

The Epic Kings of Coromandel

By Bill Bowtell

“Railed As Bro! – Epic Adventures”. My hoodie says it all.

I wear it with pride. And so I should, for I did indeed, “get railed”. It was either that, or plummet over the side of the boat, with rod in hand(s), fish attached, into 110 metres of angry South Pacific Ocean waters. And I can tell you it was bloody close! That fish hit at the 80 metre mark, I had my elbows on the gunwales at 90 and my feet off the deck at 100. I was knocking on the door of Davey Jones’ Locker! The situation only became a stalemate when my son Andrew (after he had finally stopped laughing) grabbed me by the belt and straightened me up, so that I could at least regain some composure and, eventually, control. I won the battle. The fish, a beautifully conditioned yellowtail king of 20kgs, won the war! It was released to fight another day.

“Getting Railed” and “Get a Wind!” were the catch-cries that enticed both Andrew and I across the “Ditch” from sunny Queensland to New Zealand’s north island. In particular Whitianga, on the north east coast of the strikingly beautiful, yet rugged, Coromandel Peninsula in search of what is fast becoming almost local folklore – their brutal, yet bounteous, yellowtail kingfish.

Andrew started looking into the possibilities of heading across about twelve months ago, after checking out some home-shot videos, which appeared on You-Tube. He was “hooked”, to quote a whimsical fishing catch-cry, right from the start. And, being the type of bloke that he is, started to delve further into what options were available to have a go at these fish.

“Epic Adventures” operate out of

Whitianga and Tairua on Coromandel’s north east coast. They have a long established and successful record in New Zealand’s charter boat fishery, targeting primarily kingfish, but also marlin, tuna, broadbill swordfish, hapuka and of course the iconic snapper. They run an all-year-round operation specialising in the target species of the season. Fortunately for both Andrew and I, kingfish are an all year proposition. Contact was made with the company.

Self-organising any trip is a big task, and even though New Zealand and Australia are near neighbours and speak the same language (well almost), there was still a few issues to sort out. The staff at Epic Adventures were great. They discussed the type and style of fishing we wanted to try, the conditions of boat hire, the skippers available and their experience, and, most importantly for us, the time of year best suited for us to maximise our chances of nailing kings on both jigs and baits. Andrew booked five days of fishing in early May. Allowing for favourable weather, we were hoping to get in at least three of these days. And, if we got a chance at the other two, then that would be a bonus.

We checked into our Whitianga accommodation, the Aqua Soleil units, on the Tuesday evening of our arrival where our host, Jacqui, already had the heaters going. It was spacious, warm and more than comfortable. Our excitement was growing as things began to fall into place.

Andrew had scheduled in a layday for the first day after our arrival – Wednesday. This was used to purchase supplies of food and drinks, check the local tackle shops and have a yarn, adjust to our surroundings, and rig our gear. It also provided the opportunity to check-

in with Jen and Roy of Epic Adventures to get an up-to-date forecast of the expected weather conditions over the next week. Disappointingly for us they did not look good, with unseasonal heavy rain and strong winds to 100kph forecasted to come in that evening and continue for at least the next four days, as a series of fronts swept across the Tasman from Australia. It looked an almost total wipe-out.

For any traveller, and especially so with fishers, this is crunch time. For it can mean the end to the whole planned trip and the loss of a lot of time and money. But mostly it is the disappointment of being there and not being able to get a line in the water. It was here that Epic Adventures impressed me with their professionalism, and their concern for the customer.

Before I got off the phone to Jen on that Wednesday, she had taken my NZ contact details, established a daily contact schedule, given me a NZ maritime weather web site to follow and the undertaking that she would be in regular contact with our nominated skipper, Owen, on board “Coro King”. All with the view that, should an opportunity arise to get out sooner than the predicted four days, then Epic would try and make it happen. In return, on the off chance of a vacancy, Andrew booked us in for a further day’s fishing at the back end of our stay. Roy made it happen. We were now hopeful of getting in at least two days of fishing.

