



Above: Below: Scott Ward with a thumper red taken on soft plastic.

Opening Spread: Sunrise on the Macleay River bar at low tide and a 10 knot westerly keeping everything nice and shipshape.

Below: Hooked and ready to rumble. The action can get pretty hot when the big bills turn up close to shore at South West Rocks.



Mike O'Neil's

South West Rocks, NSW

Fish photos appearing in this article: by Scott Ward, Brian Perry and Brian Stranlend.

Introducing one of the most famous fishing grounds on the East Coast, and certainly one of the most charismatic. For Mike O'Neil, this is virtually 'home base' and in this special report, he does a sterling job of providing readers with a 'heads-up' on this terrific adventure holiday destination . . .

Mike O'Neil's SWR

Few holiday destinations on Australia's eastern coastline can boast the diversity of fish species available at South West Rocks (SWR). It is truly a fishing Mecca.

From line-burning black marlin to reel-screaming wahoo; from flashing Spanish mackerel to street-fighter cobia and a whole swag of reef species in between, this tantalisingly beautiful seaside community nestled on NSW's Mid North Coast has it all, and then some.

But best of all, small black marlin can be taken in number less than a kilometre from shore, directly off Trial Bay Gaol.

During mid December through late February, small boat operators can foot it with the big boys to tag a marlin without the worry of being caught out by foul weather while fishing wide on the Continental Shelf, some 14 nautical miles run from the

Scott Ward with a brace of cod destined for the table.



bar.

However, once there, the shelf will produce much bigger specimens of blue and black marlin.

Basking in a temperate climate on the fringe of Trial Bay, near the mouth of the Macleay River, SWR is a comfortable five-and-a-half hour drive (some 470 kilometres) from Sydney or Brisbane. It is reached by turning off the Pacific Highway at its southern approach at Kempsey (35 km) or

Clybucca from the north (12 km).

This remarkable fishing ground is fed by the mighty Macleay River, renowned for its wild bass fishery and canoeing opportunities. Its catchment stretches way back in the mountains behind Kempsey and collects water high in the ranges from as far as Walcha and Ebor before funnelling it through steep, rocky gorges and farming country to join with the Pacific Ocean at SWR

Its diverse estuary system is home to some very big mulloway, xos flathead, whiting and bream and the luderick run (June through July) is clearly marked on all estuary anglers' calendars.

Planning a fishing holiday to SWR is easy, just choose what species you most want to target and connect with the best times listed below:

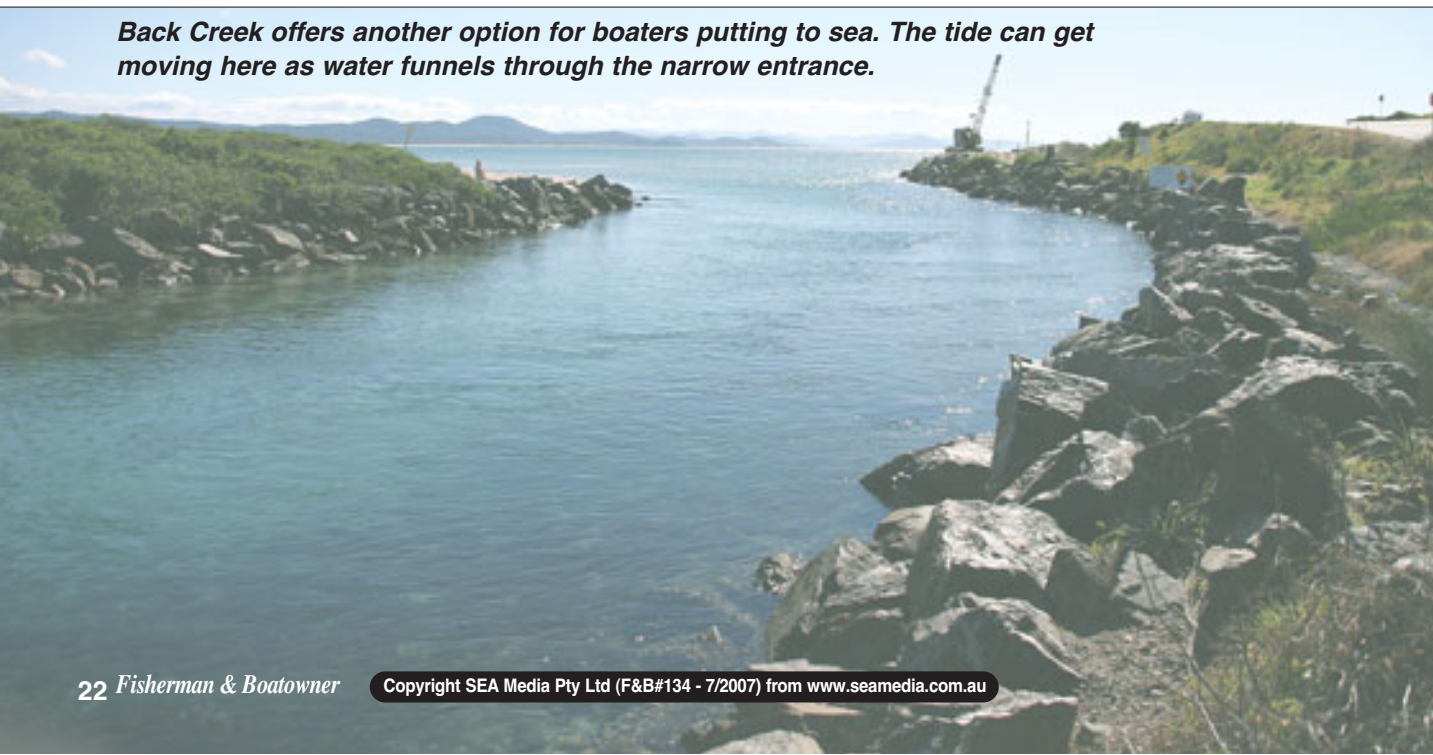
May through November you can chase a wide variety of reef species such as snapper, pearl perch, morwong, pig fish, Venus tusk, trag, cod, jewfish and longfin perch.

November through May is sport fishing time with Spanish Mackerel, dolphin (maui mauhi) kingfish, yellowfin tuna, wahoo and cobia, marlin (blue, black and striped) and sailfish.

Big yellowtail kingfish ranging up to 30kg turn up off SWR from July and usually hang around until early December. During this period, most of the action centres on Black and Fish rocks.

Poppers and jigs worked in the wash around the rocks and live baits account for most fish. While the bigger fish seem

