

Aussie Rules



Story and Photography by Gary Caputi

CHASING BLACK MARLIN IN A NEW MARITIMO 550 IS A THRILL OF A LIFETIME



AUSTRALIA'S HOT NEW MARITIMO 550 (ABOVE) PROVED GOOD AND LUCKY BY TAKING TWO 1,000-POUND BLACK MARLIN IN TWO DAYS.

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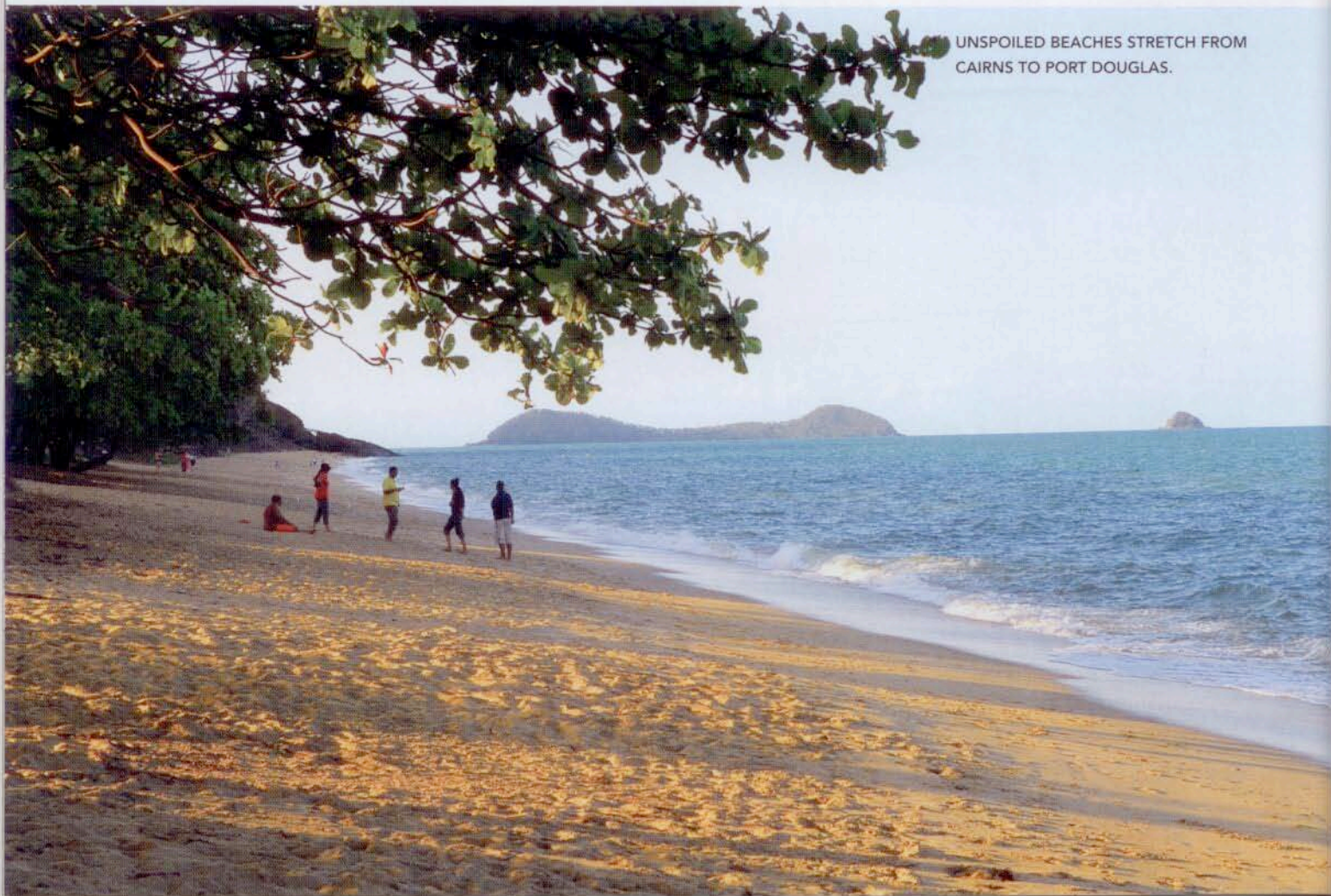
rom Lizard Island south to Cairns and just a short distance offshore from where the Coral Sea throws itself relentlessly against Australia's Great Barrier Reef, sea creatures of mythic proportions reside for a few months each year: Massive animals, graceful in form with incredible strength, that in turn entice a select group of fishermen from around the globe to converge here. In these fabled waters, home to the largest black marlin from late October through December, is a fairytale ecosystem most anglers will only dream about, the largest coral reef in the world—3,000 individual reefs and 900 islands stretching 1,600 miles, composed entirely of living organisms, inhabited by exotic fishes and colorful marine life.

