

Fishing

With Alex Julius



‘The Ord River is a minefield of killer rockbars, gravel and stone shallows and twisted, gnarled dead trees that fill the gaps in between’

WHAT'S the most dangerous river in the Top End to traverse by boat?

A few people who competed in the Barra Classic or Barra Nationals earlier this year would probably nominate the Daly River.

If you've motored from Roper Bar down the river to the mouth, you might reckon the Roper is the Top End's most dangerous.

centimetres and most likely taking a little more paint off the already well-worn skeg.

At other places, further down the river, Macka would fly over one daunting shallow stretch after another, something he was competently able to do after years of reconnaissance and a couple of dozen broken drive shafts.

But his competence also extended to his ability to put us on to quality barra.

We caught a few small barra

course, anyone who's whacked Skeg Rock down the mighty Victoria River would be a certainty to go for the Vic.

Then there's the East Alligator River with its treacherous downstream rockbar and booby-trapped mudbars.

All of the above and plenty of others in the Territory need to be navigated with care.

But I can tell you I'd now rate each one of them about as dangerous as a duck pond when compared to the Ord River just over the border in Western Australia.

It was only the week before last that I visited this beautiful river with affable Darwin lure-maker Rob Gaden.

The trip was at the invitation of Andrew McEwan, who has operated Macka's Barra Camp downriver on the Ord for the past seven years.

Before that he worked in the Territory, including for 12 months as a young guide at the famous Barra Base on Bathurst Island and then for a few years with Croc Spot Fishing Tours on the McArthur River.

Macka's camp on the banks of the Ord is really something special, and he shares the lower half of the river with only one other fishing guide.

Put simply, that's because the Ord is a minefield of killer rockbars, gravel and stone shallows and twisted, gnarled dead trees which fill the gaps in between.

Because it is dammed upriver, it is rarely at its normal height and would intimidate even the most competent river boat driver visiting there for the first time.

The river is so treacherous that, on average, Macka busts four outboard motor legs each season.

He's now had so much practice that he changes drive shafts by



ABOVE: Metre-plus fish are what Macka's Barra Camp are all about. That's Macka on the left helping Darwin lure-maker Rob Gaden hold up his Ord River trophy caught on one of his own Classic 120s.

INSET: Rob Gaden releases one of more than 20 silver barra he caught on the Ord River

Big barra and beauty out of the Ord-inary

himself overnight at the camp. Just so we're clear, this much damage is not a reflection on how he drives along the river; in fact, he impressed me with both his skills and his gutsiness.

For three days before we arrived, the dam had been partly closed for cleaning purposes and the river was particularly low.

We hit the water late afternoon and headed upriver to cast along a snaggy stretch which Macka anticipated would be quite low with easily-targeted fish.

The trouble was that getting there required negotiating extremely shallow stretches of river, including one that could only be traversed at high speed on the plane, but only after 15 minutes of

plotting a path between the dead timber, the rocks and the exposed gravel.

Once Macka was confident — and we were comfortable enough ourselves to let him have a free hand at the throttle — he backed up more than 100m and then gave it heaps.

Over we went, missing snags by

the first afternoon, but the next morning Rob nailed a beauty on one of his beloved Classic 120s.

We were up against the bank casting outwards to two promising snags when the fish hit.

At first Rob called it for a small fish, but then it charged out to the middle and exploded clear of the water.

It was a metre-plus for sure and Macka took the boat straight out to it.

At this stage, I should point out that my own lure had become snagged from a wayward cast just as Rob hooked up, so I had no choice but to free-spool as we took off after the big barra.

Rob calmly exerted the right amount of pressure at the right time to keep the barra out in the middle.

Meanwhile, Macka manoeuvred the boat with the obvious skill of a guide who had seen hundreds of big barra landed.

Rob was pretty cheery when Macka got a Boga Grip to the fish's mouth and a hand under its belly.

After a couple more fish on lures, we spent some time live-baiting for barra in the snags, which is one of the techniques Macka uses to get his clients on to those 120cm-plus barra which he so regularly produces.

I used absolutely mega-baits, and got blown away in the snags a couple of times by fish much bigger than the 90cm-plus fish which came to the boat.

Rob had never fished bait for barra before and seemed to enjoy the experience, preferring to use small mullet and gar which would be grabbed by even small barra.

Macka certainly has a healthy fishery down there on the Ord, and both the experience and skill to make sure any visitor has a great trip.