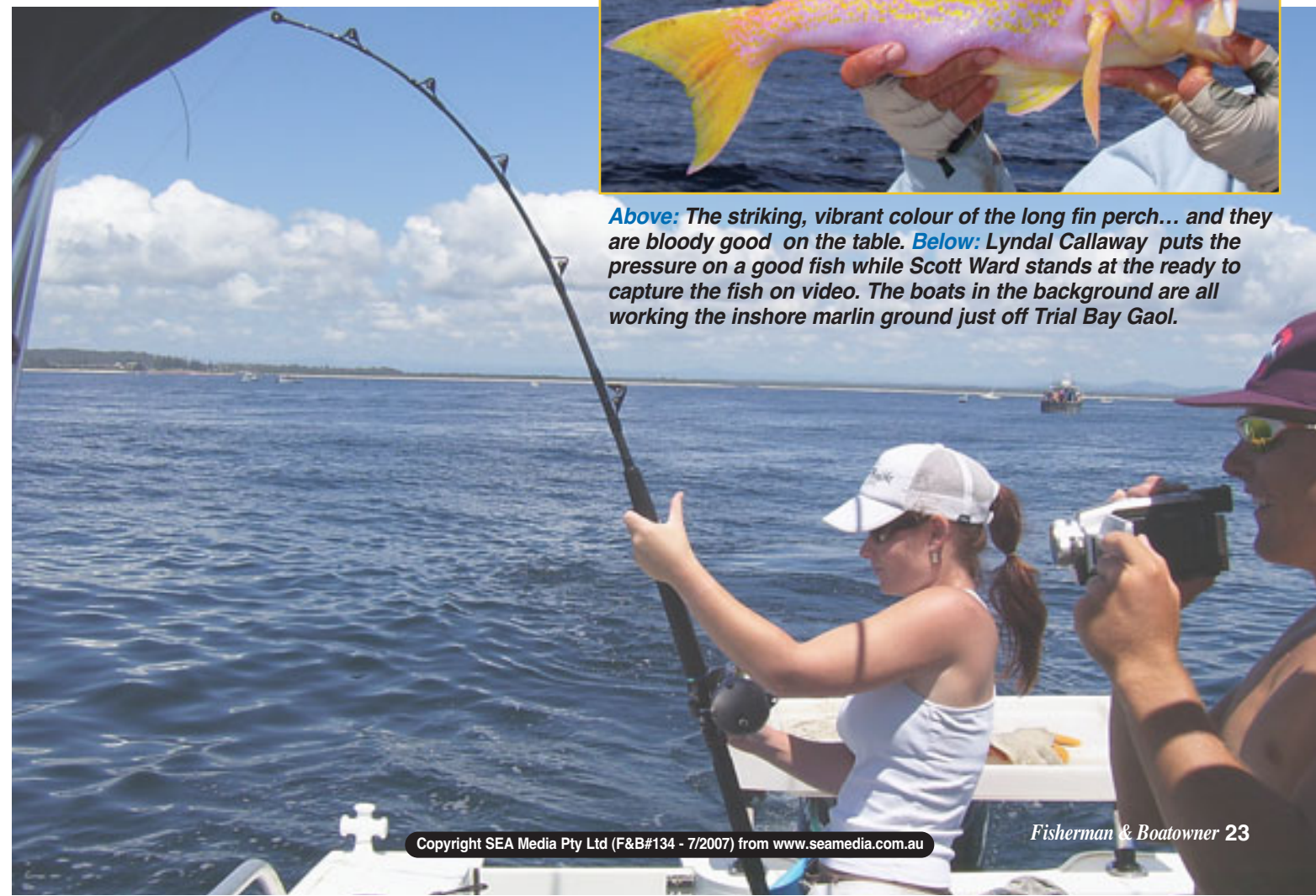
Back Creek offers another option for boaters putting to sea. The tide can get moving here as water funnels through the narrow entrance.

