

# Operation CORAL STORM

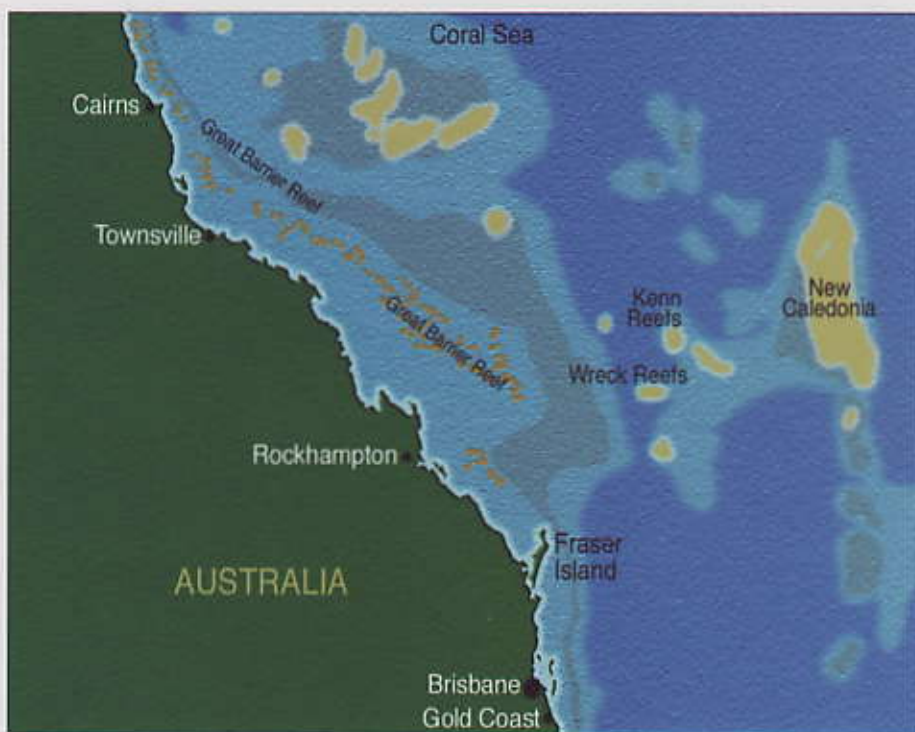


**F**RASER Island, Queensland, Australia, February 2005. On the way back from the Breaksea Spit, Capt. Damon Olsen from Nomad Charters and I were talking whilst we made our way home to harbour after a good day's fishing aboard *Nomad*, his 34ft big gamefishing catamaran. Damon had a secret project he wanted to share

with me. He wanted to fish the remote reefs and atolls of the Coral Sea for monster GTs six months from that day.

Nobody had seriously fished these places for many years, and the people he'd spoken to about the trip had already booked. There was just one little problem — he needed to build a boat ...

Fraser Island, six months later.



*Odyssey 2* is designed to carry four 18ft ski-boats powered by 70hp 4-strokes, and she was to be our home for the next few days as we set about fishing off a remote atoll in the Coral Sea.

Our target? Kenn Reef, 290 nautical miles NE of Hervey Bay, in the Coral Sea, South Pacific. After 27 hours of quiet cruising at 12 knots, the rising sun glinted off a multitude of reefs, emerging coral bommies, rocks, sand cays and reef-fringing barrier as far as the eye could see. After hours of darkness, life

was sprouting all around the boat.

Fortunately a high-pressure weather system was due to be over the Coral Sea for at least three days and would keep the sea flat for us. The ocean was incredibly calm and I was amazed to see such quiet water, considering our exposed position in the middle of the ocean so far away from any coast. The light was perfect and, as always in the southern hemisphere, the colour of the sky was of a blue that is clearer and deeper than anywhere else.

## An odyssey to fishing heaven

The GT fishing in the Coral Sea was "simply insane". 40kg-plus fish — no problem!

