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COAST TO COAST PART 2

Tim Mitchell and Jade O'Donovan head to the Top End and the Kimberleys on their round-Australia trailerboat odyssey.

By Mark Rothfield
Photography: supplied

To eat or be eaten? That was the question facing intrepid adventurers Tim Mitchell and Jade O'Donovan as they sat aboard their Extreme 645 Game King in one of the most isolated and desolate regions of the Northern Territory's Arnhem Land.

Surrounding them was water so crystal-clear that crayfish feelers could be seen waving from the coral crevices, beckoning like a siren's call. But there was a catch – a Catch 22 – because lurking nearby were marauding crocs.

Big ones, of the saltwater kind and the apex predators in these parts.

TEMPTING FATE

"In the end, we couldn't resist," admits Tim. "These lobsters had never seen humans before, so we almost felt bad taking them, but we ended up grabbing four nice-sized ones for dinner."

The pair climbed back aboard and, sure enough, saw a croc in the water, 50m away. A hundred metres away, basking on the beach, lay an even larger beast, its soulless, prehistoric eyes also on radar lock.

Let's just say that OUR mums weren't too happy with us ...

"Not our smartest moment," Tim adds. "We've heard stories where people just disappear, and I guess you assume the worst. Let's just say that our mums weren't too happy with us ..."

That said, when you've already thrown caution to the wind to embark on a remarkable around-Australia odyssey with a plate-alloy trailerboat, you understand better than most that life is there for the taking.

BARRA OR BUST

When we left Tim, Jade and their faithful seadog Indie in the previous issue, they'd toured the entire East Coast from south to north. Now reunited with their boat in Far North Queensland, their plan was to go west in search of the prized, yet elusive barramundi.

From Port Douglas, they headed along the Gulf Developmental Road, one of the rare asphalt



Above: The adventure continues.

Below: Florence Falls, Litchfield National Park, NT.

You drive along these endless red dirt roads and the next minute come across an amazing lush oasis



strips that links with Normanton in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

First stop was the freshwater Lake Belmore, near Croydon, where they gave the boat and themselves a well-deserved hose-down with the deckwash. Refreshed, they then rolled into Karumba, a coastal town licked by warm Gulf waters.

They visited the Barramundi Discovery Centre before venturing into a creek where, locals had assured them, the barra were biting. “We tried soft plastics and a couple of cicada surface lures but all we could catch were catfish,” Tim lamented.

THAT’S FISHIN’

It was a frustrating experience, compounded by a ferocious night-time attack of midges, and they departed empty-handed for what was to be the longest single leg of their trip.

Crossing into the NT, they arrived at the Threeways Roadhouse, Tennant Creek, between Alice Springs and Darwin, before heading north towards Mataranka, renowned for its thermal springs.

“You drive along these endless red dirt roads and the next minute come across an amazing lush oasis with the clearest water you can imagine,” says Jade. “Beautiful colours and so refreshing, with a water temperature of around 33 degrees ... I was in absolute heaven.”

Heading north-west, they pulled into Dundee Beach – an “awesome place, incredibly scenic”. Tim and Jade then launched and headed south in search of northern mulloway, or ‘jewies’, with a local tip of anchoring near the commercial pros.

Within an hour, Jade hooked a 16kg monster. “It pulled so hard that all the other boats stopped to watch us, and they cheered when I finally landed it. It was such a good atmosphere,” she says.

CROC-A-DALY

That night, they ventured to the Daly River and set crab traps, although the real mission was to break their barra drought. Unfortunately, the water was dirty and fast-moving, which deterred everything except the crocs.

“We heard noises during the night and got the torch out,” Tim said. “Sure enough, there were all these big red eyes staring at us from out of the dark.”



Right: Hang on there, fella.

Below: Tim finally found success at the 'mulloway spot'.

Indie decided at this point to launch herself from the boat some 50m from shore



"One of them looked to be resting its head on our crab trap and next morning we found that the foam floats were completely flattened and full of purple-stained tooth marks."

