

The Voyage of the Sailing Yacht Pindimara



Sydney to Darwin

March - October 2009

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FEBRUARY 2, 2009

It's Time

After four and a half years of preparation, we are now only one month away from changing our lives forever. On the last day of February we will walk out of the office and retire from the IT industry for good. On the first decent wind in March, we will sail away north east from the Pittwater mooring that has been our home for the last six months, and begin our voyage around Australia.

How long will we be sailing? Where will we end up? What will we do when we get back? Will we ever "get back"? We don't have answers to any of these questions, although we do have many different ideas and plans for the future. The one thing that we can be sure of, is that we're going to have a wonderful adventure, and nothing will ever be the same again.

FEBRUARY 16, 2009

Two Weeks to Go

The preparations are all over, and both we and Pindimara are as ready as we'll ever be. I did have to dismount the Hydrovane rudder a few days ago to remove the three inches of coral growth which had built up in only one month; the little critters seem to love that black plastic! The rudder is now hanging in our storage unit getting successive layers of epoxy undercoat prior to antifouling.

Now it's just work-work-work to get everything finished up at the office before we retire. In fact we moved off the boat to a hotel near to work so that we could put in the hours without killing ourselves, as something has happened to Sydney's roads and our simple forty-minute commute from the marina has suddenly, in conjunction with the incessant rain, turned into a two-hour nightmare. Still, only two more weeks and we'll never have to deal with commuter traffic again.

It's an incredibly liberating feeling. Neither of us have ever worked so hard or so long or so single-mindedly on a single project. Four and a half years of learning and planning, of cutting back and saving, of neglecting all our other myriad interests - even travel! - in order to focus on preparing for this trip and what is to come after. It's all coming to a head, and we feel giddy with the approaching freedom.

MARCH 4, 2009

Free! Free! Free!

And now, suddenly, we are either retired consultants or suspicious vagrants with no visible means of support, depending on your viewpoint. For ourselves, we just feel amazingly relaxed. We keep smiling at each other and saying things like 'Are we in such a hurry that we can't just sit here for another five minutes?'. We're both feeling and looking younger as our faces relax, and the crunchy neck that has been bothering me for the last ten years has all but evaporated.

MARCH 3, 2009

Side trip: Buenos Aires

Most of you will know that we are in the middle of buying a renovated apartment in Uruguay, and the word came through just as we were to set sail that the work has been finished and the second half of the payment was now due. We rarely need any excuse to visit Montevideo, so we popped over for a week to check it out.

You can't fly direct from Australia to Montevideo, but Qantas have recently made it a little easier by flying direct from Sydney to neighbouring Buenos Aires; as well as bypassing the traditional stopover in Auckland, it means that we can avoid flying the execrable Aerolineas Argentinas, which is always a good thing.

The plane was overbooked, and Bronwyn ended up in a luxurious Premium seat whereas I got squashed into the back of the plane in Tourist class, but luckily I was flanked by some similarly skinny guys none of whom showed any interest in telling me their life stories, so we all had a reasonably painless trip.

Buenos Aires

People keep telling me how BA is wonderful and exciting, but I've never seen what all the fuss was about. Since we were flying Quantas, we did manage to avoid the awful Aerolineas terminal, and since we had decided to take the ferry to Montevideo rather than the plane, we also skipped the painful cross-city transit to the domestic airport, with its attendant shouting at corrupt taxi drivers and endless baksheesh and idiot taxes.

Instead, following local advice (thanks, Patricia) we booked a bus ticket with the Manuel Tiende Leon bus company, generally accepted as the only reputable organisation to operate out of BA airport, and were painlessly deposited at their depot close to the ferry terminal.

The period of calm allowed me to get a good close look at the city that we were driving through, and everything that I saw simply confirmed my earlier impressions: the city consists mainly of crumbling and stained concrete slums, a vista of washing lines strung across dirty rooftops, buildings festooned with wiring reminiscent of Shanghai, and every available space densely packed with what seem to be military early warning aerials.





I'm sure that there must be a nice side to the city, but I haven't seen it yet. Maybe when we live in Uruguay we'll pop over like everybody else for our evening's entertainment in the big city, but in the meantime I think that we'll just keep on passing through...

MARCH 4, 2009

Side trip: Arrival in Montevideo

Aaaah Montevideo. How we love this city.

Following a relaxing three-hour forty-knot cruise across the muddy brown waters of the Rio Plate (First Class, of course. On the Buquebus, First Class is only marginally more expensive than Tourist, and you get a comfortable lounge and free champagne), our high-speed jet boat motored in through the breakwater of Montevideo docks.

