

KIMBERLEY BIG TIDE BARRAS.

It is very easy to have a preconceived idea of what a place will be like based on digesting a lot of stories and television. For me the Kimberley seemed wild and remote and harsh, based on watching just about every documentary that the late Malcolm Douglas ever made. While I've travelled and fished in a lot of remote places, visiting the Kimberley had always been on the 'to do' list, but getting the right sort of access to the more remote parts just isn't that easy. My good mate Sebastian moved to Broome a year or so back where he works as a doctor in the hospital, and when Seb isn't working there is always an adventure in the planning, execution and completion stages all at the same time. Seb and his partner Dee just never stop, and when Seb hatched a plan to take 4 tinnies to a remote section of the Kimberley out of Derby it was an opportunity too good to miss. Our mother ship was the Kimberley Explorer run by One Tide Charters, and Greg Prouse, our skipper, has a phenomenal knowledge of the Kimberley. It was the end of his charter season, and while fishing is a part of his routine work, most of his business is based on eco tourism and giving people a true Kimberley experience. We went in November on a fairly big set of tides to explore the Glenelg river system, a place Greg hadn't visited before.

After driving from the blue water beaches of Broome to Derby's crocodile filled brown muddy coastline, it was pretty clear that the townships of the Kimberley all had a very different and quite parochial local culture. It is harsh dry hot country and not a place for princesses. We spent the night at Drew William's place after loading up the mother ship with our supplies. One of the hardest things to adjust to as a keen angler in the Kimberley is the phenomenal tidal movement. The neap tides in Derby are equivalent to the spring tides in most Top End places, and if you think the NT tides are big, the Kimberley is a whole new ball game. Adjusting to this phenomenal water movement is the key to all types of fishing, be it chasing sails off Broome or barras up a remote Kimberley River. There are also major safety factors associated with such big tidal movements. While the locals are obviously used to the huge tides, it does take a while to adapt to it and when working out where to fish the spots that worked yesterday never work tomorrow as the water flow will be radically different.

With eager anticipation we left Derby on the Kimberley Explorer. The muddy water of Derby slowly changed to a cleaner hue, and within a few hours the landscape was changing to a harsh environment of red rock and distant fires. It was hot. The current flows through some of the passages were whirl pools of raging torrent. It was a place of wide horizons. The Glenelg River was about 220 nautical miles from Derby. I think we were going there based on a bit of a whim, a few reports and the fact that it was a dot on a distant map where no one on board had ever been too. I just love trips like that; it reminded me of the early trips we went to with Joe Wilkinson in the mid 1980s to the remote atolls of the Coral Sea. The place would be a new experience for everyone. A remote place on a map had become a real mission.

After ten or more hours of steaming we moved into a wide estuary mouth that opened up before narrowing again. The Glenelg is a huge system and from a fishing perspective it looked fantastic. We were all wide eyed and eager eyeing off tempting snags and rock bars. It was stunning country where the tidal flow constantly growled past and curious crocodiles were always in attendance around the mother ship. We had six anglers in three small tinnies. We arrived at a wide anchorage in a big tributary of the main system just as the sun fell low in the sky and the rocks burned orange in fading light. We caught a few

sharks at the anchorage and soon had a pair of crocodiles investigating our presence. They were rarely out of sight around the mother ship, a constant and curious presence watching us through night and day.

The next morning we unloaded the tinnies from the upper decks by the davit, and were soon on the water. I fished with my mate Franco on the first day. It was a fantastic feeling to explore a remote and rarely fished river. While fishing with a guide often ends up with more fish caught, finding fish off your own bat is far more satisfying. We worked the first morning around rock bars and small islands, but the fishing was slow at first. Franco caught a nice jack, and after a while we slowly put a few new and old clues together that let us find a few barra. The old lesson of looking for spindly sunken bushes in a creek mouth seems to hold true in all types of barra territory, and we soon had a few nice barras up to about 80cm that were all caught casting hard bodies around suitable looking bushes. I noticed that the Kimberley barras definitely fought well. They were hardened fit lean silver fish that had evolved in tough big tide country full of predators, and they pulled as hard as any barras I've ever caught. They weren't in big numbers, and they weren't easy targets. The harsh rivers and few upstream billabongs make the Kimberley Barras a rather special breed. They are silver chrome plated jewels in the land of rock, fire and huge tides. They have a tough life. When compared to a fat stocked impoundment barra they are at the other end of the barra spectrum.

