

# Ono – island of giants



Now that's a trevally – 42 kilos of jig-caught GT!  
(Photo: Kerry Wilson)

**Prior to each major trip, with the possible scenarios ahead seemingly endless and unrestrained by reality, one can't help wondering, 'Will this be the one?'**

Well, after returning from Fiji's Ono Island, I'm happy to say this trip pretty much was. Wow. Wow! WOW!

After flying to Nadi, courtesy of the friendly and accommodating people at Air Pacific, I met up with fishing companions David Noble from Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures, Sydney-based professional photographer, Kerry Wilson, and Brent Delaney, a journalist from leading Aussie fishing mag, *Modern Fishing*.

The domestic flight to Kadavu proved short but enjoyable, and upon arrival we were warmly greeted by host, Piero Piva, and his deckies Johnny and Simeli, Piero's Islander 28 centre-console charter boat awaiting loading and boarding just 80 metres away.

The trip to Ono Island usually takes an hour, but this time it was much longer, thanks to the white, watery eruptions that captured our attention mid-journey. They proved to be yellowfin tuna, but as my rods were taped together in a travel-tube, my reels tucked away in a carry bag, and my lures secreted deep within a tightly packed suitcase, taking photos of whatever eventuated seemed the only practical option open to me. Fortunately Piero had brought along one rigged popper outfit – just in case – and as Kerry had never used a popper or caught a yellowfin before, he was nominated as angler. Meanwhile Dave set about trying to join him in a frenzy of exploding baggage.

Kerry will never forget his first popper strike. One moment it was chugging back across the oily surface, the next it was rocketing skywards in the jaws of a Polaris-missile-like tuna, the momentum taking the fish

two metres into the air!

Unfortunately, it later came off in the midst of a sizzling run, a sequence that sadly repeated itself shortly afterwards.

Then, almost incredibly, Dave was ready too, and when both their poppers disappeared in detonations of foam within seconds of each other, we started hooting and whooping excitedly – after all, our trip hadn't technically started yet!

However, the small hooks on Kerry's lure lost their grip yet again, leaving Dave to fight his fish alone, with the long, stiff popper rod he was using quickly sapping his energy during the largely up-and-down fight. So when someone suggested the tuna had become a shark, Dave was quick to excuse himself and pass the rod to Johnny. Fighting fit and possessing no small degree of skill, Johnny proved more than a match for the tiring fish, which turned out to be a very healthy, very intact yellowfin of 20kg. (However, in Dave's defence, the leading treble hook had snagged further along the tuna's head, adding greatly to the resistance.)

Then, having lost track of the school, we headed for the resort once more, secure in the knowledge that our sashimi and tuna steak needs had already been met.

Eventually Piero eased the throttle back, and if not for the two boats moored outside, his little piece of paradise could have been missed. As it was, we got to within a few hundred metres before detecting the various buildings nestled within lush hillside vegetation, the traditional-type construction and natural materials blending harmoniously with the surroundings.

A short wade through tepid water brought us onto a short strip of golden beach, followed by a massive split-level deck and very spacious and cool looking main building. A short winding track then led to a second big house, with the eight comfort-

able beds inside partially screened off for privacy, and two huge fans rotating overhead.

Late afternoon was spent chatting and readying our gear, accompanied by some very welcome chilled ales and the first of many truly delicious meals, courtesy of very fresh local produce and Piero's very talented cooks, Kara and Miri.

Then, just before bed, I got to meet another of the lodge's star features: a bamboo-fenced outdoor shower, set amongst the hillside bush, and offering great views.

The next morning couldn't come quick enough; I was dressed and ready to go well before our scheduled departure, and the others weren't far behind. Having inhaled the substantial breakfast, we then scrambled on board *Loloa* and were off, the already warm wind in our hair and grins on our faces.

Our first spot was reached about 30 minutes later, so we split up, with two at the stern and two at the bow. There was no need to be patient; on my very first cast a good fish crashed the popper but didn't hook up, and this was followed by more swirls, bangs and chases over the next fifteen minutes. Then the inevitable happened: Kerry hooked up, a big patch of foaming, roiling water still visible when I looked back.

