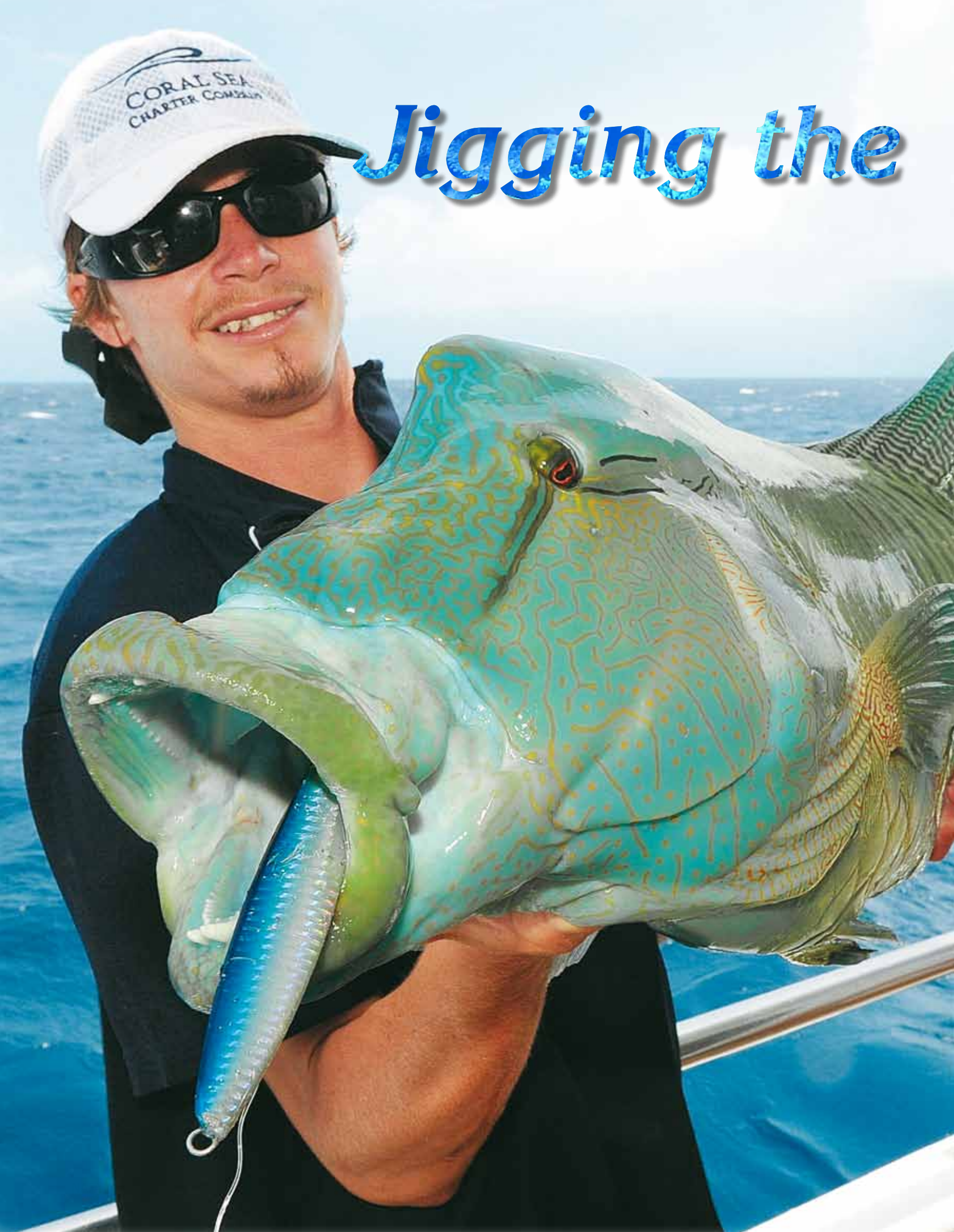


CORAL SEA
CHARTER COMPANY

Jigging the



Coral Sea

Seventeen to one are not good odds when you're the only one jigging metal and the other 17 are dangling tantalising baits, but it seems our self-described metro-sexual fisho, who has an aversion to using bait of any description, enlisted some deckie support, held his own and learnt some valuable lessons along the way.

By Peter Zeroni

Often it is said it is better to be born lucky than born smart. That very thought was going through my mind as my flight from Cairns banked over the Torres Strait and lined up its final approach into the runway at Horne Island. I had no need to pinch myself to appreciate fully that, in an hour or so, I would be boarding a 33m luxury motor yacht and embark soon enough on a week fishing the Coral Sea as a guest of the Coral Sea Charter Company. Yep — *lucky* was indeed the right word.

