



On The Bite

Coral Sea Dreamin'

Looking for an isolated fishing spot where the fish are many and large and the anglers few and far between? Well, the Coral Sea Island Territories might be just the place to wet your line.





Feature and
Photography by
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Page 80-81: A picture worth many words; still fishing at sunset.

Right: Kate Van Gytenbeek seems happy that not all the fish at Kenn Reef are monsters.

Below: Camp Kenn in all its glory and with all toys attached.



Far out in the Coral Sea, way east of the Great Barrier Reef and out from the well known Swain Reefs complex, is a series of isolated reef systems known officially as the Coral Sea Island Territories. Most keen sport fishers will probably be familiar with many of the names, such as Osprey, Saumarez, Wreck and Cato Reefs, all of which have appeared in fishing features from time to time.



But even further out are still more isolated reef systems readers probably haven't heard of. Locations such as Marion, Frederick and Kenn Reefs are too far away from civilization for most anglers and the only visitors that normally happen along are occasional cruising yachts. The focus of this story, Kenn Reef, is about 450km from Hay Point, which is near Mackay.

These remote reef systems are actually inside Australian Territorial Waters, although only just. But to give you an idea of how far out they are, at Kenn Reef, if you venture east from the eastern drop-off, you're actually in New Caledonian waters.

Understandably, the isolation of Kenn Reef enhances its 'fishability' as, without regular visits from sport fishers, the prospects of big fish and big catches are... well, 'big'.

Kenn Reef sits atop the Kenn Plateau. I quote (in part) from a Province Report by Geoscience Australia. "The Kenn Plateau is a large, relatively



"what they found was, if not the best, then certainly some of the best sport fishing in the world"



Right: Deep channels draining the reef flats are hangouts for GTs and big red bass.

Below: Kate and the Nomad Sportfishing duo of John and Damon Olsen (at helm) fishing Kenn reef at low tide. The 'rocks' are huge lumps of coral dislodged in bad weather.



poorly understood, submerged continental block, which rifted from northeastern Australia 52 to 63 million years ago... The Kenn Plateau is separated from the Marion Plateau to the west by the north-trending bathymetric Cato Trough (about 3000 metres deep)... The Kenn Reef, and Bird and Cato Islands, lie along the western margin and are presumably volcanic in origin as they appear to form a northerly extension of the Tasmantid Chain of volcanic seamounts..."

This quote omits some of the drier oceanography, but however you translate the science into fishing, it boils down to Kenn Reef being an isolated reef system located in seriously deep water, and being about as good a FAD

Cummins MerCruiser Diesel



(Fish Aggregating Device) as you could ever dream up.

Not that the world's best fishing spot is much use if no one gets to fish it. That the logistics to fish Kenn Reef are now in place is a story in itself...

IN SEARCH OF THE BEST

Although many fishing charter operators were left with precious little when the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority closed off most of the Reef for the dive charter industry, Nomad Sportfishing's Damon and John Olsen didn't take it lying down. Instead, they literally went looking further afield in the Coral Sea Island Territories. And what they found was, if not the best, then

certainly some of the best sport fishing in the world.

Talking on a world-wide scale, two sportfishing disciplines are very much flavour of the moment – deep water jigging and popper fishing for giant trevally (better known as simply "GTs"). Coincidentally, Marion, Frederick, and particularly Kenn Reef provide a perfect location for both forms of fishing.

Given the oceanography of the area, it's no surprise that some of the drop-offs in and around the Coral Sea Island Territories are truly awesome to see on a sounder. They're unbelievably sheer walls that plunge vast distances into the ocean depths, providing an ideal environment for species like dogtooth tuna. Frequently mentioned when discussions turn to which is the toughest sport

Top: Thai sport fisher, "Ek" puts one of Shimano's Orea Blue Rose jig rods through the ringer on yet another monster dogtooth. These rods don't look much, but pack unbelievable amounts of grunt. The three super-fit Thais were bringing 30-40kg doggies to the boat in 10-15 minutes.

Above: This is an average dogtooth at Kenn Reef. Start pumping iron people...



“The presence of black, blue, and striped marlin was quickly established, along with hordes of sailfish and an odd shortbill spearfish”

fish, dogtooth tuna turned out to be in large numbers (and large sizes) when Damon Olsen first explored the area. And there was also evidence of the presence of other species, like various members of the *seriola* genus beloved of the deep water jigging set, plus XOS-class coral trout and others that usually make up the cast of monstrous characters inhabiting other such isolated and untouched reef systems.

Closer to the reefs proper, where open ocean currents converge on outcrops and drop-offs, Damon found the infamous GTs. Like the

dogtooth tuna, they ranged in size all the way up to ‘almost uncatchable’.

For some incidental fun closer to the reefs, Damon found large numbers of red bass, a member of the *lutjanid* family. Unfortunately, though, they are often prone to being ciguatoxic, due to the quantity of toxic reef fish and algae they consume.

