

Exploring Exmouth



Figure 1 Sandy Bay in Cape Range National Park

Despite being born in an Alpine country I was infected with the saltwater fly fishing virus about two decades ago. I have been travelling to numerous saltwater destinations around the globe since, always in search of the irresistible turquoise colour of pristine flats and the incredible power of their silvery fighters.

Within the last two years I visited Australia four times exploring its best saltwater fishing spots. That was not easy as the country is huge and it takes some time to move around. I also like to explore the underwater world be it by snorkelling or scuba diving. And I like animals. So, these were my aims when looking for the perfect place to go in Down Under. Australia is far away from Europe and it makes no sense fishing there for a week only. A minimum stay of three to four weeks is a must as otherwise the long journey would not pay off. So it is good to combine fly fishing with other activities as staying in fishing lodges and fishing with guides for several weeks makes it a very expensive stay.

Fishing wise Australia is blessed with a large number of excellent game fish. Many of them were completely unknown to me but turned out to be fantastic targets for fly fishers like King Fish, Kahawai, Cobia, Threadfin Salmon, Queenfish and first of all the most sought after game fish in Australia - the Barramundi. Besides that, Australias' reefs offer the probably best offshore fishing in the world.

For the fly fisher, there are mainly three saltwater destinations which are really interesting: There is the Queensland Coast with its hot spots Hervey Bay (Fraser Island), Mackay and Hinchinbrook Island and the WA coast with Exmouth, Coral Bay and Shark Bay. Cape York and the Darwin area is the third one but as I also like to enjoy other kinds of water sports like diving and surfing Cape York can turn out to be a deadly holiday destination if you go for a swim due to the large saltwater crocodiles and the highly toxic jellyfish that inhabit this area. After having spent a total of about half a year in Down Under I have found a spot that can easily compete with the best beaches on the Seychelles and the mangrove

channels on the cayos in the Carribbean. It is called Exmouth and is situated about 1200 km north of Perth on the top of a peninsula.

Heading North

You can take a plane from Perth to Exmouth but the campervan is probably the best mean to travel if you like to explore the country and see a bit more than just a hotel room when coming home from fishing. It keeps you flexible. You do not necessarily need a 4x4 van but if you look for special accesses to fish near the gulf it can be of help. For the Park you do not need it. You can reach Exmouth by car within a day if you leave very early. Heading north, the landscape changes several times and the colours change from green to brownish the further north you go. After taking the exit to the road to north of the peninsula there remain only bushes and poor grass land. You will cross an area with thousands of huge termite hills until you finally reach the coastline of the gulf. After another 30-40 minutes you enter Exmouth. It is a small town where you can get everything you need. They have done a lot to provide a good infrastructure for travellers. Exmouth has a special flair. You feel that you are close to Cape Range. Emus are present even in the middle of the town.

After my arrival I went straight to nearby Bundegi beach where friends had successfully caught large queenfish the other day. The usually windy beach was dead calm. There were no baitfish around but huge humpback whales jumped right in front of us. At some spots they were as close as 500 m from shore. Every year thousands of them pass the beach on their way out of the gulf. Even if you are not a fisherman, seeing them jump, teaching their calves and playing around is worth a stay there. Diving with whale sharks is also possible if you are there in April or May.



Figure 2 Giving it a try at Bundegi Beach

Cape Range National Park



Figure 3 Kangaroos near Pilgramunna

Bundegi beach is situated on the very north near the top end of the peninsula but still on the eastern side at the entrance to the gulf. Take the way to the lighthouse and after 15 km you are on the Indian Ocean side. Cape Range National Park starts about 50 km from Exmouth. You pay a little entrance fee and if you wish you can stay in one of the 12 campsites in the Park. But you have to register online or directly in the Parks and Wildlife Center in Exmouth to reserve a spot. The campsites are very basic. They have clean toilets, but that's all. No water, no electricity! If you like kangaroos, you are just right here. Thousands of them live here and they are quite used to people approaching them. Some you can even touch. They are very thankful for a drop of water. At hot days they might even choose to have a rest under the Jeeps as they provide the only shade available. But be careful in the evening or night they are so plentiful right next to the roads that they will for shure run into your car if you do not stop and pass them slowly. Be aware of the dingos. I like those funny wild dogs as it is so nice to see them play with everything. As long as you do not feed them you should face no problem. Just do not leave things unattended at beaches which are sometimes patrolled by dingos. They will for shure play with your things. It might look funny but they might grab your stuff and run away. You can also meet the Australian Bustard there. It is a big and intelligent looking bird that is quite curious.

