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Extreme Trailer Trip

COAST TO COAST PART 3

Tim Mitchell and Jade O'Donovan's eight-month circumnavigation draws to a close as they recap the adventure's highlights and head back home to Geraldton.



By Mark Rothfield
Photography:
supplied



In the driveway of a garden-variety Geraldton home, an Extreme 645 trailerboat now rests – silent, but for the many salty tales told by its paint-chipped patina.

Owners Tim Mitchell and Jade O'Donovan tend to the weeds around it, half-heartedly, while their dog Indie eyes them curiously, as though imploring “What are we doing? We shouldn't have lawn – water is our lawn.”

And there are times when Tim climbs aboard the Extreme and just sits. On the trailer, in the driveway. Not casting for fish but casting his mind back to their remarkable eight-month pilgrimage

P94/95: Rowley Shoals.
Below: Crocodile Creek, Buccaneer Archipelago.



across the depth and breadth of Australia's circumference.

In all, between land and sea, the pair covered 34,000km. From spanning major cities to the remotest regions imaginable, they witnessed the best the country has to offer, both in scenery and in the folk whose paths they crossed.

Then there were the fish. Soooo many fish. “I'm not going to say it was sunshine and daisies the whole time,” admits Tim. “But doing a trip like this has definitely made me a more confident and competent person,” he adds.

“You also get to know each other incredibly well. Jade and I have the same passions and interests, so it was the greatest thing ever.”

DERBY DAYS

In our previous article we left the pair in the far north of WA's jagged coastline, set to explore the Buccaneer Archipelago after departing Derby.

“Jade's uncle encouraged us to stay as long as possible, so we planned the biggest stopover of the trip, 10 nights,” Tim continues. “And we loaded up with 400lt of fuel because it costs \$3.25 a litre out in the islands.”

With the autopilot holding course on a swift run-out tide, the murky water around Derby gradually turned to pristine turquoise.

Strickland Bay was the first stopover and Jade immediately snared a Spanish mackerel, which was followed by a tuna for Tim. A small croc approached and gulped down Jade's next catch, the hook becoming jagged in the croc's mouth.

“We were able to get it out, but it was another good reminder not to swim in these waters,” Jade tells.

Further unexpected hazards loomed when anchoring, as the 9m tidal differential created a dilemma in the narrow estuaries. As Tim explains: “Let out too much scope and you can swing into the bank. If you don't let out enough, you drag.”

“We heard stories of crocs parking themselves onboarding platforms during the night, and people not knowing they're there until morning.”

The area soon produced a wealth of golden snapper (fingermark bream) on jigs. One of Jade's fish also attracted a shark and they had a 30-second stand-off before the shark relented. Fortunately, the fillet was salvageable.

Tim landed the biggest coral trout he'd seen, and the session also yielded large- and small-

mouthered nannygai, giant trevally, black snapper and a variety of cod. All were released.

Sightseeing was also high on the agenda, leading the pair to picturesque Crocodile Creek amidst steep, ruddy canyons. At the end, a 9m ladder led to a waterfall and oasis.

“We tied the boat to the ladder and climbed up, with Indie under Tim's arm. It exposed this beautiful natural waterhole – like a movie scene,” Jade recalls.

“The water seemed fresh, so we grabbed our containers to restock. But when I tasted it later, it was brackish. The saltwater in the pond had obviously settled below the fresh layer.”

This setback turned out to be a blessing as the Extreme crew returned next day. They showered, filled their containers higher upstream, then heard a charter vessel, *Odyssey Expeditions*, approaching.

“Jade and I weren't wearing any clothes, so we quickly dressed and greeted them as they started climbing the ladder,” Tim reveals. “We chatted with Kat, the master of the vessel, about our trip, then met the rest of the crew and passengers.”

Fuel was now dwindling so, on day 11, an incoming tide ushered them homewards.

