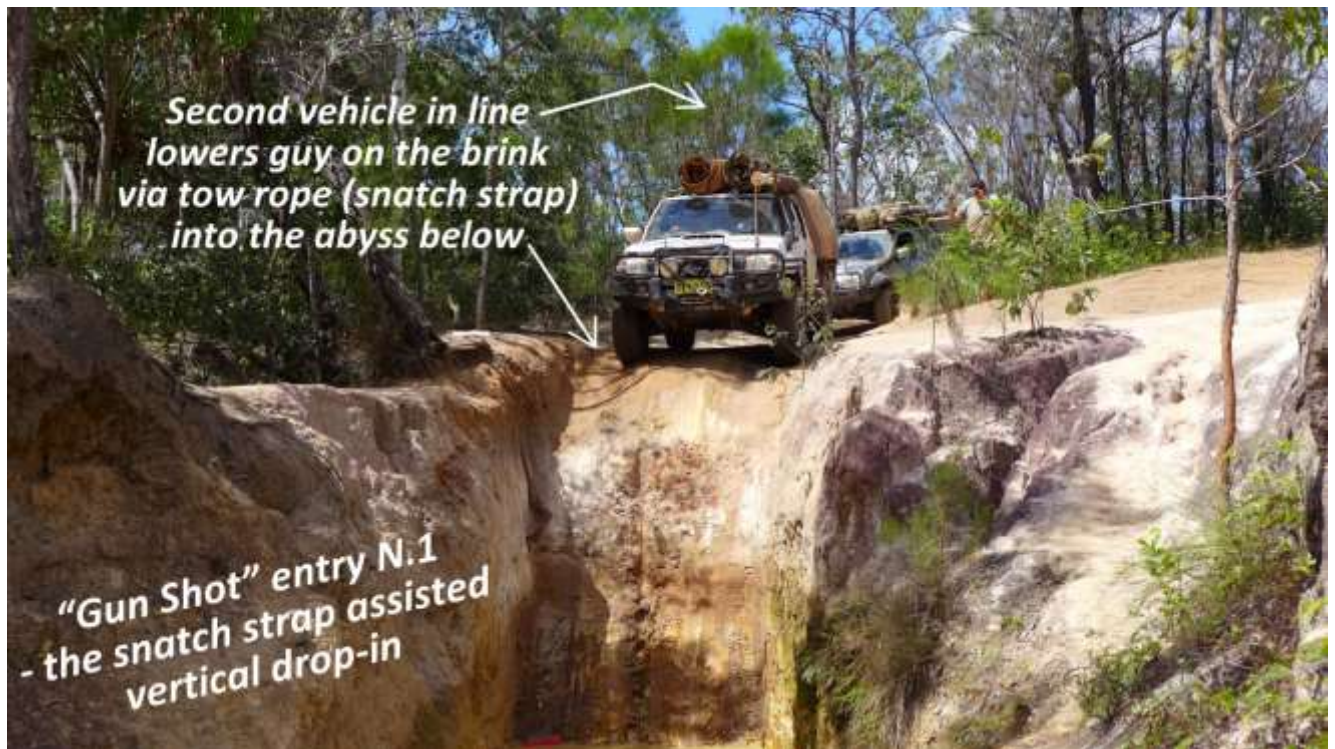


Serious testing of man and machine!









The shot above was taken just before my camera battery died!#@*%%#!

So it goes:

The vehicle's nose digs about two feet deep into the muddy pit. It stops there in almost vertical limbo as the snatch strap is disconnected from the rear – then the guy drives out without any further assistance: The undisputed hero of the moment with a **smile the size of a Mack Truck** on his face 😊!!!



Adventurer's leaving their mark at the OTT

The track from the main road to meet the OTT and 'Gun Shot' was so bad, twice we decided to give up and abandon mission but with no immediate room to turn on the spot we were forced to push on. SO GLAD WE DID!!! Wouldn't want to miss this experience for anything...

Conclusion: The OTT is a fun place for the young, the young at heart and for those who know what they're doing. Not just a playground for daredevils, indeed many bring their entire family, wives, kids and trailers. Although, judging by some of the wives little amused stern faces not all husbands' actions are met with uninhibited approvement as they take their mob to the outer limits of holiday travel.



When we sadly leave them all behind there already forms a “traffic jam” of eight vehicles queuing on the far side. All ready and rearing to tackle the challenge ahead.

No doubt, also this new group of keens will team up, band together and help each other over the obstacles in wait: Wonderful to see such **true Aussie mateship at work and... at its very best!**

After an overnight stopover at **Bramwell Station** we arrive at **Weipa** where we are booked for another fishing charter, a tour of the Rio Tinto Bauxite mine and an oil change on the truck.

Rio Tinto is a multinational outfit, one of the world's largest metal and mining corporations with headquarters in London. Founded in 1873 it has swallowed up many smaller operations over the years (i.e. Comalco). Britain has a 40% share in the company out of which 25% are said to belong to her majesty, our Queen. Apart from Australia, Canada also holds shares.

Soon their third mine at Weipa will open. A new loading jetty is currently being built. The new mine is estimated to hold Bauxite deposits lasting over a hundred years before depletion.

Rio Tinto's revenue in 2016 was almost 34 billion US\$ with a profit of almost 5 billion. Total assets amount to approx. 90 billion. The good Queen surely must be amused!

It is pretty impressive to watch their mining equipment in action...

Bauxite mining in operation



**Bauxite
mining
truck**



Under construction: Loading jetty for RIO TINTO's new (third mine) at Weipa





Unexpectedly, we also need to organise a repair job on short notice: The front end support of the canopy has crapped out. There are number of stress fractures and one section sheared off completely: A case of material fatigue – succumbed to corrugations’ relentless assault over hundreds of miles. The vehicle is unfit to tavel any further...

The damage cannot be remedied by welding and a whole new support bar will have to be manufactured. We extend our stay by an extra day and use the downtime to go fishing – *“kill two birds with the one stone”* as they say... or more a case of *“catch two fish with one hook”* if you like.



This brings us to the last chapter of this log – the fishing.

Together with two other traveling angling enthusiasts we fill a 75l ice box to the brim with a colourful array of “Piscean all-sorts”: Tusk fish, Sweet lip, several species of Cod, Stripeys, Emperor and a couple of Longfin Tuna to top off the list. All excellent table fare - worth mentioning!

We pack about 10kg of fish fillets in the freezer but would have ended up with even more (*definitely not complaining!*) if it wasn’t for some massive sharks frequently biting off prize-worthy fish leaving behind only the head.

Nevertheless, our diet plan for the next week is fixed – fresh ‘Gulf Of Carpentaria’ fare!



Tusk fish are difficult to catch – they pull harder than most other species. Upon striking one they need to be reeled in as fast as possible – when hooked they race for the bottom and ‘bite the reef’ with their huge teeth thus solidly anchoring themselves to the ground from where they are extremely difficult to get dislodged. When you manage to break one free without busting the line the next challenge is to bring the fish to the surface before “Bruce the Bruiser” mauling shark scores the larger part of it!



*3kg of Tuskfish head
bitten off
by a dirty big shark*



*Tooth lost here
probably stuck
on reef*

**Reef anchor:
Tusk Fish's set of teeth**



Coming up... heading South

Watch this space... more soon!



"TheNotSoGrey Go-Mads"

***Greetings from
Chris and Katherine***