

THE OTHER SIDE

of New Caledonia

New Caledonia is a special place with many faces and angling options—all of them involve big fish in huge numbers in relative paradise!

WORDS & PHOTOS RICK HUCKSTEPP

IN SEPTEMBER'S issue of *Modern Fishing*, I was extolling the fishing virtues of the western side of Grande Terre, the main island of New Caledonia. I also mentioned there were rumours of excellent prospects on offer at a place called Poindimie, a settlement entrenched on the eastern slopes of the mountain range dividing the length of this island.

In a recent whirlwind trip, I managed to cross the mountain range and visit Poindimie to find the rumours were true. We've found another popping and jigging paradise!

Travelling across the island, you find two distinct geographies and climates. En route

there are some terrific views and mouth-watering freshwater streams that apparently hold quality jungle perch.

The weather that comes from the deep south, past New Zealand and over the Tasman Sea, crosses the largest lagoon in the world, on the west side of Grande Terre and over the narrow and flat delta running the length of the island.

This weather climbs up and over the central mountain peaks and the result is plenty of precipitation on the eastern side, consisting of small Kanaka settlements, hugging the slopes that run right to the stone-and-coral coastline. Poindimie is not very

large, with a population of just a couple of thousand, but it is still the largest settlement on the eastern seaboard.

Subsistence for these mainly Melanesian people is small-lot vegetable farming, but you rarely see any agriculture among the dense jungle that has tangled itself all the way to the water's edge. Fish play a big part in their diets, but I am yet to see any of the locals out fishing. With healthy populations of reef species so close to shore, no doubt they never need to venture far and as a result, fish from very small craft. Once there is enough for a feed, that's the end of the fishing effort. The lack of overfishing in this



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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Red bass readily crunched our hard-bodied offerings; Spanish mackerel put on a spectacular display when hitting surface lures from below; Huge GTs like this will bring even the most seasoned anglers to their knees—get fit and hold on!

RIGHT: Metal jigs did the damage on a range of species, like this rusty jobfish, in the 100–200m-drop-offs surrounding shallow coral reefs.

TRAVEL

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AirCalin have regular flights into La Tontouta Airport from Brisbane and Sydney; the short flight times are just one and three-quarter hours and two and a quarter hours, respectively.

country has been evident on both sides of the island over three trips.

There are a couple of resorts on the east coast, one of which is Tera Tieti Beach Resort, a Melanesian-style resort with a bar, dining room with French cuisine and a nice pool overlooking the South Pacific Ocean.

The bungalows are twin and single-share with air conditioning, ceiling fans and quality ablutions, self-contained. They and the other buildings in the complex are joined by a labyrinth of timber boardwalks constructed over gardens and lawns.

The boat ramp is located just three minutes' drive from the resort. It is a basic single-lane concrete type, sheltered by a crude breakwall, and you get there via Etienne, the fishing skipper/guide, or one of the transfer agents organised by Ocean Blue.

Recapping the western side, the world's largest lagoon is hemmed in by the world's second largest barrier reef. Its waters are up to 20m deep in places and much of it has a bottom covered extensively with white sand. The water is crystal-clear and stunningly beautiful to behold.

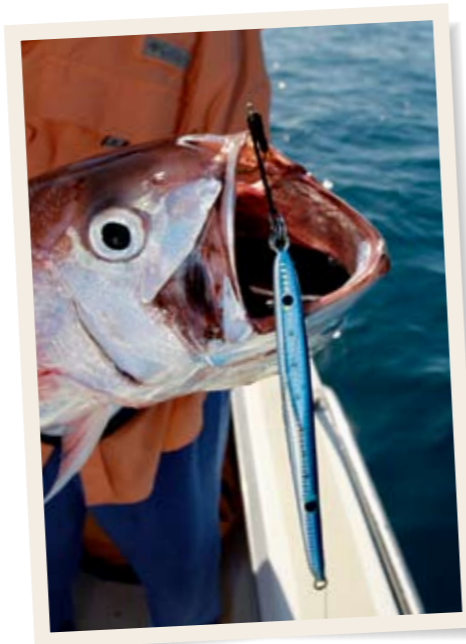
On the east side, we found the water wasn't quite as clear, which was a little disappointing, until we discovered the bottom make-up was totally different. Here, the bottom is very rocky and matted with marine growth, while the outer reef is segmented with large tracts of deep water between

and, as we discovered, it's as clean and clear as on the opposite side of the island.

The sections of reef here were also much wider than around other parts of the island, offering a larger fishing area with deep waters on the ocean side and expansive shallow flats opposite.

Checking the boxes

The focus of this trip was to be on variety, rather than quantity or quality. I joined the



boat with David Noble from Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures and Rob Chang (Ocean Blue's Singapore agent for the sailfish expeditions to Kuala Rompin, Malaysia). Rob is only slight of build, in fact much slighter than the 55kg GT that nailed his popper, literally bringing him to his knees. That was early in day one, and he sighed with relief shortly after, when a 60kg GT smashed his popper and promptly buried it in the reef! David endured less pain and suffering, with a 40kg model and a spattering of smaller trevally to keep things interesting. The bycatch while

poppering GTs was a line-up of the proverbial fang brigade. There were sharks in an assortment of brands and sizes up to 2m and about four varieties of coral trout. There were also plenty of red bass to play with, longnose and red throat emperor, and green and rusty jobfish. Variety is the spice of life!