On the way, their Raymarine sounder lit up and lines were brought out for one last cast. Jade hooked a monster, so big she thought it could only be a shark. Locking up the drag in the shallows, the biggest giant trevally for the trip appeared at the side. It was over 40kg and still very green, but Tim wrangled it by the tail, cutting his hands but landing the fish. A few photos later, the big girl was released. Jade's highlight fish for the trip.



With just 9lt and fumes left in the fuel tank, they pulled back into Derby, having notched 608 unforgettable kilometres in 38 hours of running.

SHOAL GOAL

In Broome, Tim and Jade met up again with the *Odyssey Expeditions* crew who were heading to Rowley Shoals the following day. Some 300km west of Broome, the little-known region comprises a trio of atoll-like coral reefs – Imperieuse, Clerke and Mermaid – and is a diver's Mecca.

“I'd long thought about Rowley and done the calculations, but I didn't think it would be safe heading so far offshore,” Tim says. “We were joking around with Kat and suddenly she asked ‘do you guys want to come?’”

Above: A black jack trevally.
Below: An estuary cod.
Below left: Courtesy of the Kimberley Taxation Dept.





Jade hooked a monster, so big she thought it could only be a shark

Above right: Will this do for dinner, Indie? A blackspot tuskfish.

Above: This giant trevally hit the scales at more than 40kg.

“Straight away I said yes ... if they could tow us out, we’d do it.”

The big catamaran clocked 18 knots during the overnight passage, with Tim checking his ‘baby’ every hour. It towed perfectly, and they finally moored the Extreme in the lee of a sandy knoll.



“As we pulled into Clerke we watched giant trevally swimming around the boat, tuna jumping and sailfish cruising about. It was like I’d died and gone to heaven,” Tim says.

“I match it to the Great Barrier Reef, except the visibility is better. In 65m of water you can still see fish swimming on the bottom – I didn’t even think that was possible.”

Adds Jade: “Most of the area is a fishing sanctuary because, being so far offshore, the fish are now considered a unique species and wouldn’t be able to replenish themselves. But that was fine, because we’re all about catch-and-release and conservation as well.”

Sailfish were active around the southern areas of Clerke Island, the eastern side bore GTs and there were dogfish tuna to the north. The latter particularly excited Tim as he’d never caught one.

“I was a bit out of my league, even though we had a Catch fishing reel with 25kg of drag,” he admits. “We hooked three but there was no possible way of landing them ... they’d peel the line from 40m down to 400, then swim into the reef and cut the line. The power was unbelievable.”

Tim and Jade then headed to the southern side, set a spread of lures and, within a matter of minutes, had a massive sailfish on. While Jade was reeling that in, other sailfish were jumping madly.

At Mermaid, they dived among clown fish, anemones and myriad other characters from *Finding Nemo*. A true paradise.

HEADING FOR HOME

Following a tow back to Broome, Tim and Jade prepped for a road trip to the mining town of Karratha to visit relatives. There, they dived for tropical lobster, blackspot tuskfish, and coral trout.

Fortescue River in the Pilbara region came next, a popular launching spot for the Montebello Islands. Tim and Jade were told of places closer in and, between Navionics and Google Earth, they identified suitable anchorages for three nights at sea.

Barrow Island became the scene of a rare miss and mistake for Tim.

“I’d never speared a red emperor before and I spied one under the boat. I pulled the trigger, but the spear just fell out of the gun in slow motion and tapped the fish so lightly that it swam away.

“I’d been so excited that I’d forgotten to load the gun!

“Jade was shaking her head in disbelief as she swam up to fish and shot it herself, and she laughed her head off while cleaning it. I’ll never make that mistake again ...”

From there they ventured to Exmouth to celebrate Jade’s birthday, and all she wanted as a present was to catch dolphin fish. They headed out with a local mate and pulled up at a FAD. Jade sent her cast towards it and the water erupted around the lure – a massive dolphin fish was hooked, giving an acrobatic display as she reeled it aboard, a broad grin lighting her face. It was released, along with five others.

