

NO 15 2013

Guanajuato Broken Bones | Barra and Black Bass Heaven Part II



JOHN CAHILL TRAVELS TO KUALA ROMPIN IN MALAYSIA, TO TANGLE WITH THE PROLIFIC AND ACROBATIC SAILFISH POPULATION.

BLAZING

I FIRST HEARD ABOUT Kuala Rompin in Malaysia three or four years ago, and from my preconceived ideas that all good fishing in south east Asian was finished, it did not particularly drive me to plan a trip here. At the time my good friend Jay Furniss was heading to the region for a family holiday and his research led him to believe there were good sailfish grounds in the area. He was organising a few days on charter. I thought little of his adventure, other than feeling assured that my scepticism was warranted. The locals have caught and killed all the fish right? When Jay returned the smug smile said it all, and the photos and stories made my eyes pop.

It was clear that this was world class fishing. The numbers were staggering and the trip being super affordable also put it high on the 'to do' list. Fast forward to 2012 and I had organised to fish Kuala Rompin for 20 days throughout September. This is considered the most reliable

month for good numbers, before the monsoons set in and when there are massive anchovy schools over the shallow banks ensuring the sails are in no hurry to move.

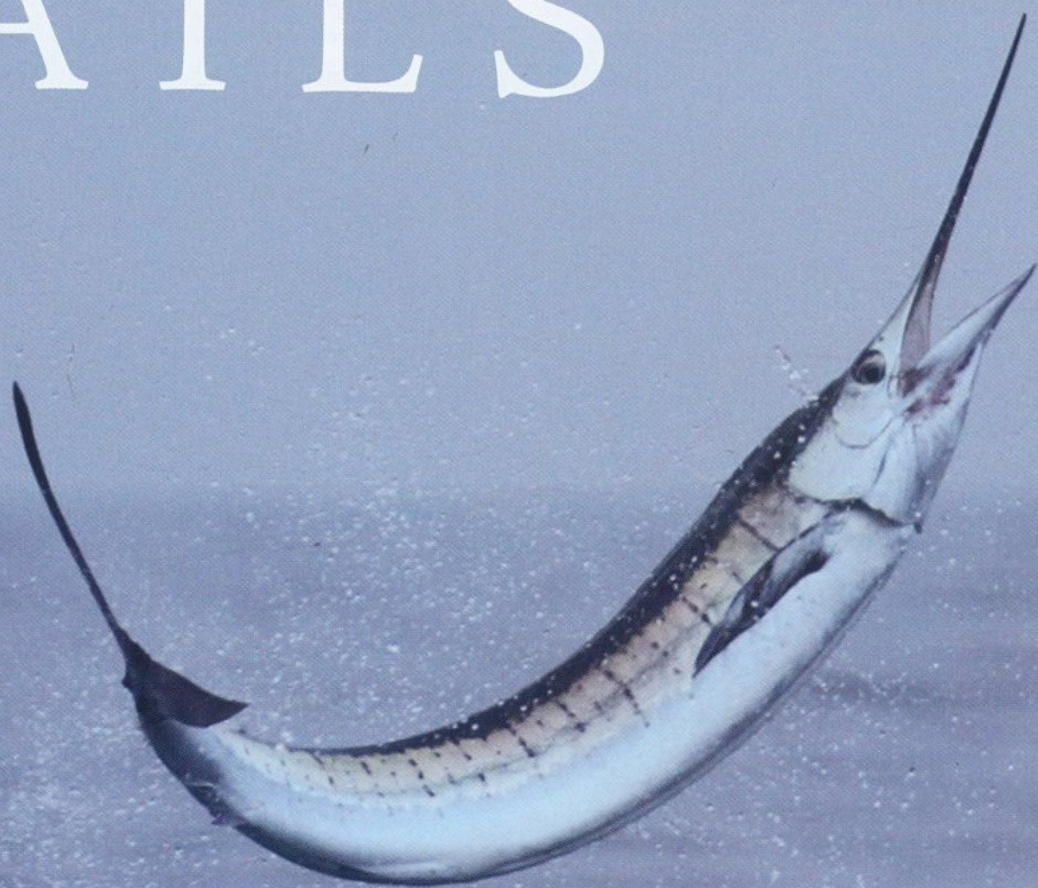
Arriving via Singapore, the road trip took about 4 and half hours with tackle store stopovers before I was standing in the intensely hot and humid Kuala Rompin sun. The fishing fleet is located on the Rompin River some 10 minutes from the town and comprises an amusingly effective but ramshackle system of bamboo jetties with the fleet rafted up together. There are basic accommodation bungalows and two restaurants, one Chinese, one Muslim Malay, oh and an uncountable number of voracious mosquitoes! An inspection of the fleet revealed a nice surprise. I was well familiar with the type of hybrid longboats in use here, however, observing that every boat in the fleet was repowered with a modern two or four stroke outboard my mind was set at ease regarding reliability.