Cairns, pronounced "cans" by locals, is the northernmost city in Queensland, the main access to the Reef and thus epicenter of the big game fishing world in those months when gladiators in multi-million dollar sportfishing vessels take up residence with a common purpose: to do battle with a grander, or marlin over 1,000 pounds.

After 32 hours of jets, airports, and connections I finally arrived in Cairns sometime after dark. Drowsy and dazed, I stumbled up to the car rental counter and was told only one vehicle, which I hesitate

to call a car, was available. Only slightly larger than a roller skate, it did manage to get me to the Shangri La Hotel before I passed out. I awoke to a new day and, throwing open the curtains, was greeted by a beautiful red sunrise over the world-class marina just below my window. A freighter was entering port, gliding silently past several hundred vessels: sportfishermen, megayachts, cruisers, sailboats and large tourist catamarans. My ride, Maritimo's first "game boat" in local parlance, was en route, leaving me time to explore Cairns, established in 1876 as a port for the newly discovered Hodgkinson Goldfield.

Cairns and the surrounding area proved to be an exotic mix of scenic wonders steeped in the rich (and complicated) history of a native peoples and conquering Europeans, much like that of the United States. The town center is comprised of the oldest buildings in a sprawling city of 130,000. Heading back to my hotel I passed trees filled with what I thought were strange, noisy birds. Upon closer examination, the "birds" turned out to be dog-faced bats with a two-foot wingspan; these flying foxes, as they are called, were everywhere. Definitely strange, the airborne mammals are considered a local



UNSPOILED BEACHES STRETCH FROM CAIRNS TO PORT DOUGLAS.



inlaid into the gunwale. The modern, flowing lines of the deckhouse and bridge are a perfect complement to the sheer. A U.S.-made Release Marine fighting chair was centered near the transom and a unique removable rigging station was set into the forward starboard side. Remove the rigging station, pop in the cushions and a mezzanine couch appears, just one of the many innovative design features of what would prove to be a remarkably adept and superbly comfortable fishing yacht.

We departed Cairns the next morning, motoring up the inside passage between the Reef and mainland. Our destination was the middle of an area called the Ribbon Reefs. Sharky and I spent the time in the plush, enclosed portion of the bridge with Chris Elliott, my fishing partner for the next few days and a broker for Maritimo from Newport Beach, California. The helm station had twin 15-inch Northstar monitors and a tiny set of digital, fly-by-wire controls connected to the twin 1,015-hp C-18 Caterpillar diesels, which gave us a very comfortable and fuel-efficient 28-knot cruising speed.

The hull has the engine room positioned further forward than other boats in its class, which results in a lower center of gravity and reduced shaft angle. Sharky said the design added to the boat's solid rough water performance, fuel-efficient operation, and the ability to back down on big fish (at speeds exceeding eight knots!). A captain's action station on a balcony overlooking the cockpit features a more traditional pod, with individual throttle and shift levers spaced wide on either side of the wheel offering pinpoint control when it's time to

ICONS DOWN UNDER, THE KOALA (ABOVE LEFT) AND THE TJAPUKAI (BELOW), PROUD ABORIGINALS WHO CARRY ON ANCIENT RITUALS.

treasure, nurtured and protected by town folk and naturalists alike.

