



Malaysia's phenomenal

SAILFISH

A BlueWater Readers' Trip to Kuala Rompin

There's a place where you'll see hundreds of sailfish, in lake-calm water, nearly every day. They'll be feeding all around you. The place is Kuala Rompin on the southeast coast of Malaysia and recently, Tim Simpson joined *BlueWater* readers on an expedition to take part in the spectacular action.

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If I close my eyes, I can still picture the scene...

It's late afternoon and an 8-knot southeast breeze is ruffling the surface of a swell-less sea – the roughest it's been all day.

Overhead is a cloudless sky, although a perpetual haze – the wind-borne smoke from extensive slash-and-burn land clearing on nearby Indonesia – casts a golden, milky pall over the region.

I am standing on the raised bow platform of a narrow, 34ft, Malaysian-style, open, half-cabin boat with a 140hp outboard engine. The water is only 70ft (20m) deep,

but we're drifting nearly 20 miles offshore, and with the calm sea and opaque, green water I feel as though I could be standing on Sydney Harbour.

But this is very different. I'm on the sheltered South China Sea off Kuala Rompin, a coastal fishing village on the southeast coast of Peninsula Malaysia. The almost perpetually placid sea is 29°C and I'm surrounded by sailfish!

At my feet is my camera, but in my hand is a Daiwa Saltiga threadline outfit, one of the best that money can buy. I've just re-cast my stickbait out across the low wind-

chop. Now I'm jerking it with short, erratic snaps of my wrist to make the plastic cigar twitch enticingly, imitating a crippled survivor of a sailfish attack on the multitudes of herring, yellowtail scad or Indian mackerel that proliferate in the area.

It's one of many casts I've made in the brief intervals between strikes on the livebait lines poised under balloons at the rear of the craft.

The frustrating part is that I can see sailfish crashing baitfish all around us, yet few take more than curious interest in my plastic imitation. The truly exciting part is that I *can*

“The almost perpetually placid sea is 29°C and I'm surrounded by sailfish!”



Above: Swooping birds were a sure sign of where a sailfish was about to surface. The dorsal fins and tails of feeding sailfish were a regular sight.

Right: Local baitfish – and livebaits.

Below: Catching sailfish with cast poppers and stickbaits is a challenging option. It's particularly popular with visiting Japanese devotees.

Inset: A Williamson stickbait with modified hook arrangements to give more chance of a hook-up with sailfish.

see hundreds of sailfish feeding all around us! They're everywhere – and on many occasions throughout the day, one of the other boats in our party will have a sailfish hooked up and jumping nearby.

BIRDS PINPOINT FEEDING SAILFISH

Black-headed terns are sparsely scattered throughout these feeding grounds, occasionally joined by pterodactyl-like frigate birds that circle much higher until something catches their laser-keen eyes.

The terns are randomly spread, flying at hunting height as they scan the surface for action.

We're all watching them as they're watching the sails. When several birds group together, then wheel down to skim the water, we know there's a sailfish on the surface and feeding.

Sure enough, just 70m to the left of our bow, three terns swoop down

and, within seconds, there's the tall dorsal fin and sickle tail of a sailfish as it casually engulfs another hapless baitfish that it's chased to the surface. I fire another cast in that direction.

Twitch, twitch... Nothing. Twitch, twitch, twitch... Nothing!

My retrieve nears the bow and I'm already scanning the vicinity to see where my next cast should land. Then, just as I'm about to lift the lure from the surface, there it is!

A purple/chocolate smudge materialises from the green soup and suddenly there's over 7ft of billfish just in front of me – and the tip of its bill is right behind my lure!

Twitch, twitch... I've got no room left to retrieve! The fish and lure are just below my feet. There's nowhere left to go; the wind-on leader is at my rod tip. If I lift the lure for another cast I know the sail will simply peel away and disappear.

There's no option; I flick the lure in a stationary position, giving it as much motion as I can without actually retrieving.

The sailfish eyes it warily. It's certainly curious – even tempted – but with so many options around, it can be fussy. It seems a hopeless situation, but with my heart pumping hard and my breath on hold ... the sailfish strikes!

At this range, and on 30lb braided GSP line, the strike is a jarring whack! But that's all it is. The sail grips the lure, rattles it (and me), then rejects the imitation despite the swinging – billfish-rigged – assist-hook adaptation hanging from its belly.



