

When it comes to fishing, Australia is the lucky country. From Tassie to the Top End and Steep Point to Cape Byron - we've got some of the best angling destinations on the planet. But it's not often you pick up a fishing magazine and read about a new and genuinely exciting Aussie location.

Way out in the Coral Sea, east of the Great Barrier Reef and well east of the famous Swain Reefs complex, is a series of isolated reef systems just inside Australian territorial waters. Officially they're known as The Coral Sea Island Territories. You've probably heard of some of them: Osprey, Saumarez, Wreck and Cato Reefs have all featured in various fishing media.

But you probably haven't heard of Marion, Frederick or Kenn Reefs. This is



This is a mid-sized GT by Camp Kenn standards. You wouldn't believe the size of some of the trevally prowling these waters.

because they're so far out to sea few people get the chance to go there. Kenn Reef, which this story revolves around, is roughly 450 kilometres out from Hay Point near Mackay. Barely anyone goes there at all, especially to fish.

As you can see from the photos, the fishing is mind bogeling! And the good news is Marion, Frederick and Kenn Reefs are all yours!

It's taken initiative and a hefty dose of plain old fashioned guts - not to mention a substantial investment - to make these remote reef systems accessible to a select few each year, but accessible they now are. The story goes like this...

Damon Olsen and his father John run Nomad Sportfishing. As many of you will be aware, they've been operating north of Fraser Island and in the nearby Capricorn/Bunker Group for a few years. When the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) decided to hand most of the Reef to their mates (the dive charter industry) Damon and his dad began looking further afield. After a bit of exploratory work, they found a new and exciting fishing destination in the Coral Sea Island Territories!

From there it was a matter of

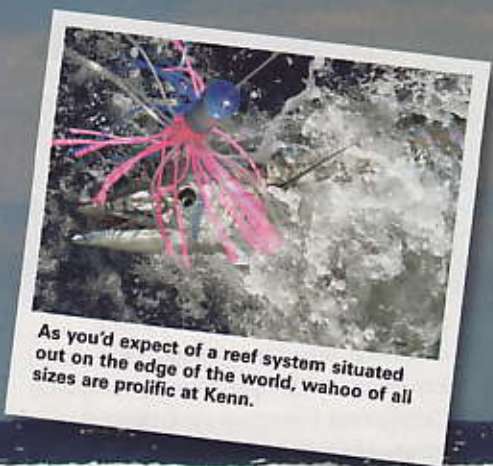


Camp Kenn in all its glory.