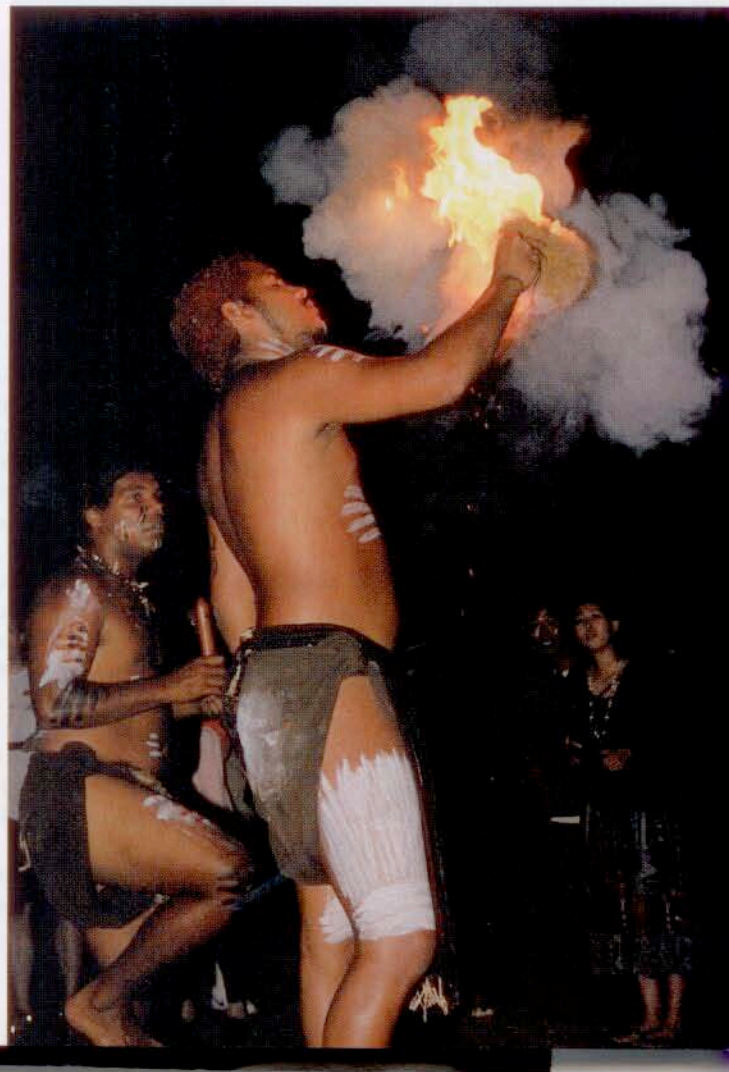
Yearly flooding that blocked supplies and caused starvation and death in the inland mining camps led to the construction of the Kuranda Railway, a monumental engineering feat which runs from Cairns along the sheer walls of Barron Gorge to lush rainforest mountains, traversing dozen of bridges built into the face of the gorge and passing through 16 tunnels cut by hand through solid rock. Kuranda Station is a scene from another time, nestled serenely beneath a canopy of tropical trees festooned with bright red flowers, quaint walkways and hanging plants.

Kuranda town, filled with historic buildings and tourist delights, lies just beyond and includes wildlife parks where you can pet kangaroo and koala, and a central market where you can browse displays of opal jewelry, crocodile leather goods and authentic aboriginal art, and even the odd didgeridoo, the native instrument made from a hollow tree limb that creates a deep, cooing sound. The trip down the mountain, via the Rainforest Skyrail, a modern cable lift that skims over the top of the ancient trees and valleys, was even more dramatic than the trip up.

At the base of the Skyrail is the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park where you can learn about the first Australians from the natives themselves, while trying your hand at throwing a boomerang and witnessing tribal ceremonies dating back over 40,000 years.

Back in Cairns late that afternoon, I walked down to the marina and found my fishing chariot nestled in a floating slip on B-Dock, along with Sharky Miles, renowned Aussie marlin captain and master of the new sportfisher.

The 550 is the builder's first sport fishing model and it is a beauty. The hull sports a graceful sheer that sweeps back from a proud bow to a cockpit with a teak sole and varnished teak covering boards





"Big fish! Huge fish!" A black marlin charged out and engulfed the skipjack as the line snapped off the rigger like a rifle shot

throw the boat around during a marlin brawl.