A bulk carrier was being pushed gently into position by a couple of powerful tug boats, and I noticed that construction of the promised new freight terminal was well under way. It looked to me as if it would at least double the capacity of the loading

dock, and in addition there were no less than two cruise liners in attendance. This pleased me greatly, because one of the reasons that I like the choice of Uruguay as our future home is that I predict a big expansion in its container industry as the world moves away from air freight, and the country's commodities market expands.

Light was fading as we walked up through the Ciudad Vieja, the largely abandoned old town, and the sweet wood smoke of the first *parilla* fires wafted down from the restaurant chimneys.



PARILLA IN THE MERCADO DEL PUERTO

We noticed a heavy presence of 'tourist police' around the old market. This area is mildly notorious for being 'dangerous' after dark, but although we haven't exactly explored any dark alleyways we've never seen anything that we would regard as sinister. Perhaps 'dangerous' is relative, as the rest of Montevideo is perfectly safe and friendly. In any case, the tourist police seem so young... or is that my own middle age creeping up?

Ciudad Vieja was largely abandoned during the troubles of the eighties, and never really recovered. It used to be the financial and legal district, and all the impressively facaded edifices remain, although now empty and largely derelict. Here and there are pockets where the old firms linger on; our own lawyer works

from an impressive building close to the edge, but in the main it's a curious little ghost town at the edge of the thriving metropolis. Property here is ridiculously cheap, and it is perfectly possible to buy an entire apartment block if you wish. However, although Ciudad Vieja will certainly return to splendour one day, and the potential for significant future profits is attracting buyers from the US and Spain, it seems to us that the payoff is decades away. Although we did view a few beautiful if run down properties here, they definitely fell under the heading of 'renovation projects' and we chose to buy elsewhere.



NEAR THE PORT IN CIUDAD VIEJA

It's actually only a short walk from the old market to the new heart of the city, a central square dominated by the statue of the national hero Artigas which stands over an impressive underground war memorial; an amazing turretted palace; and the ugliest seventies apartment block in christendom.



CONSTITUTION SQUARE

Finally we arrived at the London Palace Hotel, a real gem that we discovered on our previous visit. It's small and friendly and the rooms are just big enough to sleep in comfort, without all that extra unnecessary padding that you see so often. Why would you want to sit in your room and watch TV? This is Montevideo, and everybody is outside enjoying themselves, chatting on the street or promenading along the beach on the *Rambla*. Of course, the London Palace also boasts the best breakfast in town, an incredible selection of freshly baked pastries and cakes, local fruit, and that inevitable staple of Uruguayan cuisine, ham and cheese presented in infinite variety. And that is where I am heading right now.

MARCH 7, 2009

Side trip: Sintonia revisited



Our apartment in Montevideo is a renovation project run by a small local building company Viva Tu Casa which specialises in taking old colonial-era buildings, removing all the original mouldings and woodwork, constructing a new building behind the original facade, and then re-incorporating the original materials into the new fabric. We had been impressed by some of their previous work, and had put

down a 50% deposit on the largest or penthouse unit of the project of around ten apartments that is known as "Sintonia". This lies on one of the main thoroughfares through the Parque Rodo district of Montevideo, which we reckoned was a good bet as it is still a bit run down, but sits on the edge of the more prestigious (locals would say "stuck up") areas such as Pocitos.

In fact, on our arrival we noted many new building projects in the neighbourhood, all similar restoration projects because the city council has forbidden any changes to the character of the area. They don't want a repeat of the high-rise transformation of Pocitos.

The last time we'd seen Sintonia, it was a hive of construction activity (all labour here is manual, with little or no help from power tools) but lacked a roof and much of the internal structure. We had seen some pictures from a few months ago, when the various floors had been finished but it was still a little hard to see what was going on, but now on our third visit the apartment is almost complete.



THE FACADE, BEFORE AND AFTER



THE KITCHEN, BEFORE AND AFTER

We climbed the marble stairs in the Italian-tiled entrance hall, lit by an enormous glass-and-wrought-iron skylight, to our four-metre high front doors. This took us to our marble-tiled ground level, with ample living space, more skylights, a "social toilet" and a small kitchen and balcony. Still under construction was the open

wooden staircase that will lead up to the bedroom and main bathroom, and on up to the rooftop *terrazza*.



