

# The Cato Reef Expedition

It's a long way from 'home and mother', but the fishing out here is somewhere between unbelievable and explosive - so much so, the whole crew of the good ship *Odyssey* have all signed on for the return encounter, but with much heavier tackle!  
Damon Olsen report & pics.

**D**uring December 2003, we had the opportunity to take our 54' displacement steel charter boat *Odyssey* out to fish Cato Reef, located a mere 200 nautical miles from either Bundaberg, or Urangan Boat Harbour.

This trip was no small undertaking, and we had a crew comprising myself as Skipper, Tim Baker, Aaron Concord, John Charlton and Stuart Carr.

We also had a friend of John's from Holland, Johan Willemsen, an amateur radio operator who was keen to be the first to ever transmit 'Ham' radio from the Island. A rather strange pursuit, but I guess some people see fishing as odd, too.

Our trip out to Cato was possibly one of those experiences, which would be described as character building. I felt I already had enough character before the trip, but the forces that be, decided otherwise!

I could quite safely describe the 36 hour trip out there as one of the most harrowing experiences of my entire life. Due to a combination of disasters, horrendous weather (25 knots NE, straight on the nose!), lack of sleep and mal de mer, all aboard agreed that it was definitely character building. In fact, I was the only person not to



It is a long way to go to 'phone a friend' but that's what Dutch amateur radio operator Johan Willemsen wanted to do - whilst the other guests were content to get amongst the fire-breathing pelagics, like this big wahoo.



throw up on the trip, but must admit to feeling rather queasy at one 'stage' . . . an extended stage of about the last 9 hours!

To put this in perspective, I have only ever felt sick twice at sea, and have only ever thrown up once (alcohol induced) and this after being in some fairly

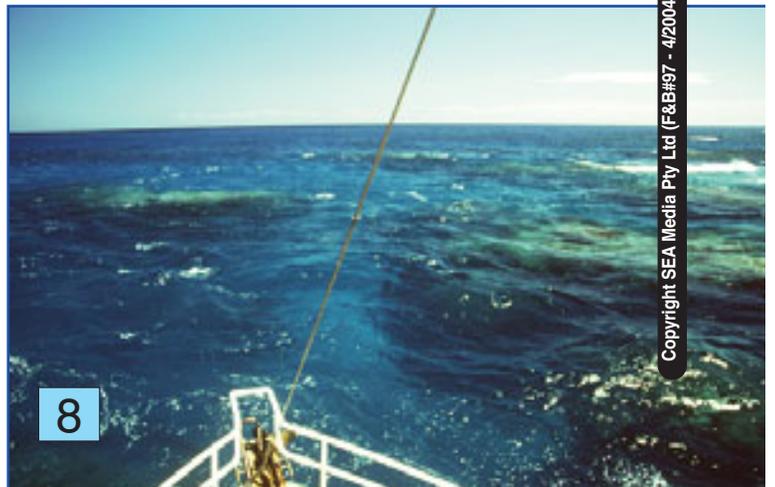
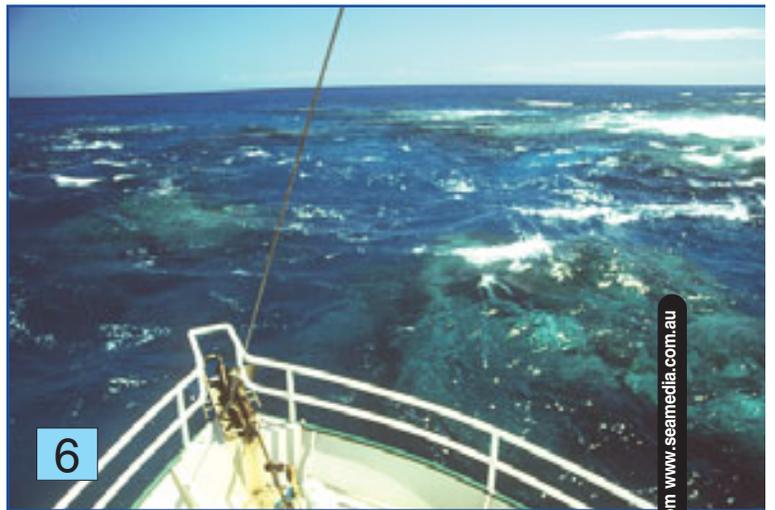
average conditions for even longer periods than this. I'm sure you'll get my drift, here.

But, was it worth the effort to get there? After only the first day, the answer was a definite 'Yes!'

When we arrived at Cato Island it was around 4:30pm, with around 20

If you are prone to nightmares, it's probably a good idea if you don't study this amazing photo series for too long! The pics were taken by F&B's Tackle Editor Aaron Concord on the roof of the *Odyssey*, a single engined, 46' steel (displacement) charter boat, skippered by F&B's Fishing Editor Damon Olsen, as they painstakingly worked their way into the lagoon at Cato Reef, several hundred miles east of Australia. "I didn't want to think about what I was seeing" commented Aaron afterwards "so I just kept the camera going, and prayed that Damon couldn't see what I was seeing from my vantage point above him. I still don't know how he did it, but we didn't even scrape the anti-fouling!"

knots of north east wind blowing. The anchorage at Cato is fairly average in anything other than a north west or south east wind, and as such we made the best of a rather lumpy anchorage. Johan was keen to get onto the island before dusk, but with the prevalent swell, it was quite difficult to get the





tinnie off the roof. We decided instead it was a better job for the morning, after a good sleep.

Having not really slept for the best part of 36 hours, and at a point of total exhaustion, we all slept like logs the first night, and the rather average anchorage seemed like a perfect haven.