"It's a horse, it's a horse!" yelled Brent excitedly, as Kerry leaned back hard to try and keep the big fish out of the shallow coral. But, to everyone's surprise, not much happened, enabling Kerry to pump the fish in remarkably quickly, and soon, there it was, a large silver slab of giant trevally waiting patiently to be gaffed.

Once on board, the reason for its strangely passive behaviour became obvious, the large inhaled popper lodged sideways at the back of its throat, and once removed, the 23kg fish went absolutely crazy. Sometimes you've got to be lucky.

Indeed, this capture proved even more fortuitous than initially thought, because despite experiencing unbelievably consistent and exciting fishing over the following days, it remained our biggest popper-caught fish.

Not that we were complaining. The time between popper action averaged around ten minutes most days, and you never knew what was



The red bass are very aggressive and make tough opponents, despite their relatively small size. (Photo: Kerry Wilson)



Dave gave his big dogtooth plenty to think about.



What a way to prove the locals wrong! The Fijians we spoke to didn't think they had dogtooth locally – but this fish of almost 26 kilos, caught by Dave, says otherwise.

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going to hit next – or if you were going to get your lure back.

Most of the explosive strikes involved blurs of red, indicating brawling red bass (which are readily eaten here, as ciguatera is very rare), but we also encountered some very nice bluefin trevally, the odd coral trout, a few coddly-type things and, of course, a fair few more giant trevally.

No matter how many fish we caught though, we never tired of their strikes. One moment you'd be admiring your lovely cast, just short of the crashing swells but still beyond a neat looking dark crevice snaking through the lighter coral formations, the next your lure would disappear in an explosion of white water. Time to hang on and hope again, with Piero either charging right into the shallows to stay on top of the fish, or slowly chugging out, trying to drag the fish into deeper water.

Highlights were many, but encountering a school of 12-20kg GTs was right up there. Due to the barbless hooks and crazy, thrashing strikes, I hooked at least three during one retrieve before the hooks finally held, with several more shouldering each other while trying to grab the lure out of its mouth. Meanwhile, the other guys were locked in battles of their own, and it was great to see three trevally end up on board.

Another memorable moment occurred a little later. I was up at the bow with Brent when we spotted it: a dark blue patch of relatively deep water amongst the various reef structures and crashing whitewater – the perfect GT spot!

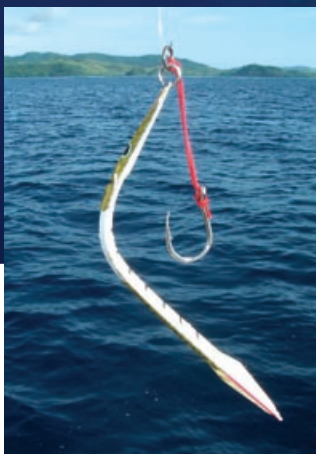
Unfortunately for me though, Brent was already letting fly, a glint in his eye and a grin on his face, but these vanished as his lure abruptly slowed and landed 30 metres short, the victim of a tip-wrap.

"Cheers, mate – I'll get that one for you!" I cheekily said, my lure splashing down on the hole's far side.

Sure enough, I'd only completed a couple of bloop when a massive shape exploded onto the lure, the immensity and savagery of the strike drawing various expletives from all on board. Then, with line now accelerating off against the heavy drag, Piero bravely darted *Loloa* right into the shallows to stay close and help avoid the bigger bommies. Initially