Some of these rigs were actually impressive.

I was fishing the entire time with Charles Lee and his wife Angie Yeo and their capable skipper, Sammy 'the sail whisperer', regarded as a somewhat renegade, but extremely successful captain who regularly backed himself and 'found his own fish'. The first night set the pattern for the next three weeks; off to one of the restaurants in port or in town where ample Tiger beer flowed, Charles ensured that exquisite and exotic food turned up plate after plate whilst we were entertained by his many 'stories'. If you plan a trip yourself here, make sure you bring an adventurous palate for the food, it's awesome but you may find yourself eating dishes you never imagined.

Down to the serious stuff - fishing days begin in Rompin at a leisurely pace - as there is no known reason to rush. Breakfast is consumed when everyone is well and truly ready and

SAILS

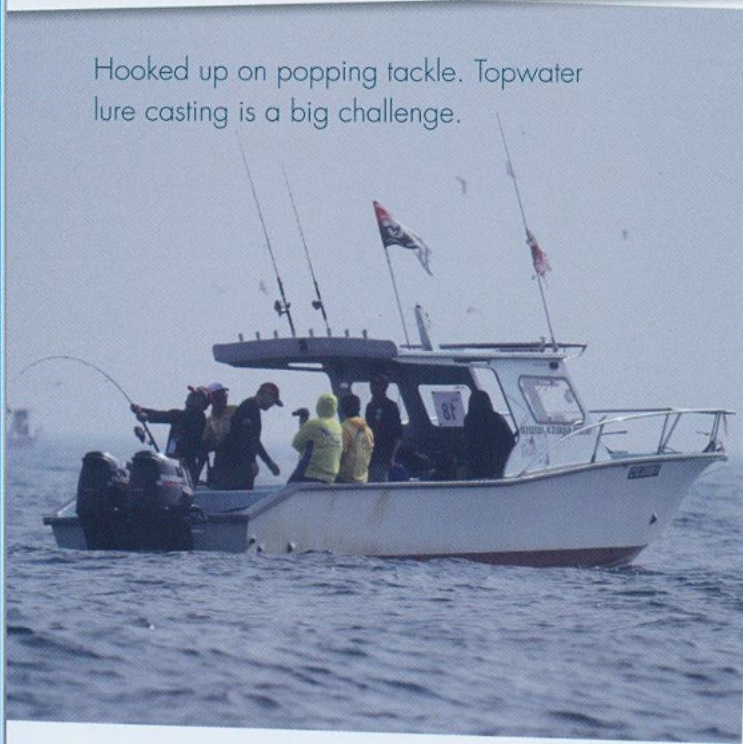


Maximum air!

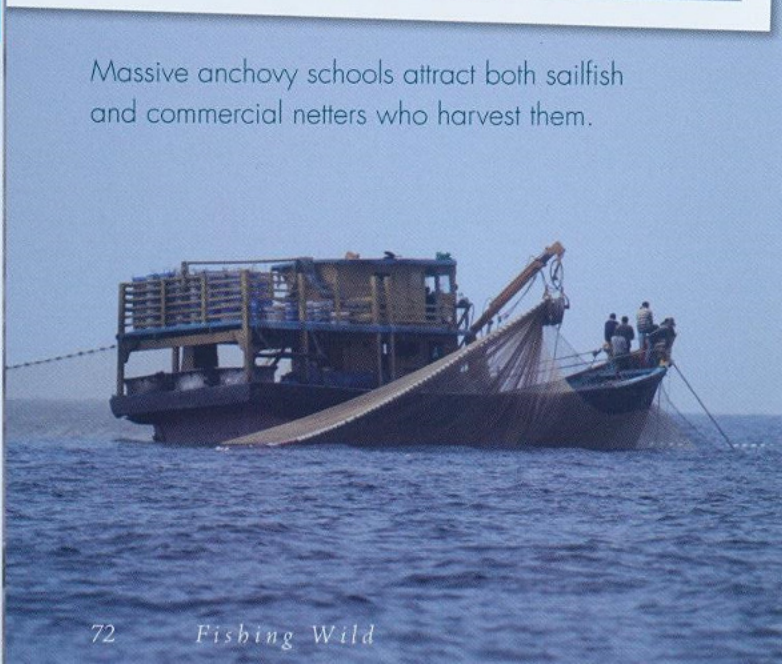
Some of the fleet ready to go.



Hooked up on popping tackle. Topwater lure casting is a big challenge.



