

This luxury lodge north of Cairns offers the ideal location to enjoy a romantic holiday with your better half while also getting the chance for some great fishing. By **JIM HARNWELL.**

# BLOOMIN' Fantastic!



**A**S a fisho, it's often hard to combine your need to catch fish with your non-fishing wife or partner's desire for completely different things. This has often caused a few ructions in the Harnwell family, and no doubt plenty of others as well. My idea of the perfect holiday involves somewhere wild with lots of fish. My long-suffering wife Mel has different priorities. On our all-too-rare escapes from the dramas and hassles of modern family life – ie, going on holiday while leaving the kids at home with their grandparents – she's keen on enjoying peace and quiet in pleasant surrounds. Being stuck up a remote river fighting off mozzies or out to sea in a boat fishing all the time does not match her holiday criteria in any way, shape or form.

So it was interesting to hear of a place which offers all the indulgences of a world-class boutique resort – fine dining, luxury accommodation, massages, long periods of time spent lounging by a sparkling pool etc – with the potential of some seriously good sportfishing. Could such a magical place really exist? I'm here to report that it does, and it's not in some outrageously expensive location like the Seychelles or Mauritius. It's called Bloomfield Lodge, and it's located about 30 minutes' flying time north of Cairns, in Far North Queensland.

Nestled into a rainforest-draped hillside at the southern end of Weary Bay, Bloomfield Lodge ticks all the boxes as far as enjoying a luxurious break away from everyday life. The mere fact that you need to fly there in a small charter plane immediately gives your holiday a touch of adventure. The scenic flight up the coast from Cairns allows you to check out spectacular coral reef and jungle fringed coastline. The adventure continues when you land at the lodge's private airstrip. After transferring to a 4WD, you're whisked down to a jetty at the nearby Bloomfield River, where you and your bags board a big alloy punt for a 10-minute ride down the river, out the mouth and across the calm bay to the lodge. You're met at the lodge's wharf by one or other of the friendly management team, forced to drink a welcoming beer or cocktail and basically told to enjoy yourself or else.

An hour after checking into to our amazing room with its big white four-poster bed and spa overlooking the rainforest canopy and out across the bay, I was back in the Bloomfield River with the lodge's head fishing guide, Shayne, flicking lures for barra. Melinda, however, was ensconced poolside, book in hand and cold drink at the ready.

She was happy. I was happy. Could this be that rarest of all things, a romantic fishing holiday?

Getting to Bloomfield involves a quick flight over spectacular country north of Cairns.

**LEFT:** Bloomfield's head guide Shayne with a cracker jack caught on the reef on a plastic and one of the new Aussie-designed Tuff Tackle XTA Diablo 9000 spin reels.



## CORAL REEF SPORTFISHING



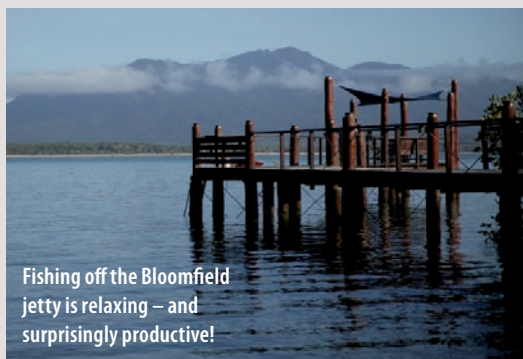
Some nice barra live in the Bloomfield River. This one ate a white Gulp jerkshad.

### FACT BOX

## Staying at Bloomfield

BLOOMFIELD Lodge is a boutique resort, accommodating a maximum of 36 guests at any one time. Most of the clientele are couples, many from Britain, and it's also popular as a wedding and honeymoon venue. The lodge itself is very laidback, with a large open timber lined space leading to the pool serving as bar and dining area, and the various rooms and suites scattered throughout the surrounding rainforest. The casual mood does not reflect at all on the dining and level of service, both of which are exemplary. For such a small resort, the lodge seems to employ an inordinate number of staff, of all whom are very friendly and helpful. The various guides, led by the amiable Shayne, are extremely knowledgeable about the local flora and fauna. All the guides are experienced and dedicated anglers and seem to really enjoy taking their guests fishing. The lodge supplies basic tackle but if you're planning some serious action I'd suggest packing travel rods in the 4-6kg class along with a variety of standard lures, both hard-bodies and softies, for the estuary work. For offshore, an 8kg threadline or overhead loaded with 30-50lb braid should do the trick on the reef fish and pelagics. The lodge's power cat has decent light game tackle as well. The tariff for staying at the lodge includes all food and accommodation but the guided fishing charters are extra. There's no charge for DIY fishing. You are restricted in how much luggage you can take on the small plane to and from the lodge so check with the booking office before you turn up with half a tackle shop in tow. If you fancy bushwalking or birdwatching, pack a pair of sturdy walking boots – some of the trails around the lodge are steepish and thongs or Crocs won't cut it. Other than that, all you need is your cossies, a toothbrush, a good book and some casual clobber for lazing around in!