Incidentally, the *lutjanids* include mangrove jacks, Papuan black bass, and the internationally famous Cubera snapper; all collectively well known for playing rough and rated highly in the ranks of the world's toughest sport fish.

Billfish, too, were, as you'd expect I suppose, present and accounted for. The presence of black, blue, and striped marlin was quickly established, along with hordes of sailfish and an odd shortbill spearfish, leaving broadbill as the only large sport fish that has yet to be confirmed lurking in the area. I'd venture they'll be found soon, though, when Damon has had more time to explore the reefs and drop-offs in the area.

Other blue water pelagics frequenting the area include wahoo, yellowfin tuna and, of course, mahi mahi (also known as dorado and dolphin fish). These, too, Damon found in large numbers and in all sizes up to likely world record material.

LEADING LIGHT

I've known Damon since he was a likeable, gawky kid who years ago joined our sport fishing club as a raw novice. He's advanced from that youngster devouring everything us seniors had to teach him, to becoming a global leading light in the sport fishing movement. But you could never say he's become blasé along the way because one of his endearing qualities is his undiminished enthusiasm.

I remember conversations with him after he first went exploring way out in the Coral Sea. He could hardly contain his enthusiasm as he tried to explain the fishing action and size of the fish. As we all know, sometimes words are simply not enough.

Back then, Nomad Sportfishing's equipment inventory comprised *Nomad*, a 34-foot, twin-diesel Kevlacat, and a 56-foot, steel-hulled mothership called *Odyssey*. But the logistics of fishing the far Coral Sea demanded more. From here, it took a courageous commitment and a substantial investment to make these remote reef

Scott Bannerot and Ed Lester found this striped marlin while in transit one night. Much of Kenn Reef's potential for billfish remains unexplored.