We returned to the boat after our first session and all the boys had caught a few fish. We had a mix of jacks, barra and fingermark and everyone was excited. All of the fish were caught casting hard bodies or Gulps to rock bars and snags, and there were certainly plenty of nice jacks to chase on the multiple rock bars. Fingermarks were in big numbers in the sunken timber and were partial to Gulp minnows twitched down deep. As in all such trips, the collective knowledge grew with each fishing session.

The Glenelg River system has a lot of different landscapes and a lot of fish movement on the tides. We never saw a lot of bait in the system. There would always be the odd mullet where you expected them to be, but it was a harsh sort of environment where the fish could be hard to find. I was comprehensively stitched up by a metre plus fish on the first afternoon. Casting to a large sunken tree my favourite little Jonesy's Rhino was casually inhaled near the boat by a very big chrome barra that tore off ten metres of braid and thrashed around in the branches before busting me up. That was an important lesson that would help me later in the trip. I cranked the drag on my souped up Curado to maximum and vowed not to let any tree dwelling big bastard get the better of me the next time.

Over the next few days we moved around a bit and we all learnt a lot. Drew and Cam Williams were clearly reading the tides better than the rest of us and were catching more barra most sessions. There is always a tendency to want to go back to where you did well the day before, and I have always tended to follow that rule. In an area of massive tidal movement, the environment you go back to can be a far cry from the one you fished yesterday, and on this trip every day needed a new game plan.

We moved further up the system and while we all caught quite a few barra, there was on spot where the big 90cm fish were stacked up in the trees and timber and were extremely difficult to extract. In a period of half an hour we busted off 5 fish that were totally uncontrollable in the sticks. The water flow ran hard through a line of sunken trees, and in order to get the bite you had to make the danger cast down a narrow slot between trees. The bites were savage, the fish big and we were comprehensively

smashed up by some chrome salties that were as tough a barra as I had encountered. But it is always better to have hooked and lost than never hooked at all, and the pain of a lost fish creates inspiration in those moments where you sit in the tinny and re rig after losing another favourite lure. We needed to find isolated trees where you had a decent chance at pulling a fish into clean water, rather than hooking them in deep jungle cover. I was beginning to understand all of that strange overseas 'Snakehead' tackle designed to pull a large fish from an environment that has more plants and shrubbery than it does water.

We also fished far up creeks and draining channels. On big tides over 90% of all the water comes and goes from these places, which makes it impossible for such a system to have 'resident' fish. Just about all the life comes and goes with the tide. In the creeks if you could find mullet the barras weren't far behind. Due to the flow there were plenty of big back eddies, and these also held plenty of barras when you found the right bit of tide. It was a great place to really look and learn about how spots worked, and how they rapidly changed with a rise or fall in water level.

One of the creeks ran into a spring fed freshwater creek, and the red rock walls and surrounding Kimberley escarpment were quite spectacular. We walked upstream to a large pool that a waterfall flowed into which created a bit of curiosity in the local crocodile population, but it was quite spectacular country well worth the journey. A few bends downstream of the waterfall was a big back eddy with sunken spindly trees, and once again this produced some nice barra, solid threadfin salmon and I even managed to catch a nice bar tailed flathead.

It is hard to put in words the general mood of a trip, but this one was a beauty. We had a fantastic group of experienced anglers in a new and remote environment for all of us. The Kimberley Explorer was a magnificent vessel, and we slept in swags on the upper decks as the heat of the day cooled down, and we were lucky as the rain was minimal. This isn't the kind of trip to go on if you want to be guided and can't run a boat by yourself. Greg and Alex make no claims to being barra guides (although Alex knows a lot more than he lets on!) but they have fantastic knowledge of the area, and really looked after us. The food was brilliant. The operation is looking at doing more fishing trips in the buildup period between September and December on a hire and ride basis. Under this arrangement you hire and are responsible for your own tinny (or you can bring your own provided it can fit on the deck.)and charter the Kimberley Explorer as your home base. This makes the overall trip a lot cheaper, roughly half to two thirds the cost of a guided operation. I found this type of operation excellent and really much prefer to work hard to find my own fish as it makes the challenge greater.

The Kimberleys is a place that is definitely hard to visit once. This trip was one of the best barra trips I've been on, and while I've caught a lot more fish in other places, the environment, challenge, variety of fishing and camaraderie of the whole group were hard to beat. One Tide charters can be reached on www.onetide.com and after the success of our 'pilot' fishing trip, Greg is planning to do more in late 2011.

David Green 14/1/2012