

# Gone fishin'

At a luxury lodge on a Northern Territory floodplain teeming with life, MAX ANDERSON joins predators and prey in pursuit of the fabled fighting fish – the barramundi.

Photography JONATHAN CAMÍ



Sir Izaak Walton, the 17th-century author of *The Compleat Angler*, found piety in piscine pursuits: “You will find angling to be like the virtue of humility, which has a calmness of spirit and a world of other blessings attending upon it.” Clearly, Sir Izaak had never been fishing for barramundi in the Northern Territory.

“Those of you fishing tomorrow, please be aware there are some very big crocs around at the moment,” says fishing guide Cameron Lambie. “They may look like floating logs, but those floating logs can ruin your day.”

There’s a ripple of laughter around the long dining table. The light is subdued and yellow, winking off wine glasses and cutlery. Outside, the night is black as oil, filled with the sounds of cicadas, frogs and a barking owl that keeps up a bizarre cry like a lost dog.

“We’ve had an excellent wet season,” says Lambie, “and once we get you among those gutters and inlets, you’ll have a good chance of finding big fish. But where you get big fish, you get big crocs.”

Somewhere, out in the surrounding floodwaters, I imagine five-metre salties are stripping the carcasses of victims taken at dusk. Buffalo calves strayed from their mothers, wild horses that were old or injured – snatched, submerged and dispatched.

The Mary River floodplain lies a hundred kilometres to the east of Darwin, on the edge of Kakadu National Park. When the January thunderheads drench the horizon, the rivers and creeks haemorrhage and drown a catchment of more than 8,000 square kilometres in waters barely a metre deep. Whole forests have their roots underwater, water lilies flourish and paddocks are visible only as an occasional fence post.

Then the water begins to drain into the Arafura Sea – a three month “run-off” when the mud stirs and the food-chain becomes bloated with insects, frogs, small fish, big fish, bigger fish, crocs. It’s when the wilderness becomes voracious.

Bamurru Plains safari lodge sits alone in these hungry wetlands on a 303-square-kilometre buffalo station called Swim Creek. For several good reasons no one swims in Swim Creek, and the main lodge and safari bungalows are built on steel pylons.

“So,” says Lambie, raising a finger to count guests, “who wants to go out on the river, and who wants to go out on the floodplain?”

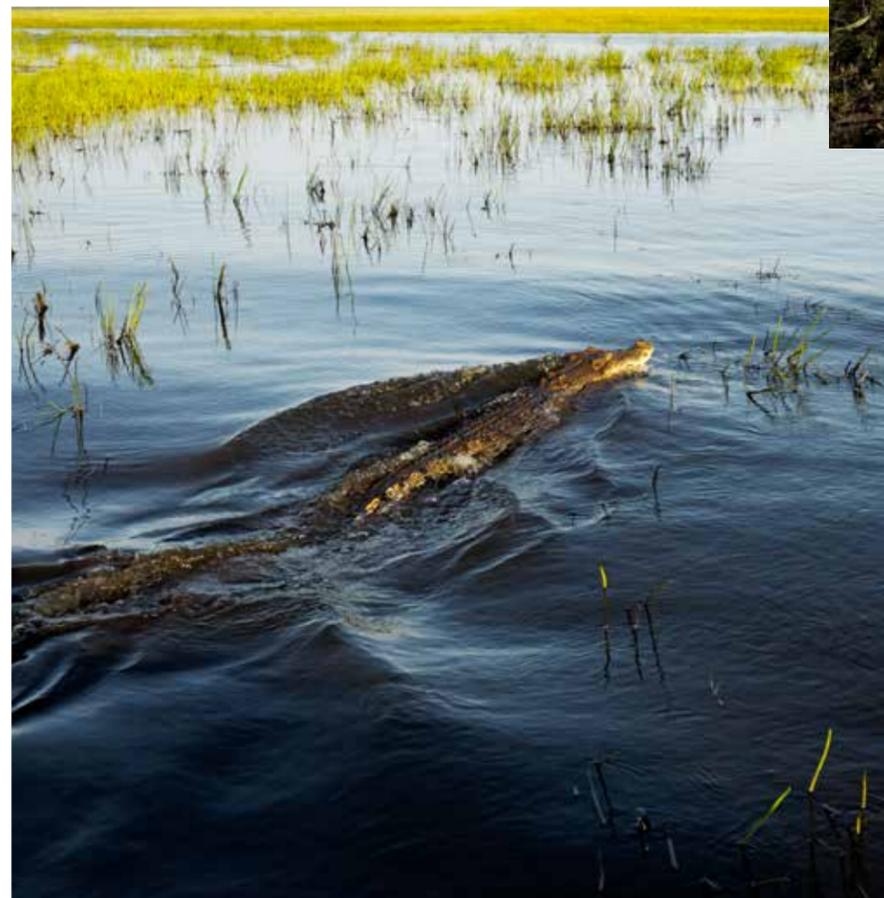
“What’s the difference?” I ask.