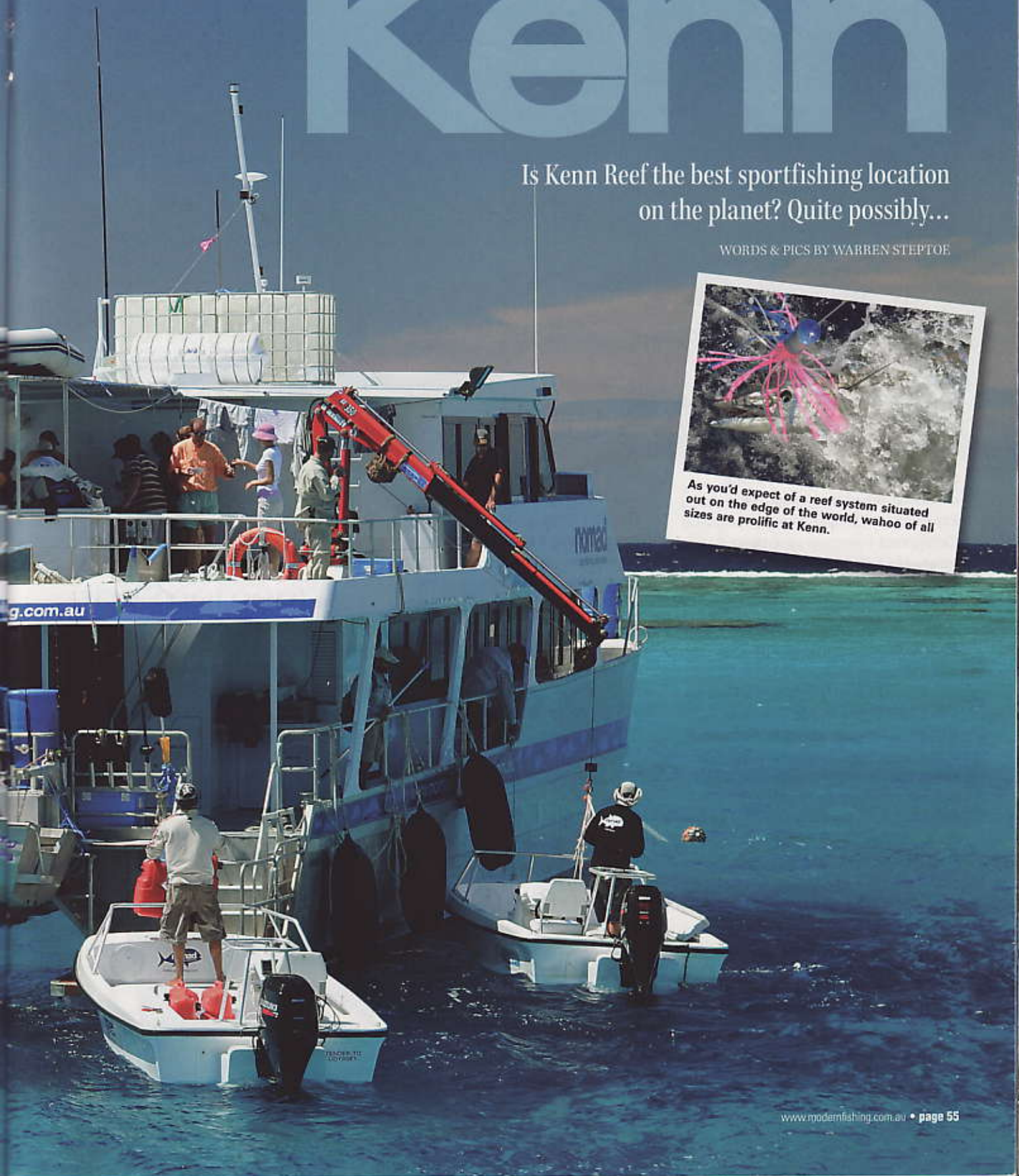
Camp Kenn

Is Kenn Reef the best sportfishing location on the planet? Quite possibly...

WORDS & PICS BY WARREN STEPTOE



As you'd expect of a reef system situated out on the edge of the world, wahoo of all sizes are prolific at Kenn.





Odyssey deckie, Brett Holliday, poses with a mega trout that grabbed Ek's popper before the GTs could get to it.

arranging the logistics for putting clients on the water in comfort. Experience with their already successful Capricornia operation gave them invaluable insight into what was required. All it took was the courage to go ahead and make it happen!

Early in 2005, Nomad Sportfishing commissioned Cairns Custom Craft to build the 80 ft catamaran mothership, *Odyssey*. If you've followed Starlo's many adventures to western Cape York with Greg Bethune, you'd be familiar with Greg's boat, *Tropic Paradise*. Well, *Odyssey* is big sister to *Paradise*. She's big, boxy and somewhat short of beautiful, but entirely practical, comfortable and an absolute state-of-the-art, long range mothership.

The next job was to find a sea plane operator capable of flying clients 450 kilometres out into the middle of nowhere. Enter Hervey Bay-based company Sea Air and a turbo prop Cessna Caravan piloted by owner, Peter Gash. Pete proved a real find. He's one of few pilots with the experience to fly out to such a remote destination.

In November 2005, Damon set up at Kenn Reef, wryly calling Nomad

Sportfishing's week-long packages 'Camp Kenn'. Clients were flown out of Hervey Bay airport to land beside *Odyssey*, which was anchored in the sheltered reef lagoon.

Camp Kenn was a huge success and will be a regular package with Nomad Sportfishing. But they'll still continue to fish the ever-productive Breaksea Spit area, along with some of Damon's secret hidey holes in Capricornia - the ones GBRMPA still allow him to fish, anyway.

Damon's 'camp', some 450 kays out in the Coral Sea, is the fully air-conditioned *Odyssey*, complete with hostess, engineer

and French chef.

