

GO BOATING

AUSTRALIA'S BOATING LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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AUSTRALIAN DEBUT
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MELBOURNE'S
MARINA SCENE





as good as it gets

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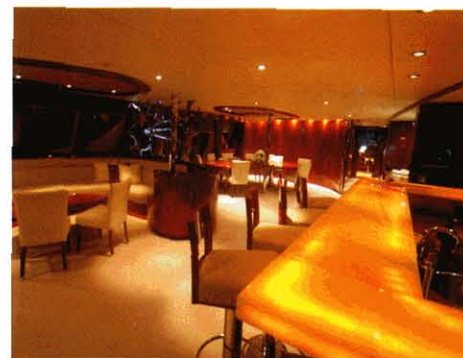
IMAGINE HAVING THOUSANDS of square kilometres of reefs all to yourself, pristine beaches that run for miles without a human footprint, fishing where less than a minute between bites is the norm, seafood that excels the best available in the finest restaurants of major cities and all this in five star comfort and luxury. Sound like a fantasy? Well, yes and no. Such an experience is possible but needless to say the ultra-luxury elements do come at a price.

Seafaris is a new 41 metre power catamaran superyacht specializing in luxury charters to the far northern region of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR). In early November 2006 I had the good fortune to be guest on a cruise from Cairns to near the top of Cape York and we did indeed have the region virtually to ourselves. In some 650 kilometres of travel along the reef we saw only one tourist cruise vessel near Port Douglas and two private yachts further north but not a single fishing boat. This is now normal for the region, increasing restrictions having all but eliminated the few fishing boats that used to work in this area.

Ashore, Cape York itself is one of the world's last great wilderness regions. In an area larger than many European nations the total

population is that of a small country town. Along the coast facing the reef, pristine beaches stretch for miles between scenic headlands and the only bathers to be seen are an occasional large saltwater crocodile. Even the strand lines are remarkably free of human debris.

Most superyachts serve only as mobile luxury apartments to be parked at exclusive marinas in trendy resort ports. Their ambience tends to reflect the style of interior decorators from New York, London or Paris with an occasional touch of their notion of the nautical. Seafaris is different. She was designed and built to explore the remote northern GBR in five star luxury by her owner, Jeff McCloy, who is an enthusiastic outdoorsman and who knows the region well. In addition to a fishing tackle storeroom full of excellent equipment and a well stocked dive locker Seafaris carries a nine metre fishing launch, 'Blakey' plus a six metre RHIB tender. Both are high speed water jet powered vessels. An unique feature of the nine metre vessel is an hydraulic launch and recovery platform that cradles it between Seafaris' twin hulls. This system makes using the launch and getting people and equipment on and off it remarkably safe and easy.





In addition to all the excellent equipment, Seafaris has a superb crew. The fishing guide is Damien Langley who grew up fishing, diving and hunting in the region. At an early age he traded a classroom for the cockpit of a commercial fishing boat and never looked back. His experiences, knowledge and capabilities are the stuff of legends. To make the obvious comparisons with well known outback characters from the entertainment world would only be misleading. Suffice to say, he's the real thing.

Wherever we fished, it was rarely more than a minute or two after a line went in the water before we were hooked up. Here's a typical fishing excursion. It is late afternoon and Seafaris stops to anchor for the night in the shelter of Creech Reef along the outer barrier. Just ahead of us the variegated shallows of the reef flat are bordered by an arc of snow-white breakers. Beyond them the open ocean of the Coral Sea is a band of dark indigo sharply edged by an empty horizon.

