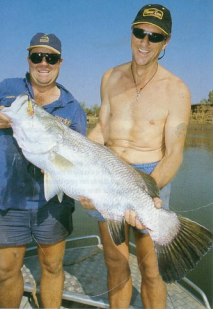


right on the NT border, and navigating it is definitely not for the faint-hearted. But the Ord River may well be the most-consistent big barra river in Northern Australia. One man, Andrew McEwan, knows every dangerous stretch intimately. You won't get burgers at this Macka's, but there are certainly plenty of whopper barras.

No  
Burgers  
At  
**THIS**  
Macka's!

By Alex Julius

You won't find a net in Macka's boat; he prefers to secure the jaw harmlessly with a Rogagrip and cradle fish aboard. Rob Galen seems satisfied that his trophy Ord River barra is in good hands.



*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 himself overnight at the camp.*

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, and even then 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

100 m and then gave it heaps.

Over we went, missing snags by 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.



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 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.

*Above: If there's one thing lure maker Rob Gaden likes more than catching a barra on one of his lures, it's catching a big barra on one of his lures.*

*Right: Could this be research for a new barra lure? Rob Gaden mastered the art of throwing the cast-net whilst on the Dvt.*

Simple



### Simple

The new Mustad AlphaCodeHookSelect™ hook identification system offers easy and fast selection of the right hook for any application.

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*Above: Popeye mullet make great bait, but they can see you coming so you need an aggressive cast-net technique.*



*Left: Another Ord River quality fish to the boat. Rob Gaslen reckoned it was one of the best sessions on quality barra that he had experienced since moving north from NSW three years before.*

*Far left: Popeye mullet are well-named.*

*Below left: Bobby Dazzler versions of the Classic 120 were popular with the Ord's prolific barra population.*

*Below: Breakfast at Macka's.*

fish much bigger than the couple of 90 cm-plus barra I managed to extract from devilfish snag piles.

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 – if you can call fish over 80 cm small because he certainly caught plenty of those.

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. As with the Top End, the prime season is during the run-off which on the Ord usually extends from late February right through to the end of May.

Now I've got my share of run-off stories and mind-blowing barra fishing, but I had nothing to match the giant barra, popper sessions that Macka regaled us with. I'm talking broad daylight and

At this stage, I should point out that my own lure had become snagged 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, and 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. Interestingly, he does not carry a landing

net, and reckons it's better for the fish that way. With no net aboard, it was impossible to weigh the barra without risking damaging it by hanging it from the mouth, but it measured a 108 cm and we reckoned 15 kg was about right.

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 onto those 110 cm-plus barra that he so regularly produces.

I used absolutely mega-sized mallet, and got blown away in the snags at least four times by



But Macka's competence also extended to his ability to put us on to quality barra. We caught a few small barra 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.







*Above: The lower Ord is Kimberley cattle country. With the river's healthy population of saltwater crocodiles, encounters like this are inevitable.*

*Right: Boab trees grow for hundreds of years and are a striking feature of the Ord River countryside.*



sessions of more than a dozen fish over 110 cm (or *doohar-oo*, as Macka likes to call them), with plenty of them over the magical 120 cm and 50 good-odd pounds.

***I can think of no other place where there is a real opportunity to catch a 50 pounder for a full nine months of the year.***

Although most of the run-off is generally booked a year in advance, the big barra are available right through the dry season. The beauty of Macka's setup is that it offers real exclusivity for extended trips, but is also close enough to Kununurra for day trips. In fact, one-day tours servicing the passing island-Australia caravan trade fill the gaps between extended packages. On those trips, Macka mainly live-baits, and that leads to regular encounters with those monsters of the Ord. But he also puts his clients onto whoppers by trolling deeper sections of the river.

If the truth be known, I can think of no other place where there is a real opportunity to catch a 50 pounder for a full nine months of the year. Rob and I were there for only two days, and we got blown away by monsters that stayed buried in the snags. But we also caught about a dozen and a half fish between 80 and 95 cm, as well as Rob's 108 of course.

Ironically, in 1978, just before I arrived in the Territory, I spent a few days fishing the Ord from a 3-metre tinnie. At that stage, my lifetime tally of barra was one, caught at Brooking Gorge near

one pool and remember the thrill of catching barra up to 65 cm on Condel Redfins. Had I known what I know now about the healthy population of metre-plus fish in this treacherous Kimberley river, I might have returned sooner than the 25 years it took me to get back. Now with Macka there and his ability to navigate the whole length of the river – not to mention his polished guiding skills – I reckon I'll be looking for an Ord River big momma barra fix on an annual basis...now if I recall, I've got an appointment with Macka this coming October.

### **How to fish with Macka**

Trips commence with airport pick-up at Kununurra. During the run-off (February to May), three days are the minimum stay at Macka's camp. Up to 12 guests can be catered for at this one time, fishing from comfortable 5 to 6 metre boats manned by professional barra guides. Day trips are available only during the dry season.

For further information and bookings, contact HotSpot Fishing Tours, free call 1800 809 035; fax: 08 89831914; email: carolyne@hospot.com.au;

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