It was over in a second and the fish disappeared towards the stern. 'Great', I thought!

A BLUEWATER READER HOOKS UP

Sure enough, moments later, as I gathered up my camera, one of the balloons briefly scurried across the low chop before pulling free.

In the cockpit, a short loop of line pulled from beneath a rubber band retainer set on the rod's foregrip and peeled friction-free from one of the three threadline outfits, set in freespool with the bail arm open.

It was a scene we'd all watched countless times in the previous three days. Seconds later, another sailfish was gyrating across the stern, screeching braid from a threadline reel as a scorching run took it from right behind the outboard to 300m away in seconds. The sails' blistering speed tore line through the surface in a racing gash that sounded like tearing fabric.

The incredible runs of these fastest-of-all-fish left anglers breathless as their quarry bounded for the horizon, barely entering the water before leaping back into the air in a continuous welter of spray. A frothing trail of smashed water traced its path between the packs of swooping birds and drifting boats nearby.

Most battles did not take long. After the first, screaming run they settle, run some more and before long are coaxed to the boat for release. Sailfish are not sought for a testing tug-of-war.

Catching sails is about exhilaration! They're a lightweight billfish, but the lightning-fast runs and airborne gyrations that these streamlined missiles consistently deliver is enough to draw anglers



to hotspots throughout the shallow, tropical waters of the world.

And we had found the jackpot. Drifting nearby – or frantically chasing their own rampaging sailfish – were four similar boats, with the others among our party of 15 anglers.

WHERE IT ALL STARTED

The trip started back in March this year when Ocean Blue Fishing Adventures teamed with *BlueWater* to offer a 'readers' trip' to the developing sportfishery in the prolific waters of Peninsula Malaysia's Kuala Rompin.

Within weeks of Issue 72 going on sale, the original plans were expanded to take more people. Then that too reached capacity and the trip was officially 'sold out'!

In early September, we all flew to Singapore, where Ocean Blue's David Noble linked the party with local guided-fishing operator Rob Chang. From there we boarded a coach and began the half-day drive into Peninsula Malaysia and up to the southeast coastal town of Rompin.

This was an adventure in itself and gave us a fascinating insight into the scenery and rural lifestyle of central Malaysia. As evening closed in, we arrived in Rompin at the Serai di Lanjut Beach and Golf Resort.

The resort is a 457-acre complex with its own 18-hole golf course and a 3.5km stretch of sandy beachfront. Its design would not seem out of place in a major Western destination although, to prosper there, it was in need of an upgrade.

Even so, considering we were in the middle of rural Malaysia, the accommodation was comfortable and certainly adequate for our needs. For

the week we were there we had it almost to ourselves.

A PARTY FROM THE BEGINNING

Our party consisted of anglers from all walks of life and all levels of angling experience. It was an interesting collection that included truck drivers, businessmen, a butcher, a retiree and his son, and a top-level corporate lawyer.

All mixed wonderfully, and each day the morning and evening meals were a hotpot of excited tales and new experiences.

We fished four of our five days spent in Rompin, taking a day off in the middle to head via coach to the city of Kuantan (two hours away) for a shopping spree.

At 8.30am on each of the fishing mornings, after a leisurely breakfast, we'd head for what we jokingly called 'the marina'. We fished a full day and would not depart the grounds until 5.30pm that evening, arriving back at the resort around 7pm in time for a quick shower before dinner.

'The marina' was a small, rickety, timber platform nestled on the edge of the nearby river among thick vegetation. To get there we boarded a golf buggy, a van that also carried the mound of personal tackle we'd brought or (most fun of all) the tractor shuttle.

It was a short run, down past the golf course, and along the way small family groups of monkeys sat along the margins, spectators to an amusing procession.



By 9am each morning we had boarded our five boats and were blasting down the muddy Rompin River towards the ocean. This tidal river flows strongly and contains barramundi, mangrove jack and crocodiles – although, with local commercial netting, it would take an effort to see any.

The boats we used were rather crude, but adequate for the perpetually calm seas. Their low freeboard made them ideal for reaching your sailfish to remove the hook and set them free.

Rod racks on the rear of their enormous canopies stored a number of spare outfits, but the rodholders varied from rusted metal pipes with broken welds to plastic plumbing tubes attached via a rusted bolt.