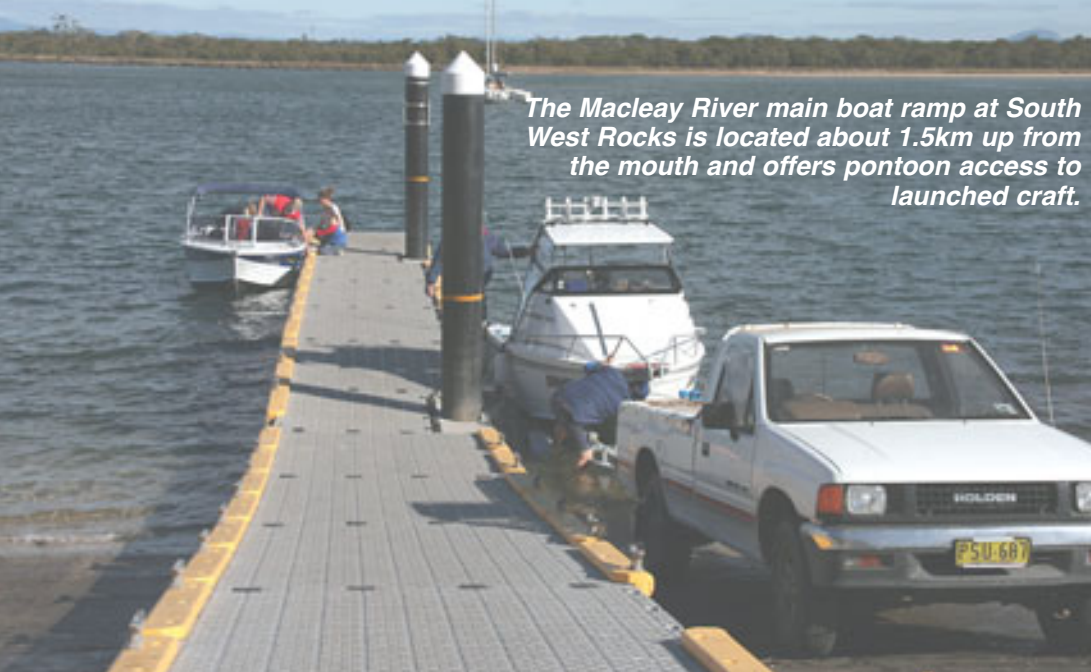


Scott Ward cradles a hefty black kingfish (cobia) taken just a few hundred metres off the Trial Bay Gaol shoreline, where the small black marlin run. (That's Trial Bay Gaol in the background).



Above: The striking, vibrant colour of the long fin perch... and they are bloody good on the table. **Below:** Lyndal Callaway puts the pressure on a good fish while Scott Ward stands at the ready to capture the fish on video. The boats in the background are all working the inshore marlin ground just off Trial Bay Gaol.

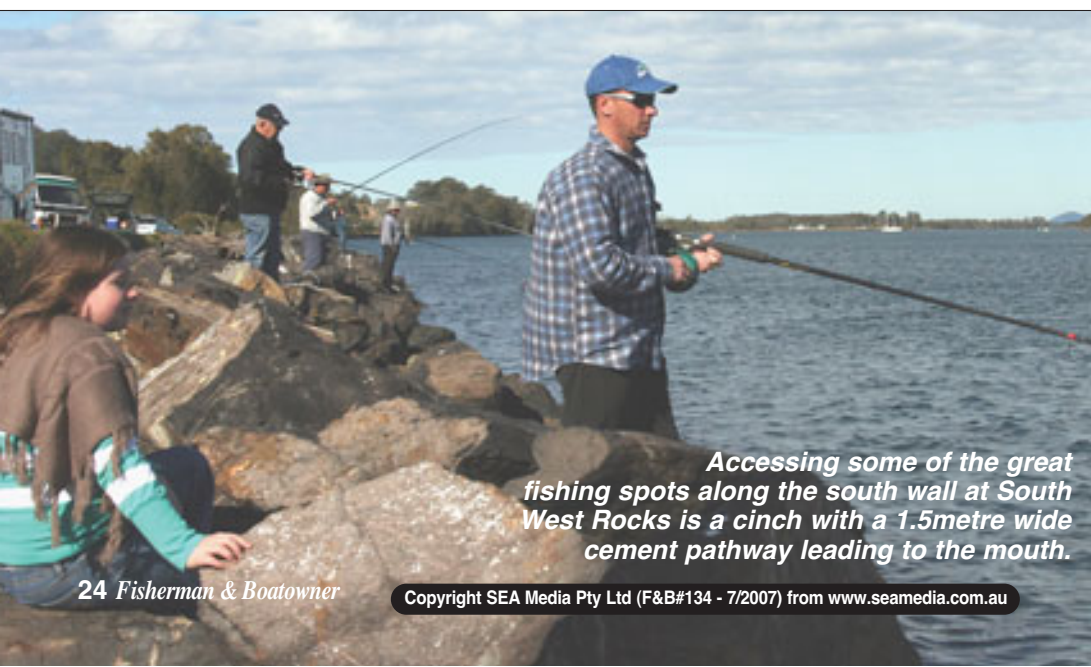




The Macleay River main boat ramp at South West Rocks is located about 1.5km up from the mouth and offers pontoon access to launched craft.



