

Tropical storms and a cool breeze during the ride home were welcome respite from the sun's searing rays.

COME SAIL AWAY



You don't need the most expensive tackle money can buy to chase sailfish effectively. Light spin tackle was my pick of the crop by week's end.

Words & Photos Dan Trotter

No matter what you have read, or what you are told, live-baiting from a drifting boat for the lightning-fast sailfish has to be experienced to be believed

NESTLED ON A quiet strip on the east coast of the otherwise hectic pace of Malaysia, is Kuala Rompin. Still a sleepy fishing village, this riverside destination has become a Mecca for sailfish-addicted anglers. If you haven't heard of this place before, you clearly need to be reading more fishing magazines!

It is a hot spot for Indo-Pacific sailfish, with anglers from across the world making pilgrimages on to enjoy the amazing action this place can produce. When the days are right, literally scores of sailfish are hooked and released per boat in magnificent surrounds. Expect hot, humid, windless days, and a welcome gentle breeze in the afternoons. The food here can be great, but be prepared to step outside your comfort zone if you really want to experience the tastiest cuisine the region has to offer.

There is almost nothing about sailfish that hasn't been written before, but before you decide you've seen it or read it – take this as a refresher on live-baiting on the drift. I believe this technique offers anglers great options to target a variety of species, in any location predatory fish swim. Remember, attention to the subtle details makes a big difference.

The nuts and bolts

Due to the average size of sailfish being smaller than most of the other species

of billfish, anglers can get away with fishing lighter tackle. This increases the fun and sensitivity. Fishing small live-baits on the drift is also somewhat finesse and for this reason outfits suited to fishing 15–24kg (30–50lb) braid are ideally suited for the job. Select graphite rods with fast-action tapers from 1.82–2.43m (6–8') long, built with quality guides and components. Outfits can be either threadline or overhead and many anglers on our trip, myself included, used the same outfits employed for medium jigging work in Australian waters. Due to the speed of the sailfish, threadline reels were better suited in my opinion, as were slightly

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longer rods, as the faster retrieve of the threadlines meant you could keep up with a sailfish charging back at the boat easily and a longer rod provided greater control on the fish when they went aerial. The usual downside of longer rods – the strain they place on the angler during extended fight times – was negligible, as most battles were no longer than 10–15 minutes. Reels



Glassed-off conditions were the norm every day. Notice the longboat style of fishing vessel and the shaded deck.

for the job need to be of superior quality, with suitable drags and the capacity to hold a minimum of 300m of the selected braid's line class. Note here that if you are fishing this technique in waters where other species of billfish or other species of gamefish are likely to be encountered, fishing light with a long rod may not be the best option for the possible target species.

Setting up the drift

Setting the drift in any location requires a bit of local knowledge, or decent charts on the chart-plotter, or both! Once you have determined the area you plan to fish, stop nearby while you perform final checks on the tackle and the rigs, and take a look at the chart-plotter and the trail. Now head back up-drift a considerable distance and set your baits. In my local waters, drifts can be 2–3km long if the prevailing conditions are right. Don't

OCEAN BLUE AND KUALA ROMPIN

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The accommodation is comfortable and set in idyllic surrounds, the staff friendly and helpful and the boat crews are experienced, fun, full of character and ever so welcoming.

To book a trip to Kuala Rompin contact the head office in Sydney;
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Life-long mates can often be made through fishing adventures in far flung destinations.



assume that predatory fish, particularly billfish, are just going to be in one location. What I like to do is set up the live-baits, and then depending on the terrain we are drifting over, engage in another form of fishing. This works particularly well on days when the drift is relatively slow - say around half to one-knot per hour. When we come up on known snapper haunts I like to cast soft plastics ahead of the drift if over deeper reef patches or broken reef areas. Dropping a baited paternoster rig to the bottom can account for a range of quality table species. In deeper water when drifting across hard reef with substan-

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tial vertical rise, dropping a jig to the bottom or even a live bait can produce welcome additions to the day's outings.

The spice of life

Live baits come in many shapes and colours. It doesn't matter where you are in Australia or the world, there are some baits that work better most days, while other baits work better every now and then. In Kuala Rompin there was a plethora of small live baits to be had.

The common Indian mackerel, small slimy mackerel, as well as small pink reef fish, which seemed to be a favourite, too. One keen Aussie angler decided to try a 'grinner' despite protests from the boatmen - and you guessed it, minutes later he was hooked up to a healthy sailfish, cartwheeling across the mirror of the mid-morning South China Sea. I guess the point is, when fishing live-baits, not only the tried and tested are always best. Legal snapper are recognized as great baits in our local waters and nannygai have been used to great effect for yellowfin tuna for decades. So provide options if available; you might be surprised with the results.