There it was, in front of me, in the Unrangan marina — *Odyssey 2*, an 80ft motor catamaran with a striking shape and the lines of a true long-range, ocean-going boat. At the helm, Capt. Damon Olsen. The





The beauty of the lagoon inside the reef was breathtaking — a rainbow of shades of blue, turquoise and emerald-green, blending to provide what must surely be one of nature's most beautiful sights. And there were big GTs to be caught too ...

### ODYSSEY: A DREAM COMES TRUE

Capt. Damon Olsen is a young, tall, strong Aussie who grew up fishing on the Great Barrier Reef. Against all odds he made his dream come true — he'd gotten the boat ready despite the jungle of bureaucracy and boat yard hazards.

The boat can accommodate 20 anglers with full gear for over 1 000 miles, if needed, and can quite safely stay out at sea for a month if fishing is good.

Damon and his guys each have expertise in different fields and double up as fishing guides. First mate is Tim, an expat South African who worked at Bazaruto's fishing lodge and immigrated to Australia after he met an Aussie mermaid. The rest of the fishing crew was made up of Scott, an American marine biologist and oceanographer with years of guiding experience, and Ed who had worked on tuna boats in the rough seas of South Tasmania.

To feed all those people a French chief had been engaged, and Alain, who had just arrived from French Polynesia, handled the job admirably. He was helped by Nicci, a true yachtie hostess who looked after everybody, made sure that the cabins were in order and that beer never ran out.

The cabins aboard *Odyssey 2* are small but comfortable, and the bunks very good. Guests are accommodated in four cabins, each with four bunks, and two cabins with twin bunks. Two bathrooms which offer very hot showers and plenty of freshwater, thanks to the desalinator, mean you don't have to queue up too long in the morning and after fishing. On the bridge you'll find the crew's cabin, another bathroom and the pilot house with a full array of electronics, a deep water sounder, GPS plotter, digital map reader, radar, weather station and sat phone.



The largest GT of the trip was caught by the author and weighed just under 50kg.

The upper deck houses the four ski-boats and is used as a sun deck or party deck when the fishing boats are deployed.

For this trip we were joined by 11 Japanese anglers. Their leader was the charismatic Yoichi Mogi who has pioneered modern GT fishing and deep water jigging. I also had the pleasure of meeting Kenji Konishi who is the boss of Carpenter Rods and Lures, and currently Japan's number-one master GT angler with several fish over 50kg to his credit. Konishi-san is a very quiet and extremely polite man in the true Japanese tradition.

The party brought along an unbelievable number of rods and reels and a mountain of lures. The back of the boat soon looked like a tackle store. Despite the language problem I got on very well with Konishi-san and quickly become "Bertrando-san" to their group.

Deploying the fishing boats took a good hour, but we had found a safe anchoring spot in the lagoon inside the atoll where we would be protected from any swell should the sea become rough.

By this stage we were all very excited and could no longer wait to cast our lures over the promising reefs. I ended up in the last ski-boat, with Mogi-san and Thara-san, nicknamed "Ipoh" as he is a judoka champion. Damon was in command and soon we were heading towards the first point. The craft's tri-hull proved very stable and still produced good speed. The 4-stroke Suzuki was so quiet that fish continued swimming around us, without taking any notice.

The sea was calm, the surface glassy, and the sound of the swell breaking lazily over the exposed reef was music to my ears. The marine life is just



Scenes from the Coral Sea trip during which an assortment of fish were caught, including 103 GTs between 15kg and 50kg, coral trout (above), dogtooth tuna, red bass, grouper, wahoo, yellowfin tuna and sailfish.

incredible. Baitfish were everywhere — mainly flying fish and blue ballyhoos. Every time I scanned the horizon I saw yellowfin tuna breaking the water's surface with flocks of birds hovering above them. They were only half a mile from the reef edge, and they stayed busy all day, every day of our trip. I have never seen so many tuna being so active for so long. I don't know why, but the Japanese preferred to leave them alone and concentrate on the GTs.

The rules of engagement were simple: fire with every popper, stickbait or spoon we had. The only rule was to release all the fish we caught and only keep a few tuna or wahoo for sashimi.

