

Mike O'Neil's

South West Rocks, NSW

Introducing a mid-NSW coastal fishing centre that has tended to be overlooked in the Great Rush North. As Mike O'Neil explains, SWR has a richness and diversity of fishing that place it on top of the heap. Yet thousands drive right on by to seek out lesser venues. To fish SWR; to work the washes off Hat Head (in the shadow of Smokey Cape) for marlin, mackerel, cobia; to chase big jew in the Macleay River . . . is to experience coastal fishing at its finest.

Few rivers in the world can compare with the awesome power of the mighty Macleay River. She's the fastest flowing body of water in the southern hemisphere and, its

been said, the second fastest in the world when in flood.

Fed by a massive 11,500 square kilometre catchment of which the largest portion occupies the upper New England tablelands, the Macleay is a unique sight when swollen and angry.

During wet periods feeder streams criss-

cross the catchment, creating a varicose system of nourishment tracing any low depression or valley to eventually meld with the main river course.

There are two faces to the Macleay: a weather-beaten, salt-scarred exterior hewn rough and craggy by countless centuries of wind and tide; and a fresh, more

protected upriver countenance swathed in vegetation, soft grasses and towering cliffs. These are the two extremes of the mighty Macleay each offering its own spectacular snapshot of timeless beauty.

For the purpose of this article I will deal with the Macleay's lower reach, upstream to the Jerseyville Bridge.

Travelling south from the Queensland/New South Wales border the winding Pacific Highway crosses some of this state's great rivers – the Tweed, Clarence, Kalang, Bellinger and Nambucca – but, like Mohammed Ali, the Macleay is the greatest of all.

Located some 15km off the highway, access to South West Rocks is gained by

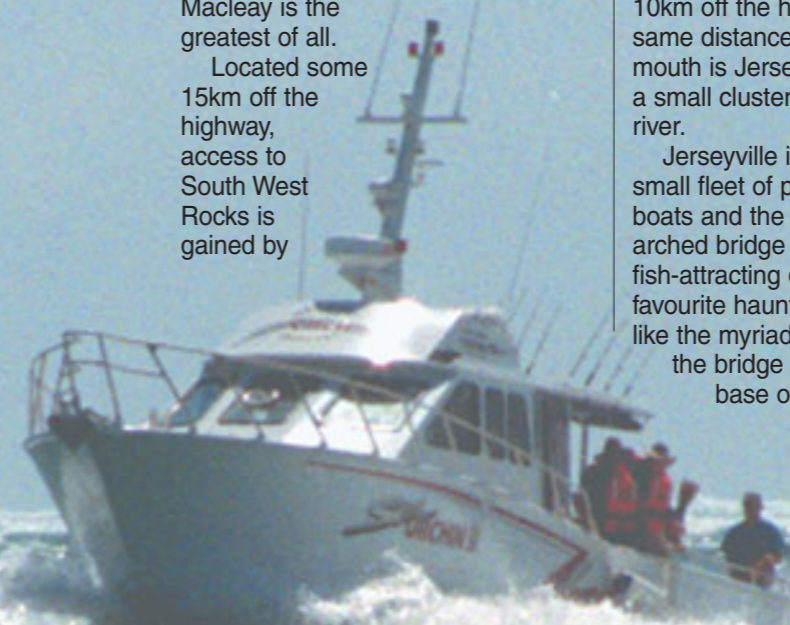


turning east about half way between Macksville and Kempsey. About 10km off the highway and about the same distance upstream from the mouth is Jerseyville, distinguished by a small cluster of homes right on the river.

Jerseyville is home base for a small fleet of professional fishing boats and the local fish co-op. Its arched bridge is a well-documented fish-attracting device (FAD) and a favourite haunt for jew fishos who, like the myriad baitfish illuminated in the bridge lights, gather at the base of the pylons on moonlight nights.

At times, particularly weekends, it is difficult to find a vacant pylon base or suitable anchor position when school jew are running. On a rising tide, an eddy is formed in the deep hole directly under the bridge and for a stretch downstream on the eastern side of the river. And it's here, during early and late evening sessions that big trevally and mulloway can be heard, and seen, stalking baitfish.

The area has plenty of other marauders. There are also good flathead and bream options. This area is a long-time favourite of mine, offering good fishing for a variety of species. It's a safe area for small



Back Creek Ramp works quite well



Back Creek moorings



Back Creek entrance is considered quite safe.





tinnies but can turn nasty when a southerly rips down the river against a flood tide.

A small park with seating and shade cover complements the boat ramp, located on the western side of the bridge. It's an ideal spot for a quick 'cuppa' stop and appraisal of the area.

Boat access is primarily suited to craft under five metres.