Considering the prices they were charging, the boats were disappointing and made it challenging to stand up and fight (and follow) hooked fish.

Once again, this was taken in a spirit of adventure by all participants. When you're in a frontier fishery, the 'challenges' are part of the fun.

Each morning, our five local captains picked us up in their boats from what we jokingly referred to as 'the marina'.

Michael Coleman helps Jim Lindrea with a photo of his sailfish before it's slipped back into the water and released.



“The sails’ blistering speed tore line in a racing gash that sounded like tearing fabric.”

WHY SO MANY SAILFISH?

The sportfishing industry in Malaysia is still in its infancy. Local sportfishing for sailfish only started this decade and has gained momentum in just the past four or five years. To encourage its development, the Royal Pahang Billfish International Challenge (RPBIC) was instigated six years ago. From slow beginnings, it now attracts participants from as far as Australia (see Tournament News in this issue).

Sailfish are caught off much of Malaysia’s coastline, but they seem to aggregate in vast numbers off Kuala Rompin. No research as to why has been done on this – nor on anything else about this huge population – but the broad, shallow waters off Rompin also hold a booming fishery for anchovies, and this may have a lot to do with it.

Sailfish may or may not eat the anchovies themselves, but they

ROYAL PROTECTION FOR SAILFISH

Malaysia has a central government, but the region is divided up into states that have a royal family to take care of local administration. Crown Prince Abdullah of Pahang (the region that includes Rompin) has taken part in the RPBIC and is keen to develop the local sportfishing industry.

To this end, the royal family has declared that within the Kuala Rompin district it’s illegal to kill sailfish. Before 2004, huge numbers of sailfish were caught and sold at the local markets. Now they are reserved for anglers.

One of the local captains mentioned that sails of less than 1kg are sometimes seen and caught on the Rompin grounds. Such small fish would be only weeks or months old, so that prompted questions about whether the sailfish aggregate here to spawn.

back – but it’s doubtful they would live through the ordeal.

PROLIFIC GROUNDS WITH EASY FISHING

Whatever the future holds for the sailfish of Rompin, the fact is that there are many thousands of them there at present – although one captain told me that the current average (20-30kg?) specimens are noticeably smaller than the 12ft monsters that were once common.

The 20m-deep sailfish grounds that the local boats fish are between 12 and 25 miles offshore. Here the sea bed is a mixture of broken coral rubble and mud. But these shallows, which sailfish prefer, extend off Rompin for much further than that. Who knows how thick the fish are in the clearer waters out really wide?

Sailfish are available all year off Rompin, but the Monsoon season begins around November and doesn’t finish until around the end of February.

The best fishing season is between late July and November. Winds are consistently light – usually between 0-5 knots in the mornings, then 5-10 knots in the afternoon. There is barely any swell.

The sailfish seemed more inclined to feed on the surface when there was a slight wind chop, but this reduced again if the wind strengthened to produce white caps. Due to the gentle breeze, the fishing seemed better in the afternoons. These pleasant conditions make the Rompin sailfish grounds ideal for those uncertain about ocean fishing, or those prone to seasickness.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVEN MORE SUCCESS

The local technique involves finding the anchovies/sailfish/birds and then switching off the engine and drifting with livebaits set under breakaway balloons. Apparently, trolling with either baits or lures is out of the question – because they have a better technique.

The baitfish are jigged-up on the grounds with small sabiki jig rigs. The most prolific of the species we caught were two types of yellowtail scad, a herring, a pink reef fish and Indian mackerel.

These were somewhat crudely rigged by pinning them straight on to a small (4/0 or 5/0) offset circle hook placed through the nose or through the back.

Frustratingly, the local crews (with limited English) were reluctant to consider any ideas or alternate



Many purse-seiners worked the same grounds that we drifted for sailfish. They would mark a school of anchovies, then surround it with fine mesh nets. The crates on the aft upper deck are drying trays filled with anchovy.

certainly do eat the multitudes of larger baitfish that also aggregate on the grounds to gorge on the anchovies.

Anchovies are purse-seined throughout the region, but the anchovies off Rompin are the juveniles, which are much more valuable. Each day, numbers of large seiners worked around us as we drifted the grounds.