Getting jiggy

With the main target species under our belts early in the trip we decided to fill the card. Teeing off the next day, poppers were traded for jigs and the deep drop-offs forming the passages between huge expanses of reef were hammered with lead.

A succession of medium-sized brawlers from the reef manipulated our aching muscles back to the condition they needed to be. A line-up of cod to 30kg were pinned with assist hooks. Throw in some more coral trout, which were in numbers similar to European carp in the Murray Darling system, then some variety to break the boredom. Nice mangrove jack, rainbow runner, puka puka—the name given by the locals to rusty jobfish—and a variety of reef oddities rounded out our impressive mixed bag. These were the fish we saw, too—quite a few went back to their caves with our tackle adorning their mouths, never to see the light of day. Some of these left us in no doubt we were drifting through dogtooth country.

Heading slightly deeper, the jigs were

LEFT: A sigh of relief is understandable when a nice jobfish, rather than a 50kg GT, grabs your popper from the surface!

TACKLE TIME

Same as for the east coast, big and strong 'everything' is required. Owner trebles in 5/0 are fine and 250lb split rings should be the minimum contemplated. Good assist hooks for jigs and poppers are also a must.

Poppers are expensive if buying in New Caledonia or replacing any of the guide's you lose. BYO Halco Haymaker 195mm and Halco Roosta 135mm poppers. Both of these can take oversized hooks and rings and still 'pop' like they should, not sink like many others. Stickbaits in 190mm also caught good fish this trip, and one in particular was the River 2 Sea Rover 230 in the 190mm size. Smaller models will be good for light tackle on the inshore reefs.

You will need 80–100lb braid, 250–300lb traces and spare braided line. Large spinning reels, such as Shimano's Stella 20000 and Daiwa's Dogfight, will hack the pace and you will need to put them to a rod that is suited to your height, strength, casting and popping stamina. We're all different in stature, which changes the leverage one can exert on a rod. The rod will be the decider as to how you perform and the results that you get. If in doubt, Etienne has gear he may provide on a replace-price-if-lost basis.



traded again, this time for big minnows and pusher lures. It was spanish mackerel time, and a few hours were expended without results, but we were all grateful for some hard-earned rest!

No dogs allowed

On one of the outer reefs, the current pushed cobalt water past the shallower waters we had been jigging the edges of. I had Pole Cam underwater video gear on board and was collecting some footage of sharks attacking anything that moved within their range. To keep them in the game, a coral trout that was due for the dinner table was sacrificed bit by bit and the next fish to grace the deck was a nice mack tuna. It too would be making up the berley trail, and on dissecting it we found where all my leftover

"Poindimie is very well placed when it comes to large fish in good quantities"

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Various jobfish species were a welcome bycatch—especially for aching arms on jigs and poppers; Ambitious little coral trout would often inhale large lures without a second thought; Brilliantly red mangrove jack were happy to smash our jigs on the reef edges.

lunch had gone. It was chock-a-block! So much for needing to match the hatch!

Our last day was spent working some reefs close to shore, due to the wind picking up. With the tops of reefs a couple of metres below the surface, the drop-offs bottomed out in some places at a couple of hundred metres of more, starkly contrasting with the shallow edges that fringed them.

This was dogtooth country, where Rob and David spent most of their time struggling hard, failing to score a hit on this species. Some unbelievably heavy fish that they couldn't budge off the bottom decimated their collection of jigs and 300lb traces. With the sun high in the sky, the bite waned, and we moved on to a few more rounds of easier angling, in the form of reef fishing with jigs and smaller Halco Roosta poppers.

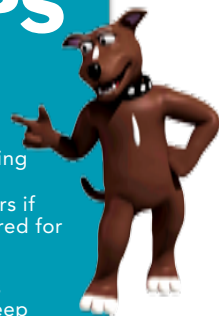
The last day marked the end of a trip that had seen the species scorecard with ticks in many of its boxes. In all, 20 different species of fish were nailed on jigs and poppers in four days, mostly by two anglers. How many fish? Too many in fact to keep track of. Suffice to say enough quality fish to encourage players to seriously consider a few months at the gym before heading to any of these hot spots in New Caledonia.

Poindimie is very well placed in the poppering and jigging ranks when it comes to large fish in good quantities. It joins Bourail and Ouano on the west side of Grande Terre to make up part of a circuit of game-fishing that's hard to match in this little corner of the world. Nothing has changed my mind about New Caledonia. The fishing is extreme, the travel time short, and the surroundings—paradise!

PRO TIPS

NEW IDEAS

- Get fit before you plan a trip to Poindimie! The fishing is brutal, unrelenting and will cripple you within hours if your muscles aren't prepared for the task ahead.
- Fishing with heavy leaders around the shallow and deep reefs is essential in any region where big coral trout and GTs are an option. Prepare to be shredded among the structure on a regular basis, no matter how well you plan.
- Try and balance the type of fishing you do so your muscles can get a break from the brutality of heavy fishing. Light reef work will be a relief between hardcore sessions.
- Talk to Ocean Blue before you book to ensure the time of year you have planned is best for the type of fishing you want to do during your visit.
- Sun protection and quality polarised sunglasses are essential on any fishing trip, but especially when you're spending four full days in the New Cal sun.



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