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AUSTRALIAN SALTWATER

ISSUE 60

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Cut-Price SAILS

BY BEN KNAGGS

We are truly privileged to be involved in a sport that takes us to places few ordinary folk get to experience. Most of these locations are well off the tourist trail, secreted away in corners of the world that would never raise a mention if not had some rabid sportfisho type stumbled onto breakneck fishing. The urge to experience such destinations for yourself is very hard to resist.

The editor recently travelled to a small, unassuming port in southern Malaysia that's home to some of the hottest sailfishing on the planet. Whatsmore, he didn't break the bank to do it





The charter fleet out of Rompin uses basic but functional longboats.

There's no doubt whatsoever that sailfish are amongst the world's most spectacular sportfish. You just can't help but get excited with this sort of action going on!



For most of us though, gallivanting across the globe in search of red-hot sportfishing just doesn't agree with that ultimate handbrake; the bank balance. In tough economic times justifying thousands of dollars spent on fleeting trips to exotic locations is a practical impossibility. And let's be honest, the expenditure required just to catch a fish in many of sport and game fishing's 'must-do' locations can be downright frightening.

But just occasionally you find a place that marries red-hot fishing with reasonable prices. Early in 2008, in one of those 'I know a guy who knows a guy' circumstances, I got word of a little-known game fishing port in southern Malaysia. Kuala Rompin was a name that vaguely rang a bell, but the stories of world-class sailfishing were new to me.

Relaying these tempting details was familiar face to the pages of *Saltwater Fishing*, Byron Gardiner. Byron filled my head with stories of flat-calm seas boiling with so many sailfish that double figure days were the yawn-provoking norm. More importantly though, he pointed me in the direction of Singapore local, Charles Lee. Charles and his nephew Daryl Chng set up Hook on C Adventures basically to give themselves an excuse fish Rompin waters as often as possible, and these were the men to talk to about the possibility of organising a visit.

The snowball was gathering momentum, and turned into an avalanche of expectation once Charles had quoted a very reasonable price for a six day package. Affordable flights into Singapore weren't too difficult to come across, and a group of eight various mates and acquaintances were confirmed for a week's fishing in the prime late-season month of October. The anticipation and tackle preparation began!

Kuala Rompin

Singapore is one of the cheapest, easiest and most convenient sky-ports for an Aussie fisho to enter Asia-proper through, and this is where our over-excited band of misfits converged. Joining myself and partner Cathy Godfrey were Adelaide-based mates of mine Jason Wormald and Ben Myles. Occasional *Saltwater Fishing* contributor Mick 'Mad Dog' Whittle and fiancé Karina Lantry were flying in from Townsville along with keen fisho Alysa Guppy, and completing this hotch-potch group was French back-packer Olivier Erlan who's journey around the globe and time spent boarding in Mick's back room had somehow led him to this point with a bunch of reprobates on the quest for a South China Sea sailfish.

Charles had arranged to meet us all along Singapore's Beach Road, which just happens to be the 'tackle store district' of the city state, from where we'd board a couple of mini-vans and make the comfortable 2 ½ hour drive along the coastal trunk roads to our destination. Kuala Rompin lies roughly 200kms NNE from Singapore, a journey which can be taken by coach, but given that the trip involves a border crossing into Malaysia the mini-van option is more convenient as well as economical.

Arriving after dark made first impressions of this small country town difficult, but any place that has a giant fibreglass marlin as a welcome sign has to have something going for it! First light revealed an interesting little township sitting at the mouth of the Rompin River estuary which also served as the port for a small fleet of longboats that are used to access the sailfish grounds just a handful of nautical miles offshore.

Kuala Rompin used to be a logging and gold mining town, however during the late 80's commercial fishing operations began, which also led to the instigation of the local charter fishing fleet. Commercial fishing activity today revolves around trawling and drift netting primarily for anchovies but also scad, sardines, arrow squid, cuttlefish, mack tuna, reef fish.... basically anything and everything they can get a net around. Consequently, the Malaysian government is trying to ban such obviously damaging fishing practices, which is a positive sign for the future.

Our group split into two and we jumped aboard a pigeon pair of basic but functional outboard-powered longboats for our maiden crack at these allegedly hot sailfish waters. Providing guidance for our sailfish escapades was chief skipper Sam 'The Man', who incidentally is one of those people born with the eyes of a frigate bird, 'Dashing' Daryl, and of course Charles himself (who was yet to be nick-named).

