

Polynesian Fishin'

We normally hear from Mike O'Neill from some remote corner of the 'Gulf, but according to Mike, competitive South Pacific airfares VS internal Australian fuel and travel costs, adds up to a whole heap of fascinating opportunities to fish with our near neighbours in the Pacific - and have a very inexpensive ball!

The fish-rich waters caressing the shorelines of the Polynesian group of Islands are becoming more accessible to anglers keen to cast a line in far flung tropical paradises.

At the time of writing, return airfares (ex Sydney) to Port Vila, Vanuatu; Nukualofa, Tonga and Apia, Samoa, were all between \$600 and \$800 flying Polynesian Airlines on the Blue Saver seating. And there are better prices if you spend the time looking. So getting there and back is not a huge kick in the hip pocket.

When you compare those prices to the cost for us cockroaches to access the waters of far North Queensland and the Northern Territory, they don't seem too bad.

Chasing big billfish from luxury charter boats definitely will set you back a heap of bucks but if that's your mindset, there are plenty of opportunities in the Polynesians.

For mine, chasing pelagics from small boats and exploring inlets and creeks holds far greater appeal.

In recent years I have visited the Solomons, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Samoa and Tonga. And while none of these adventures started out as strictly fishing trips, I did take along an assortment of tackle for light game, land-based and small boat fishing sorties.

In most instances I was a handbag for my wife Adele, 'who is as



Island hopper Mike O'Neil with 80-something-year-old Maravagi resident Joshua, who defended the island against Japanese troops during World War II. When Joshua found out Mike was into bowhunting feral game in Australia, he travelled high into the mountains to find suitable material to make him two palm bows and two sets of arrows.

passionate about scuba diving as I am about fishing and beer'. While she sailed off into the dawn, bound for some not-so-secret dive site each morning, I shouldered pack and tackle and set off exploring creeks and rocky outcrops.

And while I have caught mangrove jack in Vanuatu, tuna and Spanish mackerel in the Solomons, black snapper in Samoa and some very small unidentified species in Tonga, those sorties have not been without their peculiar quirks.

When exploring the Polynesians, it helps to understand island time...

'most things will happen, maybe, perhaps', but probably not on time.

Today, tomorrow and next week all seem to meld on island calendars.

Vanuatu . . .

In Vanuatu, several days of sports fishing on a 24ft centre console, organised before leaving home, were scuttled when the operator returned home to Queensland the day I arrived. Truth be known, we were probably in the air at the same time.

As luck would have it, I met up with a local working at the 'resort' we were staying at. He had a brother who had a friend who had a boat, and he would take me out trolling and chasing some jacks and other estuary species.



True to his word, my new friend arrived just on daybreak to shuttle me across the island to his brother's friend's village. The car he was driving was bashed in one side, its bonnet was slightly crushed and there was a large jagged hole in the windscreen.

During broken conversation, I discovered the car had been involved in a fatal accident the week before and after a few minutes as a passenger, I had the uneasy feeling history was about to repeat itself.

The journey culminated in a wild five-minute roller-coaster as we hurtled along an overgrown track, the jungle trying to devour the car as I pitched and catapulted around its interior until we slid to a halt at the village edge.

'Thanks,' was all I could mutter as I tumbled from the car.

We walked beside a small inlet harbouring several boats, none of which I thought were seaworthy.

I was shown our 'fishing boat', all 3.8 metres of her. She was a beauty.

A stout hardwood plank wedged between the gunwales provided the necessary pressure to keep the boat in an open position; the 15hp outboard had no cowling cover; and the fuel tank was a 10-litre vinegar drum, which my charter captain (who spoke very little English) kept lifting above the motor. I dubbed him captain 'Fearless'. And yes... I was

somewhat concerned for my safety.

Surprise, surprise... the motor actually started, albeit running with a miss. What the heck, we were in calm water and I could swim to shore from anywhere in the bay. Let's get the show on the road.

We headed out across the crystal clear, calm waters ringed by small islands with my \$20-charter captain making sign language for me to get a troll line in the water.

All right for him to think about fishing, I was totally committed to keeping the boat afloat, bailing with the half coconut shell that when not in use, floated around my ankles.

The sound of breakers crashing on reefy shoreline and an increase in the pitch and roll of the boat filtered through my concentration on bailing and trolling. A quick glance in the direction we were headed confirmed the signal my tightening sphincter muscle was sending... we were stuttering towards a small break in the surrounding reef and headed for rolling white capped waves.

Waving madly and yelling "No! No! Stay inside" to my captain achieved diddly squat. Instead, he grinned broadly and spread his hands in a big fish gesture and hoisted the vinegar drum above the whirring, uncovered cowling. The little motor sputtered and coughed a few times, the timber spreader groaned as we met the first wave and then we were

Maravagi 'resort': guests stay in the front bunkhouses.

through and being tossed around like a cork.

Twice we circled that bloody island, catching one luckless queenfish and two small tuna. I was justifiably petrified when captain 'Fearless' cut the motor before reaching over to tail-haul the queenfish on board. The motor started first pull . . . 'Praise the Lord I'm born again' . . . and we headed back around behind the island.

Using a combination of pigeon and sign language, captain Fearless told me the waves were too big, the wind too strong, and the boat too small for any more trolling and we would head elsewhere for sheltered-water fishing. I found it difficult to hide my jubilation.

What followed was a great afternoon as I pulled more than a dozen good jacks from their snaggy haunts.

At day's end, I stepped ashore and handed over my 20 bucks. My grinning chauffer was already waiting. "Almost there," I thought. "Just one more drive to survive."

In the following days, when not sightseeing or snorkelling while Adele and friends went diving, I would set off on foot and chuck lures around the many creeks and estuaries.