I had brought along my big guns — a brand new Accurate TwinSpin spinning reel mounted onto my Carpenter SP78UHL rod for the large blooping poppers, and a second one on my Smith Tokara for the stickbait.

The reels were loaded with 130 lb Tuf XP braided PE line from Western Filament. The diameter is similar to 50 lb mono, but it's much stronger. The braid is then spliced into a loop onto which I loop-to-loop a twisted casting mono leader of three metres. This is connected via an opposite nail-knot to a short 50cm bite leader of 400 lb fluoro-carbon mono. The bite leader ends on a 300 lb Sampo swivel which is crimped to the line and a 300 lb split ring to change the lures. We didn't use snap attachments as they always break open.

The group of Japanese were all fish-



ing with Carpenter rods and mostly Shimano Stella reels. They used lighter PE line in the 65 lb to 80 lb because, being small guys, they just can't handle heavy drags. They all wore their flotation jackets, even in the hottest weather.

#### FIRST CAST

My first cast close to the reef saw a big red bass hitting the lure as it landed on the water. At 12kg it was double the size of the bass I normally catch. We worked the point for one hour in gin-clear water and were constantly harassed by red bass, green jobfish and coral trout. I kept my big lure on whilst the other guys went for the smaller ones.

The coral was awesome, and I couldn't help staring into the depths, watching the colourful coral formations we were going over. Wham! First ignobilis — 15kg. Not big, but very strong. The water was only 24°C which is quite cool for the tropics, but it's normal for September. We carried on, and strangely the water was very quiet, with not much activity apart from the tuna going mad only half-a-mile away. Even though you're fishing in Jurassic Park, the T-Rex isn't always on the hunt!

We waited for the tide to start pushing again and decided to head up north to the tip of the reef. Scott had the same idea and got there before us as Mogi-san wanted to first refill the beer box. Suddenly shouts carried across the VHF radio. Scott's anglers had been ambushed by warriors from the ignobilis tribe who made short work of their light tackle. He was calling for heavy tackle strikes, knowing full well that I had my big guns armed and ready.

Full throttle on the Suzuki and the Kevlcat charged over the sea. I stood



at the bow, SP78UHL in hand, loaded with my best Orion lure — safety catch off. As we got there we saw three guys with rods bent double, line cutting the water, big brown shapes attacking their lures, an explosion of baitfish — and Scott shaking his head. The spot was awesome. It seemed the incoming tide trapped the baitfish in a little bay surrounded by two sharp points which extend far out into the deep blue water.

"Cast only when in range," said Damon as he slowed the boat. Three big poppers became airborne at the same time and landed in the strike zone. Simply insane! We had a triple hook up of 40kg-plus GTs!

Mogi was instantly bust up on the

reef, but Tahara-san was still in control of his opponent. Whilst small, Ipoh is built like a bull and he makes good use of his low centre of gravity.

I had decided not to give any line to my fish as we were hooked up in less than three metres of water. As a result, my fish couldn't build up any speed and thrashed the water in big bow waves and tail splashes. 17kg of drag and I was trying to hold a 50kg GT like a rhino on a rope.

I could see the big, angry head of the fish and, much to my horror, the lure had disappeared into its mouth. With no other choice the fish was stuck about 30 metres from us, shaking its massive head like a pitbull terrier. Then it bit me off through the 400 lb fluoro leader.

Ipoh was still fighting, his judoka spirit giving him the stamina to see the fight through to its end. It took every trick we knew to get the fish away from the reef so that we could see how huge it was. All this was too much for Ipoh's reel and it burst into pieces — gears, springs and screws went flying — luckily just as the leader was up. I grabbed it and lined the fish so Damon could lip-gaff it. The beast was beaten — 40kg of ignobilis lying on the deck — and we all cheered the first monster of the trip. A few pictures later it swam away, still strong and angry. In the meantime, the other boats had arrived at our new

honey spot and were having similar fun.