Massive anchovy schools attract both sailfish and commercial netters who harvest them.

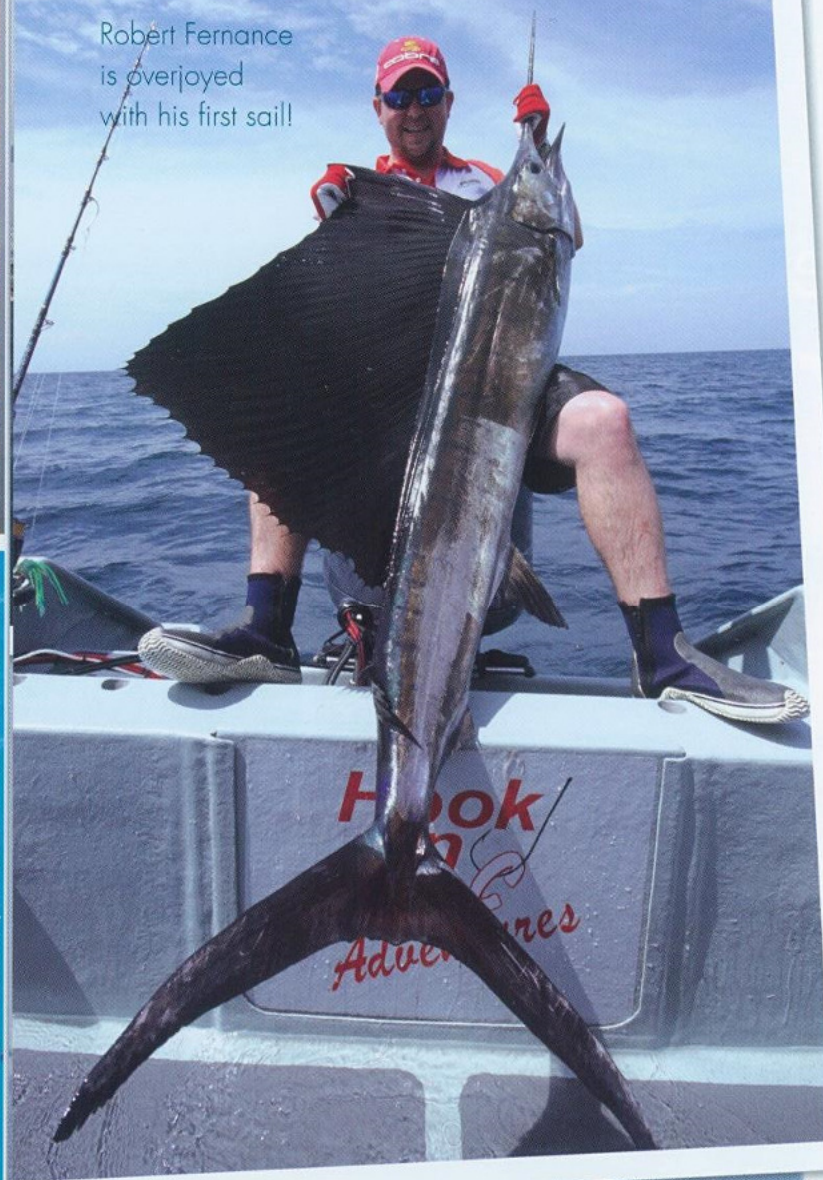


usually the boat is pushed from the dock at about 8.30am a stark contrast to the pre-dawn starts I am somewhat begrudgingly accustomed to. If you are the high strung type, Kuala Rompin may not be for you, or it may be exactly what you need to unwind a little; who knows! The sail hunting process begins with the gathering of live baits, usually 40 or so are needed to comfortably get through a day's fishing. The liveys are usually relatively easily obtained by stopping around many of the offshore artificial reefs a short run from the safe and easy bar crossing, 10 minutes up the Rompin River from the port. The liveys are a bit of a mixed bunch of species comprising a variety of small scad, mackerel and trevallies and there are a few sotong (northern calamari) to be had on the same grounds, perfect for supplementing the dinner larder. Once the bait is organised, the sailfish grounds are predominantly straight out from Rompin and to the north. On our first day this was precisely what we did, head north and within 10 minutes of leaving the bait grounds we were seeing our first free swimming sails and within five minutes of deploying our first bait we were onto a healthy, rampaging sail. While fighting that fish, we had another bait taken but it failed to stay connected. It was that easy. Throughout the trip on many occasions we actually put first baits in the water when gathering liveys and often hooked up. But there are usually more productive grounds wider where a series of bamboo FADs are in use. There are literally thousands of sails.