Good fish cleaning facilities are available at Back Creek and the Macleay River main ramp.



Accessing some of the great fishing spots along the south wall at South West Rocks is a cinch with a 1.5metre wide cement pathway leading to the mouth.

Mike O'Neil's SWR

to head for greener seas nearing Christmas, small kingies of two to five kilos can be found at the two rocks all year round.

Baitfish congregate just off the gaol and around two tanker buoys in Horseshoe Bay, west of the gaol.

Most anglers heading out for a day chasing big fish stop off at the buoys first to fill up the live bait tank. If the slimies are scarce or don't want to play ball, they head for the gaol.

Apart from the impressive line-up of sport and game fish species, there are bream, tailor, mulloway, drummer, groper, snapper, pearl perch, parrot, morwong cod, Samson and flathead for anglers chasing a feed of good table fish.

The best 'all-round' fishing period for the average angler who just wants a week of 'full on' fishing, but is prepared to try his/her hand at anything, is December to June.

Main access to outside fishing grounds is through the Macleay River bar or Back Creek. A responsible approach to both these areas is needed.

All boat captains are urged to log on with Trial Bay Coastal Patrol.



The Macleay bar can get quite nasty on a run-out tide. And around at Back Creek, a close watch needs to be kept on the tides to make sure there is enough water to exit and return. This is a narrow waterway and as such the tidal run can make things a tad difficult at times.

Bar and weather information is available from South West Rocks Coastal Patrol. Make sure you log on before leaving enclosed waters and log off on return (27Mhz channel 91 and VHF 16).

For fishers who like to keep their feet on firm ground, there are productive beaches and headlands that fish particularly well in autumn and winter.

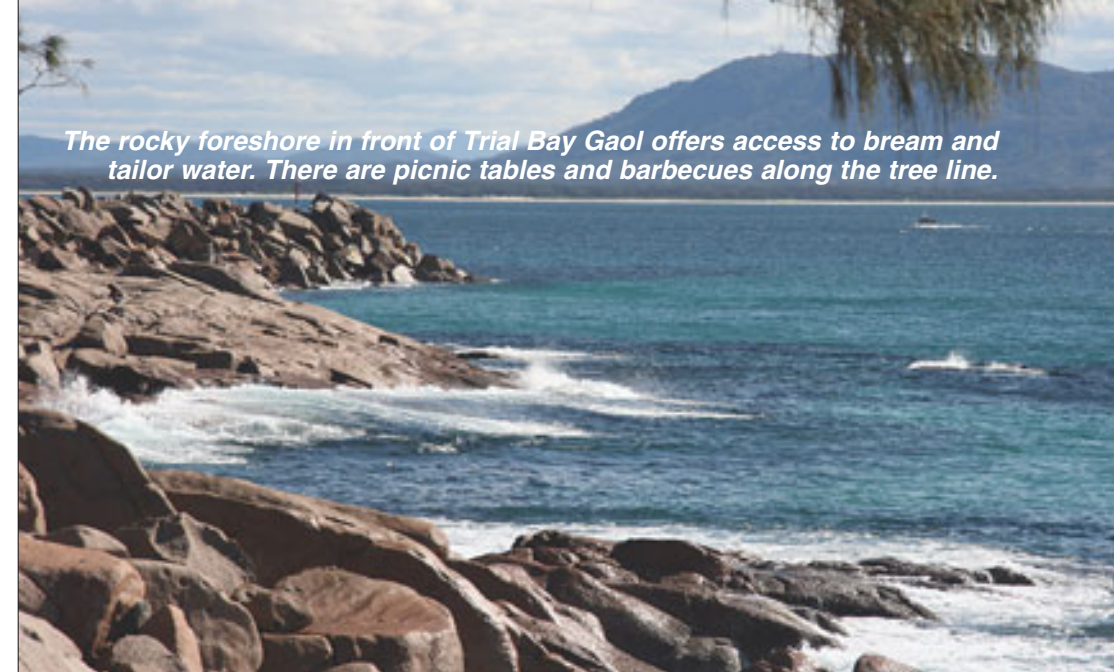
Beaches include Horseshoe Bay, Back Beach, Main Beach, Trial Bay, Little Bay, Gap Beach, North Smoky and Smoky Beach.

