



SAIL OF THE CENTURY

WORDS & PHOTOS JOHN ASHLEY

Malaysia has been hiding one of the best sailfishing grounds in the world, but now the secret's out!



BELOW: A late afternoon stroll revealed another side to this area.
 INSET: No matter how many times you see the colours of an excited sailfish, they are forever spectacular.
 RIGHT: Some of the sails went absolutely mental when hooked!



SAILING AWAY

How to get there
 Malaysia Airlines flies to Kuala Lumpur twice daily from Sydney and most other major cities once a day. Getting across to Kuala Rompin is a comfortable five-hour car trip.

Where to stay
 Kuala Lumpur has hotels to suit every budget and the Istana Hotel (www.hotelistana.com.my) right in the heart of the city was excellent. In Kuala Rompin I found the best place to stay is the Serai di Lanjut Beach & Golf Resort www.seraidilanjut.com.my, which is close to a public jetty for charter-boat departure.

How to book a trip
 Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures (www.oceanblue.com.vu) in Sydney are the best people to organise your trip. David Noble can be contacted at (02) 9280 1405 or e-mail at david@oceanblue.com.vu. Many thanks to Malaysian Tourism for their help obtaining information on the area and assisting in getting me there.

I'VE BEEN VERY fortunate and fished some amazing places around the world, but my recent trip to Malaysia was a real eye-opener. For some reason, I'd never thought of Malaysia as being a hot spot for gamefish and I had never bothered to visit until a few interesting emails trickled into my computer's inbox. A mate of mine, Josh Bruynzeel, journeyed there recently and kept sending me messages like, "We're arse deep in sailfish and even on light tackle we're catching 20-30 a day without trying".

I thought Josh was spinning yarns, until a mate confirmed his story with photos.

Josh had gone to Singapore on a business trip and read about a place called Kuala Rompin on the Malaysian east coast, so he extended his trip and drove up there to check the place out. He found a string of 25ft outboard-powered boats available for charter and discovered a great fishery in balmy calm conditions. It all sounded too good to be true and got me stirred up enough to go find out for myself.

With only a couple of contacts and a bit of searching on various websites, I managed to establish that the weather patterns and the fishing was good from April right through to November, before the start of

the monsoon season, which makes things rather wet and uncomfortable. I booked a flight with Malaysia Airlines to the huge cosmopolitan city of Kuala Lumpur.

From there, I had to organise transport across Malaysia. The drive took less than five hours. It was an interesting run across the lush countryside and thoughts of rugged mountainous roads were soon dismissed, as the highways are surprisingly good, making the ride a comfortable one.

"The first two baits in the water were pounced on by hungry sails"

Kuala Rompin is a large town with a couple of nice beach side and golfing resorts, plus plenty of hotels and motels to choose from. Being a fisherman, I soon found myself walking around a small cluttered jetty just out of town where the charter fleet and dozens of commercial fishing boats were rafted up. The pro boats, big and small, were equipped mostly with fine-mesh nets, used in the river for prawns I guessed.

However, I soon found out they also drag the outside grounds for baitfish. Looking at

the charts of the Kuala Rompin coastline, it appeared the warm currents of the South China Sea must push down the Malaysian coast, forming a huge eddy on a shallow bank that runs for miles offshore from the coast to a string of large islands. This natural feature is the reason so much bait stacks up there—not to mention sailfish!

The next day was an experience I'll never forget. The 6m timber-hulled Suzuki-powered boat I boarded was far from set-up for sportfishing but adequate for the style of fishing these guys mostly do. There were no outriggers nor multiple rod holders; just two plastic rod tubes at the stern, a live-bait tank, depth sounder and a hand-held GPS. I was told that offshore, a series of FADs (fish aggregation devices) have been installed all over the place. They consist of anything from long weighted bamboo poles—so they can be spotted from a distance—to plastic drums and styrene floats, and old bits of net. The prolonged spells of calm weather keep these flimsy looking FADs intact and they were loaded with lots of different baitfish.

Two light spin rods loaded with Sabiki jigs were soon produced to work for the bait. The jigs would not have gone 3m under the boat when we had a full house on both rods

of weird and wonderful-looking critters. It was a struggle on the light rods getting all the bait to the surface, most of them looked like baby bludger trevally. Some of the other baits Captain Sham Samad called mackerel, which were in fact yellowtail or yakkas as we call them, and there were some strange other little reef fish I couldn't name—these were tossed back.