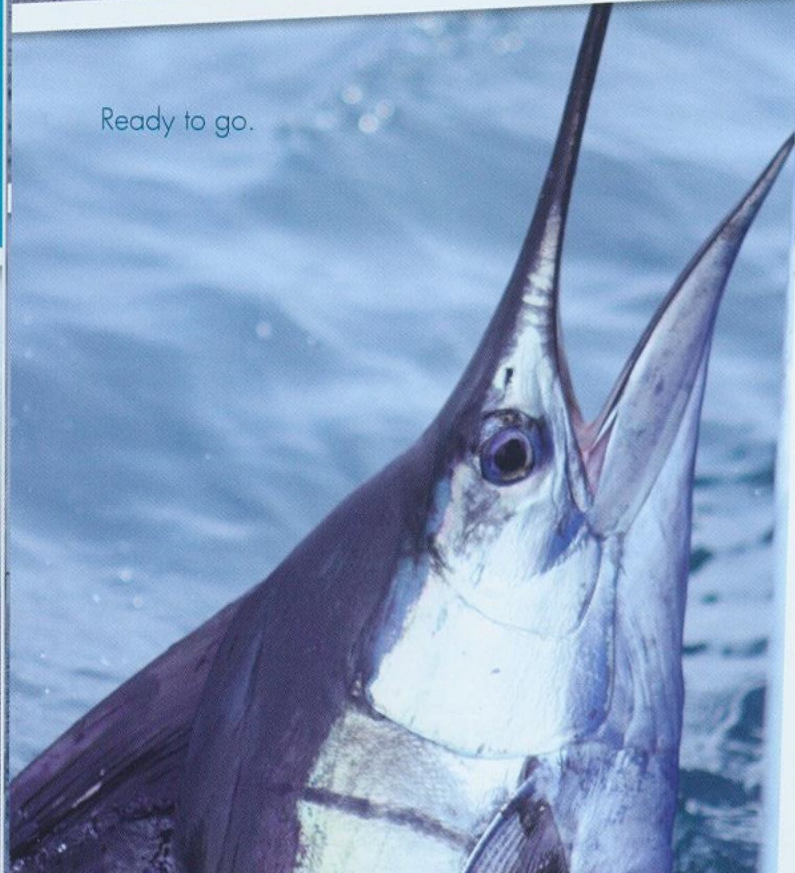
CHASIN' SAILS ROMPIN STYLE

Some days we worked a little for our fish but always managed to get two or three each at worst, meaning at least a dozen or so bites, minimum, not at all bad for a 'slow day'. Some days, particularly towards the end of the trip, we would see literally hundreds of fish herding up anchovies, however, they seemed to get a little more target oriented on these tiny fish and although fussy, could still be caught. Sailfish were a new billfish experience for me and I was pleased to see that they can be every bit as greedy as striped marlin when in the mood, which seemed to be most of the time at least! Their fight on lighter tackle was spectacular and kamikaze; graceful until they are hooked, but once they felt the sting of a circle hook in their jaw they often spent most of the time in the air, especially early in the fight. They have an uncanny ability to seemingly always land upside down! So often a hook was thrown during these acrobatics. Being newcomers to this caper, we started off fishing quite heavy, PE4 and 5 tackle dominated and the sails

Robert Fernance
is overjoyed
with his first sail!



Ready to go.