Prior to boarding the plane in Darwin, a few days earlier, Bob Edwards — skipper and co-owner of the charter company's magnificently appointed Elizabeth E II — rang to remind me to pack a few spare jigs as he reckoned there was a good

chance that my luggage going home would be a fair bit lighter.

Now that's the kind of advice I love to hear from a skipper!

However, truth be known I'd already packed enough jigs to arm most of the clients and crew aboard. This was the main reason why the credit card took some pain

at the check-in counter back in Darwin: my suitcase was 15kg over the limit! I don't think the heavily-laden rod tube and all my camera gear helped the luggage situation either. Obviously, those who run airline companies aren't jiggers, big popper chuckers or camera gear junkies or a combination of all three. In the old days, you'd just smile at the lady behind the counter while putting on the puppy dog eyes and most of the time you'd get your baggage through. If, however, you got an older bloke, then you'd promise to bring him back some fish and all would be sweet. But now it's 2011 and corporate profits and the shareholder bottom line are the drivers, and we the travelling fishos are simply the dimpled ball sitting on the tee.

After being picked up from the Horne Island Airport, we took a short bus ride to where the ferry was waiting to take us across to Thursday Island to join the EE II. On Bob's advice, I had flown in the day before the charter was leaving to get a chance

to look around the islands. Like Darwin, Thursday, Horne and other islands of the Torres Strait have a long cultural, trading and military history and it was great to see a bit of this. My advice to those heading up this way would be to set aside at least a couple of extra days to have a look around this beautiful place.

By the afternoon of the following day, the remaining clients had flown in via Cairns and were now all aboard the EE II. For those who were first timers aboard, her beauty and class immediately captivated all of us. With a Queensland maple fit-out, air-conditioned cabins with en-suites, hydraulic stabilisers and a great chef aboard, it was clear that we'd be travelling in five-star style. Once everything was stowed away and the ship-board safety briefing over, Bob steamed out from Thursday Island and into the wide expanses of the Coral Sea.

LOCK AND LOAD

Traditionally, most clients coming aboard the EE II are targeting hard-pulling reef species and fish with heavy overhead outfits and bottom rigs using the variety of fresh bait supplied. However, as regular readers of NAFA will be aware, I have become a self-described metro-sexual fisho with an aversion to using bait of any description. As a result, my confidence in getting fish on lures in any angling situation would again be put to the test on this trip — especially given all the bait fishos aboard.

For this trip, I was keen to try out a number of new Shimano Butterfly and Halco Twisty jigs. In addition, I was packing plenty of bigger profile knife jigs from Reidy's Lures that I regularly use to great effect on Spaniards, GTs and golden snapper in my home waters off Darwin. However, this specific charter was about broadening my own jigging horizons and I was hoping to tangle with an exotic array of new species found in the clear and plentiful waters 200km east of Thursday Island. Also for good measure I had thrown in a few packets of 7" Gulps and various jig heads to ensure there would be no chance of me even thinking

Deckie Josh Muller with his hands full of a hungry hump-headed Maori wrasse that crunched one of Shimano's new Butterfly jigs. As a protected species, it was released.

EE II skipper and co-owner, Bob Edwards, with a beautifully-marked Maori sea perch.



about using

traditional bait if the metals weren't

working for me. In addition to jigs, I also packed a box load of big poppers in case an opportunity presented itself to get out in the dories to entice some big GTs to join our party.

Tackle-wise, I packed four outfits comprising two jig/spin combos (heavy and medium), a heavy-duty popping outfit, and lastly a medium overhead sporting my favourite Shimano Trinidad 16N jigging reel. Other required bits and pieces included mono leaders and single-strand wire traces, both braided and wire-assist hooks and a bling-bling looking fighting belt from Jigging Master which wouldn't have looked out of place on a Mardi Gras float! All that was needed was to find some fish and get stuck into them. The good news was that we didn't need to wait too long at all.

BENDING THE BACK

After steaming overnight out to the wider grounds, Bob soon had us parked over some great-looking reef and the sounder was showing



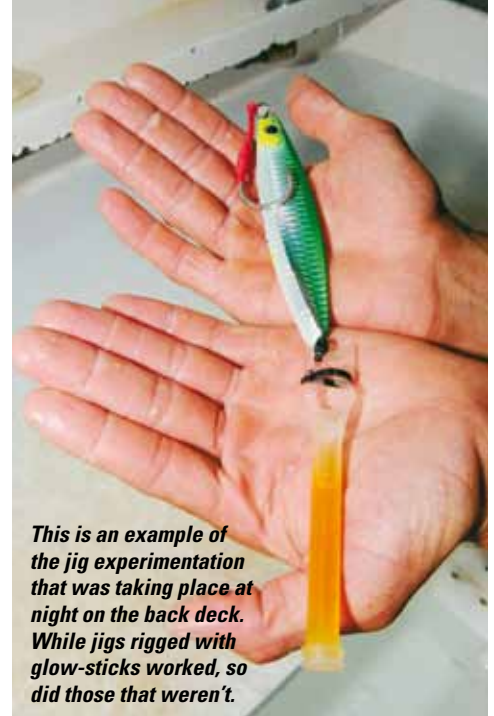
The small-boat landing on Thursday Island.

