

DIVING AND CAMPING ADVENTURE

Words & Images by Ollie Craig

Boat camping has been something I have wanted to do by myself for years. I had camped out on my friends' larger boats but never by myself on my own little boat. My ex-surf lifesaving IRB, which I have been using for a dive boat for years, has a scupper draining system (excellent in its own right), yet it doesn't enable me to sleep in a dry boat at night – water flows back in.

Finally, after years bouncing around roughing it on the IRB, I recently managed to get into my dream little dive boat, a Senator IS400 Spearfisher – an aluminium pontoon boat setup specifically for Spearos, and yes, it stays dry at night!

After a few day trips on the new boat getting used to the setup, including around the Hen and Chick Islands and out to the Aldermen Islands, I decided it was time for an overnight boat-camping adventure. I loaded the boat and wagon up with everything to make it a comfortable night out and headed towards the Coromandel Peninsula where I would dive and camp around the beautiful Mercury Islands, which offer so many options in all wind and swell directions.

I arrived at the boat ramp around midday greeted with barely a breath of wind, flat-calm seas, and blue skies. The new 4m boat, fitted with a 40 hp four-stroke, absolutely flies and before long, I was anchored up at the Merc's and in the water with my speargun, hunting for dinner.

I took a few condiments and supplies along with me, but the plan was to gather some fresh seafood as the main ingredient, which, if we're honest, was basically a given in a country such as New Zealand, and especially where I am diving – provided I'm not too fussy.

New Zealand has a vast array of fish



species, but most of us Kiwis turn our noses up at fish such as silver drummer, parore, goatfish, wrasse, leatherjacket, and more. While I have been guilty of this myself, I have started to try different species, such as leatherjacket (sold as creamed fish in markets) and goatfish, and they are lovely eating. Yes, there ARE fish other than snapper in our waters!

Species aside, while spearfishing, it's not just about the fish to eat but the fun of the hunt (which applies to rod fishing also). This, in turn, does lead to most of us spearos thriving on the hunt for snapper, which is generally a very smart, skittish fish, darting at the first sight of a diver, especially the bigger and older they get.

I hunted along a weed edge,

where the kelp beds meet the sandy bottom, which is a great place to hunt fish, especially john dory and boarfish – my targets on this day. I dove up and down along big stretches of weed edge but had no luck; the whole place seemed abnormally quiet. Just as I was almost back at the boat to change spots, I noticed a sleeping snapper below on the rocky bottom of a small cove. This is common behaviour around midday: after feeding and being active in the morning, they often move into relatively shallow water, basically 'sleeping'. Some shade in a gutter or kelp helps, especially for finding the larger fish. With my speargun loaded, I quietly made a duck dive and sunk down to the fish, which was about five

metres below me. I don't normally shoot fish when there are rocks directly behind it, as this is a sure fast way to blunt the end of your spear or, worse, bend the spear. However, as it had been a very quiet day on the fish so far, and it was a reasonably nice specimen, I decided to take the shot anyway, sending the spear directly through the fish's brain – lights out. Upon close inspection of the spear shaft following the shot, it's both blunted AND bent. Great Job, Ollie! Luckily I bought an extra speargun and spare shaft.

I moved around a few more spots with nothing but smaller snapper seen before heading out wider to a small rock that usually produces kingfish and almost guaranteed kahawai, trevally, and

koheru year-round. The current was pushing hard, so I decided the safest option for me as a solo diver was to 'drift dive', which involves connecting the rear of my speargun to the bow of the boat and drifting through the schools of fish. This approach allows me to dive effortlessly without fighting the current constantly, which in turn lessens my breath-hold time and gets my heart racing too much. As I approached the rock, the whole area was surrounded by workups on the surface. I slowly cruised over the largest school and got as close as I could before hitting the kill switch and peeling over the side. The current was moving very fast, and I needed to dive quickly before the ever-moving school of fish evaded me.

Below me were hundreds of large kahawai, loads of Koheru, and small trevally in the mix, as well as two-spot demoiselles, and more. I dove down, looking for the big green back of a kingfish below. They usually hunt just below the thermocline where the clean water meets the dirtier water, using this to their advantage with the colour scheme on their bodies. After a few dives and no luck spotting kingfish, I lined up a nice kahawai and sent the shaft straight through the fish. I am stoked; that's my raw fish entree for dinner! Once I made it back onto the boat, I realised how far I had drifted – good decision to be connected to the boat, not anchored.

With fish for dinner sorted and



still having the whole next day to hunt fish to take home with me, I headed into the shallows to hunt for some crayfish, the last piece of the puzzle for my seafood banquet dinner! With the sun slowly starting to lower in the sky, I went back to an area I had found crays previously. Time was running out, and I still needed to get my camp set up before dark. After a few dives, I got onto the crays, finding a nice crayfish in a deep crack alongside a few others. I plucked it out, and while not big, it was legal, and I knew it would taste amazing! With the cray for dinner found so quickly, I decided to push a little further and scout new terrain and was rewarded with two more beautiful crayfish. I returned to the boat and motored to a nice, secluded cove sheltered from wind and swell.