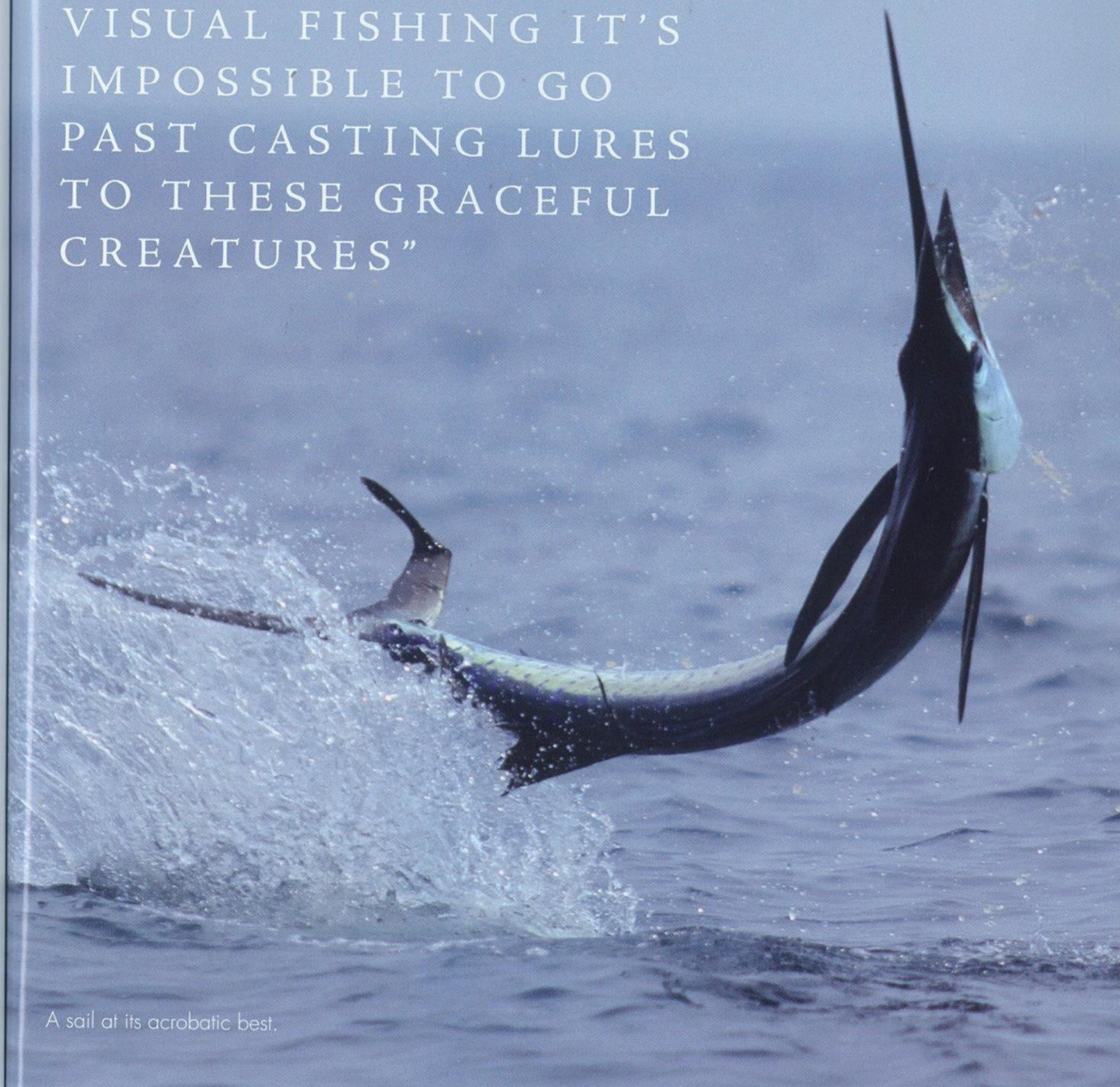


were knocked over quick smart, although often hooks were pulled by our heavy handed approach. As the trip wore on our adventurous spirit kicked in, going down all the way to PE1 spin tackle and 4kg game outfits. It was at this lighter end that the usually modest sails of about 30kg could show their blistering speed; in fact a spooling or two resulted on better fish and we spent a lot of time deep onto the backing, especially when involved in double and triple hookups when it was impossible to chase every fish down with the boat! Once you have caught a fish or two, going light is the only way to target these greyhounds in my humble opinion.

Being such a target rich environment, and having the luxury of so many days on the water, Rompin provided the perfect opportunity to try a wide range of methods; casting stick baits and poppers, soft baits, skip baiting, lure trolling. You name it, everything worked. As is so often the case however the locals know best and drifting with live baits under balloons or slow trolling liveys pinned through the nose seemed to outfish all other methods by a considerable margin. The other methods all produced fish and plenty of interest, but for the simplicity of getting a good hookup conversion rate, circle hooks and a livey could not be beat.

Skipper Sammy's method was quite simple and took a little working out initially as his English is not the best (but much better than my Chinese). Primarily he goes off the birds and not too much else. Now having said that, you will see plenty of birds in the South China Sea off Kuala Rompin but not all of them are following sailfish. We would see bust-ups and diving birds and frantically gesticulate to Sammy to head over but he would shrug his shoulders, shake his head and say "tenggiri" (Spanish mackerel) or 'tuna' (mackerel tuna) as reference to what he knew was under those particular birds. I'm certain now he was rarely if ever wrong. When the skipper found the 'right birds', he would set the boat up some 800 metres or so ahead of them on a drift line and deploy two or three live baits and start casting poppers to help bring the fish in towards the boat. The 'right birds' I learnt later would stay very low to the water and not dive in but instead drop suddenly and scoop the top of the water chasing anchovies pushed to the surface by the hungry sails. Often a sail would pop up to the surface with its sail blazing to confirm this or on better

“FOR THE ULTIMATE IN
VISUAL FISHING IT’S
IMPOSSIBLE TO GO
PAST CASTING LURES
TO THESE GRACEFUL
CREATURES”



A sail at its acrobatic best.



days half a dozen or more would! It was amazing how often we would hook up instantaneously when feeding out baits. I nearly lost a finger one morning as I was trying to tie on a balloon and a greedy fish took the bait instantly. When the birds were absent it usually meant that the sails had sounded temporarily, however this did not mean they could not be caught. This was an excellent time to troll some skirted lures or better still slow troll the live baits pinned through the nose. It never failed to raise a fish when we didn't quite know where they were.