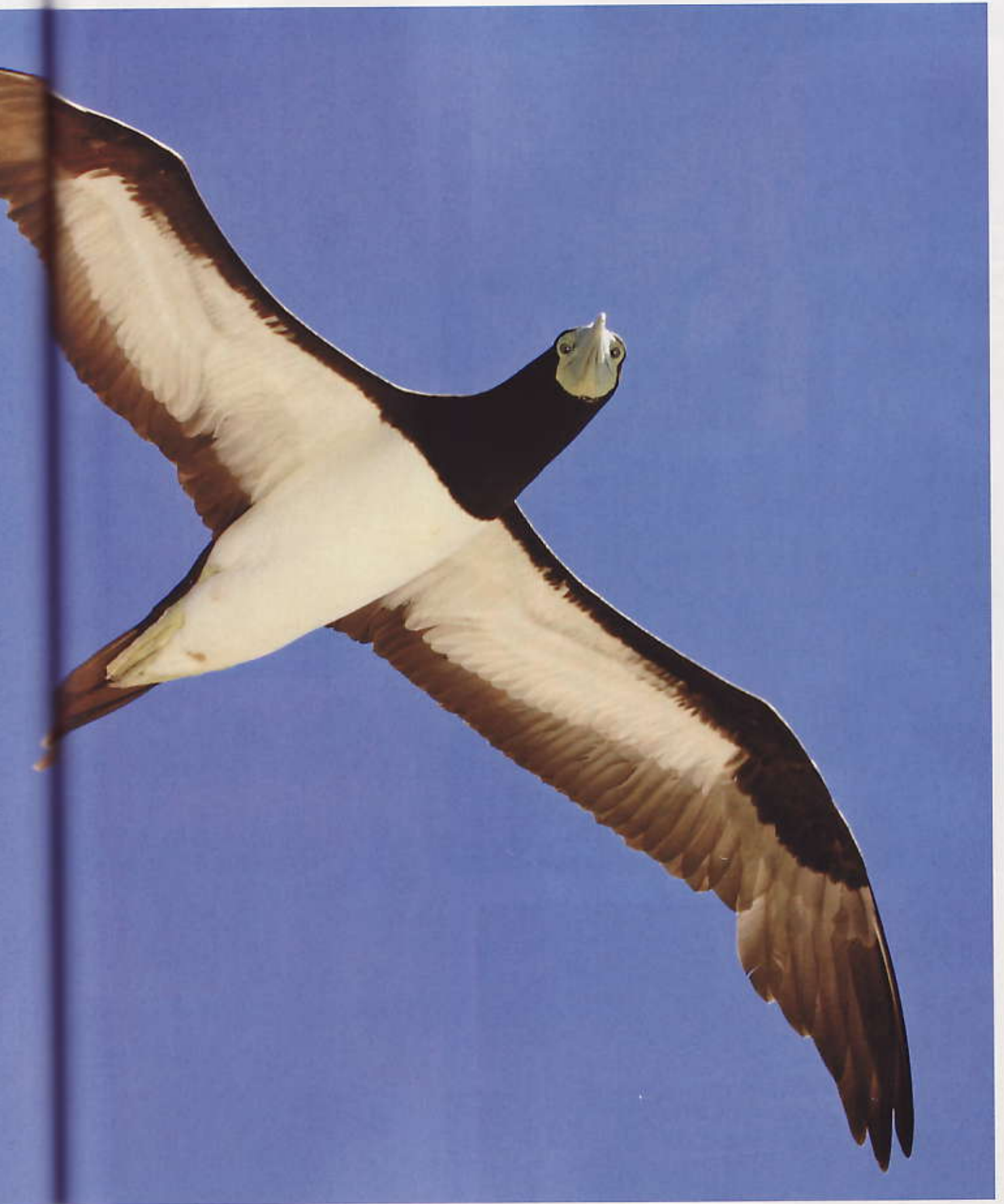


Right: A black naddy rests on Bird Island near Wreck Reef.

Below: A masked booby and chick on Bird Island.

Opposite: A brown booby on the wing.







Top: The spectacularly coloured coronation trout, a type of coral trout. Randall Bryett caught this one in a reef lagoon on fly.

Below: Pilot, Peter Gash refueling his Sea Air float plane from Odyssey's onboard tanks.

Right: Deckie, Brett Halliday poses a mega trout that grabbed Ek's popper before the GTs could get to it.

systems accessible to a select few sport fishers each year.

Early in 2005, Nomad Sportfishing commissioned Cairns Custom Craft to build an 80-foot catamaran mothership, which would replace the *Odyssey*. The new *Odyssey* is big and boxy and might be accused of being a little short of beautiful, but in reality she is superbly comfortable and is absolutely state-of-the-art amongst long-range motherships operating in this country – and indeed, around the world.

Damon and John also had to find a seaplane (and pilot) capable of landing their clientele safely out in the middle of the remote Coral Sea to avoid long and time-wasting boat passages. They eventually located Sea Air in Hervey Bay, which operates a turbo-prop Cessna Caravan piloted by owner, Peter Gash. Pete, as it turned out, was a

find in himself, being one of a precious few pilots with the necessary experience to be permitted to fly out to remote offshore areas.

Getting everything up and running, as anyone who has ever been involved in setting up a similar operation will know, is an enormous undertaking. Nevertheless, while establishing the new adventure, Damon somehow still managed to fit





Above: Land-dwelling hermit crabs inhabit the coys in the Coral Sea Island Territories.

in his annual stint on the northern GBR for the heavy tackle marlin season.

Nomad Sportfishing offered its first packages to Kenn Reef under the tongue-in-cheek title of "Camp Kenn". Finding clients wasn't a problem and a high percentage of those who first fished the Coral Sea Island Territories with Nomad Sportfishing were international deep water jigging and GT luminaries, who trot around the globe following new fishing opportunities wherever and whenever they pop up.

Damon plans more exploration in the Coral Sea for 2006-7, but in November and

December 2005 he set up at Kenn Reef. Clients were flown out of Hervey Bay by Sea Air to land beside *Odyssey*, which was anchored in a sheltering reef lagoon. By any measure, Camp Kenn was a huge success and is now confirmed as a regular annual venture for Nomad Sportfishing.

CAMP COMFORT

Based on the fully air-conditioned *Odyssey*, Damon's 'camp' is staffed by a hostess, engineer, and French chef. For the all-important fishing, there was *Nomad*, plus *Saltaire*, a beautifully

Believe it or not, this EPIC survived.



Top: A sunrise moment between two masked boobies on one of the Coral Sea Island Territories sand cays.

Above: A sooty tern hovers above its nest on Bird Island.

Left: A juvenile frigate bird on the wing near Wreck Reef.



Right: American fly fishers, Kate Van Gytenbeek and Ben Thrower enjoyed the sight-fishing on Kenn Reef's reef flats.

Below: A red bass triple for Thai sportfishers Tik (left), Jai (centre) and Ek. Are they having fun yet?

custom-built sport fisher from north Queensland. There is also a trio of cathedral-hulled Kevlacat Flycaster dories.

The aforementioned globetrotting GT and deep jigging glitterati rated Camp Kenn as good as it gets; mainly because of the ease of fly-in access and the excellent quality of accommodation provided – plus, I assume, the fantastic fishing on offer!

A pleasant surprise awaited me, too, when I flew out to Kenn Reef in December last year. The pelagic action, world class though it was, was only part of the story. If I thought I was the only one aboard who appreciated the light gear sportfishing and flyfishing available, I was soon proved wrong when an American film crew arrived.

If the few episodes they showed on *Odyssey's* wide screen TV are anything to go by, it's an eternal shame that US TV channel ESPN2 doesn't see fit to export its fishing show, *Spanish Fly* out here. The shows I saw were the best fishing television I've seen; although that's getting away from our story a bit...