Elizabeth E II moored at Thursday Island in readiness to head out to the Coral Sea.





A beautiful (and huge for this species) blue-finned trevally that succumbed to a Twisty jig.



This is an example of the jig experimentation that was taking place at night on the back deck. While jigs rigged with glow-sticks worked, so did those that weren't.

plenty of baitfish and predators. As he let the anchor fall, I dashed off the bridge and headed down to the back deck to grab my jig stick and get fishing. By the time I got there, three anglers were already hooked up and straining against big reefies intent on burying them in the reef. Instead of reaching for my rod, I picked up the Nikon to capture the action. Soon enough, the three guests were holding up a big coral trout, a huge long-nose emperor and a thickset red bass with the latter the first one I'd seen in the flesh. Now that's not a bad way to kick off proceedings.

However, that was only the start as fish were getting hooked, landed or lost all around the big boat and I spent the next hour with camera in hand snapping like a paparazzi. As the action started to taper off, Bob made the decision to up-anchor and move the boat to another patch of good reef a kilometre to the east. Like last time, as soon as we came up tight on the anchor, the action started in earnest.

Along with the previously-mentioned species, now various cods, Maori sea perch, green jobfish, painted sweetlips etc were coming aboard in numbers and keeping EE II's hard-working deckies very busy. While the hot bite was on, I dropped down a Butterfly jig and worked it up and down on the bottom. Seeing all the anglers around me hooking up, I assumed that I too would pull tight line pretty much right away. However, this was not the case. Not to be deterred, I hung in there and about five minutes later hooked and landed my first-ever red bass. For their size, these fish are one of the hardest-pulling reefies going around. In my book, they are also the most-photogenic fish and thus I couldn't stop taking way too many pics of them.

Over the course of the trip, this repositioning, re-anchoring and immediate action routine was repeated time and time again and I

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can't recall an instance when we actually lucked out finding any fish during a particular drop. As a result, I got a chance to drop jigs into some very fishy locations and ended up landing many firsts, including heaps of the above-mentioned red bass, green jobfish, long-nose emperors, a Chinaman fish, lots of different cod species and even a number of shark mackerel which we don't get around Darwin. All up, we landed 30 different species on the trip which is mighty impressive. Trust me, for those really keen to add to their personal species catch list, then this is the very charter to do it on.



Check out the stunning markings on this bruiser of a coral trout caught by Ian Gaddes.



The author was over the moon with his first encounter with red bass which he rates as the most photogenic of fish, combining beauty with menace.



Now that's a head only a mother could love! Green jobfish don't only look mean but they also give a good account of themselves.

The author was stoked with his first-ever Chinaman fish — taken on a jig of course!



Just about anything will take a jig, including a triggerfish.

As both Marc and Josh were now converts to the way of the jig, at the end of my trip I left with them all my remaining jigs to help feed their new-found addiction. A side benefit of this decision was that I had a better chance of meeting the baggage weight restrictions on the return leg back (but I still didn't!).

LESSONS LEARNT

As always the key to becoming a better fisho is to keep thinking about what you're doing and assessing what works and what doesn't. Following is a summary of the key things I took away from my time out in the Coral Sea.

- Firstly, the trip further reinforced to me how deadly a technique vertical jigging is on all manner of species, including traditional reefies, as well as more exotic fish that you wouldn't think would readily take metal jigs like trigger fish, parrot fish and hump-headed Maori wrasse.
- When you're a lone jigger surrounded by many fishing bait around you, during a hot bite, it's actually harder to get a fish onto a jig as the frenzied reefies seem to zone in on the bait offerings above all else (no doubt because there's plenty of scent in the water). However, if you got a jig down before the baits hit the water, then more

As the lone jigger, with 17 other bait fishes aboard, at the end of each fishing day (when the rest of the clients had put their rods back in the racks), I press-ganged the EE II's deckies, Marc Blackwell and Josh Muller, into some jig testing for me and they both jumped at the chance. While neither of them had used many jigs in the past, apart from the odd plastic bouncing along the bottom for a reefie, they took to using the vertical metals like a seagull to a chip at the cricket. Before long, they were pulling up all manner of species, including some thumping hump-headed Maori wrasse, which after a few quick photos were all immediately returned to the water as they are a protected species. You know when you're around good anglers, and these boys definitely showed they had the touch.