With the tinnie finally off the roof in the morning, we were again confronted with a 20 knot north east wind, and quite a deal of swell. This made it extremely challenging to pick our way into the lagoon. In fact the first ever run for our 4.0m Sea Jay tender was to run the reef break at Cato, quite an initiation for any tinnie.

The reef was breaking all the way around the island due to the direction of the swell, but there was a small gap on the western end of the island where we were able to sneak in. The lagoon was simply stunning, and was unlike anything I've ever seen before.

Cato Island itself is a large sand cay, taking around 25 minutes to walk around, and being about 6m above sea level at the highest point. The birdlife on the island is exceptional; there were gannets of 3 varieties, two types of terns and a few frigate birds.

After getting Johan set up on the beach with his radio gear, we went back to the Odyssey to get the rest of the crew, and decided to



spend the day on the beach relaxing, snorkelling and having a bit of a fish.

Of course, Aaron had landed a 12kg GT and a 7kg green jobfish casting poppers from the front of the boat while we had been risking life and limb running the break – typical!

The water in the lagoon was crystal clear, with visibility approaching 50m. But it was the popper fishing from the beach, which was the real thrill for this trip.

As the tide was rising around the island each afternoon, huge GTs were cruising the lagoon flats, and were very susceptible to a large blooping popper.

In fact, there were GTs everywhere. The isolated bommies out from the edge of the reef were absolutely chockers with schools of 15-20kg GTs, which would sometimes hook-up 2 at a time.

But the casting inside the lagoon on the rising tide was nothing short of awesome. Casting poppers from the beach produced hits from 30-50kg GTs, literally at your feet in the surf.

I had a GT which looked like a small car, probably a 60kg+ fish, nail my popper about 5 feet from the rod tip and proceed to charge off into the coral. I was nearly pulled from my feet as around 18kg of drag screamed from my reel, and when the GT straightened the 300lb split ring and got away, I was left sitting on my bum in the sand wondering what had just happened to me! It is difficult to convey just how incredible and how prolific this afternoon session really was. Personally, I lost 3 poppers and only landed one fish, but must have had 12 hits from 30kg + GTs in under 2 hour's fishing.

Of course, that night,

Aaron and Tim decided to have a fish from the back deck of *Odyssey* and were well and truly shown who was boss. Aaron went 0 fish from 12 monumental bust-offs in the first 2 hours' fishing, so believe me when I say he was getting a bit edgy!

I was so exhausted I couldn't stay awake for the completion of their session, but Aaron finally managed to land a GT around 30kg on his spin outfit.

The place was just loaded with GTs, but we weren't complaining.

In fact, there are so many stories of good fishing sessions, that it's hard to remember them all. However, one other interesting incident occurred one morning when Tim decided to jump in out the back of the boat and have a morning spearfish around the anchorage. After sitting on the duckboard and donning the appropriate gear, Tim jumped in and stuck his face under water. He sort of sat there for a minute, with hand still attached to the duck board, and after around 20 seconds under water, quickly jumped back on the duck board and inside the boat.

Apparently as soon as he

looked down, there was a 15kg coral trout, a couple of 8kg green jobfish and some big sweetlip all cruising under the boat. However, what made him jump out was the 12ft tiger shark cruising on the bottom, that showed a marked interest in him as soon as he jumped in. Apparently the tiger shark started swimming up at him, from about 18m of water, and this is what caused the rapid exit from the drink. But to see so many big fish in such a short swim was exciting.

The weather on this trip was certainly rather average, and it wasn't until the last day that we had some nice 10 knot SE weather to allow us to explore the northern side of the reef edge. The charts of the area show that there are some entrances to the lagoon on the northern side, but we didn't have a chance to check them out until late in the trip. We had explored them in the tinny, and decided they were marginal at best, and in the prevailing NE weather, there was no point attempting to get the *Odyssey* inside.

However, the swell had picked up to around 3-4m from the east on our last day and left us with a difficult

situation trying to get the tinnie back on the roof in any sort of swell. We were left with the option of putting the tinnie on the roof inside the lagoon, or towing it home in the water. Both options seemed particularly daunting at the time.

We anchored outside the best of the so called 'entrances' and sat there for an hour or two waiting for the tide to stop running- but it didn't. After standing on the roof of *Odyssey* for the best part of an hour and surveying the situation, I decided to have a crack at the entrance.

I figured that with a 7mm steel hull, the worst that could happen was that we'd take off a bit of antifouling, or maybe ding a sheet of steel . . .

I guess the attached pictures tell the real story here, but the entrance was a real challenge, and definitely another character building experience! The 70 degree turn in the middle, with 2kn of current provided the greatest challenge, but I think I could safely assume we had only 1-2 metres clearance on either side of the boat.

Once inside the lagoon, we all wanted to stay forever. It was calm and

tranquil, just like we imagined, and would have made an excellent anchorage if we could have gained access 3 days earlier. The short story is that we got in, loaded the tinnie and got out without touching any bommies.

Of course, our trip home was in beautiful conditions, with a slight sea and swell assisting us. We made it back to Urangan in around 21 hours, compared to the 36 hour slog on the way out.

The main things we learned included not to go to Cato in a NE wind, and that the lagoon is accessible in excellent weather and with a slight swell, but not for a boat much bigger than *Odyssey*.

This trip sparked some incredible ideas, such as the pristine beauty of the area. Thoughts of 60ft motherships and trips to distant coral sea atolls filled the conversation on the way home, and rest assured there will be plenty more trips out into the Coral Sea in future years.

There's no doubt a trip such as this can be a life altering experience!

**F&B**