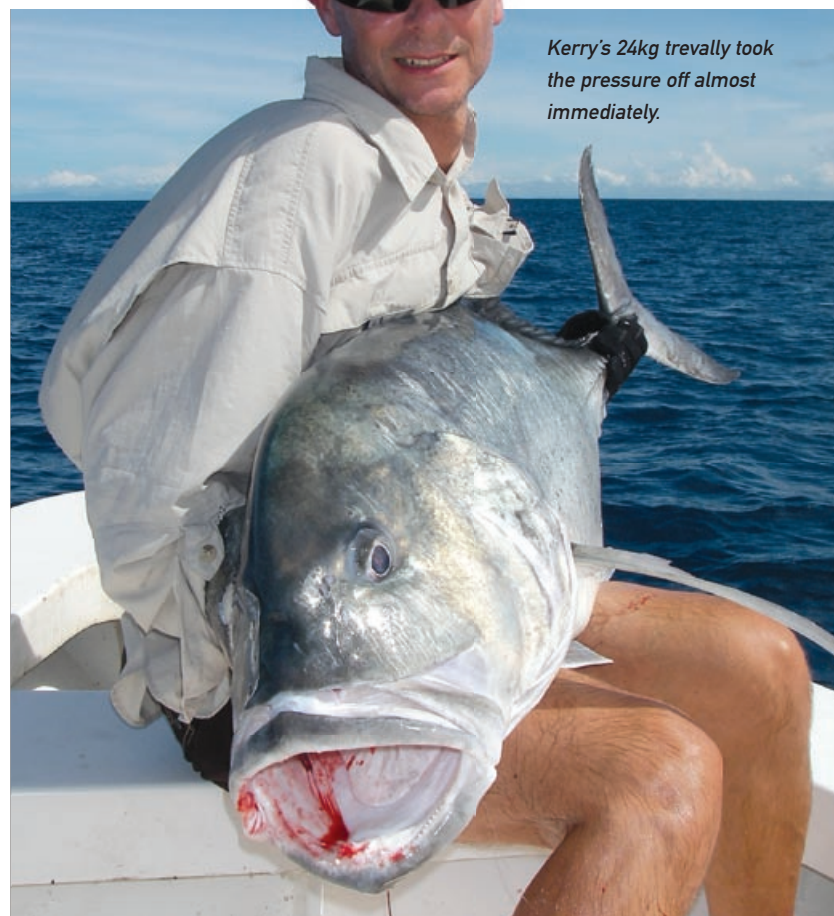
Wonderful structure like this equates to innumerable opportunities in Fiji. (Photo: Kerry Wilson)



A massive 'something' bent the Broken Arrow jig but didn't hook up.

this strategy worked pretty well, but then, without warning, the big fish charged straight at the main reef, the pressure and speed of the run flattening my rod and the line carving a deep cut through its foregrip. Next moment, thanks to the crystal-clear water, I saw 30-35kg of giant trevally tilt on its side and thrash through to the lagoon on the other side. Not surprisingly, I felt the rasp of a bommie seconds later, and when the line parted soon after, I nearly did a back-flip.

And then there was Dave's neat capture. At the time he was really nailing the casts, and upon seeing one land in good territory, right amongst the suds, I kept watching to see if it was as good as it looked.



Kerry's 24kg trevally took the pressure off almost immediately.



A couple of thumper red bass caught by Brent Delaney and the writer. (Photo: Kerry Wilson)

Again, just a couple of chugs enticed the by now familiar blast-of-white-water strike, locking him into a brutal battle. Guesses as to its identity were flying about, but no one got it right, with 13 kilos of beautiful maori wrasse ending up on board for careful photographing and releasing. They're very rare in Fiji these days.

However, popper fishing was only half our fishing equation, as jigging was just as productive and rewarding. Indeed, it was the type of tropical jigging you always hope to experience, but rarely, if ever, do. It began on the second morning, when an exploratory Raider jig attracted and hooked an 8kg longnosed emperor before reaching the bottom, and went on from there.

Our primary target was, of course dogtooth tuna, but we also caught a mind-boggling array of neat fish, often in quite hefty weights. These included coral and lunar trout, jobfish (green and rosy), several types of emperor and snapper, a huge mangrove jack, and a bunch of brightly coloured reef fish that were far too pretty to eat.

Then there were the dogtooth. Most were of modest size – around 5-10kg – but then Dave hooked a deep running locomotive. Aided by some good boat work from Piero, he

really got stuck in, loading his powerful jig rod to the maximum and taking line at every opportunity. It was a pretty impressive display, and in a surprisingly short time, there it was, a very nice doggy of nearly 26kg.