“It’s down to whether you want quantity or quality. The floodplain is all about quantity – if conditions are right you can be pulling fish one after the other. The river’s about quality. You won’t get the numbers, but that’s where the big girls are hiding out.”

“River!” says a guest raising his hand.

“River!” says another.

“River for us!”



**PREVIOUS PAGES** Magpie geese at sunrise on the Mary River floodplain. Clockwise from above: an open-top safari drive; barra lures; crocodile on the move; writer Max Anderson prepares to cast.

More wine is poured and talk turns to the “magic metre”.

At this time of year, the guests at Bamurru Plains are here for one thing: to catch barramundi, the fabled Territory fish that eats almost anything by sucking its prey into its mouth at lightning speed. But the anglers are particularly excited at the prospect of bagging a 100-centimetre barra, a trophy fish that everyone aspires to hold at least once. One of the guests says the closest he got to the magic metre was a 96-centimetre fish; another spins a tale of a monster, easily a metre in length, that got away. “She was huge!”

Why does everyone keep referring to barramundi as female?

“Barramundi start out life as male,” Lambie explains. “When they grow to 80 centimetres they turn female and start laying eggs. The magic metre is the holy grail for barra fishos, and any fish that big has to be female.”

“Can you keep them?”

“It’s strictly ‘catch and release’ at Bamurru for any fish over 80 centimetres. In the Territory, a boat fisherman can keep a single barra over that size, but most people will release them because they’re breeding age and you’re protecting the stock. Even your beer-swilling cowboy will do the right thing and put a big girl back.”

Not that there are too many beer-swilling cowboys around this table. These anglers have paid close to \$1,000 a night for their adventure.

Lindsay is a retired judge from New Zealand. His conversation extends to Herodotus and human rights – but it’s barramundi that has him leaning forward in his seat to make a passionate case. “The thing about barramundi is this,” he says, placing his hands flat on the table. “You’re fishing in heavily discoloured waters, so you can’t see anything. Then you get a ‘take’. And that’s when this big, shiny silver fish leaps out –” his hands take flight over the table “– and it flares its gill covers, exposing bright red gills. Oh, they’re really quite magic!”

Another barra fanatic is a CEO from Washington State who has flown the last leg here by helicopter. Her name is Patricia. “We were out on the floodplain today and we caught 42 barramundi,” she says. “It was just incredible fishing. I’ve been to other fishing camps, but nothing like this.”

Chef Made Mustika is at work in the kitchen, preparing Black Angus scotch fillet and ratatouille. But the first course is something special: a platter piled with strips of barramundi fried in breadcrumbs, with a dipping sauce made from finger limes. It elicits a chorus of approval when it’s placed in the centre of the table.

“Get stuck in,” urges Lindsay. “We caught it yesterday!” >



And right then, I know the fish I want to catch: a barra measuring between 55 and 80 centimetres, so it's legal size, male and perfectly eligible for the grill. "I think I'd like to try fishing the floodplain."

**F**ishermen are notoriously secretive when it comes to revealing their sweet spots, but this fishing secret is worth sharing. Since opening in 2007, Bamurru Plains has become Australia's answer to an African safari lodge set on Australia's answer to the Okavango Delta. For six months, from the beginning of May, travellers come from all over the world to be cosseted in tented pavilions and immersed in an exotic ecosystem inhabited by a swag of marsupials, 236 species of birds and some very large reptiles.

This is Bamurru's luxury season and it coincides with the Territory's dry season. The days are generally bright and warm and the evenings are cool. The forest tracks behind the lodge are firm, allowing for dawn and dusk game drives. There are also quad-bike safaris, airboat safaris and a bird hide hoisted on a six-metre tower at the edge of a waterlogged paperbark forest. (Couples can sleep out in swags here, enjoying dinner by lamplight.)

For three months after the monsoon season, during the run-off, Bamurru Plains assumes its alter ego as a fishing lodge. From February to April, the floodplain is lapping the front of the lodge, the rivers are angry and swollen, and the tracks are boggy.

**Above: fishing rods and the floodplain. Right: aerial view of the floodplain, taken from a charter flight to Bamurru Plains.**

The lodge food is a little less finessed and the 4WD options are fewer, but the lodge is staffed by licensed fishing guides and Bamurru's river boats and airboats are loaded with specialist rods and gear.