Heading for the bait grounds, 'Charlie Onto-It' (until now) gave us the run-down on the fishery. The sails aggregate in the surprisingly shallow waters offshore from Rompin thanks to prolific schools of sardines and anchovies that school-up throughout the inshore waters. The nearby Tioman and Pulau Berhala islands appear to act as a baffle to the current that flows to the north during March to November, and then back down to the south from November to February, creating an obvious oceanic eddy that concentrates the nutrient load capable of sustaining such a virulent food chain.



Swimming another sail just before release in idyllic conditions

How many fish we landed for the week I honestly have no idea. In my memory banks the six days are pretty much just an endless haze of flying sails, whirring drags and hyped up fishos



The Ed with his best sail for the trip, subdued on light spin gear. Rompin is the perfect venue for light tackle enthusiasts

The sailfish season runs from March to November, really only interrupted by the late November onset of the monsoon which keeps boats off the water throughout the wet season. Rainfall run-off and ocean turbidity tends to send the baitfish and following sails further out to sea at the end of the monsoon, but fish can still be caught on the close-in grounds without too much difficulty during the start of the season. However, it's the September-November build-up period when the place really fires, with countless packs of sailfish moving in closer to shore and really tearing into the sardine schools.

The sailfish 'grounds' out from Rompin aren't your atypical billfish habitat either. The seafloor out here is an almost entirely flat, fairly sterile affair with an average depth of perhaps 40m. Significant features to aggregate the fish are almost non-existent. Therefore, the fish are spread over a wide area, moving around with the bait schools. You'd think finding them would be a challenge but such are the numbers of sailfish congregating that the local skippers use only basic GPS and sounder equipment, and even this simple gear usually runs second place to simply keeping an eye out for sailfish on the surface or circling birds that betray them. Says something about fish numbers doesn't it?!

A Hail of Sails

To be honest, I don't think I really believed these stories of constant double-figure days I'd heard prior to our visit. Surely if the place was that good that often there'd be flybridge cruisers and hot-shot skippers everywhere right?

Upon reaching the sailfish grounds though, any doubts were quickly thrown out the window. While the first live-baits were fed out the back, I began hostilities by pitching a big stickbait around. On only my second cast in Rompin waters a fully lit-up sail charged the stickbait right to the back of the boat, but failed to hook up. Ah... perhaps the rumours were true!

Ben and Jason on the live bait rods soon found themselves coming to grips with the difficulties of securing a solid hook set in a sailfish jaw, missing the first two takes amidst bewildered wails of excitement. Barely ten minutes after feeding back my first live bait for the morning I had a sail on the board, with Ben, Jason and Cathy following soon after. This place is a joke!



While not huge, Rompin sails are a decent size. This fish is about average



Catch and release is well entrenched amongst the Rompin charter fleet. This is a very positive sign for the future of a fishery sure to quickly become much more popular

And that's basically how the week went on. By lunchtime day one, all sailfish virgins on both boats had popped their cherries, and double, triple and even quadruple hook ups were regular amongst the pack-attacks from fired-up sails. How many fish we landed for the week I honestly have no idea. In my memory banks the six days are pretty much just an endless haze of flying sails, whirring drags and hyped up fishos. And quality fish these were too, averaging a healthy 20-30 kilos with the odd bigger fish thrown in from time to time.

A typical day wide of Rompin started with a bait gathering session on the local FADs. These were interesting structures; most being a simple construction of long bamboo poles driven into the seafloor with palm leaves attached to provide a foundation point for the food chain. A few slightly more sophisticated creations of rope and floating plastic water cans were also to be seen, and all were effective at aggregating healthy schools of various baitfish. The locals construct these FADs early each year, replacing those destroyed by the strong winds of the monsoon. Scattered about reasonably close to shore, they provide a quick and easy source of live bait and see more than the odd sail as well!



I can pretty much guarantee you won't find world-class billfishing at such affordable prices anywhere else on the planet

As you'd expect, the best live baits were large sardines, but other local favourites known as selar kuning (basically a yakka), lolong (big-eye scad), cincaru (hairtailed scad) and kembong (long-jawed mackerel) were high on the list as well. All of these are only small, delicate live baits that therefore required small, light gauge hooks to present in good health. The local favourite is the Owner Mutu Light in a surprisingly small 4/0 or 5/0 size. These small gauge circle hooks were light enough not to hamper the free movement of the fragile live baits when simply pinned sideways through the nose of the bait. I did also try bridled live baits and noticed a better hook up rate, but keeping a sardine alive through the bridling procedure is next to impossible.

