

OFFSHORE ADVENTURE

By Grant Dixon



New Caledonia's trophy GTs (Part I)

Guide Etienne Picquel and angler Murray Stewart with the fish of the trip, a 52kg giant trevally.

Prior to my first New Caledonia experience targeting their trophy giant trevally with poppers, I never realised just how technical this form of fishing could be.

In the past I had been content to rip out the cast and then bring the lure back to the boat with a series of jerks, interspersed with some furious winding. The process would be repeated until either a fish was raised or it all became far too taxing on ageing muscles.

However, after fishing with Etienne Picquel, operator of Blue Caledonie Fishing Trips, I now know very differently.

In addition to having a comprehensive knowledge of the grounds and the target species, Etienne is also a patient teacher who's prepared to

pass on what he knows to those prepared to listen. And it pays to listen closely.

I was in New Caledonia hosting a four-day reader's trip targeting giant trevally, organised by fishing travel specialists, Ocean Blue (oceanblue.com.vu). We were a mixed bunch, and most had not fished for GTs much before, if at all.

After getting off the Air Calin flight at Noumea, we were met by a representative of Ocean Blue, Sebastien Davignon of Nautilus Tours, who introduced us to Etienne before heading to our first base, the Ouano Surf Lodge, an hour's drive up the west coast.

Once there, we had the afternoon to relax, prepare tackle and generally gird our loins for the battles we

hoped lay ahead.

The next morning we were divided into two crews, introduced to another guide, Franky Pochard, before setting off, with one boat heading north, the other south, with fishing confined to within the Great Reef due to a 3.5-metre swell running outside.

Before going too far, those of us with Etienne were put through our paces casting poppers and stickbaits to an inner reef. This gave us a chance to flex our casting muscles while our guide assessed our abilities.

We must have all passed muster, as after a few tips and David Campbell striking first blood with a Spanish mackerel, it was off to more serious grounds.

Our 'honorary Kiwi', Aussie Jim Caddy, showed how it was done on

the other boat, landing the first GT of around 14kg. Although one of the smaller specimens (as it turned out), it was still a great warm up for what was to come.

Fishing from the same boat, Michael 'Irish' Gordon set a hot pace with a 40kg GT – not bad for his first fish! (Interesting enough, the fish had taken a River2Sea Dumbell popper, in a livery Michael's wife had picked out. 'It's not one I would have chosen,' he remarked.)

Michael had certainly done his homework prior to this trip. He came away with a bunch of 'twisty' leaders pre-prepared, all his lures had been beefed up with Owner 4, 5 and 6X strong trebles, and his rods and reels were immaculate and fit for purpose. Having researched the area



Michael Gordon with his trophy 45kg GT, his second fish of 40kg or better on the trip, caught on a River2Sea Dumbbell popper.



One of the best efforts of the trip was Peter van Eekelen's 28kg GT caught on a light Shimano spin outfit and a Yo-Zuri Sashimi slider.

and the operations thoroughly, he embarrassed the tour leader with his knowledge! It was great his enthusiasm and effort had been rewarded with such a solid fish first up.

On our boat, in complete contrast, Te Awamutu's Murray Stewart arrived in New Caledonia with no tackle, happy to leave the lures, rods and reels up to Etienne to supply. The 'hire' gear is top of the range, consisting of Daiwa Dogfight reels and matching rods, so nothing is lost here, making it an option that suits many people.

While still getting to grips with this new style of fishing, Murray struck first blood with a 20kg GT that smashed his lure in spectacular fashion about 15 metres from the boat.

If there is one thing that gets an angler's heart rate up, it's the way a GT devours the surface lures on the bite; you are left in no uncertainty that the fish wants your offering! Then, once hooked, it is just a matter of hanging on as the fish is pulled away from any coral heads or patches of reef into open water, where you have a good chance of landing it.

