



IAN WELCH'S angling adventures

Here, in our unmissable 4-page slot, the UK's most cutting edge specialist coarse angler is the man to follow every week. Welch writes exclusively in *Angler's Mail*.

Thai cats resort is well up to scratch

POUND for pound it's possibly the hardest fighting fish on the planet. The Mekong catfish is the ultimate test of muscle power and endurance. After several like this, including a couple of double hook ups, Welch was shattered!



TOPCATS RESORT, KOH SAMUI, THAILAND.

Thailand's paradise island of Koh Samui nestles in the Gulf of Thailand off the east coast of the Kra Isthmus. It offers white, sandy beaches, warm seas, coral reefs and more coconut trees than people. It also offers a real gem for travelling anglers in the shape of Topcats Resort, the only freshwater fishing complex on the island, and one holding some 20 different species, many of them running to World record sizes. Amongst the fish you are likely to encounter are redbtail, leopard, ripsaw, mekong, tiger, chaophrya and sharptooth catfish and siamese, rohu and Jullien's golden carp. Also present are pacu, arapaima, featherback and alligator gar.

IAN'S AIM

For once I'm not really fussed and will happily take whatever comes along but the plan is to set my stall out for the catfish species on day one then switch to the carp on day two.

CONDITIONS

Clear blue skies, hot sunshine delivering temperatures into the 40s and a lot of chilled Singha beer!



FOR once I was visiting Thailand not to track down monster rays, help advance science, film documentaries, or even to photograph an Angling Adventure.

I was there simply to have a couple of days chilling out in the sun in the company of good mates FishSiam boss, Rick Humphreys and web wizard, Billy O'Connor; both of whom now reside in the paradise that is south-east Asia.

It was, of course, a busman's holiday, and the fact this is appearing as an Angling Adventure is down to the fact that sometimes a fishing trip is so good you just have to share it – holiday or not!

Rick and Bill between them are responsible for my enduring passion for angling in Thailand, but this time around I had my doubts, as Rick suggested we drop into Topcats Resort for a couple of days.

Being used to the wild fish of the big Thai rivers I didn't know how well I'd take to what was in effect a relatively small commercial fishery, but Rick told me I'd love it.

I agreed to go along because it was a very short break and meant to be a holiday. I didn't need to have my every sinew shredded by monster fish the size of snooker tables every time I visited.

Rick and I met up in Bangkok, and after a short flight on the

wonderfully luxurious Bangkok Airways touched down on Koh Samui; the third largest of Thailand's islands.

Billy was making his way down separately from central Thailand via train, coach, ox cart and ferry – or whatever transport he could find, and we expected him 'sometime' before we left!

Samui itself was a delight. Given that in the 1970s there were no roads and it took a day to trek through dense jungle from one side to the other, it has come a long way, and although now a major tourist destination there are plenty of spots off radar if you look for them.

Our journey from one side of the island to the other via an air-conditioned 4x4 was a little quicker and easier, and we pulled into the Topcats car park late in the afternoon where we were greeted by owner Mike Lucas and shown straight into the bar!

Ex-pat Mike is one of those wonderful characters who you instantly know to be one of the good guys – and are at once grateful for the fact that you are not one of the bad guys!

We shook hands and over the next couple of hours, over several bottles of chilled Singha beer, he gave me the guided tour, showed me the photo albums, and



Accommodation for visiting anglers is floating on the lake. Antique Thai teak houseboats fully renovated with all mod cons!



Rick scoffed a mahosive full English in the restaurant. I opted for the more genteel delivery of fresh fruit and black coffee to my swim!



The Thai welcome has always been wonderful but the greeting on my bed was a bit special!



One of the most striking of all the catfish the Redtail is, to my eyes, one of the best looking fish in the world. Couple that with a dogged, bulldozer-like fight and perfect behaviour on the bank and you have one of angling's ultimate fish species.



Young Stacey leans into a big Mekong and shows the boys just how it's done.



Girl power. Every lady angler I've met has had an uncanny ability to catch big fish. It must be the pheromones!



I've fished worse swims...



Bait for the Redtails consisted of large chunks of fish or mussel meat but the species was strangely quiet.



Fish care on the complex was the best I have seen anywhere in the world with no fish removed fully from the water and all hook-holds and any abrasions treated with antiseptic.



Chopped fish groundbait was spiced up by head guide Yut who added a good helping of a local herb - a type of basil I think.



A relative of the piranha, a first for me, and a truly stunning specimen of a pacu.

“It was the Method mix which attracted the early big fish, with a string of giant mekong giving me some serious grief.”

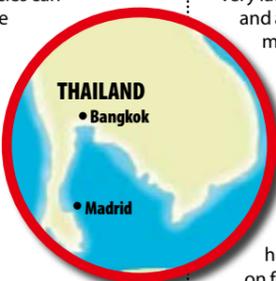
VENUE information

DESCRIPTION

Topcats is the original multi-species Amazonian predator lake on which all others were modelled. It extends for some 4 acres and drops off to 27 ft amidst a backdrop of mountains and rainforest. Species such as the ripsaw catfish and the carp species can be very challenging, but most of the others are catchable and the local guides will get you on them.

TOPCATS RESORT

For full details of Topcats Resort including numerous special offers - which currently include the opportunity to bring your other half free of charge - check out www.fishinginthailand.com or call 0066 7741 5387.



described how he had built the lake and complex from a barren field into the top class resort it now is.