The irony of this developing situation? That same afternoon we visited the Whitianga wharf. It was calm and sunny as we watched skippers, Owen on “Coro King” and Chase on “Game Chaser” bring in two totally worn out parties of happy fishermen (and woman), each with their one-per-person bag of big kingfish. They’d had a big day on the kings and were feeling the effects. We were here and the fish were obviously biting. Now for the weather!

The Coromandel Peninsula is a tourist gem, with exotic scenery, wonderful surfing beaches, luxuriant sub-temperate rainforest and quaint coastal villages each with their own unique blend of fine foods and coffee houses. It is a worthwhile point to remember, as fishing can then be incorporated into an extended holiday. We sought out the best that Coromandel had to offer over the next two days as the weather belted Wellington and the lower North Island. Fortunately for us this predicted weather did not quite make it as far north as Whitianga. Although the wind still skipped along at about 37 knots offshore. Day three and the local forecast offered 25 knot winds – fishable?

We got the call from Jen at Fri-



Bill nailed this “rat” 14kg king using a Synit Mac-X 300 PE 4-8 rod and a Jigging Master PE5 reel.

day’s schedule timeslot – day three, Saturday, was a goer if we wanted it. It was explained that the seas were still running at about 2 – 3m so this would not be a full blown offshore trip, but more of an inshore, Mercury Bay, scout around chasing jack mackerel, kahawai and snapper with the possibility of some “rat” kings to 14kgs!! “Rats at 14kgs” – we took it! Owen Willis was our skipper on the Senator RH690 “pontoon” boat “Coro King”, run by Epic. He is one of three professional skippers employed by Epic Adventures to run their fleet of three Senator RH and MH series big alloy boats. During our stay we got to meet the other lads, Chase and Hadyn, and it was obvious from the start that all are very professional in their approach to the fishing, the client and to each other – very important in every circumstance.

We met Owen at the Whitianga ferry wharf at a shade before 7am on the Saturday morning. He already had the boat prepared and the big 250hp Yamaha ticking over. He welcomed us on board, gave us a full safety briefing, asked us if we could handle the boat in case of a serious accident, or man-overboard situation, informed us of communications procedures, then finally, gave us a bit of an idea on how the day would pan out given the current weather forecast. He also asked if we had any medical conditions that he should know about that might prohibit us from fishing. I told him that, “We were Aussies, mate!” (in hindsight, I wish that I had not been so bloody forthright!). With the mooring lines shipped, we slipped out of the harbour.

Getting bait in Mercury Bay is a fast and furious activity. The primary bait for kings is live “jack mackerel” – called yellowtail in most of Australia, or yakkas here in Queensland. They school up around the bait schools of anchovy and are easily caught on a multi-hook bait jig. But, as a school, they move quickly, and the skipper has to be on his game to keep above,

and at pace, with the fish. Owen was good and we soon had thirty, or so, stud-sized “macks” in the 85 litre live-bait tanks fitted port and starboard in the transom of *Coro King*.

We moved north of Whitianga, through Mercury Bay and on towards the Mercury Group of Islands. To say that the coastline of this peninsula is stunning is an understatement. Sheer walls of consolidated sandstone rock rise vertically from the ocean depths, some forming nothing more than a needle-like pinnacle. Others like Red Mercury and Great Mercury are well formed and regular with dense scrub and brush growing on top. But all features have one thing in common – they break and swirl the oceanic currents moving down and along the Coromandel coast, providing uplifts of nutrients which in turn bring the schools of bait fish – and of course, predators such as yellowtail kingfish.

Owen summed up our sea-skills early in the piece as we motored north in giggly, but not unfishable seas. We summed him up in turn, as he expertly handled *Coro King* in the 30-knot wind. Both felt comfortable in each other’s company. We pushed past Red Mercury and out into the shipping channel north of Great Mercury Island and found the kings to be waiting.