The basic method employed by the local guides and skippers really is just that – basic. Once a patch of sails is located, the boat is dropped out of gear and allowed to drift while three or four live baits are staggered out the back with the help of half-inflated balloons. That's it. And really, that's about as complicated as you need to make things here to get hook up after hook up on greyhounding, gyrating sailfish.

But if you fancy a little more action in your day, the other option is to buzz between bird activity or feeding sails and pitch livers into the fray. Much of the time this is virtually sight cast fishing, and on many occasions we had fish on before the boat even settled. 'Sam the Man' was a gun at this technique, seemingly able to spot fish over the horizon. It was hectic stuff just trying to keep ready to launch baits!

Initially I couldn't believe we would often drive past a single tailing or free-jumping sail when on the search. Back home such a sight would have you flogging the area for as long as it took to get that fish to bite. But the hot action comes when packs of competing sails are found, and searching for these aggregations really did up our strike rate. Not that it really needed improving by normal standards – even drifting around aimlessly with baits under balloons you could reasonably expect the sails to find you every half hour or so. Tough life!

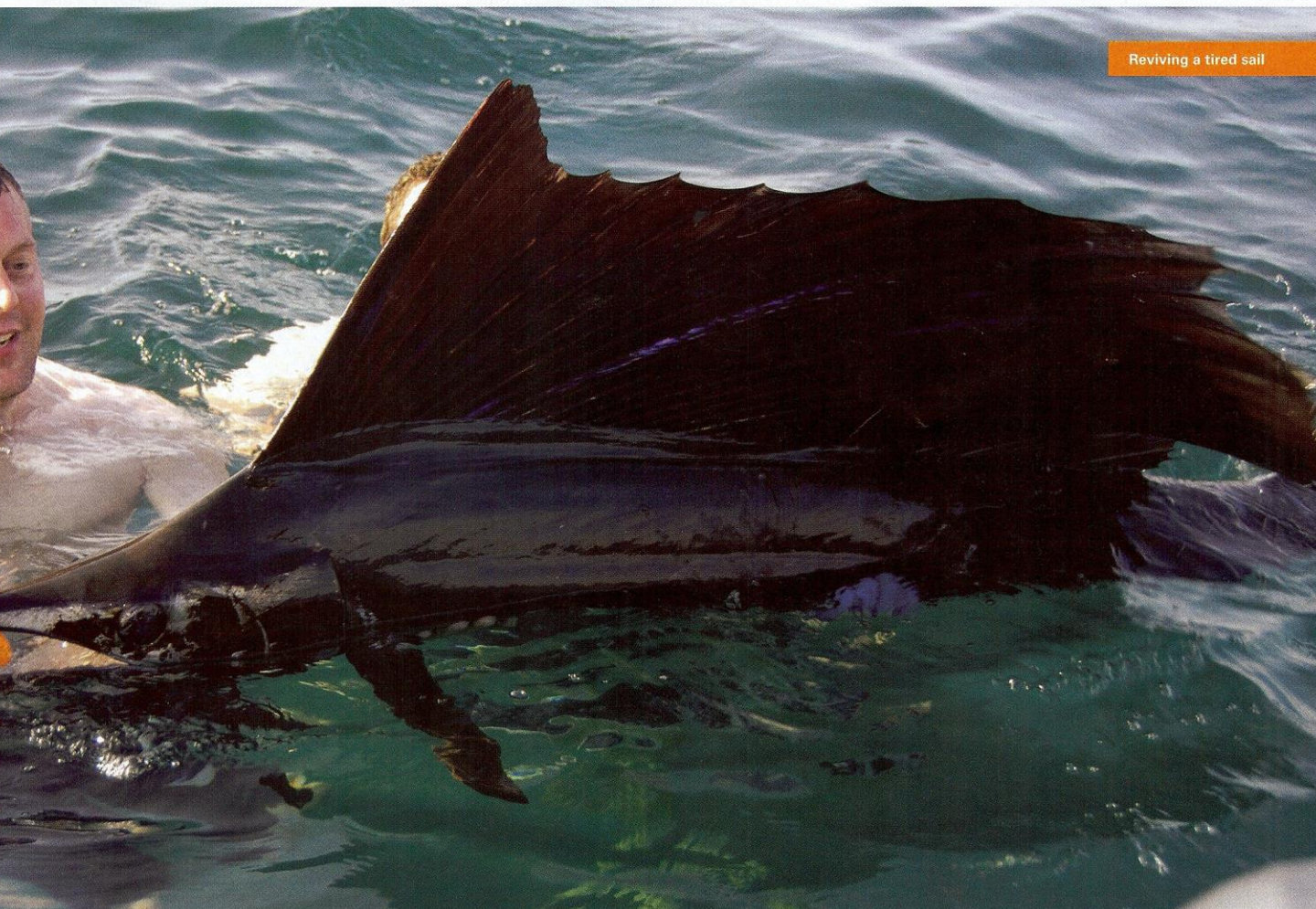
Because you're fishing such shallow water, light tackle fishing is a cinch. Once I had a couple of fish under the belt on 15 and 10 kilo gear I dropped down to 10lb braid and knocked over my best sail for the trip no sweat. In fact I'd go so far as to say that a