Gathering live bait is restricted to jigging for herrings, small baitfish traps, pumping a few yabbies or pulling a few beach worms.

Cast or bait nets are taboo in Bob Carr's 'Premier State'. Other options are to drop into the South West Rocks (SWR) boat and tackle shop on the starboard approach as you head into SWR township. They always have a plentiful supply of fresh and frozen bait, and the staff is always happy to bring you up to date with what fish are biting and the best places to try.

South West Rocks' fish-producing reputation has been well documented over the years. There is almost an unbelievable mix of species to be taken in the Macleay River estuary system and from offshore grounds.

What makes SWR such a Mecca for fishos of all ilk is an almost surreal mix of species, and a hot run of Spanish and spotted mackerel from February to June. Throw in a



Around the page - (Top) Hat Head, unquestionably still one of 'the' best sportfishing regions in Oz. (Above) Trial bay Gaol, and local camping ground.



Christmas run of marlin and it's not hard to see why this small coastal business community really fires up for the Christmas holiday period.

Adding colour and excitement to the blue water options are species such as amberjack, cobia, Samson, rainbow runner, wahoo and dolphin fish. And if you have a mind to, you can always target tuna (all species) yellowtail kingfish and trevally.

Bottom fishing usually returns consistent catches. There's plenty of hard reef around within easy striking distance.

There are two main ocean access areas at SWR – the Macleay River mouth and Back Creek – and there's also small boat (up to five metres) launching behind the SWR Gaol wall, but it does require a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

The main channel at the mouth of the Macleay is on the southern side. It usually has plenty of depth. However, like all bars, it should be treated with respect. Generally speaking, a run out tide mixed with a nor-easter tends to create difficult conditions.

Small boat owners should check out Back Creek access before taking on the bar. It runs behind the town, back into a swampy area, and although its entrance is usually quite shallow at low tide, under normal conditions it is considered a safe crossing.

Launching and fish cleaning facilities in Back Creek are excellent, but at dusk you will need a 44 gallon drum of mosquito and sand fly repellent. They're thick and nasty and two-to-a-matchbox. I've seen tough men wrapped in Glad Wrap when the buzzbugs do their thing.

Upmarket fishos should make sure they book apartments at the 'Rocks well in advance of their trip, because accommodation in this area is scarce during peak season. For those preferring something a little more fitting for a fisho with boat, missus and anklebiters in tow, there are several caravan and camping areas available and all offer quality facilities.

No visit to South West Rocks would be complete without taking a leisurely stroll through the historic gaol.

Built in 1880 and used as an internment camp during the Great

War (1914-1918), the gaol's hidden secrets are etched into its granite walls. And if you listen long enough, the wails of wretched prisoners echo through the time-etched hallways.

The gaol was decommissioned after the Great War and, through neglect over time, fell into disrepair. Then along came the Arakoon Trust to take on the responsibility of caring for, and refurbishing, the site.

Since then there has been renewed interest in our heritage and this has ensured the old gaol and museum within its walls now have a reputation as one of the most popular tourist attractions on the New South Wales Holiday Coast.

If you really want to space out on the history trip, there's caravan and camping sites right in the Arakoon Recreation Area and happy campers can languish in the shadow of the gaol and go to sleep to the gentle sound of waves breaking just metres from their sites.

The camping ground offers powered and non-powered sites. There's an on-site kiosk for light refreshments and provisions . . . and, if you really want to get fancy, there's also a licensed restaurant overlooking the gaol.

Arakoon State Recreation Reserve has electric barbecues and provides access to beautiful Trial Bay, popular for fishing, swimming and sailboarding.

The area is serviced by a number of fishing charter operations offering a range of services. You can choose from half and full day offshore charters but if estuary fishing is more your style, that's also available.

Rock and beach fishing around the South West Rocks area is legendary, and the north and south walls of the Macleay have long been regarded as the best on the coast.

Bobby corking for jew with live baits and spinning the ends of the walls are favourite pastimes of many anglers in this area. You need only take a walk along the wall any weekend afternoon or morning to see how popular it is. And the results are there. Big jew are often taken from these areas.

Around January and February, small cobia to around five or six kilo turn up in the lower reaches of the Macleay. While some have been caught as far up as the Jerseyville

Bridge, their usual haunt is in the first kilometre inside the mouth.

As if the fishing options available at SWR are not enough, Hat Head lies a few kilometres to the south and offers what is arguably the best rock fishing on the NSW coastline. It's long been a favoured destination with land-based game fishing enthusiasts and, in the past, has produced such catches as Spanish mackerel, tuna, kingies and even marlin . . . and around June and July each year, there's the annual run of 'Clydesdale' tailor . . . but that's another story.

F&B