



TWO APPROCHES TO VISITING THE NINGALOO REEF

Marte and I arrived at the Northwest Cape of Australia for our third trip to the remote and small town of Exmouth, a two-plus hour flight north from Perth. On the west side of the cape was the Indian Ocean and the spectacular Ningaloo Reef. This area has attracted global attention for its intense marine environment and, in 2011, was designated a World Heritage Site in the attempt to protect its natural bounty. Whale Sharks and Humpback Whales (with cubs) visit here during their migrations. Three varieties of sea turtles nest on the beaches. The coral and reef fish life is outstanding. And then there are the reasons I return: GT's, Golden Trevally, Permit, Bonefish, Queenfish, etc etc. On the east side of the cape, there is the Gulf, a totally different marine environment with a vibrant population of flats species, especially permit. The spectacular coral heads of the reef side are not present here.....just a super rich marine world which feeds its sportfish without the natural beauty of the coral structures of the Ningaloo Reef side.



The aerial photo of the Ningaloo Reef at left pictures the physical layout. Inside the reef and extending for about 75 – 100 yards are coral heads, each with a large number of various reef fish and creatures. Between the coral heads and the shoreline, the water shallows to produce a solid habitat for the flats species that are of interest to the fly rodder. Often, GT's are found on both the flats and around the coral heads - also inside cuts in the reef

One other element of the overall fishery is the offshore billfish opportunities. Sailfish and Blue, Black, and Striped Marlin are here. It seems as if everyone in Exmouth has a boat rigged for offshore fishing. This is the part of the fishing that attracts the most attention, leaving less exposure for the shallow water flats fly fishing. There are occasions, such as in November, when sailfish enter the gulf side pursuing baitballs, when billfish can be sight cast to with a fly.

ECO INTERESTS AND FLY FISHING

On our second day in Exmouth, while waiting for my guide to pick me up, I noticed a guy walking down the road with a fly rod in hand.....not a common sight in Exmouth! So began a relationship with a fascinating young couple from Scotland, Selena and Keith (at right). Keith's primary interest was the fly fishing opportunities, but he and Selena shared a common passion in the natural phenomena of the cape, primarily the nesting sea turtles. Each morning, before departing for fishing, they would arise at dawn and patrol the beaches; every evening, after dark, they would return to the beaches. Their interest was twofold – they wanted to find a momma sea turtle digging her nest and to find a clutch of baby sea turtles popping out of a sandy nest. They found both.



Photos below, l to r: at dawn, a female Green Turtle finishes her nest in the sand, after laying 100+ eggs. As the sun peeks over the horizon, this exhausted mother heads back to the ocean. Early in their trip, they found a few babies hatching after dark.....the newborns use dark to hide their trek from the nest to the ocean from birds and other predators. Almost at the end of their trip, they found what they were looking for – a 100 (give or take) babies bubbling out of the sand and heading for the ocean. At right, for size perspective, Keith gently holds a newly hatched baby.



Keith is a newcomer to the salt water flats. He is a self-taught fly caster who had spent most of his fishing time pursuing stillwater and river trout. However, he enjoyed as much success in the salt with his fly rod as they did finding turtles! Photos above, l to r: One of his highlight days was taking 8 Queenfish in the shallows on poppers. The Queenfish (left) is a spectacular leaper – a super fly rod fish in the 8 to 20# range. They devoted one day to fishing offshore and hooked and released a 190# Black Marlin taken on a fly. While looking for tailing permit on a shallow flat, a 40# GT was found patrolling the shallows and this photo resulted....a real thrill for a new salt water flats fly rodder on an 8 weight rod!! Other highlights included a 16# Golden Trevally and miscellaneous other species. At right, the Pacific Permit generally have more gold and yellow coloring than their Caribbean brothers. Keith had several shots at these challenging devils and had a few tail on his fly, but taking his first one will have to wait for his next trip.

STRICKLY FLY FISHING

Marte (my wife) is an avid snorkeler and spent most of her days on the coral and reefs. However, for me, it was all about the fishing. Mostly, the fishing gods smiled on me and I “hit it right.” So many highlights on this trip including a 17# permit (right, below) on my last day that included fighting with a 12 foot Tiger Shark over the fish. Four permit my last two days supplied my top highlight. I had 23 clean shots in my first four days at large GT’s that ranged from 40 – 60# with one monster that must have been 80#. I had several fish charge the fly (a GT charge in shallow water is an electric experience), four eats, and hookups with two fish that were over 50# and lost them to coral heads. Finally had to settle for a “smaller” one of about 30#. A large Golden Trevally (left, below) caught over coral heads is a real struggle to keep him out of the coral. The Mantaray Ningaloo Resort is the place to stay in Exmouth (center).



DAILY FISHING DIARY

If you’d like to see my daily fishing diary of our Ningaloo trip with more details on the fishery, click here: [Ningaloo Reef Fishing Diary](#)

Either phone or drop us an e-mail if you have questions or would like more information about any of our destinations.

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