Unfortunately, I wasn't successfully converting my own chances. My biggest disappointment came while ripping my big Broken Arrow jig upwards. Suddenly, everything came to a very firm halt. It was as if a giant hand had seized the lure. Then, split-seconds later, my rod wrenched down as something massive accelerated away, triggering a whoop of triumph – at which point the hook fell out. Upon retrieving the lure, I found it bent into an L shape!

Fast-forward to the final afternoon's jigging session. Knowing this was my last chance, I summoned up the courage to use my brand-spanking-new 'elephant gun' – a Shimano Torsa 40 lever-drag reel on a Shimano Blue Rose jig stick. On it was attached a 500g Katch1 King Jig, another brave move, as my arms were already weary from days of constantly casting, jigging and fighting fish.

We didn't go far initially – just a few hundred metres out from the main lagoon entrance – but there

was plenty of current, and the 100-metre depth was well suited to big dogtooth.

After dropping down the hefty jig, I found my arms too sore to mechanically jig it, so settled for speed jigging instead, and was happily surprised to feel a heavy strike soon after – which sadly didn't stick.

Another five minutes of cranking and ripping saw me ready for something less physically taxing, but upon seeing the deep teeth marks and massive bite radius left on my jig, I decided to persevere.

A good thing too, as everything suddenly locked up in my hands soon after, followed by a big tail kicking in and line scorching off at a scary rate. If this was a doggy, it was a really good one, and fortunately Piero wasted no time getting *Loloa* underway to stay on top and reduce the chances of busting off.

By this time 70-80 metres of 37kg PFK braid had been dragged off the reel despite 12kg of drag pressure, but on the positive side, the fish was heading towards deeper water, so I tried not to change this.

Eventually a stalemate was reached, enabling a kidney harness to be attached to the Torsa reel, providing welcome relief for my thoroughly tortured arms and for extra pressure

A vertical advertisement for Katch 1 Spear Jigs. At the top, the logo 'Katch 1' is displayed in a stylized font with a fish icon, followed by 'Spear Jigs' in white text. Below this, a large, vibrant pink and purple spear jig is shown against a blue background of water. The text 'Check out our new range of colours and weights' is written vertically on the left side. At the bottom, the 'SPORT FISHING New Zealand Ltd.' logo is featured, along with the website 'www.sportfishingnz.com'. A price tag 'from \$14' is also visible.

to be placed on the spool with my fingertips.

This did the trick, and soon line was coming on slowly but steadily, with just the odd burst of power and ponderous headshakes keeping me anxious.

Finally the shape of something huge and silver could be seen on its side, tail still pumping slowly, and when it hit the surface, it did so in a rush, seemingly bursting up and through it like a small island.

Various shouted expletives followed, along with "It's a \*%\$@ing horse!" and "Massive doggy!" but then puzzlement, followed by "No – it's a bloody GT!"

And sure enough, it was – all 42kg of it! My head felt as if it was going to explode with the elation, especially with just an hour of our trip left to go!

At that point it felt like 'mission completed' and that I had earned a couple of cold beers, but with dehydration quickly averted, it seemed unprofessional and wussy not to drop that big jig once more.

About two minutes later my line slackened on the down-drop, suggesting the bottom had been reached,



The Katch1 King jig strikes again – this time attracting the attention of a 45kg flowery cod. (photo: Kerry Wilson)

and upon quickly engaging the reel and striking – just in case – I seemed to be snagged. Then the snag started moving, and I was into another tropical leviathan, although this one was slower and more ponderous than the GT. Eventually, after a 10 minute slugfest, I again prevailed, the barrel-

like shape of a huge mottled flowery cod bursting onto the surface.

Weighing 45kg, it was later gratefully accepted, along with the giant trevally, by the local village.

As I said near the beginning: wow. Wow. WOW!

For more information on this exciting operation, see the Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures' advertisement below.

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