

ONO! ON AGAIN!

Fiji's remote Ono Island may well be the hottest popping and jigging location on the planet

WORDS & PHOTOS BRENT DELANEY



Ono Island's massive red bass and GTs gave stunning accounts of themselves on heavy gear.

INSET TOP: The peaceful accommodation options at Oneta Resort were a pleasure to come back to after a long day of arm-stretching action.

INSET MIDDLE: This 42kg GT fell to a massive knife jig worked down deep.

INSET BOTTOM: Sunsets were spent enjoying some shoreline popper action near the resort, or by taking well-earned breaks and beverages!



PICTURE THIS: one of the longest continuous reef systems in the world; an unexplored and unexploited fishery; boutique accommodation on a small island in the middle of it all and a masseuse waiting for you at the end of the day. Such a place exists—Oneta Resort, located on Fiji's remote Ono Island and it is one of the hottest tropical popping and jigging locations on the planet.

This place dished up the best tropical sportfishing I've ever experienced. Sure, we caught big fish such as solid dogtooth tuna, giant trevally (GTs) to 42kg, cod to 45kg and huge red bass (to name a few species), but what really made this trip exceptional was the consistency of the action. The numbers of GTs, red bass and dogtooth in this area have to be seen to be believed. We were hooked up all day, of every day, of our trip.

I fished Ono in early February this year, thanks to Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures. My companions were David Noble from Ocean Blue, Mark Kitteridge from *NZ Fishing News* and photographer Kerry Wilson.

Oneta Resort

Oneta Resort consists of a small collection of stylishly appointed traditional Fijian bures set in tropical gardens near a small palm-fringed beach. The resort is owned and operated by Piero Piva, whose Italian heritage means he believes in the good things in life. Expect incredible food, strong Italian coffee and good style!

Piero has designed Oneta to blend perfectly into the surrounding environment—you can hardly detect its presence when you approach in a boat. It is also a sustainable development, in that the 'jungle' that surrounds the bures has been carefully cultivated and provides all of the tropical fruits and vegetables on which you'll be dining during your stay. The bures have intricately carved wooden beams, thatched roofs and outdoor showers surrounded by bamboo and jungle.

Oneta is located on Ono Island, off the tip of Kadavu in the rarely visited south of the Fijian Islands chain. Ono sits in the lagoon of the Great Astrolabe Reef system, along with many other dreamy little tropical islets. Within minutes of leaving Ono you can be casting poppers at big GTs.

Poppering perfection

The Great Astrolabe Reef is one of the longest reefs in the world and it is fished by a handful of villages, an operator out of

Matava on Kadavu and Piero... that's it. This means huge swarms of rarely targeted GTs and red bass patrol this reef and are eager to eat poppers.

We spotted yellowfin tuna smashing bait from the window of our small plane as we came in to land at Kadavu. Ten minutes later we were in a boat being transferred to Ono—surrounded by 15–30 kg yellowfin slowly rolling on the surface! Kerry unpacked a rod and cast a popper into the fray. He had two spectacular takes but the hooks failed to stick. By this time, Dave had rigged a rod and his popper was engulfed instantly. After some backbreaking work, Dave put a fat yellowfin into the boat among our luggage. What a start!

Over the next week, our poppering sessions were fast and furious. Kerry caught the best fish of his life in the first five minutes of day one—a 23kg GT. Large red bass were everywhere, and we would hit patches crawling with GTs in the 12–20kg bracket. One memorable session had Mark, Dave and me achieve a triple hook-up on GTs to 20kg—they were thick! By-catch included bluefin trevally, coral trout and Dave scored a Napoleon wrasse—uncommon in Fiji.

Each zone of the reef offered different structures to work, including hard reef edges with deep-water drop-offs, clustered bomboras, channels with strong current flows and gently sloping fissured reef-flats with perfect peeling waves rolling over them. The latter offered superb visuals of fish eating your lures and striving to rub you off on the coral as incoming glassy rollers drained water off the reef.

On a couple of afternoons we opted to abandon the reef edges and work the bommies straight out from Ono in the lagoon. As the sun set we enjoyed a few cold beers and lost popper after popper to red bass and bluefin trevally. Big bass were a menace in the lagoon shallows!

Another occasion sticks firmly in my mind. Mark and I were casting from the front deck at the gently sloping reef behind the breakers. We both spotted a blue hole in the reef covered with whitewash which just screamed 'big fish'.

