I recently experienced four days of fishing heaven in the Tiwi Islands. My friends Kirsten and Tony were posted to a remote indigenous community called Pirlangimpi on the edge of Apsley Strait, which divides Melville and Bathurst Island, and they invited us to fish with them.

Flying into Pirlangimpi airstrip from Darwin took only 30 minutes, but all the pristine snake-like rivers and creeks seemed endless. For an angler, this view was magical. I just knew I was in for a good week of fishing. We got settled at Kirsten and Tony’s house and organised our fishing gear to set off the next day.

DAY ONE

We woke upon day one with a 20 knot southeasterly. Although Tony hadn’t been on Melville Island for very long, he already had the place wired up for all the fishing spots. I had wanted to target mackerel but he said we should chase golden snapper (fingermark) instead, so we headed to a reef in front of Dudwell Creek on the top end of Bathurst Island.

We pulled up and bam, the sounder was alive with fish. Kirsten hooked up on the first cast. The fish pulled heaps of line until finally a big golden snapper was in the landing net, with a Kato Shadow soft vibe hanging from its mouth. At the end of an hour’s fishing we had 10 golden snapper up to 6kg, all on the Kato vibes.

After a couple of hours catching golden snapper, small black jew, javelinfish, blue salmon and a few cod, we decided to chase a barra in the mouth of Dudwell Creek. When we got there we had the welcoming committee to greet us with two big crocs liking the look of tourists in their playground. The barra were slow, but after catching queenfish one after another we decided to head home and cook up a feed of fresh golden snapper. What a great start!

DAY TWO

Day two was all about barra. After a late start we headed down Apsley Strait and fished Fuingatingerrany Creek. The locals call it Police Creek and it’s one of the longest creeks on Bathurst Island. To give you an idea of the sheer scale of this waterway, it’s roughly 40km long with 16 arms coming off it and we fished only two arms in one day. It was fishing heaven.

It started with a cold southeasterly and neap tides, and the barra were quiet. We cast lures at drains, mangrove roots and trolled hardbodies for a couple of cod, tarpon and a few oversize pikey bream.

After a while we come to a deep corner in the second arm with overhanging gum trees. With the side scan on we started to count the grains of rice hanging tight to all the laydown timber. It turned into a hot little barra bite, with soft plastics like Zman Diesel MinnowZ and the Savage 3D Shrimps working well. All up we got 13 barra to 81cm, which was great fun on flathead spin gear.

The boys decided to anchor up and wet some bait while we had lunch under the shade of the gumtree. They ended up catching 14 golden snapper but, surprisingly, no mangrove jacks. I asked Tony why there weren’t any jacks, and he said he didn’t know but that some creeks produced barra and golden snapper together and other creeks produced jacks and barra.

DAY THREE

With the southeasterly easing on day three we decided to chase a few black jew about 10km northwest of Dudwell Creek. These waters are uncharted on the maps and rely on good local knowledge to navigate.

We went to a patch of reef that came up from 15m to 8m, and fished it the hour before and after high tide. We got slammed in the first 30 minutes, and got four bust-offs between us. Black jew pull some serious drag and definitely pull a silver jew backwards (as David Green had warned me). In 8m of water the 4000 twin power and a 10kg spin rod which I use for silver jew on the Gold coast just didn’t cut it. But still we ended up with six black jew that morning between 70-110cm.

This is a truly diverse fishery system and every day we fell in love with it even more. Over our three days of fishing I didn’t see one other boat fishing – a far cry from the busy Gold Coast Broadwater. Kirsten, being the principal of the local school, invited Peter and I to meet the local kids on the last day. I bought them a Sherrin AFL ball and had a quick game with them, which was great fun and topped off an unforgettable week.

LAST SESSION

With only five hours left we decided to hit the local creeks near the boat ramp. These creeks had a different look from the other creeks in the system, with white sand at the mouths and nice clean water. Tony trolled while Peter and I cast lures at fallen trees and mangrove roots. I was first to hook up a nice mangrove jack on a Savage Manic Prey lure, then Peter was on with a feisty barra. We pulled four jacks and three barra from one little creek.
The next creek really produced the goods; we got 17 jacks to 45cm and three barra to 69cm in a single short session. Every fallen tree had jacks on it. They were like a pack of dogs, fighting over our lures. The bigger the lure, the feistier they got.

We called it a day after the hundredth “this is the last cast”. It was a mad scramble back to the boat ramp, then we cleaned the boat, packed our gear away and raced to the airport. In no time we were on the small plane flying back to Darwin, looking down at those snake-like creeks and rivers on Melville and Bathurst islands and thinking “how good is this place!” I was chuffed to experience the indigenous culture of the Tiwi people and the most diverse fishing an angler could wish for.

**Facts**

**TIWI ACCESS**

The Tiwi allow permit-free access to the intertidal waters of the southern sections of the Tiwi and Vernon islands and the eastern side of Melville, as well as the Aspley Strait (including associated rivers and creeks). Anglers in boats can access and fish in these areas provided they don’t go ashore*. If you want land access there are two designated camping areas at Camp Point and Robertson Creek, both of which require a permit. More information is available at www.tiwilandcouncil.com. *

*Regulations are different for tour operators, permanent non-Tiwi residents and their guests.

**Images**

A barra from Fuingatingerrany Creek that ate a Savage 3D Shrimp.
Black Jew pull like freight trains.

We pulled four jacks and three barra from one little creek.

Kirsten with a big golden snapper that ate a Kato Shadow soft vibe.

One of the crocodiles that eyed us off.