I love going bush for weeks at a time with only a backpack, fishing rod and camera, but boy, could I get used to camps like Kenn!

The first Camp Kenn involved two gameboats and a trio of 5.5 metre fishing dories. Nomad Sportfishing's familiar twin-diesel Kevlacat, *Nomad*, was one of the gameboats. The other was *Saltaire*, a beautiful, custom-built sportfisher from north Queensland. The dories were specially built versions of the Kevlacat's tri-hulled 'flycaster', which we reviewed in these pages a year ago.

Readers probably take more notice of photos than words when it comes to fishing. And while I returned from Camp Kenn happier with my photographic results than I thought possible, even that spectacular collection of images fails to convey the scope of what's out there.

Deep water jigging and popper fishing for giant trevally or GT is flavour of the moment and the location of Camp Kenn is perfect for both. Have a squiz at the underwater topography and you'll see why.

Kenn Reef sits atop the Kenn Plateau. A Province Report by

Geoscience Australia describes it as: "a large, relatively poorly understood submerged continental block which rifted from northeastern Australia 63 to 52 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 Tasmanid Chain of volcanic seamounts".


I've omitted some of the drier passages of oceanography, but when you translate that lot into fishing language it's illuminating stuff. An isolated reef system, located in seriously deep water, is as good a Fish Aggregating Device (FAD) as anyone could dream up.

Some of the drop-offs where Camp Kenn clients jig for monster dogtooth tuna are awesome to see on a sounder. They're incredible sheer walls that can plunge from shallow to seriously deep in an instant.

Not many Kenn campers get to look at the sounder though - they're too busy grimly hanging onto a jig rod, battling drags set at about half my body weight. It's raw, cutting edge stuff which Damon's something of a world leader at. It's no surprise a high percentage of the first Camp Kenn



Hey Jai, notice something missing?

A photograph showing two fishermen on the deck of a white boat in deep, clear blue water. One fisherman, wearing a light-colored shirt and a hat, is leaning over the side holding a fishing rod. The other, wearing a red and white patterned shirt and a hat, is also leaning over the side. The water is very clear, showing some seabed features. The sky is bright and clear.

Big GTs and red bass love to hang in the deep channels adjacent to reef flats. Lob a popper up into the shallows, bloop it back and be prepared to get belted as it passes into deep water.

World wide, deep water jigging and popper fishing for the infamous GT is flavour of the moment.

clientele comprised the kind of international luminaries who trot around the globe following new fishing opportunities wherever they open.

Some of these blokes actually work out for months beforehand, training up for what's undoubtedly one of fishing's greatest physical challenges. While I was camping at Kenn with Nomad Sportfishing, Damon had aboard a trio of Thais - Jai, Ek and Tik - who attacked their jigging and popper tossing with the dedication and enthusiasm of elite athletes. This was my baptism in deep water jigging and one I was happy to observe from the sidelines.

To their credit, Jai, Ek and Tik were genuinely nice blokes who went out of their way to help less prepared fellow campers enjoy the action. They certainly led by example and were

exceedingly generous with their gear.

Jai owns a tackle company in Thailand specialising in jigging and GT gear (it's big business over there), and had an incredible selection of tackle. I actually saw him grinning happily when he broke the latest state-of-the-art jig rod on a middling dogtooth - all part of cutting edge tackle development, apparently. And that was after I'd seen the rod bowl over a succession of 30 and 40 kg dogtooth in short order.

What truly blew me away though was how mid-size dogtooth and members of the *Seriola* (amberjack) clan kept coming up with bite marks from *big* doggies on them. Yep, attacked without mercy in the dog-eat-dog world down there in the abyss.

Dogtooth tuna are considered by many to be one of the hardest fighting fish in the sea. I've caught smallish doggies before, but after seeing these Coral Sea monsters going for it, I completely understand why the species is rated so highly.

The same goes for the Camp Kenn GTs. I managed to be aboard the right

boat at the wrong time and only managed to photograph some 'middling' GTs around the 25-30 kg mark. But Kenn campers have caught some monster trevally. Damon's posted images of these on the Nomad Sportfishing Web site at: www.nomadsportfishing.com.au.