Pristine Beaches

The beaches of Cape Range National Park are awesome! Turquoise blue water and white flats like on the Seychelles. No palm trees behind you though, but red lava rocks and sand dunes instead. On Sandy Bay flat the large Australian bonefish were first discovered in 2005. After publishing the spot a real hype followed and many big fish up to 80-90cm were caught. The Australian Bonefish (round jaw

bonefish) are a little bit slimmer than the Atlantic Bonefish and they feed in deeper water of 1-1.5 m. So you usually catch them from a boat. As bonefish are resident species it became more and more difficult to catch them. You cannot just go there and expect to catch one from the beach. Forget about that! It might happen, but you have to be very lucky. Not all the beaches are allowed to be fished as some of them are sanctuaries. Look for the ones where dry pebble creeks enter as the bottom structure there suits crabs which are perimits favourite prey. If you are lucky you might catch even a Giant Trevally on the flats. Golden Trevallies, Spangled Emperors, Queenfish, cod and many other species can be caught there, too. And at some flats there are lots of shark. But it is not dangerous as there is enough food for them. Outside the reef there is probably best the offshore fishing area in the world. As close as 2-3 km offshore and can sight fish for sailfish targetting baitballs. You can even fish for marlin in sight distance from the beach or go for the many members of the tuna family. Most Australians just bottom fish there. Ningaloo Reef is much closer to shore than the Barrier Reef and at some spots like in Turquoise Bay it reaches right to the bank. You have fantastic snorkelling possibilities there. It is a healthy reef without any bleached corals as it regularly gets fresh cold water with southernly winds unlike the Barrier Reef which is not only far offshore but is not that healthy any more. And there is another good thing. There are no box jellyfish or Irukandji to be met there. So it is a paradise for both fishing and snorkeling/diving, if there is no wind.



Figure 4 A beautifully coloured Gold Spot Trevally

Fishing by boat

The wind can be a real problem on the western side. The last time we experienced only two calm mornings on the Cape Range beaches within three weeks. All the other days we faced 20-40 km/h

south westerly winds. It can be completely different next time but that's nature. You can never say for sure what to expect, everything changes. If you have a boat, no problem. You will find a spot that suits.



Figure 5 Pilgramunna beach by kayak

BTW you can hire boats at site for 300-500 AUD per day. It is a good alternative if you have a 4x4 car with a hitch to pull the trailer. All you need is an [Australian boat driver licence \(you can do it online\)](#) and a [boat fishing licence \(AUD 35/year\)](#) and there you go. A kayak is another alternative but if the wind is too strong you will not enjoy it.

The Exmouth fly fishing guides fish most of the time deep down in the gulf. The water there is not that fantastic. It is still clear though but there is much more food there. So the permit (snub nosed dart) you see on the fly fishing charter websites are usually caught there. Besides that you can go there for giant hering (ladyfish), milk fish, large golden Trevally, GT and many more species. So in fact, Exmouth has everything you need if you have a boat. If it is calm and overcast you can go offshore for marlin on fly on the Cape Range side, if it is sunny and calm the Cape Range Flats can be sight fished for bonefish, GT and other species and if westerly and south westerly winds push hard on the Cape Range beaches the guides head into the gulf. You can be sure to expect very exciting fishing if you will be guided either by Brett Wolf from TrueBlueBones or Ben Knight from Ningaloo Sportfishing Charters (AUD 700-800/day).

Wilderness Island - The Ultimate Experience

If you look for something very special you need to take a plane from Exmouth Airport. During a 15-min flight, it will take you across the gulf to a little island situated south of Tent Island. Conor, our pilot is Irish and manages the sight-seeing and transport flights of North West Airwork. He brings the plane down on the dirt slope that smoothly that you will hardly notice that you have already landed.

Jim Alston a former farmer that has survived a terrible parachute accident and decided to start a new life operates the camp in complete wilderness. It took him seven years of negotiations until the Aboriginal custodian of the area gave him this piece of land to develop Wilderness Island Camp. With the help of his partner Kim he has created a unique place where you can feel like Robinson Crusoe and enjoy a great time in an untouched area. They have done great work to build this place as everything was built by hand and had to be brought by ship.

The fancy bathroom at the beach is said to have a better water jet than any of the hotels and the five comfortable but basic huts make you forget that you are in complete wilderness. Besides that, Jim and Kim are great hosts and cook delicious meals for their guests in the main building. Guests can bring

their own boat (1 h from Exmouth) and gear to the island and fish as long as they want provided they follow the rules.



Figure 6 Mangrove Channels on Wilderness Island



Figure 7 Some huts at Wilderness Island Camp

Only C&R

There is no fish taken from Wilderness Island, so it is catch and release only. There are not only the well-known GT, queen fish, giant herring, milkfish, sharks Spanish mackerel, permit and many more sport fish to be targeted but also barramundi. Unfortunately, there was a drop of water temperature for several degrees the days before my wife and I got there. As barramundi are extra-sensitive to such changes they switched to the non-biting mood. However, nowhere else I have seen that many large barramundis at one spot and I am pretty sure I will be there again the other day when everything will match their demands.

There are many mangrove channels on Wilderness Island where you can also target Mangrove Jack and big estuary cod. If you are lucky you will also see dugongs which also inhabit the area. These ancient looking creatures are quite big and you can approach them quietly and observe them feeding on seagrass.



Figure 8 A giant hering aka ladyfish

Considering the possibilities that Exmouth offers, it is the prime saltwater fishing spot in Australia. If you are a diver, too, consider visiting Coral Bay (120 km S) as there you can not only meet whale sharks and humpbacks but also manta rays.



Figure 9 A Nervous Shark from a flat



Figure 10 Queenfish - Be aware of the spines!