For the ultimate in visual fishing it's impossible to go past casting lures

to these graceful creatures. Poppers seemed to get the most interest but slowly twitched stick baits and soft baits got the most attention. It was common to have a sail or two charge up behind a lure and then circle it with its sail extended emitting the most amazing neon blue and violet imaginable. Getting a take in these circumstances was largely a matter of three things; the competitive nature of the sail (it seemed if there were two or more fish you were more likely to get a hit), how slow you could make yourself twitch the lure (it's hard to slow down!) and how rough the surface of the water was (on super

calm days it was hard to get a surface bite). What really amazed me was how gently the sails took a surface lure, often rising like a wily brown trout in a gin clear mountain stream. They certainly were nobody's fool, and not quite the GT crashes I was used to! I lost count of the number of times I struck and missed or managed to momentarily hook up in a hard part of the mouth near the bill only to come unstuck during the first jump or two. Regardless of the intricacies, top water fishing for sails is right up there as a visual spectacular and Rompin is a brilliant environment to do it. Sailfish on fly would be sublime.

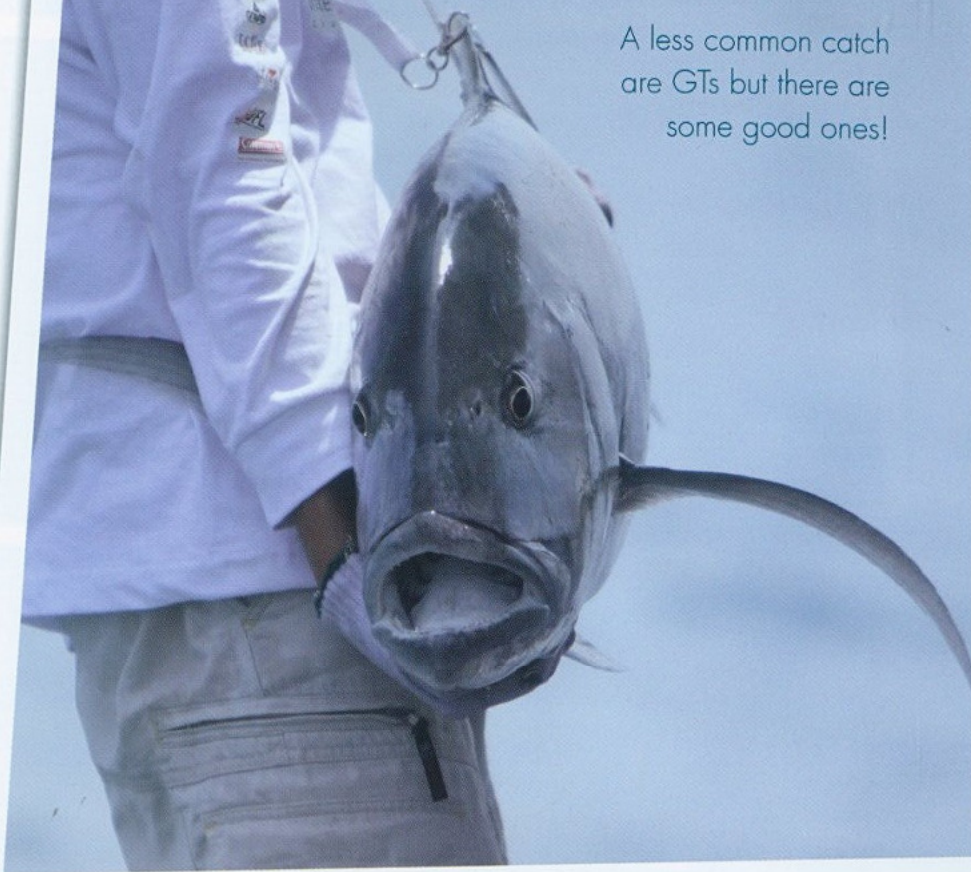
SAILFISH WELFARE

The local fishermen's co-op which comprises some 40 odd operators reached agreement some years ago that the sailfish were worth much more to them alive rather than dead. As a result there is 100% release of all billfish even if they die during the fight. Quite simply a boat is not permitted to return to port with a dead sail, world record claim or otherwise. They tell me this approach was adopted to eliminate the old excuse, 'oh it was tail wrapped and died' that kicks around time and again. This action ensures an ethical approach to continuing the livelihood of these pioneering fishermen. The efforts made by our skipper Sammy ensured that each and every sail we caught swam off strongly even if it took a while to. Fish welfare was a big priority. The annual Royal Pahang Billfish International Tournament is carried out in this tradition, catch and release only, and is usually held in September.