ROOFTOP TERRAZZA



MAIN STAIRWELL DETAIL

In the original design, the second floor of this apartment was to be split into two small bedrooms with a hallway to the bathroom, but we had arranged with the architect to leave the whole thing open-plan, and we were very pleased with the result.

On the roof, amongst a forest of chimneys and glass skylights, we found our *parilla* (the wood-fired barbecue without which no Uruguayan house is complete), our gas water heater, cold water tank, and lots of space to lounge about in the sun.

There remained very little for us to do. The builders were leaving the wooden floor and staircase sanded but unlacquered so that we could choose our own finish, and so we organised a quotation from a floor-polisher who happened to be standing nearby. Saul, the owner of Viva Tu Casa, drove us around to a couple of dealers and we chose a wood-fired heating stove for the lounge. We just need for the builders to finish the stairs, complete work on the lounge window, install the electrical fittings and clean up. A couple of the smaller apartments are already complete, so we got to meet one of our new neighbours, and got a sneak preview of the finished product, with which we were duly impressed.

The sad part, of course, is that we won't actually be able to move in when it's finished. Not only is it time to get back to the yacht and start our sailing trip, but we don't know what the future holds, and so somewhat regretfully we have arranged for the apartment to be rented out for the next couple of years until we have a better idea of what we are going to do next. This might cramp our options a little (Uruguay is a very cheap place to live if we run into financial problems), but we really didn't want to leave the apartment empty for what could be a span of years, and in our newly unemployed state it's likely that we will value the rental income.

MARCH 15, 2009

Almost...

It's been a busy week. We went to our storage unit and threw out a skipload of stuff. The rest of it either went to the boat or into a friend's basement, which meant that we could shut down our storage account and save hundreds per month. Having completed all of our removals, we sold the ute and used the money to provision the boat.

We had grand plans to set off on Friday 13th, but we were prevented from doing so by a number of problems:

- (1) The superstitious horror of our sailing friends.
- (2) The tail end of Cyclone Hamish.
- (3) While filling the fuel tank, the filler cap broke off and fell off into the sea. Naturally we can't find a simple replacement, so I'll have to fit a new through-hull unless we want water in our diesel.
- (4) I was expecting some rock samples for my postgrad correspondence course, and they're currently lost in courier-land, so I have to hang on to the motorbike until I find out where they are, in case I need to go and get them.
- (5) All that stuff that we moved to the boat, is still in the cabin and littering the deck, because we haven't yet figured out where to put it.





THERE'S JUNK EVERYWHERE!

On the plus side, we see that (finally!) the Bureau of Meteorology is forecasting a whole week of gentle southerlies starting tomorrow, which is exactly what we've been hoping for.

MARCH 17, 2009

We're off, you know

The one thing that we'd been waiting for, a delivery of rock samples for my post-grad geology course, had been lost for a week in some courier black hole. On Monday morning, with our southerly already blowing, they reported that they had tried delivery and failed, so I got them to hold the parcel at their depot. Although we'd sold the ute, we'd hung on to the motorbike for precisely this eventuality and so we took a last four-hour commute across Sydney afternoon traffic to pick it up.

With the bike now abandoned at the marina (enjoy her, Elizabeth!), there only remained the little task of preparing Pindimara for sea.

We hauled the Walker Bay dinghy up onto the fore-deck and tied her down. This is the first time that we've tried this without deflating the RIB. The RIB is removable, and in the past we've let it down or taken it off to give us more deck space, but the Walker Bay dealers have been more than a little incompetent about replacing our

lost pump valve adapter (it's been over a year now!) and we haven't been able to source one from the internet, so we don't want to go to the hassle of trying to borrow one at the other end so that we can pump it up again.

In any case, we've designated the Walker Bay to be our inshore "life raft" if things get really nasty, so it's better if we can leave it inflated. We lashed the oars inside before tying it down, and mounted a knife inside the anchor hatch in case we need to cut the dinghy free in a hurry.



We pulled down our Ampair wind generator and converted it to tow mode, and mounted the Hydrovane rudder (which has been out of the water for antifouling) and sail (which has been stored below while we've been on the mooring to minimise UV damage). Finally we mounted the jack stays on either side of the deck, and went around the cabin securing all the bits and pieces so that they wouldn't fly out and hit us on the head at sea. We were ready to go!

Except for one little thing. We were expecting it to take us 19 hours to get to the next deep-water destination, Port Stephens, and we prefer to do our in-shore and reef navigation in the light. This suggested a mid-morning departure, so we went to bed.