Find out more about Bloomfield Lodge via a detailed website at [www.bloomfieldlodge.com.au](http://www.bloomfieldlodge.com.au) or by calling the booking office on (07) 4035 9166.



Fishing off the Bloomfield jetty is relaxing – and surprisingly productive!

### The fishing

Bloomfield Lodge has access to untapped coral reef sport and game fisheries as well as some excellent inshore and estuary action. I got a solid hit from a decent barra while casually flicking a lure into flooded mangroves literally metres from the lodge jetty. Depending in the tide and season, there is definitely the chance of catching good barra and jacks off the jetty, especially if you ask one of the guides to cast-net you a few mullet for livebait.

“ Could this be that rarest of all things, a romantic fishing holiday? ”

Shayne and I fished the Bloomfield River in the lodge's tinny (which by the time you read this has likely been upgraded to a purpose built sportfishing boat with electric engine and quality electronics). The tide was dropping and we anchored up out from a promising rock bank fringed with mangroves. The entire entrance of the Bloomfield is very fishy with expanses of flats extending out from the mouth certainly looking the goods for golden trevally, giant herring, tarpon, barra and even permit. On the right tide a session flicking plastics or flies around this flats system would doubtless prove effective. But we were focused on the barra. The first 30 minutes were a bit slow but towards the bottom of the tide we started getting bites and a few jump-offs from feisty barra. I missed a strike from a metre-plus fish boatside before hooking up tight to a solid 80cm chrome-plated beauty on a white Gulp 7-inch jerkshad, one of my favourite soft plastics. This fish was landed and photographed before release.

A few smaller fish in the 60-70cm range were hooked as well. The usual cod and a couple of tasty plate sized fingermark rounded out the session. Shayne and I discussed our plans for the next few days while trolling our way out of the river and along the flats and drop-offs back towards the lodge. Tomorrow would be an all-day session out on the reef, an adventure that I was really looking forward to. After that, the tides were still good for barra and there was a little creek system a few miles northward that we could explore as well.

Ten minutes later I was sitting by the pool with Melinda, sipping a cold beer, and telling her about the barra. She'd had





Mel and Shayne with a toothy 'cuda caught trolling the mouth of the Bloomfield River.

INSET: Lodge guide Ryan with a tasty coral trout caught on the reef.



2006 SA shiraz saw Mel and I sleepily make our way along the floodlit paths towards our room high in the rainforest canopy. Brilliant green tree frogs sat in the pools of light along the path, hunting moths and insects. Back in our room I found a big fat green frog hiding out in our cupboard. He stayed there for our entire stay. We went to sleep amid a cacophony of croaks.

### The reef

We headed out to the reef early the next morning aboard the lodge's 10m cat, which is powered by twin 200hp Yammie four-strokes. A look at a chart shows significant coral reef systems east of Bloomfield, the closest being about eight nautical miles out. We were fishing prime shoals and reef within an hour of leaving the mooring. Shayne and fellow guides Ryan and Gary are all very keen anglers, especially for the prized "red fish", a generic term Queenslanders use to describe Lutjanid species such as emperor, mangrove jack and large mouth nannygai. We didn't catch any emperor or nannygai but I got a cracking 6kg jack, again on the mighty white Gulp 7-inch

jerkshad. I'd lost two big fish – probably XOS jacks – on the bottom before I landed the "red" so the need for powerful gear in the form of a custom built Seed rod and Tuff Reels XTA Diablo 9000 threadline loaded with 50lb braid was justified.

The boys at Bloomfield tend to favour handlines and bait when fishing the reef but I think they were impressed with the efficacy of the plastics, especially when a 15kg Spanish mackerel ate a lurid green Gulp 5-inch curl-tailed grub I'd sent down for a trout or reefie.