Spangled emperor just loved jigs, especially at night.

often than not you'd hook up straight away. But also, if you hung in there, your effort would be rewarded.

- Surprisingly, applying a do-nothing jigging action with a metal jig (yes that is a tautology) often resulted in more hits than yo-yoing it up and down on the bottom.
- If you troll long knife jigs out the back when the boat is shifting spots, then the amount of flash they generate will amaze. When I did this, more than likely I'd hook a shark mackerel or a Spaniard, and Bob even stopped the ship so I could land it.
- Jigging metals at night off the back deck is amazingly effective and kept deckies Marc and Josh as well as myself very occupied late into the night after everyone else had turned in. Surprisingly, non-lumo-painted jigs in dark colours worked best of all on the nocturnal red bass and sweetlip population.
- The EE II has acres of deck space to fish from and served as an excellent jigging platform. Anglers to our north living in Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and Japan are very used to jigging from larger vessels and now I can see why. Despite her size, I didn't see one fish lost due to being rubbed off on the side or bottom of the boat.
- The key benefit of being aboard a big boat means that you are less impacted by rougher conditions which are what we experienced on our trip. Due to the size of the EE II, we were able to still travel safely to the edge of the outer Great Barrier Reef and then stay tucked in behind it. This meant we were able to fish through the day

and moor at night in relative comfort.

- Personally, I'd love to see a group of dedicated jiggers aboard the EE II at one time to truly showcase how effective jigging techniques can be on traditional bait-caught species.
- Lastly, if you have the time to send your jigs and other heavy items to the Coral Sea Charter Company in advance of going on your trip, then you can take a whole lot more jigs and pay a whole lot less in excess baggage (particularly true if there are a number of you in your jigging party).

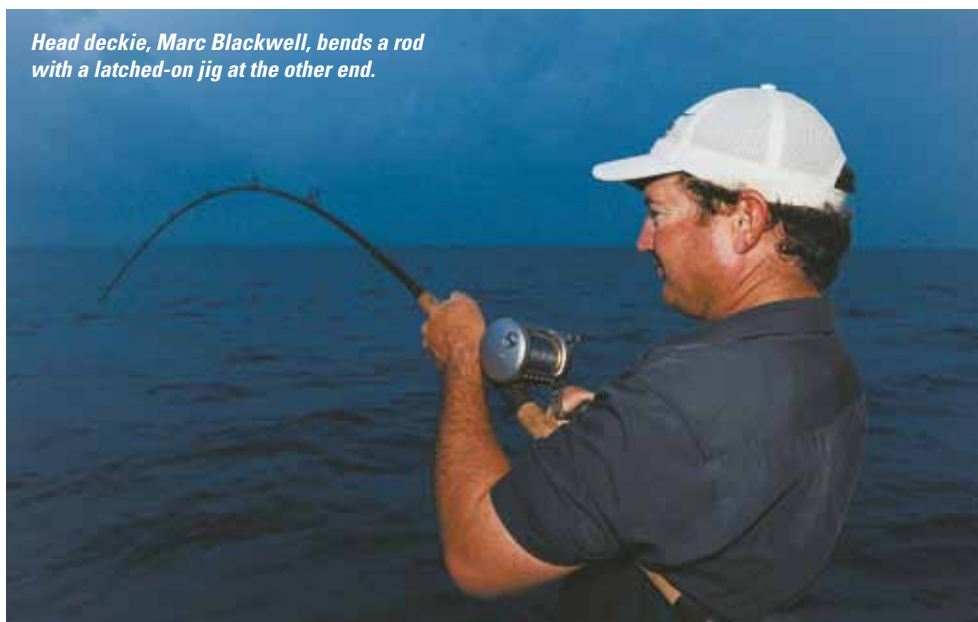
SUMMARY

From the above, you can see that the Coral Sea is truly a jigger's paradise. Unfortunately,

due to some unfavourable weather conditions, we weren't able to get outside the outer reef into deeper water where the big dogtooth tuna lurk, nor comfortably chase Volkswagen-sized GTs on poppers from the dories. None-the-less, this still didn't change the fact that it was the best charter I've been on to date and it was so much more than just about the fishing. And you never know...the luck I was talking about earlier might just get me back out for a second round of jigging the stunning waters of the Coral Sea. *Mick*

*For more information on the Coral Sea Charter Company visit: www.coralseacharter.com.au.

Head deckie, Marc Blackwell, bends a rod with a latched-on jig at the other end.



Somehow Marc managed to land this solid Spaniard on a wire-less-rigged Gulp, as well as extracting it from the clutches of a hungry shark.