The following morning, we checked the BOM (Bureau of Meteorology) and Tuesday was still forecast light southerlies, changing to northerlies on Wednesday and Thursday. It really was time to go.

Bronwyn cooked up a hearty oatmeal breakfast while I prepared the boat and then, coffees in hand, we motored out of Gibson Marina for the last time.



It was a strange feeling, looking back and watching the familiar shoreline recede into the distance. Almost everything we know, we learned here in Pittwater. Not only did we do our initial 'Competent Crew' qualification here, but over the years as we learned to sail our own boat, we have known joy and laughter, sunshine and storms, frustration and anger and even fear. We sat in silent and companionable contemplation as we chugged out towards the heads.

Passing under the Barrenjoey lighthouse, we hoisted the main and the friendly light southerly took us out to sea.



MARCH 18, 2009

Pittwater to Port Stephens

It was a working weekday morning. Usually when we've been out beyond the heads it's been a weekend or a public holiday, and so it was a slightly eerie feeling to make it all the way through Pittwater and out to sea without seeing a single other boat.

On the other hand, we had plenty of animal company. We surprised a gannet asleep on the surface with its head under its wing, and sighted some others drifting in formation high above the mast. Petrels skimmed the surface all around, scooping fish from the water, and the occasional pelican soared regally past.

Down in the water, we spotted a good number of my favourite jellyfish. I haven't been able to find out what they're called - or even find any reference to them in the literature - but they're common near Pittwater. They're a good 20cm or more long, thick and chunky and yellow, and look like something out of Star Trek. Like many jellyfish, they're also very curious, and will come and bump on the bottom of the boat to see what you are.



A few hours further on, we were joined by a couple of pods of dolphins, who put on a display for Bronwyn as she stood in the pulpit, jostling with each other to see who could dive closest to the bow, and rolling and surfing in the swell. The scars on their backs show that they must occasionally get too close to motor boats, but they obviously enjoy it too much to stop.

The day passed in pleasant conditions. The last time we'd been here, there were more than forty bulk carriers queued up to get into the coal port at Newcastle, but it looks like the backlog has cleared because there were only half a dozen or so waiting now. As the sun set rosily over the coast, the carriers all lit up like small towns, and Bronwyn went below to rest.

Night fell, and we put in a reef and began to take watches. We don't really keep a rigid watch system on Pindimara. One of us is awake and the other is asleep, and we switch when we're tired or when something interesting happens that means that we both have to be on deck. For the remainder of the night, we slept turn about for two or three hours at a time.

Usually on a passage we sleep in the sea berths, which are the benches in the main cabin, but we haven't fitted any lee-cloths yet and so there is always the feeling that

you're going to roll off onto the floor. On one of my off-watches I chose to sleep in the cockpit with the milky way wheeling above. The night was crystal clear, and there were so many stars that the familiar constellations were all but drowned out in the pointillist background. On one off-watch I decided to try sleeping in the fore-peak, which is our usual master cabin when not at sea. We had recently replaced the original hard foam cushions with blocks of latex, beautifully covered by a local sail maker. With the boat corkscrewing from side to side, I found that the latex bounced pleasantly with each swell, and I quickly fell into an easy sleep.

We enjoyed excellent although rather light winds most of the way, never attaining more than three or four knots, along with a couple of hours of intermittent motoring when the wind died completely and we were getting slopped about in the swell. When morning came, we shook out the reef and sailed up to the Port Stephens lighthouse, avoiding the reefs and aiming for the large and easy entrance to Nelson Bay to our north west. It was at this moment that the forecast nor'wester came in, blowing straight out of the heads, and so we took down the sails and motored in. Behind us, the first of the fishing trawlers followed us in with their catch, surrounded by clouds of hungry seagulls.



It was eight in the morning, and we'd been at sea for twenty-four hours. Hardly a world-beating passage, but very enjoyable and a good shakedown.

We popped into the Noakes shipyard to discuss some work that we needed doing, and then went around the corner to Salamander Bay, where we dropped anchor in pleasant surroundings at the edge of a marine reserve.

MARCH 22, 2009

Salamander Bay: The morning fish fry



*PINDIMARA AT DAWN,
WITH SUNSHADES AND WIND GENERATOR DEPLOYED*

There's no sign of another southerly until the middle of next week, and the guys at Noakes are not free to fit our holding tank until Monday, so we've settled down to relax for the remainder of the week.

This is no great hardship, because Salamander Bay is a superb and well-protected anchorage. The neighbouring marine sanctuary is packed with life, and every morning the seabirds put on a great display as the bait fish come to the surface.