On the northern side of the Macleay bar, Grassy Head beach stretches some seven kilometres to Grassy Headland. It is prime mulloway fishing territory.

Mulloway, like bream and whiting, can be caught all-year-round.

Pipis and worms can be found on most beaches. They tend to be more plentiful in the softer sand areas, free of shell and grit.

Best time for worming is



The rocky foreshore in front of Trial Bay Gaol offers access to bream and tailor water. There are picnic tables and barbecues along the tree line.



Smoky Cape Lighthouse can be accessed from either end of a link road, which runs from the South West Rocks approach road to Trial Bay Gaol. It is only a few minutes drive and is well sign-posted.



Horseshoe Bay Caravan is situated right on the waterfront and offers magnificent views.

Mike O'Neil's SWR

half down to low tide with larger king worms frequenting the flats at dead low tide.

Kempsey and neighbouring Nambucca and Bellingen shires share a three-shire beach permit system.

Visitors can organise through any of the three councils for a permit to access designated beaches in each shire. Only vehicles registered for road use comply.

The north and south Macleay break-walls are popular land-based fishing haunts for all manner of anglers. As well as offering relatively safe fishing platforms, given the right tides and times they also produce a good variety of fish.

A night on the wall provides opportunity to tangle with big mullet and some cracker bream. Flathead and whiting are prospects early morning and late evening.

During January and February, you might even tangle with some hefty cobia and, although their numbers are not sufficient to make them a specific target, mangrove jack.

Four-wheel-drive access to the north wall is via Grassy Head beach. Many anglers make it an overnight trip to catch prime times of dusk and dawn.

I have spent many nights there, chasing jew with live baits and light-lining for bream. The wall is a perfect platform for casting unweighted pilchard baits into the run-out tidal current. By walking the wall, you can



South West Rocks and the Trial Bay area is steeped in maritime history.

Trial Bay was named after the brig *Trial*, which was stolen by convicts attempting to escape to South East Asia in 1816.

Unfortunately for the convicts, they were not good mariners and Trial went down in the bay and the wreck was not discovered until 1817.

There was no trace of the convicts and authorities considered they had all died from either starvation or at the hand of local Aborigines.

The *Woolloomooloo* came to grief in Trial Bay in 1864 and a monument to

those that drowned is set on the South West Rocks headland.

A decision to construct a deep water harbour at Trial Bay and a break-wall during the 1870s led to the establishment of the gaol and the prisoners were used to construct the rock wall.

Unfortunately the force of Mother Nature was underestimated and the grand plan fell into the sea along with the partially constructed break-wall.

Established in 1896, the township of South West Rocks evolved from a new mouth to the Macleay River being established. A Pilot's Station was built in 1902.

To learn more about the area, make sure you check out the Tourist Information Centre at the Boatman's Cottage, located in Ocean Drive - open 10am - 4pm. The Cottage is also a museum with an interesting display of the maritime history of the local region.

- Mike O'Neil

When it comes to bagging big fish, Scott Ward has a well earned reputation for being one of the best fishos around and with catches like this, it's no wonder.



Liam Williams loves his fishing, especially when the day's catch turns out to be a toothy critter like this solid mackerel.



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keep pace with your bait and cover a heck of a lot of very fishy ground.