Most of the grounds we fished were wide of the reef proper over shoaly/rubbly bottom about 20m deep. According to Ryan, this is prime ground for red emperor. We racked up some nice fish at the various reefs we visited including coral trout, cod, sweetlip, trevally, green job fish, cobia and mackerel. Trolling sessions with Rapala X-Raps and Halco Laser Pros, teamed up with Shayne's wog-head rigged gars, saw plenty of solid mackerel come aboard. A blast out towards out towards the edge of the fringing reef system saw the water turn much bluer and clearer. We trolled around a massive bommie where Shayne and Ryan had encountered doggies and XOS mackerel but soon

a couple of nice swims and a good read of her new book. She was obviously enjoying herself – her eyes glazed over only once or twice as I rattled on about the fish.

There were only two other couples at the lodge during our stay. Both were from Scotland. Strange as it sounds, Bloomfield Lodge is much better known in Britain than it is to the average Aussie. Loads of Poms stay a few days or a week at Bloomfield during a holiday Downunder and a quick study of the visitor's book reveals that the Bloomfield experience is often a highlight of their trip.

A sumptuous meal prepared by the resident chef – all the meals at Bloomfield were absolutely top notch – and a bottle of

## CORAL REEF SPORTFISHING

discovered no-one was at home. A few miles further eastwards and you come to the open waters of the Coral Sea where wahoo, dolphin fish, billfish, yellowfin and big doggies can be targeted. This is all less than 15 miles east of Bloomfield and an easy run in the lodge's big, stable cat.

Shayne and I suited up after lunch and snorkelled around a shallow reef while Gary and Ryan kept fishing. I love snorkelling around coral and Shayne is a mad-keen spearo so a dive was always going to be on the cards. There had been some discussion back at the lodge about painted crays so I was keen to see if we could find one. Surprisingly enough, I spotted a big cray – his antennae were poking out of a cave in the coral – and had to find Shayne, who was chasing a coral trout, and then backtrack to the crevice where the cray was hiding. An accurate shot with Shayne's speargun saw us dragging the delicious crustacean back to the boat.

That night the cray was served up tempura style as an appetizer for the main meal, which if I remember correctly was char grilled lamb backstrap followed by crème caramels with toffee sauce.

Melinda had an equally enjoyable day. First up she did a rainforest bushwalk with one of the lodge's experienced guides and spotted the rare paradise kingfisher. After that it was time for lunch, which consisted of grilled scallops on an Asian noodle salad followed by Bundy rum and

banana crepes, and a much-needed rest barside at the pool. Following that was a two-hour massage and facial session in the lodge's health spa. Then some more pool time and a cocktail, which she was just finishing off when I arrived back from the boat.

Apart from fishing, guests at Bloomfield can enjoy day trips in the power cat to coral cays and exploratory boat trips up the Bloomfield River, where a variety of birdlife as well as the odd croc can be spotted. Bushwalks – ranging from easy to quite strenuous – are a popular option amongst guests and there's a great walk over the headland to a private sandy beach just south of the lodge.

The first half of the next day was spent investigating a small estuary system north of the lodge where Shayne and I pulled out some nice mud crabs, which were transformed by the chef into a very tasty



LEFT: This Spaniard ate a Gulp Grub meant for an emperor!

entrée that night. Melinda came out for an afternoon session in the Bloomfield, during which we caught more barra and a big barracuda on the troll.

The estuary/river fishing at Bloomfield is very quick and easy, which no doubt appeals to non-fishing partners. And there's always the wharf if you need more action after dinner. A deck chair set up at the end is purely for use of guests who wish to casually wet a line. And you can easily walk around the shoreline from the lodge to the river casting shallow divers or plastics around the many rocky bommies and drop-offs along the way.

The fishing options on offer, combined with the laidback luxury of this boutique resort, means it's a viable option as a "romantic fishing holiday". You don't have quite the same level of fishing focus as a specialist fishing lodge, but there's more than enough to satisfy your sportfishing needs. And there's plenty of other activities to do as well, meaning you can spend quality time with your better half when not on the water. Or maybe she likes fishing, which means you'll both experience the wonders of the Great Barrier Reef.

I really enjoyed fishing with Shayne and the boys but it was good to come back and hang out at the pool with Mel, having a quiet drink and just relaxing together.

*Jim Harnwell fished FNQ courtesy of Bloomfield Lodge.*





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