In four-and-a-half days fishing around Kenn Reef, the four boats landed 103 GTs between 15kg and 50kg. I had the privilege of catching the largest of them which came in at just under 50kg, with Konishi-san, the master himself, looking on.

Then there were the dog-tooth tuna we caught on jigs at night, the red bass, the huge coral trout, grouper, wahoo, yellowfin tuna and sailfish all hooked on surface plugs. At some points it was like a fishing remake of the fights in the movie *Kill Bill*.

Do I need to mention the giant GTs that were either seen or hooked and lost? We all saw them, and after seeing what a 50kg fish could do to our tackle, these even larger fish drove fear into our hearts. I hooked one — the mother of all giant ignobilis — near the reef, but lost it through a stupid tackle failure when, after doing all the hard work, the crimp slid out. Damon, who landed a 68kg GT at Fraser the year before, said this fish was much, much bigger.

On one day I even raised a black marlin of a solid 200kg behind my stick-bait. It followed the bait all the way to the boat in only 20 metres of water, but didn't bite.



The pristine white sand cays (top) and reef-fringing barrier in the lagoon (above) — fishing heaven!

#### TOO BEAUTIFUL TO FISH

More than even the fishing, it's the sheer beauty of the place that amazed me. Just take a look at a marine map of the South Pacific. Point your finger between Australia and New Caledonia

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# BRAD KIDD

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It's time to fish so it's time to leave the mothership, *Odyssey 2*, an 80ft motor catamaran with the lines of a true long-range, ocean-going boat. Guests are accommodated in four cabins, each with four bunks, and two cabins with twin bunks.

— that's where we were. That alone was enough to keep me happy, even before I had caught any fish.

At low tide the reef becomes magical, and I can hardly find words to describe what I saw. It was like a rainbow of blue, turquoise and emerald-green all over. When we got inside the lagoon it was so beautiful I couldn't fish. I put down my rod and just contemplated the scenery around me, respecting the virginity of this place that belongs to the world as a whole. The entire atoll is immaculate — no lit-

ter, no trace of pollution ... only nature as it was thousands of years ago, before mankind in its stupidity started its predation guided by madness and greed.

The remains of a wreck on the sand cay reminded us that despite the calm conditions we experienced, we need to respect the ocean and we need to

take care of such pieces of paradise.

The noise of a plane brought us back to reality as a Transall from the Australian Customs department flew low over us, checking on the boat's registration and that we were permitted to be there. Longliners, purse seiners, shark finning boats, rapists of the sea, pirates of the ocean, stay way from these reefs: they are part of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, and commercial fishing is illegal here.

#### THE CEREMONY

The best part for me was on the last day. After I had caught the big fish, Kenji Konishi had asked me to try one of his new rods called Wild Violence. He was very interested to hear my comments on it. After the last day's fishing I cleaned it and gave it back to him. The rod was just incredible and a joy to use.

At dinner that night he appeared with the rod laying on its sleeve and called me. The translator told me that he wanted to give it to me as a present and that it would be an honour for him if I would accept the fishing rod. Like in a samurai ceremony, I was given the rod in front of everybody, and it felt incredible. Beyond the language barrier and culture difference, we had the same passion — a love for the sea, the fish and the fishing. I realised that Japan is a great nation of sportfishermen as well as tackle manufacturers.

All too soon we needed to get the ski-boats back on the upper deck, lift the anchor and get ready for the long cruise back.

Alone at the stern of *Odyssey 2* as she headed back towards civilisation, I watched the wake on the deep blue Pacific Ocean. I reminisced about the big fish I caught and released. I had mixed feeling of happiness and sadness — the Coral Sea blues. Despite the clear blue sky and bright sunshine, I felt cold. Indeed, the sea always evokes deep emotions.

Kenn Reef: 21°14' South, 155°45' East. I promised myself I'd be back. All I need do is press "Go To" on my GPS ...

• For further information on fishing this region, visit <[www.nomadssport-fishing.com.au](http://www.nomadssport-fishing.com.au)>.

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