There is nothing quite like ripping out a good fish and slapping the fillets straight into the waiting fry pan. *(Whenever I go fishing, I always carry a small gas stove, frypan, some flour, olive oil, limes, salt and pepper.)* Ah! I can even smell fresh frying as I write. A cold beer to wash it down and I'm in paradise.

While vehicles are not permitted on the southern break wall, it is possible to drive a good way out on a track running alongside the wall. But be warned, during high tides, water does seep through the wall into some of the low-lying areas and I have seen vehicles parked in a foot of water.

The southern wall has a concrete path about 1.5 metres wide running all the way to the mouth, providing excellent pedestrian access to the area.

It's quite an interesting stroll along the wall, just to see the innovative equipment used to transport fishing gear.

Golf buggies are definitely the vehicle of choice, but I have seen rickshaws made from bicycle wheels and old wheelbarrow tubs. With such a good surface to walk on, these contraptions sure beat the hell out of lugging a heavy pack for a night chasing jew.

Fishing the stones around SWR takes on a whole new meaning during the cooler months, particularly if you have a penchant for bagging big bream and tailor. May through August is the best time and although it can be a tad chilly fishing the suds during prime hours,



South West Rocks township presents a pretty picture from the south break-wall.

the rewards make it all worthwhile.

Also popular with rockhoppers is the area just in front of the gaol. There is a small break-wall and rocky shoreline that provides access to good water.

And if you have been forced to leave the big boat at home and car-top a tinnie and tow a van to keep the family happy, don't fret, there is still

opportunity to get amongst the offshore fishing scene - several fishing charter businesses operate out of SWR.

I have fished with Mark Flanagan, who owns and operates *Sea Urchin II*. His fishing charters cater for individual, family and group fishing trips.

Sea Urchin is a 36 foot custom built, planing hull vessel of aluminium construction.

At the time of writing it would cost you \$100 per person for a half day; \$180pp for a full day; and a weekend package would set you back \$280, includes two days fishing and two nights accommodation with continental breakfast. Like the tourism brochures say... *South West Rocks has it all.*

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South West Rocks . . Where To Stay

Few could deny South West Rocks its reputation as a great fishing destination... but there is more to this intriguing region than wetting line.

As a holiday destination, it is right up there with the best.

The township has a population of 3,500, but during holiday times this increases dramatically.

Ideally suited for all tastes, it offers a wide range of accommodation, including motels, guesthouses, luxury units, self-contained cottages and caravan parks with modern, on-site accommodation and camping grounds.

There are four caravan parks plus a full range of accommodation options from self-contained flats and cottages through to quality motels. Supermarkets, pub, club, fuel and a full range of services are available in the town.

Trial Bay Eco Tourist Park offers a natural environment of bushland and relaxation with facilities to make sure you enjoy your stay.

It is a pristine and virtually untouched area with regular visits from kangaroos each evening. **Enquiries to (02) 6566 6142.**

Arkaroon State Recreation area, which includes Trial Bay Gaol, was established in 1965. There is a good camping area located below the gaol.

From there, a number of excellent walks ranging from the short (Little Bay to Gap Beach takes about 45 minutes) to a long and quite difficult walk along the coast from Trial Bay to the Smoky Cape Lighthouse can be accessed. **Enquiries to (02) 6566 6168.**

Horseshoe Bay Beach Park is located right on the water in the heart of town, shaded by a backdrop of magnificent Norfolk Pines. It offers a range of accommodation such as on-site vans and cabins. All sites are powered.

Daily rates per powered site (excluding September/October holidays) were at the time of writing \$28 (two persons) and each extra person 15 years and over, \$8; children between six and 14 years, \$5; and children five years and under, \$3.

Enquiries can be made on **(02) 6566 6370** **Rocks Real Estate ((02) 6566 6999); LJ Hooker ((02) 6566 6313); and Raine & Horne ((02) 6566 6116)** all produce a South West Rocks accommodation guide. If you are looking for specific information, give them a call.

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