On the aft main deck of Seafaris, the launch Blakey, is lowered making it easy step aboard. There are five in the fishing party. In addition to Jeff and Damien, there is Chris Meehan, CEO of Bell Property, Archie Livingston, a retired BHP engineer, and myself. Once we are aboard the launch, platform is lowered and as we float free

Damien reverses Blakey away from Seafaris. We head over to a small pass that separates this reef from the next one along the vast chain that makes up the outer barrier. These passes between reefs are the freeways for marine life travelling between the open ocean and the vast reef spattered lagoon of the GBR. This concentrated flow of life attracts an abundance of predators. We drop in a couple of lures and slack them back to troll. Within seconds the razor gang lets us know it's their turf with two powerful strikes. Mine proves to be barracuda of about 20kg, which we release. Chris' is a nice mackerel of similar size, which we keep for dinner. I trade the rod for a camera to cover the action, which doesn't stop. Most of the time is spent with one line or both engaged in fighting a fish. The trolling itself rarely takes more than a minute or two before a strike occurs. Within an hour we had caught barracuda, Queensland and shark mackerels, red bass, jobfish, coral and coronation trout, plus giant and bluefin trevally.

Being the photographer has its advantages. At least I have time to enjoy a cold beer while the fishers are occupied with fighting a particularly stubborn giant trevally. At dusk we head back to Seafaris silhouetted against a sunset over the distant mainland of the Cape. Upon arrival we nudge onto the cradle and in a few seconds are lifted securely back to the main deck, where we are met by a

stewardess with cold damp face towels and a glass of wine.

Unlike larger yachts Seafaris is not set up to accommodate numerous guests but rather, a few in luxury. In addition to the master stateroom there are only four guest cabins but each is spacious and elegant with its own handsome ensuite. After a refreshing shower I make my way up to the bar area on the bridge deck.

Seafaris is a masterpiece of design and craftsmanship. Every detail reflects thoughtful consideration in concept and excellence in execution. She exemplifies a quiet harmony of form and function wherein elegance is simply accepted as a given with no need to demand attention with unnecessary embellishment. If one is mindful of good design, contemplation of the whys and hows of various details makes an interesting diversion but no analysis is needed to know Seafaris simply feels good. No matter where aboard her one goes, it seems inviting.

Aft of the bridge and captain's quarters, most of the bridge deck is devoted to a dining and bar area adjacent to an open plan galley. On Seafaris the food is better than good. It is truly outstanding. In addition to a larder of the best produce from around the country plus a well stocked selection of fine wines and cheeses and a top class chef, there is



something more that even the finest restaurants cannot match. That something is direct access to an abundance and diversity of truly fresh seafood from pristine waters.

Freshness is paramount to seafood quality and the speediest air freight can't equal catch and consume right on the ocean. Then too, seafood absorbs and concentrates many substances from the waters in which it lives. This also effects taste and, needless to say,

purity. Australian waters in general and the remote northern portion of the Great Barrier Reef in particular, are among the least polluted in the world. With the best in quality and superb preparation, Seafaris' seafood is one of those things that can only be experienced to fully appreciate. Suffice to say, if you are a seafood lover, this is as good as it gets!

On this evening we enjoyed fresh sashimi

and an excellent Margaret River Semillion at the bar. This was followed by delicious fillets of coral trout pan fried in a crisp dusting of rice flour for the main course at the elegant dining table.

The next day further up the reef, we stopped off to do a bit of fishing for reds in a mid-shelf region to the northwest of Raine Island. On the charts this area is called 'Turning Point Patches' but Damien referred to it as 'Africa', the name he knew this area as when he was commercial fishing and cray diving in this region. It is an area of sandy ridges sprinkled with small scattered coral patches some 50 odd nautical miles offshore in clear blue water and a depth of 20 to 30 metres. On a sounder it doesn't look like much but every little bump of coral you come across shows a speckling of fish above it and occasionally there is a cloud of blips denoting a school of smaller baitfish. The speckling is mostly red emperor and nannagi. They are hungry and not the least bit hook shy. If you don't feel a bite within a few seconds of your bait reaching bottom you have drifted out over the open sand and need to pick up for another try. Usually, however, it is all lines hooked up within seconds. The only downside of such good fishing is that everyone quickly has their limit. On the other hand it leaves plenty of time for other things or for doing nothing and not even feeling guilty about it.

One of those other things was a dive on the





wreck of HMAS Warrnambool. In World War II some 13,000 anti-ship mines were placed to defend the shipping channels of the Great Barrier Reef against Japanese invasion. After the war several year's effort were required by RAN minesweepers to clear them. On 13 September 1947, HMAS Warrnambool hit a mine while minesweeping and sank in 25 metres depth off Cockburn Reef about nine nautical miles north of Cape Grenville. Four lives were lost. It was the last Australian naval loss of the war.

