



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*.

BANDAGED and beaten up good and proper, Ian saw angling guide Boy dragged underwater in a bizarre netting duel with the most awesome creature he had ever encountered in his angling career.



Arm-aching action with magnificent monsters

THIS
WEEK'S
VENUE

I.T. MONSTER LAKE, RATCHABURI, THAILAND

Situated some 100 km west of Bangkok, I.T. Monster Lake is a commercial fishery dedicated to predator angling and is well-equipped with toilets, showers, a kitchen offering fine Thai food and a comfortable lodge. Most impressive, though, is the species list, with a wide variety of native and imported fish, including redbtail, chaophraya, Asian and sorubim catfish, alligator gar, barramundi, arowana and snakehead. The ultimate quarry, however, are the Amazonian arapaima, which run to 150 kg.

IAN'S AIM

The ultimate aim of catching one of the largest and rarest freshwater fish on the planet, the giant freshwater stingray, has been put on hold, and Welch's focus has switched to banking a big arapaima.

CONDITIONS

Hot and sunny with temperatures well into the 30s, but late afternoon brings gale-force winds and a rain storm of monsoon proportions.

DESCRIPTION

A five-acre commercial fishery with depths from 2 m to 6 m, the shallowest water being concentrated in the entrance bay. The active predators respond well to artificials, including surface lures and flies, with live and deadbaits also scoring well, particularly for the catfish species. As with any lake anywhere in the world it is foolish to neglect the margins...

FISHING IN THAILAND

Ian fished with Rick Humphreys, Wuttichai 'Boy' Khuensuwan and the FishSiam.com team, who offer a range of bespoke angling packages throughout Thailand. For full details check out www.fishsiam.com

BEING forced off the Bang Pakong river and away from my quest for a giant freshwater stingray (GFS) by impossible water conditions was a real downer. The expression 'I was gutted' is a bit of a cliché but, despite being in brilliant company in a country more like paradise than any I had ever visited, I was indeed totally deflated.

My hosts, Rick and Boy of FishSiam, sensed my mood and felt the same way themselves. We had hoped to spend a few days at the end of my trip chasing a big arapaima if we caught stingray early, but just three days into the trip and we were already onto Plan B. Thankfully a bit of reconnaissance and some sneaky margin pre-baiting by Boy had got me off to a flier with a big redbtail, and after a wonderful breakfast of fresh fruit, including



The lodge at I.T Monster Lake offers great shelter, great food and superb predator fishing off the veranda!



Mackerel sections snipped and cut to release natural juices and rigged to ensure the circle hook sits perfectly to aid hooking.



Groundbaiting with live tilapia was a totally new one on me.



Brendan's retro soda bottle bite alarm had me in stitches – but it worked!



A big, native chaophraya was one of the first fish to hit Brendan's livebait.



Boy gently lifts my first arapaima to ensure it gets enough oxygen.



The mesh cages ensure arapaima never leave the water and recover perfectly before release.



A mouth like a bag of chisels could well see me heading to Texas for a future Adventure!



The leopard catfish just before it decided to impail me with 10 cm of serrated pectoral spike!



OK so you have to pay, but the Thai medics did a fast and faultless job of patching and dosing me up.

» local mangosteens, rambutan, pineapple, durian, papaya and longan, I was feeling more positive.

Arapaima are found throughout much of northern South America, and these prehistoric-looking armour-clad predators are among the largest and most awesome freshwater fish on the planet. Introductions have been made into Thailand over the past 20 years, and the species is now well established at a number of locations.

In their natural habitat, Arapaima live in rivers which flood into the surrounding jungles. With the onset of the dry season the water recedes rapidly, frequently leaving them landlocked in poorly oxygenated pools. By a remarkable piece of evolution, arapaima have got around the problem of oxygen starvation by developing a primitive type of lung, and they surface regularly to gulp atmospheric oxygen. This distinctive but discreet trait was to be our aid to location today.

I teamed up with Boy for the session and rather than sit it out at the lodge we decided to adopt a mobile approach, baiting several swims around the lake then visiting them in turn, looking out for arapaima bubbles at all times. Boy also kept up his baiting of a margin area tight to the lodge, so there would always be a few catfish working the area if we needed to get a bend in the rods.

We were going to start by spending time fishing one of the main hotspots on the lake – a small, grassy area close to the lodge where the lake was 'fed' on a regular basis. I assumed feeding involved

heavy baiting with the chopped mackerel we were using as bait, but when a truck and trailer reversed in carrying a massive tank of live tilapia it dawned on me that this was predator groundbaiting of a totally different nature!

I set up on one side of the tank, Brendan (a local expat) dropped in the other side and the local lads started baiting up with live fish. When the lake first opened, feeding time always resulted in big hits of fish as the lake's residents charged through the newly introduced and disorientated tilapia. But over time the better fish learned to stay well back from the edge, so I flicked my freelined tilapia well out, opened the bail arm and waited.