Top class it certainly was, with the 'Poacher's Paradise' Restaurant overlooking the lake offering Thai and international a la carte cuisine, prepared by a chef who had catered for US presidents and the 'One That Got Away' bar with big screen satellite TV, pool table and live music. On top of that there was the crèche and the swimming pool. Oh, and there was the small matter of the lake too - the very first, and Mike would argue best, of the breed of multi-species angling complexes in the country, and the blueprint which all of the others followed.

I would have to wait until the following morning to see just how good it was, as it was very late by the time we finally stopped talking, and after a wonderful Thai meal and several more beers, I just had to get some sleep.

My accommodation was afloat on board my own individual antique Thai houseboat manufactured from local teak and restored to include all mod cons. The 'welcome' to me spelled out in petals on my bed said all there needed to be said about both Topcats and Thai hospitality. If the fishing was half as good as the rest of the resort I'd be on for an incredible two day's fishing!

I was awoken early by the sound of fish crashing around the boat, and opening the shutters to let in the early morning light I could see head guide, Yut, beginning to prepare bait on the peninsula swim opposite. So I pulled on a T-shirt and shorts, splashed on some sun cream and went to join him.

With my breakfast of coffee and fresh fruit delivered to the swim, we talked about the plans for the day which were to target the redtails with one rod, mekong with a second, and a third specifically aimed at the elusive and beautiful ripsaw cats. The redtails and ripsaws were of particular interest as the lake holds IGFA World records of both species, but the methods used for each species are very different, reflecting the diverse environmental niches they occupy.

My redtail gear comprised a 4 lb test rod, heavy braid and either a fresh fish section or bunch of freshwater mussels hair-rigged on a size 2/0 Owner SSW straight eye hook.

Yut had prepared a bucket of diced fish to use as groundbait around the hook bait, and I was intrigued as he gathered, and then added, a handful of chopped herbs to the mix before boating it out to the far bank mark. The scent is, apparently, a particularly good attractor!

The ripsaw gear was much lighter, with a couple of grains of flavoured corn as bait.

The species is an omnivore and will take

the occasional fish, but it has a small mouth and a delicate feeding pattern requiring finesse of presentation including light bobbins.

Yut told me to look out for a gentle drop-back bite followed by a steady lift, rather than the usual screamer associated with redtails. They were tricky customers to hit and I'd need to be on top of my game if I was going to connect with one.

The mekong tackle was again heavy, and it needs to be to cope with what is arguably the pound for pound hardest fighting fish in the world. Surprisingly these monsters - they grow to over 200 kg - are not piscivorous, so bait was a stack of sweetcorn fished in conjunction with a Method feeder.

By the time I had my rods out the rest of the resort was coming to life and Rick had joined me after tucking into a huge full English!

Resort regular 'Naughty' Nigel had set up opposite to target the redtails and arapaima, and a young holidaying Brit couple, Dean and Stacey from Bedford, were setting up in the main area of the lake below the swimming pool.

I had expected to pick up a redtail or two early on but the deadbait rod remained quiet, apart from producing the occasional small arapaima.

It was the Method mix which attracted the early big fish, with a string of giant mekong giving me some serious grief. These beasts just do not know when to stop and their electrifying runs have to be experienced to be believed.

Rick and I ended up playing fish simultaneously throughout much of the morning, and by lunch I was exhausted. So much for a relaxing holiday!

Although I was catching well, it was clear everyone on the lake was being outfished by Stacey, who was demonstrating an uncanny knack at connecting with the better fish!

Despite the fact she was almost dragged into the lake on several occasions by powerful mekong runs she kept her cool and did the job brilliantly!

A couple of bleeps as the bobbin dropped on the ripsaw rod alerted me to the first sign of life on the other side of my swim. As the indicator lifted I struck into what I hoped was one of the giant African cats, but the fish I had hooked, although lively, lacked the power of a big cat and Yut eventually netted a stunning pacu for me - a relative of the piranha, a first for me, and a very welcome interloper.

Throughout the day I was impressed by the level of fish care demonstrated by the guides who ensured no fish were removed from the water and all hook-holds were treated with antiseptic before being returned.

Their care clearly pays off as, unlike many Thai commercial fisheries where fish damage is often evident, every fish in Topcats was pristine.

Despite an arm-aching day full of mekong and arapaima the famous resort redtails had failed to show, and it was getting late when I finally hit a screamer on the deadbait rod, which doubled

over in the dogged, bulldozer-like charge so characteristic of the big Amazonian cat.

Yut did the honours with the net after a powerful five-minute fight and I was delighted to finally be able to cradle one of my favourite species.

Another couple of redtails as the light started to fade completed a fabulous day of fishing, and I retired to the bar as the lights around the lake started to glow. It was very late when the final member of our party eventually arrived, with Billy turning up late, due to having lost his phone in the local town of Lamai.

We caught up in the restaurant and I discussed carp tactics for the following day with Mike and Rick, both veterans at Thai carp.

I'd never caught siamese carp or a rohu (indian carp) before and was keen to get to grips with them before leaving.

Yut was already on the case preparing groundbait and pre-baiting a couple of gravel bars (yes, they have them in some Thai lakes too!) and after agreeing to meet him at first light - by then just a couple of hours off, I made my way back to my boat to recover.

If you want to know how Nigel became 'Naughty' and how Billy lost his phone in Lamai then I'm afraid you'll have to wait for my book.

And if you want to know how I fared fishing for the Topcats carp, make sure you get next week's mag!