As I would soon see, the boat would prove capable of handling anything the biggest, baddest marlin could throw at it. But the first afternoon passed without a single knockdown as we trolled three baits arrayed from the riggers—a 10-pound skipjack rigged to skip on the surface from the short; a three-pound scad rigged with a chin weight to swim subsurface from the long; and a huge, silver mackerel down the center. Big baits for very big fish!

With nothing to show for the day we idled into an anchorage behind Opal Reef to spend the night. Our hostess, Jeanine Grant, set out an antipasti platter and a couple bottles of fine Australian wine on the fighting chair to help assuage our disappointment while she put the finishing touches on dinner—roast leg of lamb with all the trimmings.

The galley on the 550 is a cook's dream, easily large enough for two people to work without tripping over each other. Two dining tables and L-shaped couches in the spacious saloon make feeding the entire crew, plus a boat full of guests, a sit-down affair.

While we were up early the next morning, there was no hurry to get to the fishing grounds. Sharky advised us that blacks rarely

bite well early in the day; the best action gets underway in the late morning or early afternoon and can continue straight through until dark. We hobnobbed with our anchorage neighbors, a lovely family of Kiwis there for marlin season in a new, American-built G&S 48; then headed out to catch and rig some fresh baits. Since the fishing had been slow the day before, Sharky ran back to the south to Jenny Louise Shoals, off Cairns, cruising outside the Reef in two- to four-foot quartering headseas. The Maritimo was unfazed.

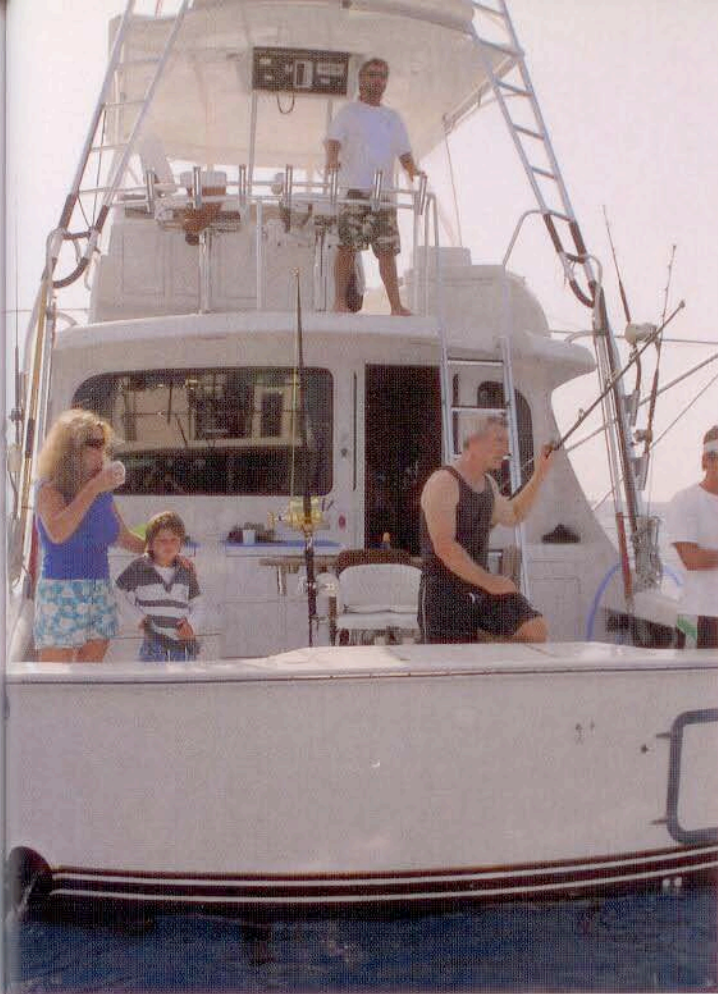
We arrived just in time for the afternoon bite. In the first hour we hooked a 250-pound male that jumped and pulled line off the 130-lb class tackle for 10 minutes before surrendering. Heavy tackle makes fast work of fish less than a quarter of a ton. After another hour of trolling, awaiting my turn at the rod, something took place that will remain forever burned in my memory.