Inside the traps was a pair of nervous muddies.

BARRA FEAST

Our adventurers returned to the mulloway spot from the previous day, with Tim desperate to match Jade's effort, and his second bait yielded a 10kg specimen that they later feasted on. Mulloway rapidly became one of Jade's favourite table fish.

Heading back to the ramp, the tide was low and the surrounding mud as dicey as quicksand. They anchored up to wait their turn.

"When the time came to pull the anchor up, it had become fully snagged," Tim said. "I'd been told in no uncertain terms not to swim there, and I ended up pulling the anchor so hard that it bent to 90-degrees."

Bored with proceedings, Indie decided at this point to launch herself from the boat some 50m from shore. Onlookers cried out "NO!", and she promptly retreated to the boat.

TOP-END TUNA

With Darwin their next stop, Tim and Jade learnt that northern bluefin tuna were running just a few kilometres offshore. They sent metal lures into the school and reeled in fish almost at will. Tim then tried a new style of jig from Catch Fishing called Squidwings, and was quickly rewarded with a Spanish mackerel.

Darwin also offered a bounty of wild mangos, so Tim would slowly drive the boat beneath a tree, with Jade standing on the hardtop to pluck the juicy fruit.

The Corroboree Billabong, near Marrakai, southeast of Darwin, was next on the agenda, being home to northern saratoga and, supposedly, wild barramundi.

"One of our friends there runs a cattle property and we went fishing with him near the billabong," Tim tells. "An hour into the trip, a cow head appeared, then it was sucked down into the water as we approached. Eventually this massive croc appeared."

"Around the next corner we found a full cow in the water. Three of the biggest black crocs we'd seen started ripping the carcass limb from



limb, which was like something out of *National Geographic*."

Still no barra, but surely Arnhem Land would deliver? They set their sights on Nhulunbuy, separated by 600km of corrugated dirt trails and bulldust.

"There was so much dust we couldn't see the boat behind us at times," recalls Jade. "We'd wrapped the outboard in garbage bags and shoved newspaper into every gap, but still the dust got everywhere."

With just three kilometres to go, they heard protestations from the trailer. A bolt had shaken loose, allowing a brake calliper to spin around and sever the hydraulic line.

With repairs made, Tim and Jade headed for the Wessel Islands.

THE GAP

"We'd been told about a place called The Gap, which runs between two islands and is basically NT's version of the Kimberley's Horizontal Waterfalls. The current runs at about 12 knots, so we sat and watched it for a while, admiring



the power," Tim says. "Next minute, we started getting sucked into it, and it was too late to analyse the best route."

Tim gunned the throttle and safely navigated the foaming torrent, finally finding refuge in the lee of a small tropical island. They anchored and began casting plastics, netting giant trevally,

Above and inset: Wanted (an estuary cod) and unwanted hook-ups in the Buccaneer Archipelago.



IT'S A DOG'S LIFE ...

Some dogs would be all at sea when it comes to spending extended periods aboard a small boat, exposed to sharks and crocs that place pampered pooches high on their preferred diet.

But not Indie, Tim and Jade's beloved kelpie/ border collie cross. They got her seven years ago and she's been aboard boats ever since.

"She absolutely loves the water – in fact, I think she prefers being on the ocean to being on land. It's her thing, just like it's ours," says Jade.



"She knows when the fish are on even before we do. She sits there and watches the rod tips, then gazes over the side to see the fish come up."

Indie toilet-trained herself by going off the back of the boat, like her owners do, and ignoring the special AstroTurf they'd bought for her.

Her confidence has grown so much during this trip that she'll stand right on the edge of the coamings in big swells. Or she'll see fish at the back of the boat, when the blue underwater light is on, and watch them intently for hours.

There was one incident when Indie pounced on some small blacktip reef sharks that were swimming near the transom. Otherwise, she has learned to keep a respectful distance from crocs.