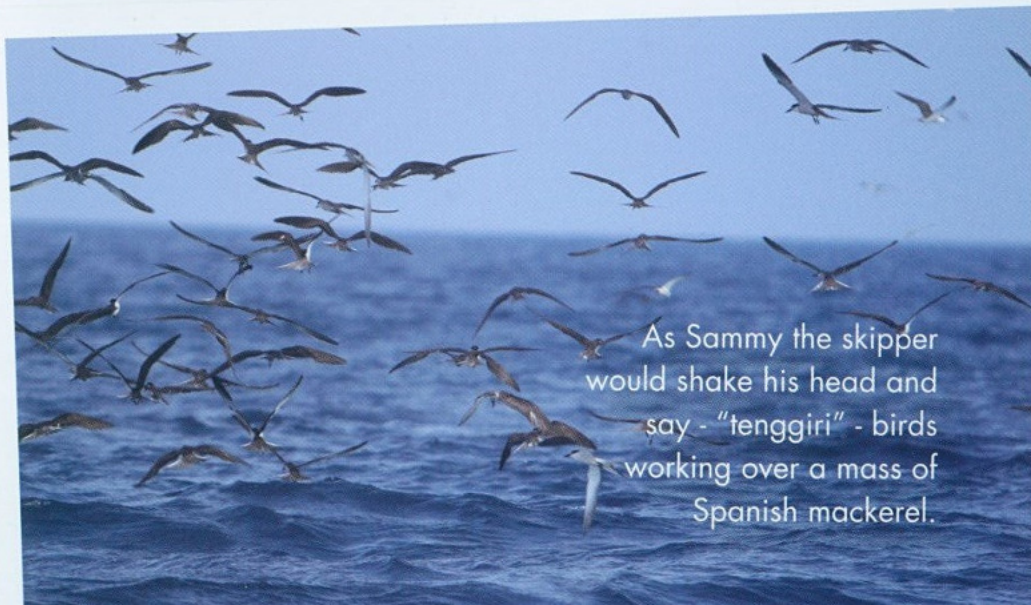
OTHER OPTIONS

Without doubt the prime species from Kuala Rompin are the sailfish, however plenty of other options exist if you seek to diversify, which every group I hosted did for a day or two. On the weekends in season the port has plenty of visiting fishing groups from around the region and about half of them are there for other species. Juvenile black marlin are a highly prized catch and are found by the same methods and over the same grounds as the sails. GTs can be found popping the islands to the south, however we had random geets turn up when targeting sails in open water! Spanish macks and pesky long tom abound and some impressive cobia haunt the reefs whilst mahi mahi are frequently caught around the FADS. One of my favourite 'other species' were the numerous and large northern calamari that could be found at the bait grounds.

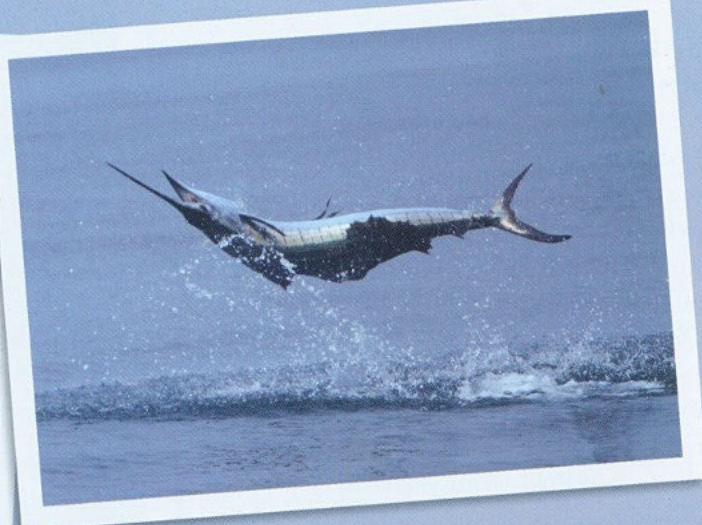
A less common catch are GTs but there are some good ones!



Brothers Mick and Alan Cahill compare sails from a double hookup.



As Sammy the skipper would shake his head and say - "tenggiri" - birds working over a mass of Spanish mackerel.



MAIN: Absolutely berserk!

TOP LEFT: Sotong or northern calamari are in big numbers around the bait grounds and make an awesome addition to the dinner larder!

TOP RIGHT: It is uncanny how many sails land on their back; it almost seems intentional.