We filled the bait tank with small but good-looking baits and it was time to go fishing—wherever that was going to be!

Trying to have a conversation with these guys was difficult for me as one guy, Mohd Yusof, the angler, couldn't speak English at all, and the Captain could only get a few words out that I could understand. All I knew was we went a long way offshore to another FAD before we started any serious fishing.

These guys normally take out up to four or five anglers at a time, catch their bait, then tie up to a FAD or drift certain grounds with live baits set out under balloons or styrene floats. These fairly narrow-gutted craft they charter work well for this style of fishing and everyone gets to hold onto their own rod and wait for a bite. On our first stop, one boat just near us had a double hook-up with sailfish, but we didn't get a bite for an hour

so we moved to another bunch of sticks.

That spot didn't produce anything either, except for a couple of small barracuda that made me jump in anticipation every time a ratchet sounded. It was interesting to see plenty of small mahi mahi jumping about around the various FADs, but we didn't get a bite from one. These voracious fish normally eat every bait they see, big or small!

After a couple of hours without even a sniff of a sailfish the Captain decided to move and try drifting a ground he had marked on his little GPS. It was a good half-hour run and at 4000rpm the big Suzuki really hummed as it pushed the boat along at 30 knots or better. I caught a glimpse of some birds diving on the water in the distance and as we got closer I could see they were working a bunch of sailfish. This was more like all those heady reports I had received!

The first two baits in the water were pounced on by hungry sails. They were a nice size fish too, and they danced around giving the angler and yours truly a real work-out on the 10kg threadline tackle.

The Captain had to do a bit of fancy backing and filling with the boat and surprisingly the single screw outboard worked well to bring the fish under control. We finally

released both sails, which weighed about 22 to 27kg (50 to 60lb)—nice start!

By the time we had caught the two fish the school had moved well away, but the guys were quite happy to just set out a couple of baits and casually drift along and wait for another bite. After a restless hour or so I could still see the birds and the odd splashes of bait and sailfish off in the distance, so I suggested to the boys we go over and cast



TOP: The charter fleet wasn't what you'd expect at a gamefish haven like this.

ABOVE: The action was fast and furious once we rigged up with skip-baits.

"These flat-sided baits were perfect to skip off the rod tips and the sails went absolutely nuts"

after bite. With three of us on board we only trolled two baits and to get some jumping action with the camera we tried to hook one fish at a time. To do this we waited for the sails to home in on the baits and then I'd reel one in as fast as possible. This often produced some breathtaking, bill-slashing attacks and often a bunch of lit-up sails would come right to the transom of the boat looking for the bait. Naturally, at times it was near impossible to get the second bait away from the hoards of hungry sails and we were often crash-tackled instantly by two fish. When a double hook-up occurred, I had to drive the boat and try to take shots as well. It was really spectacular stuff!

The two days that we used the trolling skip-bait technique with either yakkas or trevally were out-of-this-world fishing. We lost count on the last day how many we actually released before we ran out of bait and left them snapping. Yusof had never caught so many sailfish in his life in such a short time. He must have released more than 20 himself that day and was absolutely worn out, but his cheeky grin said it all!

I think these guys learnt some interesting new methods, which I'm sure they'll use when they have limited anglers on board. I certainly learnt a lot about these grounds

PRO TIPS

THE MAIL ON SAILS

- The best tackle to use for sailfish is a versatile threadline outfit: you can cast the unweighted baits a good distance if need be.
- It's not a bad idea to take some spare tackle, such as your favourite hooks, lures and teasers.
- The charter boats supply the tackle but you're welcome to take your own conventional tackle (threadline or overhead), or even fly fishing tackle.
- The weather is always warm to hot in Malaysia, so light clothes are all that's needed to cover up from the sun.
- Rain showers often come through the area, so a light spray jacket is also a good idea.
- Other essentials include a good camera, polarised sunglasses, hat and plenty of sunscreen.

and why there are so many sailfish there. The place has to be seen to be believed—the fishing's better than I've experienced anywhere in the world, including Costa Rica.

The Serai di Lanjut Beach and Golf Resort holds an annual sailfish tournament on these grounds during August, which they say is in prime-time. I couldn't imagine the fishing being better than what I saw in May! **MP**