Hinchinbrook boat access

Garry Smith | June 2003

HINCHINBROOK Island and channel have long been considered two of the most pristine marine environments on Queensland’s east coast that are accessible by south-east anglers. However, before you embark on the 18-hour drive from Brisbane, it pays do some homework – especially as regards to boat access to the channel. While the channel itself is about 45km long and offers access to hundreds of kilometres of waterways, it has very few boat ramps. This could have a fair bit to do with why it remains such an unspoiled wilderness.

The two main access points are at the far southern and northern ends of the channel, with another popular launching point in the middle. After that, it is just a few relatively unknown and tightly-guarded dirt ramps that allow small boats to slip into feeder creeks and rivers. As these ramps are often on private property and won’t take a lot of traffic, I’ll stay away from exposing their whereabouts and leave them to the locals.

By far the best all-weather, all-tide access to the channel is from Port Hinchinbrook on the northern end, about 2km south of Cardwell. Even in a strong wind warning at low tide it’s possible and relatively safe for pleasure craft. The launching ramp itself is totally protected, being located right up in one corner of the marina, but once boats reach the channel they face a bit of open water. Just the same, I have crossed the channel in a strong wind warning in 12-14ft tinnies quite a few times, and only copped a bit of spray. Even so, take care here.

Port Hinchinbrook not only offers excellent access, but has fuel, bait, ice and fishing gear available right next to the ramp from the Port Of Call. There are even refuelling services on the water, and a mechanic is available at Anything Marine in Cardwell.

Port Hinchinbrook is the best take-off point to access the channel from Haycock Island north, as well as Missionary Bay, Goold Island, the Brook Islands and the front of Hinchinbrook on the northern end.

The original ramp in the township of Cardwell is still there, but it’s little used as it is in open water and only usable from about half tide up. It was once the main public access on the northern end of the channel, so it can do the job and would suit those heading to the northern creeks as it would save a couple of kilometres’ run. With any boat over 12ft though, I’d still make the run from Port Hinchinbrook, for peace of mind.

If you want to access the Family Group or Dunk Island, far better options are Clump Point ramp or even the mouth of the Hull or Tully Rivers.

Access from the southern end of the channel is via the boat ramp at Dungeness, which is pretty well protected from all but a north-easterly at high tide. Tidal access varies, but generally great care has to be taken at low tide and at times it’s inaccessible to even small craft on big outs. At the time of writing, tinnies could get through on all tides, while bigger reef boats needed at least five metres. Al Goodwin from Crackajack Sportfishing Adventures tells me that the markers at present are a bit confusing, so take care until you have developed a bit of local knowledge.

There is also a Botel about to open just downstream from the ramp. This is a combination of a mini-marina and motel, where boaties can moor their boats and stay in the waterside motel.

There is a small supermarket about 100 metres from the ramp, where you can get food, takeaways, tackle, bait, ice and fuel. There’s more available in the township of Lucinda a few kilometres away.

Dungeness is the best launching point to access the channel from Haycock Island south and around the front of the southern end of Hinchinbrook. If you want to go straight to the Palm Group of islands, my preference is Taylors Beach. However, you need a GPS or local knowledge to find the entrance to Taylors Creek on your return – the country is very flat, with no obvious land marks from a distance.

If you want to access the middle of the channel, the best option is Fishers Landing. While it offers direct access to the mid section of the channel, it does have its difficulties. It is a single lane concrete ramp that’s only accessible from half tide up, with a bit more leeway if you are the gambling type or have a small boat. Having dragged a 14-footer the last 50 metres, in six inches of water, I highly recommend allowing plenty of leeway!

Jim ‘Jimbo’ Lee from Un-Reel Sportfishing Adventures in Cardwell tells me that you currently need a 1.3-metre tide to access the channel from Fishers. The tide is a little slow to rise, so allow an hour or so past what should be enough time for the water to be high enough. The creek bottom is walkable for some distance downstream from the ramp, but there is presently an 8ft croc in residence. There are no facilities at Fishers Landing though there is a caretaker living in the nearby house who keeps a bit of an eye on things.

A real problem with Fishers is finding it again, so I highly recommend using a GPS. Do not try to return after dark on your first trip, even with a GPS. When I lived in Ingham, prior to the advent of GPS units, my mate Mark West and I fished from Fishers often and we gradually stayed later and later, with a number of trips returning around dark, until we could find our way home on a pitch black night. Just the same, we managed to spend quite some time one day trying to find our way out of the mangrove maze. It can be a nerve-racking experience with dark fast approaching and the fuel tank nearing empty!
When Port Hinchinbrook was built many people were concerned that it would spell the end of Hinchinbrook as a wilderness experience. This hasn’t happened, and Hinchinbrook still ranks in my top five destinations – some 30 years after first gazing in disbelief at the massive expanse of mangrove, waterways and rainforest-covered mountains, from the lookout at the top of the Cardwell Range.

1) The boat ramp at Dungeness is first-rate and has boat wash-down facilities on-site.

2) Hinchinbrook is a haven for boats of all sizes. Knowing where and when to launch your boat can lead you into fish, such as this GT caught off Goold Island.

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