punchy 6-8 kilo threadline or overhead outfit is the perfect set up for this unique fishery. If you're a light tackle freak I really can't see too much of a problem nailing these fish on 3 or 4 kilo mono. It's the perfect situation for stunt fishing really.

But the clincher to the Rompin story really is the whole package. Not only are these waters chock-a-block full of sails, but for the vast majority of the time the seas are flat calm, and I mean FLAT calm. More often than not we found ourselves floating about on a millpond, wishing for a friendly breath of wind to dry the sweat from our brows. Late season brings pregnant skies and more brooding, humid weather, but light winds are still the rule. Plus the sails are apparently absolutely running amok by this stage of proceedings.

Amazing food is a feature of this part of the world and we feasted on a varied smorgasbord with a prominent seafood bent every night. Malaysian cuisine is a mix-match of various Asian styles and its all tastebud-tingling delicious. How the hell it's possible to make a deep-fried yakka taste good I'll never know, but we were scoffing these left over live-baits with gusto equal to that of the sailfish!

Reviving a tired sail





Charles Lee lifts yet another nice sail for the camera

For me one of the most appealing features of the Kuala Rompin experience is the port's laid-back, non-commercialised nature. This lets you really get a taste of the local lifestyle. When visiting busy game ports throughout Australia and the world as a travelling fisho you often feel like a wallet on legs. But Rompin's unpretentious vibe is very refreshing and unavoidably enjoyable.

With the word getting out about such unbelievable sailfish action, Rompin will inevitably grow as a game fishing port, but hopefully the insane fishing should last. The local guides, skippers and anglers are all very protective of the sails, keeping a close eye on the activities of the local trawler fleet and making it abundantly clear that killing a sailfish is very much a no-no. This is a rare and valuable ethic in this seafood loving part of the world, and is something the small charter fleet should be commended for.

If any encouragement to protect this fishery was needed, you'd only need look to nearby Thailand. Up until only recently the south-western coast of this country had similarly superlative sailfish fishing, but an absence of catch and release has now reduced it to barely a shadow of its former glory. Malaysian waters currently have no recreational or commercial fishing restrictions on any fish species or methods whatsoever, but the increasing

profile of its sailfish fishery may turn the tide on this arrangement.

But what about the price? Well, I can pretty much guarantee you won't find world-class billfishing at such affordable prices anywhere else on the planet. All up our six days of fishing, including transport to and from Singapore, comfortable 3 star twin share accommodation, all meals, guides, skippers, boats...basically everything except beer cost SG\$1800 or roughly AU\$1553 (based on exchange rates at time of writing) per person. Shop around other game fishing ports and see if you can get a price that low. I very much doubt it!

I flew Adelaide to Singapore for about AU\$1236 return, but you'd do way better than this if you're more organised than me and booked well in advance or played the airline specials. For those of you that like the odd celebratory ale, the local Tiger beer is cheap and our group in full-on holiday mode knocked back more long necks and cartons than I think is responsible of me to state here (err...a lot of chilli in the food?), the cost of which split amongst the group worked out to what you'd spend on a single big night out on the town back home.

If you'd like to visit these world-beating sailfish grounds, and really you'd be crazy if you didn't, Hook on C Adventures can be contacted on +65 9660 1500 or +65 012 227 9335, or on the net at www.HookOnCAdventures.com. **SWF**

**Flat calm conditions and hot-to-trot sails everywhere.
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