I fired a cast in first, hoping to get the jump on Mark—only to watch in horror as a pesky tip-wrap made my cast fall short. Mark's face lit up in a cheeky grin of trans-Tasman rivalry and he exclaimed, "Cheers mate, I'll get that one for you!"

His cast was on the money and I watched as a GT of at least 35kg consumed his popper! The big girl ran through the breakers



ABOVE: Big GTs were taken on poppers and jigs, and gave a strong account of themselves.

ABOVE RIGHT: Puka puka, or rosy jobfish, provided the jigging entertainment between dogtooth strikes.

RIGHT: Everyone called this brightly coloured mangrove jack for a red bass before it came over the gunwales—an unexpected but welcome catch!



"This place dished up the best tropical sportfishing I've ever experienced"

and turned on her side to make it over the top of the nearly exposed reef. Predictably, Mark's 100lb braid was shredded. Revenge is a dish best served by an angry GT!

And that was just the popper action! We spent the majority of our time jigging!

Jigging jubilation

This is a place where you can be among the first wave of explorers to find out what lurks in these waters. Piero had never seriously jigged this reef, he focuses on poppering. The Ono locals had never seen or heard of a dogtooth tuna. We found dogtooth in most places we dropped a jig.

While the guys were poppering, I often threw soft plastics at the reef edges and



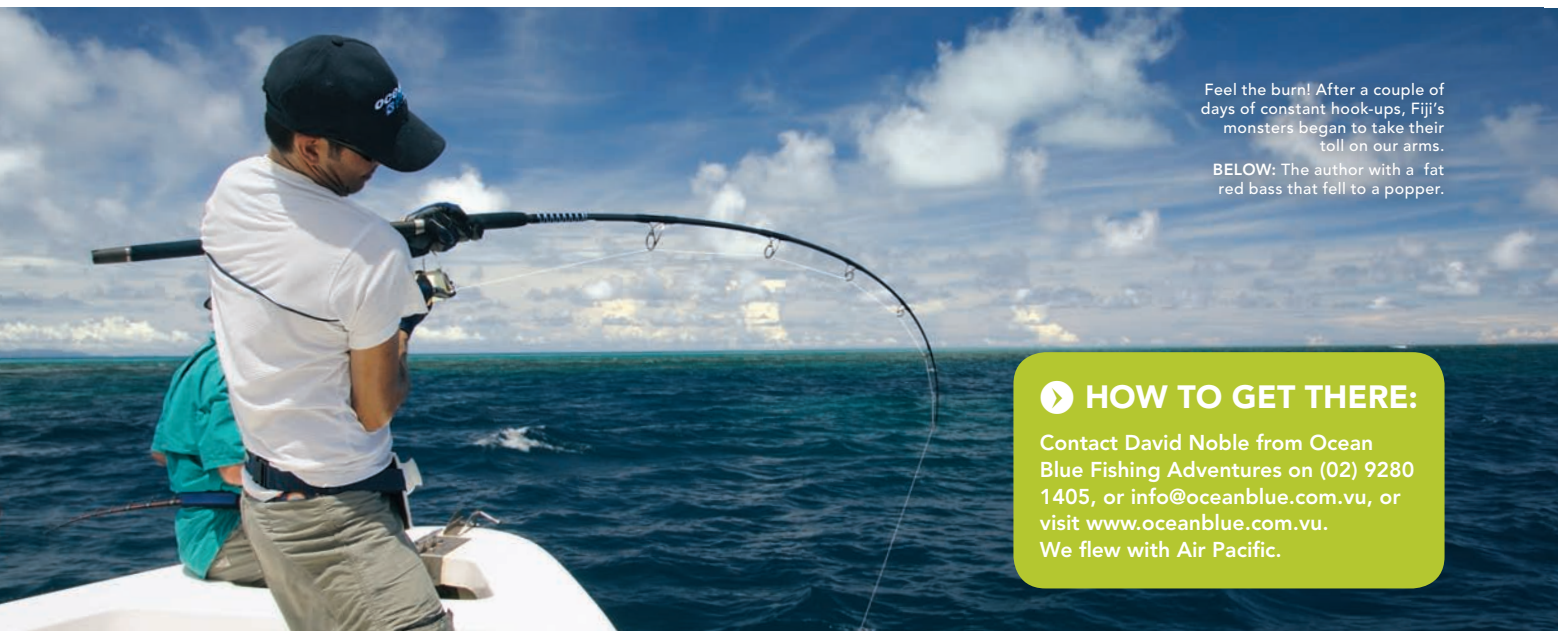
PRO TIPS

ONO ISLAND ESSENTIALS

- Get fit before the trip—poppering and jigging all day will take its toll on you.
- Learn how to tie a mid-knot (see page 80)—it's the strongest knot around and it casts smoothly.
- When surface fishing, large chuggers and poppers attracted more strikes than stickbaits or high-speed poppers—a slow retrieve with explosive chugs did the damage.
- Take a selection of jigs but ensure you have plenty of large knife jigs.
- Go 'bommie bashing' to donate any unwanted lures to the brutal lagoon-dwelling red bass!

Modern
fishing
LONGNOSE EMPEROR





Feel the burn! After a couple of days of constant hook-ups, Fiji's monsters began to take their toll on our arms.

BELOW: The author with a fat red bass that fell to a popper.

▶ HOW TO GET THERE:

Contact David Noble from Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures on (02) 9280 1405, or info@oceanblue.com.vu, or visit www.oceanblue.com.vu. We flew with Air Pacific.



caught plenty of red bass, coral trout and various other reefies. We were fishing a hard reef edge with loads of current when I pulled up a small dogtooth tuna on a 7in Gulp Jerk Shad. Dave was then dusted by a serious doggie. We had picked up the scent.

