

New Caledonian **CHAOS!**

The coral reef-studded waters surrounding the South Pacific isle of New Caledonia are forging a big reputation amongst the heavy tackle popper fishing fraternity. Jarrod Day journeyed over to see what all the fuss was about and came back with longer arms

BY JARROD DAY





Reef edges like this abound in New Caledonian waters, and all seem to have fish on them



Within seconds the fish were almost bunny-hopping over one another to devour the lure before one fish won the race and absolutely annihilated the fast-moving popper

Fourteen years in the catching, Ilja's first yellowfin tuna was made all the more memorable by having been caught on a popper

Lush green flood plains form a barrier between the towering rugged mountain peaks before they meet up with the sandy coastline. Coral reefs extending some 80 meters below the surface rise to meet the ocean swells, creating a mix of turbulent white-water and foam. Down below, a myriad of coral cays make home for some of the hardest and hungriest fish. This was New Caledonia, and I was here to marvel at its scenery and sample its finest fishing.

After arriving in Noumea, we were greeted by our Skipper, Olivier Quach. Olivier, a very experienced guide in these parts, owns a 42ft purpose built Power-cat designed for both live-aboard and long-range fishing adventures. Having 7 anglers on the trip,

Oliver also had another boat; an American designed 28ft Luhrs, also ideal for similar fishing adventures.

We had chartered both vessels for five days and set four of the group on the Power-cat while the other three fished onboard the Luhrs.

Making our way out from Port Moselle, we took one last look at Noumea before setting our sights on the nutrient rich, cobalt blue water that was before us. We had only motored for a 30 minutes before sighting the first coral reef that rose from 50 meters of water right to the surface.

"Cast here!" Gerard, who was skippering the Luhrs, yelled with his fluent French accent. Without hesitation a countless number of surface poppers took flight

towards the edge of the reef. The first retrieve for all of us drew a blank, but with all of us dying to raise a fish, the next few minutes saw the water flayed by a barrage of poppers in what looked like some sort of weird air-strike. I was tossing a Black Jack Cubera and it was this lure that was engulfed by the first fish of the trip.

All I saw of this brutal hit was tail fin amongst the eruption before the rod loaded. Not really ready for the hit, I stumbled forward towards the bow rail. "What is it?! What is it?!" was bleated out from the deck. "How should I know?!" I stuttered back, and in that a ridiculous amount of head shakes shook the rod as the fish darted back and forth under the boat. The fish tired quickly

with the battle lasting no more than 5 minutes, and with a few more turns of the handle a big mack tuna came to the surface.

After releasing the tuna I was eager to get the popper working along the edge of the reef, and with its first two bloop another fish burst from the depths taking a good amount of 80lb braid as it bolted for the coral. There's no other way to handle hostile fish hooked so close to sharp structure than to pile on enormous pressure, and on this occasion I slowed the fish up before it could make it to safety. After a short battle, the fish was worked up to the surface and revealed as the first GT of the trip.

Shortly after releasing my GT, both Dean and Ilja backed it up with a few solid coral trout

taking a liking to their poppers. These fish hit hard and headed straight for their underwater lairs upon hook up, so it was no easy task stopping them from stealing your popper.

We were adjusting nicely to this style of fishing, and had managed a nice array of species in the opening arvo session, so decided it was time to head to our resort to check in for the evening. Our destination was Kanua Eco Lodge, situated in Port Boisé at the Southern end of the island. This was our home for the next few days while fishing the Great Southern Lagoon. The only downfall to staying at this newly built resort was that the

walk from the pier was along what could only be described as a billy goat track through thick rainforest. Nevertheless, the knowledge that liquid gold was waiting for us at the other end made the trek far easier.

After resting up, I awoke to the morning sun peering through the holes in the peak of the thatched roof. A quick shower and it was back to the office to see what could be raised with our arsenal of poppers. Having already worked the northern end of the Southern Lagoon, Oliver decided the next few days were going to be spent searching out larger fish by heading wider to reefs he only fishes once a season.



The Quo Vardis the 42ft power-cat saw us fishing like royalty



While not growing to as large a size as the GTs, red bass were every bit as mean

I finally came to terms with what everybody had suggested before heading off on this trip and that was to go to the gym a few weeks beforehand. Unfortunately, I just nodded it off but now know only too well that will be a prerequisite for my next bluewater popping adventure

The trip was long but re-tying Bimini's, attaching fresh twisted leaders, and inspecting every swivel, split ring and barb point only to make sure passed the time quickly. The first reef produced some good fish; red bass and golden trevally along with a thumping coral trout which devoured my PR Labs Fly popper. Dean loaded up to the first GT of the day that really put the pressure on, while I was busy battling it out against a green jobfish.

It seemed every fifth or so cast drew a strike; whether it hooked up or not was another matter. Many fish hit the lures hard, but failed to hook up. On inspection of the poppers after each miss, teeth marks across the back of the lures were a sure sign there was no way we'd hook the fish in the first place, so all you could do was bang out another cast to try again.

Ilja cast right to the strike zone, pumping two perfect bloopers of the lure to provoke the biggest explosion we had seen so far. It was as if somebody dropped a 44 gallon drum into the water, and Ilja's rod almost bent in half as it buckled under the pressure applied through 80lb braid. After a brutal brawl, Ilja brought what turned out to be a nice red bass to the boat. Although smaller in size to

that of the GTs we were catching, pound for pound red bass just about have it over the more highly regarded trevs.

I finally came to terms with what everybody had suggested before heading off on this trip and that was to go to the gym a few weeks beforehand. Unfortunately, I just nodded it off but now know only too well that will be a prerequisite for my next bluewater popping adventure. By day three, it was a real struggle to pry myself from my slumber. My shoulders were aching, back sore, and I swear my arms were an extra two inches longer. I can recall the nickname "nancy" being said a few times.