They would scan the area for a school and then mark it with a float before setting their net around the whole lot. Then, having hauled their catch aboard, they’d fire up their boiling vats to briefly cook them before transferring them to the drying racks piled high at the stern.

The timber they use to boil the vats must be very green and damp as, whenever they started the fires, such billowing black smoke poured from the vessels that you would swear there was a maritime disaster happening.

The answer I got from several captains was that they could not remember ever having seen eggs or milt inside a caught fish; they had always been sold ungutted to the markets.

I then asked if the anchovy netters ever caught sailfish.

“Oh, yes!” came the reply. “You see them jumping within the nets all the time, but they release them all alive – they have to.”

I then queried how they got them out of the nets and the answer was not what I had wanted to hear. “With gaffs,” they replied!

If the area is a spawning ground, or even a nursery – which would make sense considering the abundant, small baitfish food supply – then I also have grave fears for the vast numbers of juvenile sailfish that must also be caught among the anchovies in the micro nets of the purse-seiners. They might be thrown





While the captain removes the hook, Geoff Harris secures the tail of one of Chris Mitchell's sailfish, while Rob Vine and Chris look on.

rigs or techniques. They obviously caught plenty of fish (it was hard not to with so many available) and probably considered that they had it all perfected.

However, despite the locals freespooling and striking for inexperienced anglers, the hook-up rate was appalling. Between half and two-thirds of all our strikes on the livebaits were lost. It's lucky that we had so many chances!

It will be very interesting to visit this area in years to come when, with the experience of more visiting anglers, they will hopefully adapt some more sophisticated techniques and rigs to see a more realistic conversion rate to their livebait strikes. Hopefully, they'll also realise the difference that non-offset circle hooks provide, and so deep-hook far fewer of the sailfish that do stay connected.

Our 15 anglers (on five boats) released 88 sailfish over the four days. It was spectacular billfishing

by any measure, but with more sophisticated techniques the catch rate could easily reach dozens of sailfish per boat, per day.

POTENTIAL FOR TEASE-AND-SWITCH

Interestingly, while we were at Rompin, two highly experienced Sydney fly fishermen were also there to fish exclusively with tease-and-switch fly techniques. They had found an amenable captain and were trolling daisy-chains of fresh squid from a similar boat.

When they had a sail come up on the teasers, they'd draw it closer to the boat, then take the engine out of gear and cast their feathered fly to the, by now, aggressive billfish.

Using fly tackle is a demanding challenge. Dedicated proponents happily trade potential quantities of catch for a few fly-caught fish that they value far higher. Even so, fishing from just one boat, Gordon Dunlop and Neil Sheppard say

they saw between 2500 and 4000 feeding sailfish during their 10 days of fishing off Rompin.

They raised 386 sailfish with the teasers and actually landed 22 of them on fly. The staggering thought is that Gordon says if they were switching the teased sails to a livebait instead of an artificial fly, he believes they could have caught most of them!

A WEEK FULL OF FUN

It was a fabulous trip and all involved had an absolute ball. Besides the fishing, we had lots of fun at an end-of-week 'mad hatters' day, where we all wore absurd hats in friendly competition for a nominal prize.

Then there was the shopping trip – and what an experience that was. Some of the crew, being dyed-in-the-wool Aussies, decided that they couldn't last the drive home from Kuantan without a few chilled beverages.

With admirable ingenuity, they scoured a (Muslim) shopping centre, found one of the rare stores that sold beer, then bought a garbage bin from a supermarket and ice from another outlet and snuck the loaded bin into the rear of the coach to set up the 'clubrooms' for the relaxed journey home.

There were a lot of laughs and at the end of the trip it was difficult to say goodbye to all the newfound friends. In fact, there was a general commitment to reconvene the party at a future date and do it all again in some other fabulous gamefishing destination. ☑



YOUR CHANCE TO EXPERIENCE ROMPIN'S SAILFISH

Now that they've seen the potential of Rompin firsthand, Ocean Blue is offering regular trips to the area. If you'd like to experience your own Rompin adventure – and more sailfish than you can imagine – then give David Noble a call on (02) 9280 1405 or email him at david@oceanblue.com.vu

Visit the Ocean Blue website (www.oceanblue.com.vu) to read and see more of the fun that we got up to on the trip.

Or watch some online action video, taken on our trip, at YouTube: www.youtube.com/OceanBlueFishing