Next they spread some lures, targeting blue marlin. After a few hours of trolling, it was battle stations.

“We had it on for about 15 minutes and it was continually jumping, and way, way bigger than we were prepared for,” Jade describes. “Eventually it came off, but just to have it on the line was enough.”

Farther south, Coral Bay lived up to its title. At a shark sanctuary close to shore they found 50 or so baby reef sharks nestling in the shallows, beckoning Jade to swim with them.

A four-day weather window then enabled a visit to Carnarvon. The islands off the town, Bernier and Dorre, were leprosy compounds in the 1920s and ‘30s and the anchorage is known as



Hospital Bay. Today, they’re inhabited mostly by sharks and opportunistic cobia.

Tim donned a mask, plunged his head over the side of the Extreme and shot a cobia to make up for his red emperor mishap. He also happened upon a school of squid and speared some calamari for dinner.

A clever new tactic deployed at this stage was to drop a Shark Shield down on a weight belt at

Above and below: It’s sailfish time.





half depth. Once a fish was hooked, they'd bring the shield up at the same time, which greatly reduced the number of fish lost to the marauders.

Passing through their new hometown of Geraldton, they grabbed some crays for Christmas during what's known as the 'whites migration' – a



Above: Jade's birthday wish realised, an Exmouth dolphin fish.

Right: Snorkelling a WA coral reef.

synchronised moult when the lobsters change their shell colour to a creamy-white and transition to deeper waters.

All that remained to finish the circumnavigation was Esperance. Although, en route, they caught another bucket list species – a WA dhufish, off Busselton.

"Pulling into Esperance, it was just a really good feeling," Tim reveals. "Knowing we'd achieved something that few people have attempted.

"Obviously we wanted to put the boat into our old waters, and we got among the nannygai at our favourite spot. It was a really nice way to finish the dream."

Both couldn't believe how quickly the time had passed, despite living cheek-and-jowl in a small boat. It felt more like eight weeks than months.

For now, for their legion of social media followers, we say so long ... and thanks for all the fish. Already, though, the seeds of another, even longer trip are being sown – a victory lap of sorts, despite the trip confirming in Tim and Jade's view that 'West is best' when it comes to fishing.

To quote Tim: "Coming home has been a big change – just having so much room – but the Extreme still feels like home. As daunting as it was at the start, the only adventure you regret is the one you didn't take, and we're so glad we took this one."

DOLLARS AND SENSE

What price an eight-month, all-inclusive round-Australia adventure for two people and their dog? Well, aside from the cost of their rig (around \$120K) the answer may surprise those who assumed that Tim and Jade had inherited a fortune or won Lotto.

They averaged just \$1000 a week, or under \$1 per kilometre.

For Tim, the trip was long service leave at half-pay and annual leave. The rest was hard work and concerted saving by both. They're adamant that anyone can do it, with careful planning and by utilising the advice of locals.

Using an app to find the cheapest fuel in each area they visited helped, as did eating their catch. Their Extreme 645, Toyota Prado, Yamaha 200, Raymarine electronics and Easytow boat trailer all proved exceptionally reliable as well.

Boat

Trips:	63
Total distance:	7100km
Fuel used:	5615lt
Cost:	\$7983
Engine hours:	442

Vehicle

Total distance:	27,000km
Fuel used:	4450lt
Cost:	\$6586

Ancillary

Service/maintenance:	\$7000
Food:	\$4500
Accommodation:	\$2000
Alcohol:	\$4000

TOTAL	\$32,069
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Tim and Jade's Facebook and Instagram updates at @hereweareaustralia have netted more than 15,000 keen followers, who can continue to join them as they explore the Abrolhos Islands on Geraldton's doorstep. It's Australia's newest national park, with 122 islands accessible by boat ... so watch this space. [CM](#)

Above: Crays for Christmas.

Below: A good rig will get you anywhere.