I'm usually sitting in the cockpit each morning for an hour or so after dawn, catching up on email or reading a book or just sitting and thinking. Then I hear the first characteristic fizzing sound, and the surface starts to boil in a circle a few metres across as the fish begin to jump. I can only assume that they are trying to avoid some predator fish circling below.

The first gulls arrive; they seem to be able to detect the fizzing from far away. They land inside the circle and try to spear passing fish with their beaks.

Attracted by the commotion, the first terns arrive, wheeling fifteen to twenty metres above and then folding their wings to plummet into the water with a signature 'splosh', returning to the surface a moment later with fish grasped firmly in their bills.



If the fish stay active for more than a few minutes, then a stately pelican will drift over before landing in an unsightly flurry of wings and water, losing no time in

cruising through the centre of the disturbance with enormous beak agape, scooping up fish by the litre.

Then as quickly as it began, the fish boil will stop, and all the birds relax and bob on the surface and wait for the next one

MARCH 22, 2009

Thinking about the Future

One day, the money will run out.

On the other hand, we're completely serious about giving up our old careers. It is true that the money was great, and it has allowed us to buy and equip the boat and to purchase enough property to form a nice safety net for the future. The Information Technology industry has been good to us, and for many years we enjoyed the challenges. In recent years, though, as we went from contract to contract we have found that there are no new problems under the sun, and that usually those problems result from the clients making the same old mistakes. We realised that we were just getting frustrated and weren't learning anything new. Being in a senior position is boring; it was time to find a new career and to start from the bottom again.

Over the three years that we planned this trip, we were also researching a number of different future career options. Among others, we considered running a cafe, running a b&b, studying medicine, teaching English, teaching SCUBA diving, etc. In the end, we decided that although we would bear all of these options in mind, we would focus our minds on the mining industry.

Our new home, Australia, has some of the best mining opportunities in the world. The commodities market is all that stands between Australia and the worldwide recession. We foresee a boom time for Australian exploration mining, and there is also a lack of people who are willing to go out into the bush and get their hands dirty; the focus in all industries in recent years has been on the world of finance and business rather than doing the hard miles at the sharp end. In the mining industry in particular, people are rejecting the fly in / fly out remote working because it takes

them away from their families and friends and cities for extended periods. We are keen to go the other way, to leave our soft office jobs and get out there into the wilderness. Our theory is that although we are older and less experienced than most career geologists, we will be valuable to employers because we are willing to go out there together and therefore won't be stressed about leaving anybody behind.

This time, too, we've chosen two slightly different study paths. This isn't just down to our differing interests; we're very aware that for too long we've had all our eggs in one very small basket, and it feels good to be diversified. Bronwyn is doing a degree in Surveying Science. and I'm pursuing a post-grad diploma in Mining Geology. It's good to be using our brains again, and we're both enjoying our courses immensely.



A Magical Interlude

I discovered early on in our live-aboard life that while I have the knack of sleeping through all manner of shipboard noises, if the boat once moves in an unusual fashion or there is any untoward sound, I am awake and on deck in a flash.

At three o'clock this morning I found myself standing in the cockpit in mirror-smooth conditions under a crescent moon. The Milky Way hung above in all its glory, the Greater Magellanic Cloud a splash of white high above. All seemed calm and silent and I couldn't work out why I was there.

Then right at the edge of my hearing I detected faint music, as if somebody was playing a transistor radio muffled under a blanket. I looked around to see if there were any fishermen on the water or perhaps courting couples on the beach, but there was nothing to be seen. All the houses in the vicinity were also dark and quiet.