And the secret? Those who visit Bamurru during the final fortnight of the fishing season run a good chance of finding the best of both worlds. The humidity is waning, the waters are receding and the tracks are drying. Better yet, the barra are still biting. It means guests can spend time grasping the complexity of the ecosystem on a safari (with morning tea or sundowners) before going head-to-head with the apex underwater predators.

I arrive at Bamurru after lunch when the fishing guests are out chasing quarry. The camp is fashioned from canvas, hardwood timber and corrugated iron, and finished with muscular details: chequer-plate steel underfoot, buffalo horns for door handles, and period photos showing just how tough the early buffalo farmers must have been.

Bamurru's interiors are cool, calm and faithful to the idea of a bush camp. It's about simplicity, natural textures and lots of light and air. Mesh walls admit the sights, sounds and smells of the wilderness; whether guests are under organic cotton sheets or a monsoon shower, the wetland is never more than a couple of metres away.

In the main lodge, guests gather to dine, drink and recount wetland adventures. There's a help-yourself bar, fat wicker sofas and an open galley kitchen. ►





Clockwise from top: fishing gear; a pair of ospreys survey the floodplain; guide Sam French takes the airboat fishing; a barra on the brag mat.

There's no mobile-phone reception, and no wifi; quieter distractions can be found among the lodge's books, chessboards and works by Arnhem Land artists.

I grab a book and a beer and wander onto the deck, looking over a 100-square-kilometre vista of the Mary River wetland. It features a fire pit and no ordinary infinity pool – a tranquil pond on a floodplain where only the fittest survive. I sink into the pool and rest my arms on its lightly spilling lip to take in the view. An osprey sits atop a dead melaleuca, scanning the waters for prey. Buffaloes wallow in emerald reed beds, sloshing and snorting. And beyond that, the mirror-like waters offer the ultimate Rorschach test: two Australian skies split by a single horizon, challenging you to see anything ugly in the world.

**The creature is just beneath the surface, carving angrily away from us and creating a fat serpent-like wake.**

I spend the late afternoon on a game drive with guide Sam French. Low light slants through the forest, flashing against the flanks of darting wallabies, and rendering white corellas like chips of ice as they swoop and shriek among the canopy. At a billabong, the water has turned golden in the twilight, its surface punctuated by termite mounds, buffaloes and a dozen bird species. As French lays out canapés and drinks on the vehicle bonnet, I marvel at the number of hawks circling.

“The magpie geese have had their chicks, which is why there are so many raptors around,” he says. “During the run-off, nature goes into overdrive, so it's an amazing time to be here. Recently, I saw five ospreys in one tree. That's insane – I don't even know if there's a collective noun for ospreys!”

(There isn't.)

**A**t six in the morning the floodplain is cool and sweet-smelling, bathed in pale light. It would also be silent, were it not for the 380-horsepower V8 Chevrolet engine mounted on the back of the airboat. French has it firing, and it's so loud our fishing party of three is obliged to wear earmuffs.

An airboat is basically a tea-tray propelled at high speed over water by an aircraft propeller. It's capable of skimming across thick reed beds with barely a tremor – which is why we fail to see the 3.5-metre crocodile until a split second before we skim over its back.

French throws the airboat into a tight circle, then kills the engine so we can take a closer look. The creature is just beneath the surface, carving angrily away from us and creating a fat serpent-like wake. After a few metres it turns, rises and eyes us off.

“Do they jump?” I ask.

“At this time of year there's so much food around he probably wouldn't need to,” says French, “but we'll keep our limbs inside the boat.”

The fishing gets underway with a challenge. We want to beat Patricia's catch of 42 barra in a single day. “Let's do it!” says French, dropping the anchor. “But don't forget, it's not a fish until it's in the boat, okay?”

We're in smooth, still waters encircled by reed beds. Our guide rigs up our rods with “poppers”, brightly painted lures, and “squidgies”, soft plastic worms. We're to cast and reel in repeatedly, hoping the lures imitate the motion of small fish. It's not a difficult skill to master. The other angler on board is young Harry, who has only ever caught fish off a jetty; under French's guidance, he's soon casting the short barra rod with its Shimano Baitcaster reel like a pro.

The waters look black and polished in the morning light, stirring only occasionally when small fish get panicked by something larger. Shadows pass overhead: brahmny kites, whistling kites and the huge form of a jabiru with its distinctive black-and-white wings. After two hours, we have nothing to show for our labours. We're occupied mostly with the things fishing trips are made of: snacking, taking the mickey out of each other, and talking about fish.

We learn that until relatively recently, barramundi was known as Asian sea bass, except in central Queensland where the Gangulu people used the word “barramundi” to mean “large silver-scaled fish” (and quite possibly to refer to another large silver-scaled fish, the saratoga). In the 1980s the name was appropriated by commercial barra farmers looking to give their northern Australian product a more marketable identity.