Enduring another brisk morning walk along the 'goat track', Olivier, brighter and bushier-tailed than all of us giggled at the fact we resembled the dead rather than refreshed anglers ready to go another round. The first few casts were gruelling but after a short while every muscle loosened and it was back to the normal routine of flicking poppers and belting them back the boat.

We'd worked a few reefs to no avail before setting our sights on a much smaller reef that didn't break the surface. Approaching it, three poppers were launched, and both Dean and I hooked into red bass, while Ilja met



Just another nice GT being led to the marlin board. Tough life!

AD

Working sinking stickbaits down the reef edges was a sure way to connect to quality coral trout



AD

his match on his third cast with a sizeable GT. Meanwhile, the occasional "GT, GT" was spoken over the 27meg each time the boys on the other boat hooked up.

At the end of each day at the pier, both groups would brag about their catch but somehow Chris and Warren kept raising larger fish. Like us, they packed more poppers that you could imagine and after finding one that was easy to cast yet threw a substantial amount of water, they ended up only sticking to the one popper for the five days. Mind you, by the end of the trip there really wasn't much of the original paint work left on the lures, but they did contain plenty of teeth marks that would give them 'memento' status.

To give myself a break between popping, I had packed a lighter rod; a Wilson Blade 'n' Tails and Shimano Twin Power 6000 running PE3. This outfit was perfect for flicking Yo-Zuri 120 sinking Surface Sliders to the edge of the reefs. The most productive technique was to free-spool the lure for 20 odd meters, flick the lure back up the reef edge and it would invariably end up in a coral trout's mouth.

Aside from sinking stickbaits, trolling was also productive. From reef to reef you could

travel anywhere from 500 meters to 5km's, so to break up the boredom of motoring we opted for a spot of trolling to see what was around. Within seconds, Ilja's Stella came to life but after 100 meters of braid was ripped from the spool, the hooks pulled. On the second attempt, a good hour or so had passed before the reel screamed for a second time. A solid green job fish devoured the Hydro Magnum, and although at around 15lb it was no match at all for 50lb braid, did highlight the lucky dip trolling such wild waters provides.

We had approached a smaller reef late in the day. Adjacent to it was another with a channel separating the two that looked incredibly fishy. Gerard didn't speak a word of English, so sign language was the only way to communicate that we were keen to fish this spot. Gerard wasn't keen at all, but eventually steered us toward it, albeit with a very hesitant look on his face.

The current was pushing through here hard, making it a challenging task just to keep the boat in position while we made cast after cast in an attempt to raise a fish. Finally, a monster Spanish Mackerel chased down Ilja's lure but didn't take it, swimming just under the surface all lit up with black bands

Some of the GTs encountered were real thumpers



and silver flanks. The fish seemed to hang around for what felt like an eternity before casually swimming off.

Lex, who'd so far been unlucky on the GT front, perched his popper right on the reef edge and with two vigorous bloopers, raised 4 or 5 GT's. Within seconds the fish were almost bunny-hopping over one another to devour the lure before one fish won the race and absolutely annihilated the fast-moving popper. Holding on for grim death, Lex instantly put the pressure on. "This one's not getting off!" was his battle cry as the rod loaded uncontrollably before the fish went deep and began its characteristic pulsating circles.

Green jobfish were also willing popper takers



Scrambling to the marlin board, I reached down and in one foul swoop grabbed the fish in two hands and lifted it onto the deck. I can honestly say I've never before seen such smiles of relief, as Lex held up a GT that made the others look small.

Day five had come around quickly, and loading all our belongings onto the boats for our final day's fishing almost cast a dampener over us all, yet we still had plenty of reef systems to fish on the journey back to Port Moselle. By this time, my body was screaming for the chiropractor but I wasn't giving into it just yet.

We approached the first reef of the day, flicking right around its southern flank but raising nothing but a few longtoms. In the distance, one section of reef looked really promising, so we made a B-line for it. A few casts later and half dozen fish swarmed over Ilja's popper. One unlucky assailant grabbed it and in seconds had run a solid 50 meters without showing any sign of slowing down.

Holding on, Ilja lent back almost to a seated position as the fish rapidly changed direction and headed towards the boat. As Ilja gathered the line, the fish swung down deep, but was fighting against 8

kilos of drag which almost brought him to a standstill and eventually planed him to the surface. "A yellowfin! A yellowfin!" Ilja yelled in excitement before landing the fish. "It's taken me 14 years to catch a yellowfin and to hook it on a popper, now that's brilliant". Not surprisingly, Ilja had a grin from ear to ear.

But Ilja's day wasn't over yet. Two or so casts later, another fish engulfed his popper. By this time, the back begins to become tender before heating up like a volcano, yet the determination to boat another fish on the last day was the only thing running through Ilja's mind. To end the day on a high boating another 20 odd kg GT was a sensational effort, and put the last lick of icing on a sensational trip.

Having found muscles in my arms I thought I never had, it was time to sit back and enjoy a cold ale as we motored back into Port Moselle Marina, taking in the sights of the mountain peaks meeting the combination of cobalt blue and aquamarine coloured water amongst the maze of scattered coral reefs. We really had seen New Caledonian fishing at its best. **SWF**

Jarrod and crew fished New Caledonia via Ocean-Blue Fishing Adventures. For more information log onto www.oceanblue.com.vu

This sort of fishing with this calibre of fish is not for your 'average' gear. You'll need high-end equipment to deal with hook ups like this for days on end