Brendan did the same before setting up the most brilliant retro bite indication system I have ever seen, with a loop of line pulled out and slipped around the neck of an empty soda bottle (full for windy conditions!). I curled up laughing, but watched in amazement as it fell over shortly after, and then photographed Bren with a chaophraya catfish. I admired the fish and his style, and despite the fact he was once a trainspotter we became good mates!

Without the advantage of a bottle indicator I had to watch my braid, and shortly after Brendan's fish it started to peel off the spool. I wound into another good Redtail, a species I was really beginning to admire for their incredibly powerful and dogged fighting characteristics. A day of hauling them and you'd have muscles like Popeye after a spinach festival!

Despite my flicking tilapia into the area on a regular basis, the area remained strangely quiet, and it was clear most of the resident fish had wised up to the tactic. I swapped back to a mackerel section, and after a discussion with Rick suggested to the local lads we ought to move the trailer around to a totally different area tomorrow.

A couple more catfish, including a nice Asiatic redbtail, gave me some serious punishment before I hooked a smaller, but nonetheless powerful, specimen that eventually revealed itself as an alligator gar; not one of the monstrous Texan specimens, but a fish of around 8 kg with as fearsome a set of dentistry as I have ever seen.

'Arapaima!' The shout went up from Jeb, one of FishSiam's top guides, who had been studying the water all morning. Seconds later my mackerel hit the same patch as the bubble left by the fish, and a minute later the spool was a blur. I wound down, hit it hard, waited a second and hit it again.

I guess being attached by a length of braid and a Fox Spod Rod to a train pulling out of a station must be incredible, and the sensation here was probably similar except for the fact arapaima accelerate a lot faster than trains. By the time Boy went into the water with the landing net and did the honours I was in meltdown.

Care for these wonderful creatures at the lake is incredible, and after netting it the lads gently slid the beast into a mesh recovery cradle, unhooked it and gently lifted it at regular intervals to ensure it gulped air effectively. She was a modest specimen

'The shout "Arapaima!" went up and in the next instant my entire fishing life changed.'

of 45 kg, but as I joined her in the water, all sense of disappointment regarding the stingray had gone.

After lunch, Boy and I stepped up our roving and baiting tactics and I picked up several more good cats and gars before landing a second smaller arapaima. As the afternoon wore on, the atmosphere was electric. Bren landed an arapaima of around 50 kg, and there were signs of fish over a number of our baited areas – it looked like it might all kick off at dusk.

As we relaxed, waiting for the next take, the intense sunshine vanished in seconds and the rainy season hit with full force. We sheltered for the hour it took to clear, and within seconds of getting back on the rods I was into a big leopard catfish. Boy had warned me to watch out for the pectoral spines, but as it kicked and writhed, rather than drop it I held more firmly in typical UK fish protection mode. The spine went in deep, not quite right through and out the other side of my arm, but damn close!

Back home in A&E I would have waited four or five hours to be seen of a Friday evening. In rural

Ratchaburi I was seen by a doctor within a minute of arriving, cleaned and patched up brilliantly, given a bum-full of antibiotics, a course to take subsequently and a couple of bags of pokey-looking pain killers. I'd had tetanus and the usual jabs before leaving the UK and, despite having a swelling the size of a mango, I reckoned I'd live – and, more importantly, so did the doc!

An hour later I was back at the lake, where a dejected looking Boy suddenly brightened up. We had been on arapaima when I was forced to leave and he'd thought I wouldn't get back to fish again. He said something about amputation before thrusting the rod back in my hands with a grin!

The doctor had told me to rest the arm, but within a minute it was throbbing as I connected with a chunky redbtail. With the fish dealt with I recast and looked forward to chilling in the lodge for the last hour, but within a minute the braid started to trickle off the spool again. I wound down, hit it, mumbled something to Boy about it only being a small fish and heaved.

It hit the surface at incredible speed, the shout 'Arapaima!' went up and in the next instant my entire fishing life changed as for the very first time I found myself connected to something so incredibly large, fast and powerful that I really didn't know how I could ever possibly land it. With my arm throbbing and the dressing getting more magenta-coloured with every heave, I hung on for a series of long, electrifying runs against an impossibly tight clutch and just inched back line when I could.

I don't know how long it took to get the fish close in, but I was almost broken by the time it showed a few metres out before starting to make another run. In the most amazing feat of netting I'm sure I shall ever witness, Boy, up to his chest, got its head in the net and hung on as the fish surged. We all had our jaws on the deck as he was dragged underwater in a sort of 'death roll' before appearing a few seconds later with the fish safely in the bag.

At 2.5 m long, with a girth you couldn't get your arms around and needing a five man lift, she weighed over 150 kg and was the most awesome creature it has ever been my privilege to encounter. I shook Rick's hand, hugged Boy, swallowed a few tablets and wondered, briefly, if they would react with the beer that would be flowing that evening!

Plan B had worked a treat. We were scheduled to come back the following day, but we all looked at one another and knew exactly what we had to do. We packed the gear, checked out of the hotel and risked everything on one last roll of the dice – could it possibly come up 'giant stingray'?