It clearly worked, and the marketing continues in weird and wonderful ways. In 2016 and again last year, Tourism NT released 101 barramundi into waterways around the Territory; a hundred of them were tagged with a \$10,000 prize, and a single “million dollar fish” was tagged with something considerably bigger. During the last season, 13 were recovered, and the million-dollar barra remains at large.

Our first fish doesn't have a tag, but it's no less exciting when Harry's lure is snatched. There's a distinctive “who!” sound as the barra violently sucks in the lure, followed by a tremendous splashing. The 30-centimetre barra fights all the way into the boat. He's well shy of the legal catch size of 55 centimetres but he's handsome, with a solid hump, generous mouth and red reflective eyes. ▶



French carefully removes the lure and returns him to the water. "Well done! Only 41 to go..."

My turn comes soon and the barra's flying leap is exactly as described by the judge. This fish is bigger, and French unrolls a plastic "brag mat" to lay the barra against a printed ruler. "Forty-five centimetres," he says. "Still too short to keep."

"That's a half-metre fish!" I gripe. "Who puts back a half-metre fish?"

We quiz French about the biggest barra he's seen. "Biggest I've seen is 122 centimetres. The biggest I've heard of is 138 centimetres. And they'll really fight at that length. I was out with a guest who hooked a big barra - took him 25 minutes to bring it in."

One of the jobs of a fishing guide is to keep things moving, always trying different spots, hoping to interpret the conditions and anticipate the mercurial whims of feeding fish. French pulls up anchor five times during the day and by 5.30, with the sun close to the horizon, we have precisely 12 fish to our name. It's a long way off the American target and, worse, none of them have met the minimum 55-centimetre threshold. My platter for tonight's table is promising to be just that. A platter.

In the last half hour of light, French has plans for one final assault, returning the airboat to the open water of this morning. He also agrees to take up a rod to help us jag a keeper.

The low light over the water seems viscid and we cast urgently into the setting sun. Almost immediately there's a solid take and a barra is reeled in. Whof! Another one takes a lure. Whof! French's line is snatched, and our guide is suddenly juggling catch-and-release duties and his own screaming reel.

It's like someone has flicked a switch. The water is frenzied, and every lure is snatched by a hungry barra. The energy on the airboat is electric, and the count escalates in minutes: 15, 20, 25, 30...

"Come on, come on!" I cry, reeling in another, "where's our keeper?"

Our guide, however, is under orders to get guests back to the lodge before dark, and the lower half of the sun is already swallowed by the Bamurru wetlands. "I'm really sorry," he says, "we've got to go."

And then his rod arches over. "Wow, that feels right!"

And it is. As the sun snuffs out and the sky begins its celestial transition from orange to purple, we have a 57-centimetre barramundi on the brag mat.

I have no idea how or why the wetlands of the Territory came to bless us with a legal fish in the dying seconds of the day. But as Sir Izaak Walton wrote: "Rivers and the inhabitants of the watery element are made for wise men to contemplate, and for fools to pass by without consideration."

Amen to that. And throw me a beer. ●



Clockwise from above: wallabies graze outside bungalows at Bamurru Plains; prepping a rod; a barramundi bites; safari bungalow at Bamurru Plains. Opposite: the airboat skims across the floodplain.



### Fishing there

**Bamurru Plains fishing season** runs from 1 February to 30 April. For private charters (two anglers per boat), packages cost from \$3,190 per person for three nights and two days. This includes safari bungalow accommodation, all meals and drinks, and daily fishing with a specialist guide.

**Bamurru Plains luxury season** runs from 1 May to 31 October. It costs \$1,090 per person per night (twin share, minimum two nights), which includes safari bungalow accommodation, all meals and drinks, and daily guided wilderness activities. These include airboat safaris, croc-spotting river cruises, open-top game drives and walking tours.

[bamurruplains.com](http://bamurruplains.com)

### Getting there

Charter flights between Darwin and the private airstrip at Bamurru Plains, on the edge of Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory, cost \$650 per aircraft one way, carrying up to four passengers with 15 kilograms of luggage each.

The 30-minute flight offers spectacular wetland views. The drive between Darwin and the lodge takes about three hours.

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When in transit to the lodge, **Vibe Hotel Darwin Waterfront** is well positioned between Darwin CBD and the Waterfront Precinct, and a short walk from Stokes Hill Wharf. It's also close to restaurants, bars, cafés and a wave pool. Rooms from \$199. 7 Kitchener Dr, Darwin, (08) 8982 9998, [vibehotels.com](http://vibehotels.com)