Epic Adventures has invested in high-end technology and the big Furuno 14 inch Nav Net TZ Touch on *Coro King* is no exception. Its features are limitless, and in the hands of one very familiar with its operations, no time is wasted fishing unproductive areas. This became very evident when the first patch of kingfish was located along a 25 metre fractured rock face in 100 metres of water. The fish were schooled and sitting above, and along, the wall at between 50-70 metres down. The sea rolled through. *Coro King* held her position over the school under the power of her big 250HP Yamaha motor. Two baits of live “macks” were lowered under the order of, “one five, one seven”. Andrew called “five”. I nominated “seven”. The braided colours, each 10m in length, rolled off the spool.

Our tackle, all supplied by Epic Adventures, was simple, yet technical. Simple in the fact that, at the terminal end it was nothing more than a 10/0 circle hook, 3 metres of 130lb mono trace, a swivel, a running sinker #14, then a further 4 metres of 130 mono trace attached to PE#6 colour banded braided line. Technical to the point that, the circle hook was 28X strong, the swivel, a 98kg tested barrel, the mono leader “Black Magic”, and the knots to hold it all together were locked Uni-Knots at hook and swivel and a bobbin-wound PR knot where mono met braided.



Andrew with a nice 4kg snapper taken during a session using cut baits.



Bill working the big Stella 10000 and Catalina rod to the max. Working threadline gear over the wide gunwales was a bit of a problem.



Andrew with the best fish of the trip – a beautiful 24kg fish taken on the morning of our final day with Epic Adventures.

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Travelling Fisho



Destined to be live baits - jack mackerel in the live bait tanks of "Coro King".

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Then at the business end, two nano-tech Ocean Devil rods, one mated up with a Jigging Master PE5 reel and the other a Shimano Ocea Jigger reel – both capable of fishing 15kgs of drag.

Paradoxical you might say, but then, fishing for brutal fish that have little regard for both tackle and who is trying to capture them, is paradoxical. And you **will find out** if there is a weakness in the system – tackle, or body! These kingfish will find it!

To pull 15kgs of drag is a big ask, but that is what these kingfish had to do **before** we "Got a Wind". When the first fish mouthed the bait and put pressure on the line at 70m it felt as if the rod was going to be pulled

from my grasp. The temptation to strike was there – not a good move with circle hooks, as anyone will tell you. Owen was adamant – "Hold the rod down until the drag begins to slip, then wind, even if it is only half a turn. Get the fish's head!" It was exciting and when the line finally slipped, I "got a wind". Andrew did the same – a double hook-up on our first drop.

The fight was all that we had hoped for and although I have hooked and landed some big, strong fish, including GT's to 29.4kg, nothing bettered the fight being experienced off of the Coromandel Coast on board *Coro King*. The initial burst of 20kgs of kingfish was sheer brute force culminating in a back-breaking stalemate lasting several minutes before any line was gained. Once turned, the real size of the fish was gauged. It fought all the way to the surface.

The gear provided performed beautifully and although we had taken across our own, primarily for jigging, for the cost of getting it there, when EA provided all that is needed, is a point for consideration by anyone intending to travel across. There are conditions in place by Epic Adventures to cover cost of any breakages, damage, or loss, but these are explained at the time of booking.

Andrew and I got in four days of what can only be described as "Epic Fishing". Our total catch was 46 kings (which included a "hog" of 24kgs to Andrew) – 11 of these were taken on jigs. We also scored several Kahawai (whilst chasing bait), 10 snapper to 4kgs, several golden snapper, 3 silver trevally and other "NZ fush!" of which I have no idea of their names. It was, as Andrew describes it, "an epic king of a trip".



Clients working hard on board EA's big Senator RH750, "Epic".



A broad selection of jigs that glide, slide, flutter, shake and glow. This selection accounted for more than a dozen big kings over the four days.

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