I changed out of my wetsuit into some warm clothes and proceeded to cook up a feast. I started with raw kahawai dipped into soy sauce with wasabi and a

squirt of lemon juice. Incredible! Next up, I pan-fried the snapper with butter and salt and used it to make fresh snapper sandwiches with salad and mayo. Simple and delicious. I finished the meal with what I call my dessert: a beautiful cray tail cooked in butter and salt. Again, simple, which is how I think most seafood is eaten best.

With a belly full of freshly gathered kaimoana, I set up a makeshift tent using my hunting fly over the boat. The boat was dry, I had my blow-up air mattress and sleeping bag, and it was a beautiful night on the boat as the sun dropped and greeted me with a glorious sunset. The evening was stunning, with clear, dark skies. The stars were bright too, thanks to minimal light pollution, and I lay there warm under my tent looking at the stars watching satellites buzz over and the odd shooting star. Life felt good.

The next day I woke up before sunrise, and with a quick brekkie, I was back in the water

at daybreak with the aim to spear some fish to take home with me. Still struggling on the snapper, I headed to another favourite kingfish haunt of mine. After a few dives in very fishy conditions and clean water, a few kingies started to appear deeper down, but they were acting very cautiously. I also spotted a large bronze whaler shark, which is a usual sight in most hotspots around the North Island these days. I carried on diving down into the schools of baitfish, again drift diving with my boat. I was just about to call it quits and try another spot when two kingfish came into range, and I got my chance, sending a shaft into the head of one of the kingfish. I knew I needed a good shot, ideally a kill shot (which is why I aimed for the brain) but I was unsuccessful and the fish screamed off into deeper water. The fish was at full power, and even with a good holding shot I was pulling with all my strength while kicking my fins hard to

stay on the surface. But the fish continued to power down, dragging me under each time.

Then, my fears became reality, the big bronze whaler came charging in, sensing the struggling fish, and it wasn't long before it swallowed the kingfish tail-first and ripped it in half like butter, leaving only a tattered head connected to my spear. I swam desperately for the boat and decide that Tangaroa had spoken – it was time to get out of the water. I didn't listen for long, though, and I tried one more spot before heading home. Once again, I was charged by a big bronze whaler who even tried to have a go at my speargun before finally disappearing. Ok, that's enough.

I headed home, still with two crayfish, half a snapper and half a kahawai, but most of all, another adventure filled with awesome memories and a good break from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.



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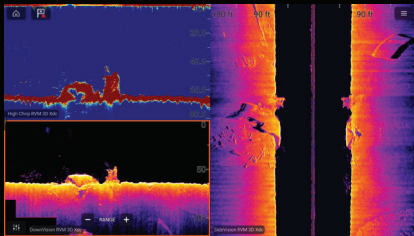
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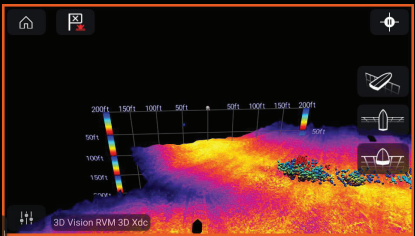


GAMEFISH VIEW – stalking bait

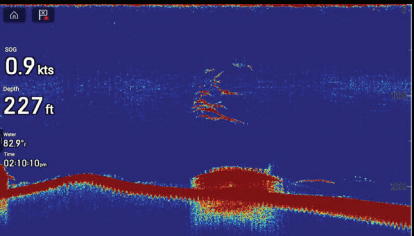
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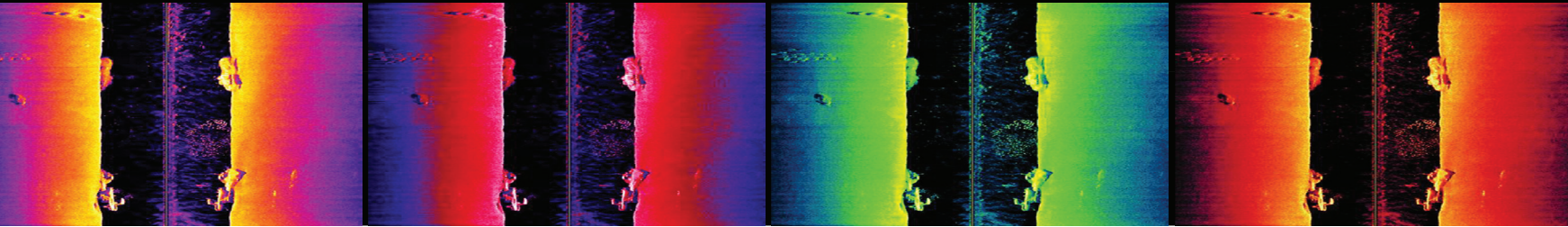


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