There are a number of ways to pin a live bait for drifting, if the bite is fast and furious, simply pin the livey through the nose or shoulder (above the lateral line) with the appropriate-sized hook and drift it back. If the day is a bit slower, it is worth taking the time to bridle-rig the bait. This will keep it swimming and active for longer. The size of the baits and the target species you expect to encounter will dictate your hook selection. If targeting billfish it is a good idea to use circle hooks. Whether you choose offset or straight is a matter of personal opinion. Personally, I like straight circle hooks. The gauge will be proportional to the size of the bait and the breaking strain



A medium sailfish is quickly lifted high in elation. The slime from all billfish can cause quite a rash and an irritating sting, be aware of this.

Circle hooks are a must in Kuala Rompin; all sailfish must be release by law.



of the line you are fishing with. Larger baits and heavier line will require larger hooks and heavier gauge.

Setting the baits

Once the baits are hooked up and allowed to swim away from the boat, it is key they do not get tangled. To increase chances of predatory fish finding your delicious offerings, set baits at various distances from the boat and at different depths. From what I observed in Rompin, the deepest bait was closest; set approximately 10m deep at a distance of about 10m, then the next at 7m deep and about 15m distance, then the third and final at 5m deep and 20m distance. The water we were fishing in was never any deeper than 30m and often shallower than 20m. If you are fishing in deeper water where the drift is slightly faster, it is worth setting the baits deeper and having the shallowest bait closest. It may also be worth adding some weight to keep the bait down should the drift cause the baits to lift through the water column. Importantly, the reels are fished in freespool. On threadline outfits, balloons are tied around the foregrip to clip the gel-spun line under. This simply pulls out when a sailfish grabs the bait and races off with it. Unless you are fishing for

yellowtail kingfish, GTs or other dirty-fighting fish, fish your baits in freespool or with the bail arm open, allow the fish to race off and swallow the bait before engaging the gears and lifting slowly to set the hook.

Obviously the methods and techniques for chasing sailfish are as diverse

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as the locations in which these fantastic fish can be located. Trolled skirts, hard-bodied lures and even poppers can prove productive, and daisy-chain teasers are commonly utilised to bring inquisitive sails to the boat. Sails put up a spectacular account of themselves – leaping, high-flying acrobatics that will test the angler's skill and the tackle he or she has chosen to employ. Locating sailfish hot spots is sometimes difficult, but Kuala Rompin is certainly an internationally renowned sailfish hot spot, while the warm waters of the Northern Territory and Western Australia have great numbers of these fish, too. Get online or on the phone and see what all the fuss is about for yourself.



PRO TIPS

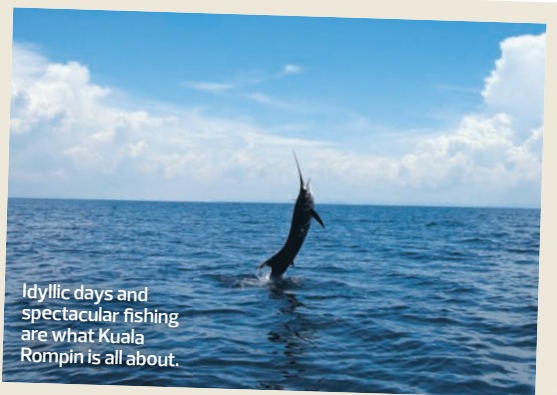


SETTING SAIL

- Setting the hook – when live-baiting with a circle hook or J-hook, never strike hard. Greater success will always be had by lifting strongly and gently and allowing the hook to find its place. Striking hard more often than not simply pulls the bait and hook out of the fish's mouth.
- Fighting the fish – once a fish is hooked, try and feel what the fish is doing. There is no point in winding like a man possessed if the fish is simply taking line off the reel. If you're in close quarters to structure with a fish looking to find its home – for sure put the brakes on, but relax, enjoy the moment and learn to read the signs of how the fish is behaving.
- Swimming billfish prior to release – if you plan to release a billfish you have hooked and brought to the boat, it is imperative (no matter how hot the bite!) that you respect the fish you have just caught and are about to release by swimming it with the boat in gear. The major criticism of all the Australian anglers of the trip to Kuala Rompin was that the fish were not swum for long enough. Try swimming the fish till colour returns to its flanks, a tail beat can be sensed and the strength of the fish's jaw returns. If you have already caught a few, don't lift the fish from the water for a picture, keep it submerged and swim it.
- Local techniques – ask lots of questions, and watch the locals closely. Whenever you are away from your home waters, don't assume the technique you use works best. Sure it may, but be open to learning new techniques – that's part of the joy of fishing anyway, isn't it?



On the trip we went on, there were 15 anglers from all across Australia. The first sailfish for the trip has angler Ken Elliot all smiles.



Idyllic days and spectacular fishing are what Kuala Rompin is all about.