I had read about the wreck and asked Damien if he knew where it was. He did and so we made a dive there. A few years ago a team of naval divers from Cairns had reported the wreck to be in near upright position but we found her to be lying fully on her starboard side. A cyclone in the interim must have shifted the hull despite the 25 metre depth. This isn't as improbable as it might seem. In 2005 a hurricane in the Florida Keys up righted a much larger wreck, the USS Spiegel Grove, that was lying on its side in even deeper water.

The Warrnambool is now home to masses of fishes. Red emperor, nannagi, fingermark, trevally and tarpon hung about in dense schools interspersed with numerous individual coral trout and a few larger reef cods. On the portside just forward of the bridge a gaping hole in the hull edged by ragged steel plates attests to the violence of the fatal blast.

At Hicks Island just off Cape Grenville, Jeff McCloy has an island property with an airstrip and a couple of comfortable houses. Before he built Seafaris, Jeff spent a lot of time here so he knows the area well. Now it serves as a most useful base to get fresh supplies and people in and out from this remote region without having to make the long sea voyage all the way back to Cairns.

On this trip, Jeff had his helicopter come up to meet us at Hicks. Piloting it was an old mate, the legendary game boat skipper, diver, bush pilot and general mischief-maker Dennis Wallace, better known as 'Brazakka'. Brazakka has his own fleet of choppers operating as Cape York Helicopters and for some years has offered helifishing excursions to the area. These take anglers to all sorts of remote fishing holes around Cape York. Most are far removed from any road or track and would entail a major effort to access in any other way. Instead of bush bashing for hours or days to get to some





magic place, it's only a few minutes scenic flight before Brazak settles you into a landing in what looks to be some impossibly small space where the rotor tips just brush the surrounding shrubbery. When the roar of engine and rotor noise dies and merges into that vast silence of the outback you suddenly seem to have stepped back into a dreamtime world much as it was before human existence.

For a couple of days we flew around the Cape, mostly sightseeing so I could get pictures and video but also not missing the opportunity for a bit of pig shooting. While national parks and other protected areas on the Cape have been increasingly expanded, little has been done to manage them. Providing and maintaining all of the air conditioned necessities of government employ in such remote areas is simply too difficult and expensive so the parks and wilderness areas tend to become protected refuges for feral pigs and dope growers. The pigs being the more energetic and fecund tend to spill over into surrounding areas as well. Their abundant populations are having a significant environmental impact. Anything that nests on the ground such as geese, ducks, brolgas, crocodiles and turtles are at great risk from nest predation. Pig shooting, regardless of how one may view it as a sport, provides a valuable environmental service.

The most striking part of the experience was flying for miles along the coast on a glass calm day when every fish, shark, ray, turtle, croc and dugong could be clearly seen. The scenery varied from long low sandy beaches, to craggy headlands as well as a varied mix of mangroves, creeks, lagoons, estuaries and dazzling white dunes.

About the only noticeable trace of human existence was a half-century old skeleton of a World War II P39 fighter aircraft just off the beach near Cape Grenville. My visit was up all too soon but it's good to know that a

few such places still do exist in today's world.

Designing, building and operating a vessel like Seafaris would be a major undertaking under any circumstances. To do so independently of a major yacht builder, achieve stunning results and then operate it in such a remote area is exceptional. For those who can afford it Seafaris offers an incomparable experience. For access to the same great fishing without the five star luxuries Doreen Too out of Port Douglas also takes regular fishing charters to the region.

MORE INFO

Seafaris - www.seafarisaustralia.com

Doreen Too - www.fishingportdouglas.com.au/doreen.html

Brazakka's Cape York Helicopters: Heli-Fishing and Hunting Safaris

www.brazakka.com.au

HMAS Warrnambool - www.navy.gov.au/spc/history/ships/warrnambool1.html

Also - www.abc.net.au/backyard/shipwrecks/qld/warrnambool.htm

USS Spiegel Grove - www.spiegelgrove.com