Anyone who has caught silver trevally in New Zealand will appreciate this species' size-to-fighting-ability ratio. Double that and you have GTs, which tough it out right to the bitter end.

We put in a big effort that first day, with our only other reward being a second fish for David, although this time it was the target species.

Etienne is involved in a GT

research programme requiring all fish caught to be recorded, so I was pleased to see the 21kg fish weighed, measured, tagged and released – and it's the same for all the GTs caught by anglers while in this operation's care.

The New Caledonians certainly take their stock conservation seri-

ously; several times during our fishing we were either spoken to by fisheries patrollers on boats, or checked out by a helicopter overhead. The former were keen to ensure we were observing the many 'no take' reserve areas, where fishing was completely banned, whether we were catching and releasing or not. It was great

to see the respect shown this sport fishery.

The next day the two crews swapped areas. Michael was still buzzing from his first-up 40kg trophy, and before leaving told me: 'My trip expectations have been fulfilled – I don't think I will top that one.'

In reply, I suggested it was a new day and a new area, so anything was possible.

Prophetic words as it turned out, as we got the message via a scratchy phone service that one of the other crew had landed an estimated 45kg fish. My guess was that it was Michael, and was later proved right; it had taken another River2Sea Dumbbell Popper, this time in a colour of Michael's choosing!

Hearing of the other boat's success only hardened our resolve to cast a little more often and further. We worked out you could whip out around 70 lures an hour. Extrapolate that out over a day's fishing, and you might be making 400-500 casts, so going to the gym prior to such a trip is not a bad option.

Our reward came after an almost fruitless afternoon, a big fish coming off the reef and chasing David's stick-bait close to the boat, but without hooking up. However, as it turned to head for cover, Etienne grabbed Murray's rod and cast the Halco Haymaker 195 popper well ahead of it, before passing the rod back. Murray needed little encouragement to work the popper back past the nose of the fish, resulting in it being

Guide Manu Hernu (left) and David Campbell with a typical GT of around 25kg.





Clockwise from top left: the quality of the boats was excellent. Guide Etienne and expectant anglers head away for another day of challenging GT fishing; Don McRae and blue maori cod; guide Etienne with a Maori wrasse.

engulfed with one mighty splash. Game on!

At the same time, Peter van Eekelen also hooked a smaller fish, so this had to be brought aboard and 'processed' before Murray could start putting some serious pressure on his GT, which had made the mistake of heading for more open water.

Even five minutes into the scrap, Murray could do little but hold on. Slowly, with short pumps of the rod, the fish was brought closer. This was trench warfare stuff – the piscatorial equivalent of hand-to-hand combat, as in the gin-clear waters we could see the fish's every move a short distance away.

In the end the angler prevailed, and with Etienne on the tail and myself holding onto the popper, the fish was brought aboard. It had scoffed the Halco almost right down, and it took a little while to retrieve the lure before processing and photographing the fish. It pulled the scales to 52kg – and that was with the tail still dragging on the deck.

Once released, it staggered away a little punch drunk, but none the worse for its experience. I am sure the capture will be etched in Murray's memory for years to come.

That evening we shifted a further hour's drive north to the delightful Nekweta Fish and Surf Camp at Bourail, where we were greeted by manager and fishing guide, Manu Hernu.

Etienne had trailed his boat up as well, and we set off full of enthusiasm the next morning, again splitting

north and south. I jumped crews at this stage to fish with Michael, Jim and Don McRae, the latter an enthusiastic angler from Wellington.

We got just one fish for our efforts that day, with Jim landing a juvenile GT of around 6kg, while Don broke off a much larger fish when his connecting knot parted. GTs are quick to find any weaknesses in your kit or setup.

The others had much better luck, encountering fish to 28kg. The biggest specimen was accounted for by Peter on relatively light tackle. Pete is one of those guys who likes to 'play with his food', and is often found taking the angling equivalent of 'a knife to a gunfight'. He was fishing a Yo-Zuri Sashimi Slider – a smallish surface lure – on eight-kilo braid, spooled to a Shimano Stradic 5000 reel and matching Shimano T-Curve 5-10kg rod – something of a GT kamikaze mission.