"It's funny to see people's expressions, where we're miles out to sea, and they notice a dog hanging off the side," Tim says. "But she's so obedient that she'll stay onboard if we tell her to. She's been a massive asset to the trip and we're very lucky to have her."



queenfish, long toms, coral trout and emperors among a remarkable assortment of reef fish.

"We ended up staying for six nights because it was just an amazing place, so incredibly diverse as a fishery," Tim explained. "There were even some creeks that we thought would break the barra curse, but again the catfish kept popping up."

At night, Jade was entertained by jumping long toms, and as she followed their path with a torch, one launched itself like a missile, narrowly missing Indie's nose with its gnarling teeth before landing inside the cockpit.

Back at Nhulunbuy, they turned their hand to tuna fishing. Jade hooked one and set the drag for battle. They could sense the fish was panicking and it suddenly shot clean into the air, with the nose of a huge shark right on its tail, but she managed to jag it aboard, away from the monster's jaws.

Finally, and reluctantly, they prepared for the return trip, having overstayed their schedule by five days. The hydraulic line again ruptured mid-trip, but the Easytow trailer otherwise withstood all the punishment meted out by the road.

WESTERN FRONT

Tired and dusty, Tim and Jade eventually pulled into Kununurra, 40km inside the West Australian border and on the eastern extremity of the Kimberleys.

It, and nearby Wyndham, enjoy a solid reputation for barramundi – Tim and Jade not



Above and left: A seafood bounty of crays, red emperor and coral trout.

I think she prefers being on the ocean to being on land





Above: At last ... a barra!
Below: Top End anchorage.
Below right: "I'm watching you ..."

People said that if we couldn't get a barra there, there was something wrong with us



so. But this time, back in their home state, it was personal ...

"By now I'd assembled an arsenal of lures, of all shapes and sizes, plus we caught up with an old fishing guide to tap his local knowledge," Tim said.

"He taught us all these techniques we hadn't considered, like tying a treble hook through the eye of a plastic, because barra usually hit the bait head-first."

The expansive Lake Argyle awaited, and they saw three barra but only managed a catfish. Eventually they gave up and travelled to Wyndham.

"People said that if we couldn't get a barra there, there was something wrong with us," Tim laughed. "We found a creek, waited until the incoming tide, and Jade cast her first lure into the snag.

"Bang! Finally, we'd caught our first barramundi. It wasn't a big one, only 50cm long, but it gave an acrobatic display before she landed it. Two casts later I landed one as well."

They ended up tallying seven, the biggest measuring 68cm, and kept one to eat. It was definitely worth the hype and the hundreds of ill-fated casts.

Jade then cannily chose a freshwater Murray cod lure that Tim had owned and cherished since he was a teen. He pleaded with his partner to be careful as she launched it towards a snag – it landed perfectly, and within seconds there was an almighty splash – a massive mangrove jack



was on the line. It was followed by a threadfin salmon, and later a small hammerhead caught on livebait.

Friends in Broome recommended the Buccaneer Archipelago as their next stop, accessed from the small town of Derby. Tim set the autopilot for a 90km course and awaiting was another tropical paradise, rivalling the Whitsundays with its pristine blue waters.

Jade soon lost a golden snapper to a shark, and only just managed to salvage another. "I got the second one to the side of the boat, when this shark just latched on. It was practically coming into the boat with us, but I managed to pry it off with minimal fillet damage," she said.

Tim dropped a jig and landed the biggest coral trout they'd seen. "It was a good start to such an unbelievably cool place," he commented. 

To find out more about the Buccaneer Archipelago, Rowley Shoals and more, don't miss the third and final instalment of Tim and Jade's Extreme pursuits, in the next issue of Club Marine. In the meantime, see their Facebook and Instagram updates at @hereweareaustralia.

an unbelievably COOL place

Above: A massive mangrove jack.

Below: Crocodile Creek, Buccaneer Archipelago.