That night we pored over the maritime charts and looked for likely spots around the reef to jig. The next morning we rained down metal in several different areas and found heaps of fish.

We focused on water 60–110m deep and caught longnose emperor, red bass, green jobfish, coral and lunar trout, GTs, huge cod, mangrove jack and 'puka puka'. Oh, and lots of dogtooth!

Most of the doggies were modest specimens in the 8–12kg range but we had some frightening encounters with big fish. Mark had a 400g jig bent in half by a monster of the deep that painfully fell off the hook.

Dave then upped the ante and went into battle with a better class of fish. Line sized from his reel, but Dave triumphed in the end: 26kg of dogtooth tuna was the vanquished party. We also had plenty of dogtooth double hook-ups.

Piero says he has seen giant doggies while diving here—we barely scratched the surface of this fishery. Another positive aspect was the lack of sharks. We only lost three fish to the bities for the whole trip.

Proceedings reached a crescendo on the final afternoon. We fished the mouth of a reef passage flowing hard. Down went our metal armada. I dropped a 470g weapon, Mark took things to another level by dropping down a jig of alarming proportions.

We were all catching some great fish but then Mark was hit, big time! His tackle and muscles held and 15 minutes later a 42kg GT surfaced like a Russian nuclear subma-

TACKLE BOX

- ▶ **POPPERING:** Ugly Stik Bluewater 24kg Spin, Shakespeare Sigma 80, 80lb Stren Sonic Braid, 100–150lb leader.
- ▶ **JIGGING:** Ugly Stik Bluewater 36kg Jig Spin, Shimano Stella 18000SW, 80lb Stren Sonic Braid, 100–150lb fluorocarbon leader.
- ▶ **SOFT PLASTICS:** Poppering outfit, plus Nitro Gulfstream PE 6ft, Abu Garcia Revvo Toro 50, 65lb Stren Sonic Braid.

rine. He dropped the hulking lump of metal down again for another hook-up—this time a 45kg cod was the result of his toil.

Our fishing time wasn't cleanly divided between poppering and jigging. We would often start by jigging and then simply move closer to the reef and cast surface lures and soft plastics for a change of pace.

For those who enjoy trolling for pelagics and billfish, during the 'winter' months the outside edge of the reef is reputed to be crawling with wahoo, mahi mahi and sailfish. We spotted a few free-jumping sails and we were there in the wet season. Spanish mackerel and yellowfin tuna can be encountered at any time of year, although we didn't catch any Spaniards. We didn't target them, either—there is a limit to how much you can cram into a fishing trip!

I had no idea what to expect when I travelled to Ono Island—I'd never heard of the place—and I didn't expect to return home babbling about a new global GT and dogtooth Mecca. But there you have it. Oneta Resort delivered the kind of fishing experience that we all dream about.