BOTTOM: There are plenty of large and pesky long toms eager to steal your live baits, or in this case jump all over a trolled lure.





MAIN: It doesn't seem possible, but this sail looks like its jumping backwards having spun like a top.

TOP LEFT: In profile, most of the sails are mighty thin. The average would be around 30kg with 45/50kg a big one.

TOP RIGHT: Back to the water with a thud.



Fact File

GETTING THERE ▼

Most major carriers have direct flights from Australian capital cities into Singapore or Kuala Lumpur. From there hire a car to take on the 4 or so hour road trip, or better still organise a driver so you can kick back and enjoy the lush scenery.

OPERATOR ▼

Hook on C Adventures

Web - www.hookoncadventures.com

Telephone - +65 9660 1500

Email - charles@imiggroup.com

Rates: \$1400SGD (Singapore dollars) per day based on 4 pax. This equates to around \$1,100AUD at the time of writing and is some of the most affordable billfishing you will find.

HOW TO GET THERE ▼

Best accessed from Singapore, which is approximately an 8 hour flight from Sydney. It's a fairly simple drive via Johor Bahru and Mersing and takes about 3 or so hours depending upon the immigration and customs clearance times enroute. Via Kuala Lumpur it is slightly longer at about a 4 hour trek but in both cases the roads are quite good. Options include taxi, a chartered van or hire a car yourself.

Kuala Rompin: Kuala Rompin located on the South China Sea, is on the map for two reasons; as the gateway to the diver's paradise Tioman Island and as the sailfish capital of Asia. Apart from the nautical attractions, dining in Kuala Rompin is a delight, from the many seafood restaurants to the specialist roti cafes, which are almost as good as the fishing! Being a predominantly Muslim area the consumption of alcohol can be an issue in some restaurants depending upon the owner.

ACCOMMODATION AND COSTS ▼

Staying in Kuala Rompin is mostly a basic affair. Our accommodation at the Rompin River Chalets was comfortable and clean without being anything fancy, and airconditioning in all the bedrooms was a very welcome respite when retiring. For those after a finer experience the Lanjut Golden Beach Golf Resort some 25 minutes down the road from the port provides 5 star accommodation and dining and a more family friendly place to base fishing activities from. Prices range from 100 Ringgit (\$31AUD) or so for the chalets to 880 Ringgit (278AUD) for a family suite at the resort.

WEATHER AND SEASON ▼

December to March is Northeast Monsoon season when the fleet packs up and hunkers down through the tropical storms. The fishing season begins in April and peaks in August / September but be aware a midyear monsoon exists (the Southwest Monsoon) and takes effect between May to September often bringing afternoon rain and storms. For much of the rest of the year typically days are hot, relatively windless and the seas are quite flat. If a storm is brewing it is closely watched and often the fishing fleet will scramble in unison for port. Typically during the fishing season you will experience temperatures in the mid to high 30s with high humidity. Covering up from the sun and staying hydrated are mandatory!

SPECIES ▼

Sailfish are clearly the plentiful target and mahi mahi, cobia, Spanish mackerel and a host of other reef species round out the catch for those seeking to diversify.

LANGUAGE ▼

Through Malaysia, Malay and Mandarin and English are spoken depending upon the region. In Kuala Rompin many of the boat skippers speak Mandarin and have relatively modest English speaking skills.

VISAS ▼

90 day visa on arrival with no charge.

CURRENCY ▼

The currency of Malaysia is the Ringgit and is roughly on a 3:1 ratio with the Australian dollar. Singapore dollars are often also accepted.

FISHING EQUIPMENT ▼

Most boats do not supply gear, or it is basic. You are much better off being self-sufficient. If you are a record chaser, light overhead game outfits in 4 and 8 kilogram mono are perfect but for my money light PE 1 to PE3 casting and light jigging outfits with 3000 - 4000 sized spin reels are where the fun is! If following the locals' lead, all you will need is a roll of 80lb leader and a pack or two of 5/0 circle hooks; it doesn't get much simpler but make sure you bring a few smaller stick baits and poppers to experience the top water action!

CLOTHING ▼

Covering up with long sleeves and pants protects you from the tropical sun and the mosquitos in the early morning or evening. Light clothing with a high SPF and which is breathable is crucial.

OTHER ACTIVITIES ▼

Golf, diving around Tioman Island and eating!

STAR RATING ▼

Accommodation (chalets)	●●●●
Accommodation (resort)	●●●●●●
Skipper	●●●●●
Food	●●●●●
Fishing	●●●●●●
Degree of difficulty	●●●●
Suitability for non-fishing partners	●●●●
Bugs	●●●●●
Weather	●●●●●
Value for money	●●●●●