As I mentioned earlier, mega GTs are the flavour of the moment internationally, and there are some incredible GT spots available around the globe if you're prepared to travel. What makes the Nomad Sportfishing set-up so special though is ease of access and the high level of comfort. Incidentally, the aforementioned globe-trotting GT and dogtooth jigging glitterati reckon Camp Kenn is as good as it gets anywhere in the world. Food for thought...

What about billfish, I hear you ask? Surely a spot like Kenn Reef, which rises from deep water amid open ocean currents, is crawling with beakies? Well, not a lot of exploratory work has gone into billfish at Camp Kenn yet. But they're there, that's for sure. During my stay I saw several free swimming



Incredibly, this is a run-of-the-mill Kenn Reef dogtooth tuna. Better start pumping iron, boys!

- 1 If you wanna go popper fishing for Kenn Reef-size GTs, get fit.
- 2 If you wanna go deep-water jigging for dogtooth tuna, get *bloody fit!*
- 3 Unless you have the best heavy tackle spinning and jigging gear, use Damon's.
- 4 When you're tired of getting your arms reefed out of their sockets, take a break and fish the reef flats. It's magic.
- 5 Don't forget to pack a mid-size spinning reel loaded with 20-30 pound fused GSP and a matching seven foot spin rod for some light tackle relief. Throw in a collection of four inch soft plastics, poppers and shallow-medium running minnows, too.

marlin, probably blues. And several black, blue and striped marlin, plus a shortbill spearfish, were hooked and lost by clients who had minimal billfish experience.

Crew members Scott Bannerot and Ed Lester pinned a hefty striped marlin one night while transporting *Nomad*, and Damon found wall-to-wall sailfish in the same area when he was scouting around a few months previous to Camp Kenn. That only leaves broadbill, which are probably there too, and will no doubt be found when the *Nomad* Sportfishing crew get around to looking for them. But with the present popularity of deep jigging and GT popper tossing, a serious effort on beakies is on the back burner.

With world class, heavy tackle sport fishing like this so readily available it almost seems irrelevant to consider the lesser options on offer at Kenn Reef. Mind you, plenty of people would be happy with some of them, myself included. Camp Kenn is a sport fishing set-up first and foremost, so meat-oriented bottom bouncing is well off the agenda. But what about the light tackle lure and fly fishing?

What about it, indeed! With several pristine reef lagoons and sand cays at the Kenn Reef complex, exercises like sight-fishing the reef and

sand flats provide incredible fishing. This is where the Kevlacat Flycaster dories come into their own. They're used on the open water too, but some of the best fun comes around the reef complex itself.

GTs of frightening proportions frequent Kenn's reef flats and lagoons, presenting an entirely different challenge to their contemporaries inhabiting the rips and current lines along the reef proper.

Outside the reefs, there are bluewater fly fishing opportunities for species

like dogtooth, big yellowfin and wahoo. These are opportunities difficult to find anywhere in the world and will surely attract globe-trotting fly fishers when word gets out. Sight-fishing GTs on the reef is another.

I particularly enjoyed sight-fishing for the gloriously coloured bluefin trevally in Kenn's reef lagoons. My efforts on the bluefin front may not compare to those of globe-trotting fly rodder, Randall Bryett, who bagged a 22 kg doggie on fly out wide. But as an 'appendix' to the bluewater stuff, casting lures or flies in the reef lagoons is a definite must-do. As for other species, green job fish are wall-to-wall, as are red bass, coral trout and the usual cast of reefies in their multitudinous variety.

While I was out at Kenn Reef in December, amazing sunsets were provided each day by the dust of drought and smoke from bushfires on mainland Australia. You'd come back from fishing at about the same time the western sky turned on the magic, to be met with a cold beer as you stepped aboard *Odyssey*. Life simply doesn't get any better than kicking-back with an ice-cold beer while the sun goes down over a great day's fishing at Kenn Reef. For more details on Camp Kenn, contact *Nomad* Sportfishing on (07) 3311 5012. Or visit the Web site at: www.nomadsportfishing.com.au ■



Nomad Sportfishing's Damon Olsen is a world leader in deep water jigging and GT fishing. Sometimes he has to do a little developmental fishing himself.