Host Jose Wejbe and his dedicated crew dutifully sampled the GTs and dogtooth, with some wahoo and others thrown in, and were delighted to have a couple of shows 'in the can' so quickly. In fact, they had so much footage they decided to do something different and took to fishing the reef itself. This culminated in Jose jumping over the side wearing mask and snorkel, while still clutching rod and reel. He'd gone overboard to unhitch a red bass, which had reefed him in a deep channel draining Kenn Reef's lagoon.



We saw the raw footage that night and it was mind-blowing and hilarious in equal parts. The *Spanish Fly* crew then spent the rest of the time aboard fishing the reef lagoons, ultimately coming up with enough footage for up to five episodes.

While all this was going on, I'd had to borrow Damon's onboard computer to clear some card space because the whole 3 gigabytes of storage space I had available was full. I, too, had more than enough 'footage' and was happily in a position where I could put down the cameras and do some serious fishing myself.

A standout was a dogtooth I caught one afternoon. It was about 15-16kg I suppose – a baby by Kenn Reef standards – but what really impressed me were the bite marks it displayed from bigger doggies!

DOG ON FLY

As my luck would have it, also onboard at the time were globetrotting flyfishers, Randall Bryett (an Aussie expat resident in the US) and his American wife, Kate Van Gytenbeek. Flyfishing at Kenn Reef is cutting-edge stuff, as Randall showed when he boated a 22-kilo dogtooth, with the considerable help of crew member Scott Bannerot (himself a globetrotting expat American). Randall's dogtooth is actually a capture of global significance because very few of the species have ever been caught on regulation fly tackle. Delightful company that they are, the couple didn't limit themselves to doggies, also targeting bluefin trevally, an unbelievably

Top: American flyfisher, Brendan Mason fishing the reef flats at Bird Island.

Below: Crewman, Scott Bannerot gets to do the honours once again with a small reef flat GT for Scott.

Right: Namad Sportfishing's Damon Olsen is a world leader in deep jigging and GT fishing.





brilliantly coloured inhabitant of reef lagoons and tidal flats, which we sight-fished on many occasions. This, too, was very special fishing.

To flyfishers, the Coral Sea Island Territories, and Kenn Reef in particular, offer truly unique opportunities. There are, indeed, few locations anywhere in the world where flyfishing for bluewater species such as dogtooth, wahoo and big yellowfin tuna is possible, let alone with the amenity of the Nomad Sportfishing Coral Sea set-up.

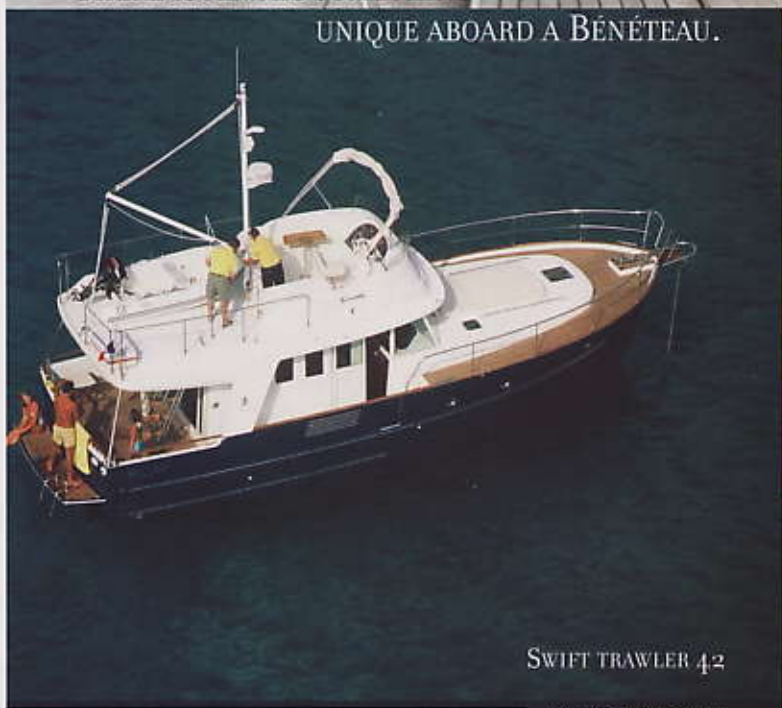
While it goes without saying that most people are going to come out for the pelagic action, especially the deep water jigging and GT fishing – and probably for the billfish, once Damon and crew get around to sorting them out – you'd be some kind of fool not to sample the light-tackle fishing on the reef itself. If nothing else, it at least gives you a break from the physically demanding action in deeper water out over the reef edge.

For more information about fishing and diving in the Coral Sea Island Territories, cast a fly to: www.nomadsportfishing.com.au. 

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