One moment Sharky was yelling, "Big fish! Huge fish! Coming across!" The next a black marlin, bigger than any fish I have ever seen, charged out of the water and engulfed the skipjack on the portside short rigger, pulling the line from the release clip with a sound like a rifle shot. As I ran to the rod the line from the long rigger on the other side of the cockpit was pulled from its clip—we had a double header! I jumped into the chair with Rowan behind me, while Chris and Derek worked to keep the smaller second marlin in check.

My big girl charged off with the Maritimo in hot pursuit, line peeling from the huge reel as the massive fish rose into one awesome jump after another. Starting with 40-pounds of drag I inched the drag up higher at Sharky's command and eventually the fish was

CHRIS ELLIOTT REELS AND THE MARITIMO 550 BACKS DOWN ON A GRANDER (BELOW); BARRON GORGE IN KURANDA (TOP LEFT).





a maw big enough to swallow a man, the drag was engaged, the throttles pushed down to finish setting the hook and the battle was on.

From the flybridge, cameras in hand, I recorded the fight, which lasted an hour and a half, the huge marlin sounding and staying deep after the first half hour. Sharky used every trick in the book to coax her back to the surface with practiced skill, taking full advantage of the boat, which responded instantaneously to his every command. Grudgingly the huge fish came shallow where the battle continued. The massive marlin, which Sharky said would weigh between 1,000 and 1,100 pounds, took off again. At times the boat was making eight knots in reverse, water flying over the transom only to disappear just as quickly through a scupper system unique to the Maritimo.

About the time Chris was thinking he couldn't take much more the fish provided an opening for Derek to grab the leader. The catch was official, but as he tried to bring the fish close for pictures the line parted just above the hook, the 650-pound test leader chafed through by jaw and bill.

Heading triumphantly back to Cairns with two granders in two days, the only two caught by the entire fleet, the Maritimo ran away from the other boats at a fast 30-knot cruise. Team Maritimo was all the talk on the VHF and on the docks later that night when we shared a victory dinner at the Water Bar and Grill overlooking the marina. Then they headed back north with several clients interested in this great, new game boat and a shot at catching a grander. □

Contact: www.maritimo.com.au

A KIWI FAMILY ON THEIR SPORTFISHER, HERE FOR MARLIN SEASON (TOP LEFT); DAWN AT SMITH'S CREEK AND ITS MARINA (BELOW).

pulling 75 pounds and I was balancing with my legs trying to keep from being pulled from the chair.

The power of a fish this big is impossible to describe and the techniques used to fight them are very different. When the boat is backing down or spinning on the fish the angler prevents slack in the line by reeling like a madman. To gain line the angler loads the rod using his legs and body weight and then puts the line on the reel by cranking until his bottom is precariously up and out of the chair.

When the fish was worked close to the boat Derek grabbed the leader; as if on cue, it rose half way out of the water, a towering presence displaying all its awesome power. After a few boatside pictures the line was clipped and the massive fish swam away. When I asked Sharky how big the fish was he smiled and said, "Easily 950 to 1,000 pounds, mate. Your first grander!"

Another small fish was caught before the day was over and we headed back to Cairns for dinner and to rest up to do it again the next day. We left the marina and headed out into a much livelier Coral Sea, the wind blowing 20 to 25 from the East. Crossing through a very shallow, narrow cut in Jenny Louise Shoal to get outside was a great test of the boat's handling in gnarly conditions that would have caused a lot of boats to turn for home, but the 550 handled it neatly.

Once through, the Maritimo was on its way in six- to eight-footers. We trolled in the troughs, in head and following seas, without so much as a misstep or roll, the hull exhibiting excellent seakeeping manners. The first fish of the day was a very small male, about 125 pounds, which put on a quick aerial display before release. Not long after another huge black smashed the bait on the center rigger and missed the hook.

"Reel, reel, reel, mate," screamed Sharky. "Reel as fast as you can. Here she comes. She's on it! Free spool!" The bait dropped back into