While the others were casting 37kg tackle, Pete and his peashooter hooked up. With the gear maxed out, he hung on for dear life as Manu expertly chased the fish down, and together he and Pete worked it out into open water.

After some time, several laps of the boat and more than a few scary moments, the fish was brought alongside, and, as already mentioned, tipped the scales at 28kg. While Murray might have had the heaviest catch at 52kg, Pete's had to take the most meritorious capture of the trip. That little rig provided plenty of excitement, and fishing the smaller

lures produced the likes of bigeye trevally, red bass, long nosed emperor, cod and mangrove jacks.

For the final day I joined Manu, Pete, Murray and David for a jaunt that saw us land and release five GTs. Jiggling in one of the reef passages, I hooked a fish on a Raider jig I never stopped, the excitement ending in tears when I was taken into the coral by something in the XOS range. But, as the saying goes: 'if you don't weigh it, don't say it'!

This day belonged to the River2Sea Rover 230 stickbait – especially the blue and white model; everything wanted it! We parted company with the lure on one of the last casts of the trip, when it was grabbed by a good GT that took me into the coral – perhaps a fitting end to a top performing lure. (The guides tell us that because the hook barbs are crushed, the GTs soon shed the lure.)

The part of the reef we fished was magnificent; the crystal-clear waters meant you could see the fish spurt out from cover to grab the lures against a magnificent backdrop of the surf rolling over the reef. And, as you sped from spot to spot, tropical fish darted for the cover of the nearest bommie, loggerhead turtles were constant companions, and, for those lucky enough to spot them, the occasional dugong. In short, fishing heaven!

About the operation

As mentioned, the trip was put together under the auspices of Ocean Blue. Etienne works almost



Peter van Eekelen with a mangrove jack (left), and a long-nosed emperor.

exclusively through them, especially on multi-day trips.

He has been fishing these waters for some five years, the last 2.5 as a guide, building a great reputation for his professionalism in that short time.

A fishing guide who plied his trade in his native France before heading to the South Pacific, Etienne proved knowledgeable as well as a great coach. If you are new to casting poppers, don't be overawed, Etienne will have you amongst the fish in no time.

Occasionally we had a mix-up while coming to terms with each other's accents, but Etienne and Manu's English, in particular, was good.

The boats used are in the 6-7.5m lengths. Etienne's own craft is an immaculately maintained 7m New Caledonia-manufactured centre-console, modelled on the Tahitian commercial mahimahi boats, and powered by twin Yamaha 100hp four-strokes.

Etienne's hire gear reflected his boat for maintenance and quality, his Daiwa Saltist Dogfight reels being matched with appropriate rods, some of which are manufactured locally. A great selection of lures was also available on a 'if you lose it, you own it' basis.

Franky's boat, powered by a brand

new Evinrude 90 E-Tec outboard, was more in the style of the Yamaha centre-console longboats so prevalent throughout the Pacific. Its stainless steel rails were at just the right height, so did not hinder casting, but added security to your footing.

Manu's rear-console vessel had a raised platform up forward to cast from. Powered by a Suzuki 175hp outboard, it too had plenty of boogie poppers to get you from spot to spot quickly, while also providing the best casting platform of all three. With a bit of care, all four of us were operating from it together.

The accommodation was comfortable at both locations, with Nekweta in particular being quite special.

Over the years I have fished with a number of charter operators, and there have only been a handful I would rate as truly five-star professionals. Etienne Picquel and Blue Caledonie Fishing Trips are right up there with the best of them, and I can recommend the operation to anyone wanting to give GTs a shot, regardless of your angling background. We'll certainly be back! 📍

Next month; part II: The tackle and techniques.



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