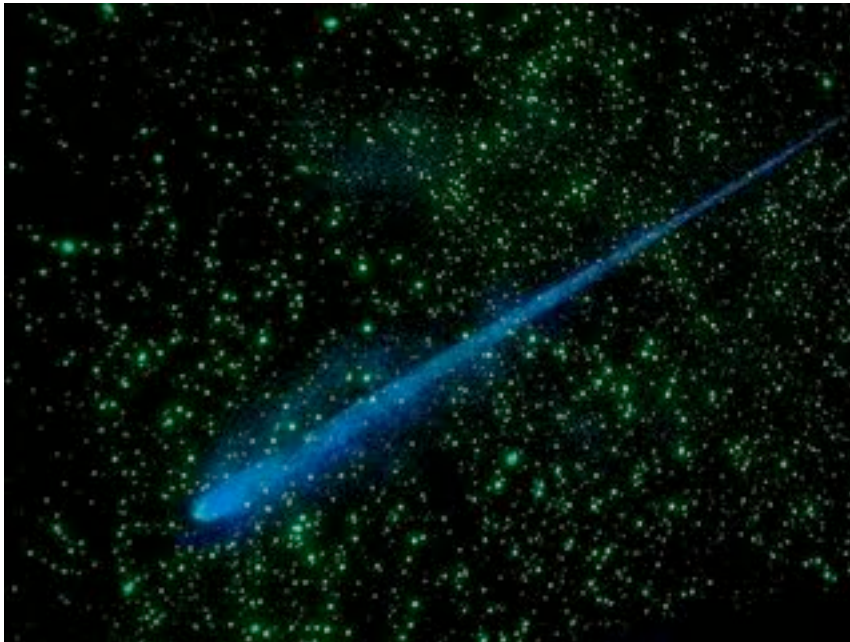
The volume of the music swelled, and I was able to recognise a violin being played impossibly fast, like a fast Irish jig in double time. After another minute or two, although the music was still very faint, I was able to get a fix on the direction. The sound was coming from the uninhabited mangrove swamp bordering the marine sanctuary. I couldn't make out any lights at all from the swamp, just this crazy fast dance music.

I began to suspect that I was suffering from tinnitus or the remnants of some dream, and then the music got still louder and a dog in one of the darkened houses barked uncertainly a couple of times. A roosting seabird squawked its disapproval.

I began to recall those old folk tales, where an unwary traveller stumbles upon a party of the fairy folk, joins in and is welcomed and showered with gold, only to find that mysteriously back home a hundred years has passed. I thought idly of getting in the tender and rowing over to the mangroves, which were only a couple of hundred metres away, to see if I could get a better look.

Then, from on high, a big fat white shooting star plummeted from the heavens, straight down into the mangroves and directly into the source of the music... which suddenly stopped.

After contemplating the silence for a few more minutes, I went back to bed.



MARCH 25, 2009

Fame Cove

The guys at the Noakes shipyard were able to fit us in on Monday morning, and since we're not expecting the southerly that is our ticket out of here until Thursday, it all fits in beautifully. The holding tank was a quick and simple job. Naturally, as soon as we had Pindimara out on the hoist, it was immediately apparent that a few more things needed doing. Despite the recent antifoul paint job, we had a good inch of coral which had grown while she was sitting still back at Gibson marina, and I suddenly noticed that when the Bayview marina guys had antifouled our hull, they had neglected to paint the saildrive, which was by now down to the bare metal. Not impressed! But needless to say, Noakes sorted it out.

While all this was going on, we had popped into a local bar for a drink. Our new budget certainly doesn't run to foreign beers, but we allowed ourselves just one premium \$10 German beer on the waterfront, and then we'd head to the RSL for a

coldie and a schnitzel (non-Australian readers probably should just ignore that. You don't want to know. Trust me).

But then it magically happened to be Happy Hour, and it would have been rude not to. And then we met Evie, who had a similar story to ours, to wit she had just left her high powered job to run away to sea, and the evening just seemed to get better.

By the time the Noakes boys had fitted the head tank and attended to all the other little tasks, it was time for them to go home and we were nicely sozzled, so we just stayed tied up inside the lifting cradle and spent the night there.



PINDIMARA ON THE LIFTING CRADLE

On the morrow, I was up bright and early and motored out of the marina to find us a new anchorage, while Bronwyn slept on. I tried a few places, but there was quite a bit of swell, and eventually I just dropped the pick in a channel while we had breakfast and decided what to do next. We had just about decided to try Fame Cove when a northerly blew up and our anchor started dragging, so we hauled it up and used the wind to get to Fame Cove, deeper inside the Port Stephens area.



FAME COVE AT DAWN AND DUSK

It really is a lovely spot, and we spent a couple of great days working on our schoolwork. Yes, really! I'm sure that my previous university studies would have gone much more smoothly if I'd been able to do them moored in a private little bay in the sun. Be that as it may, I also took the opportunity between swims to refit a few instruments that I have been "repairing" for the last couple of years, one of which was at the top of the mast so I got to try my snazzy new tool belt, which Bronwyn bought me to stop me from dropping my tools over the side.



HAVE TOOLBELT, WILL TRAVEL

The only down side to Fame Cove is the incredible number of house-flies. Our boat is full of them! We can't figure out what they're after; they ignore any food that's laying about, they don't seem to be interested in water. The only common theme is that whenever Bronwyn opens her MacBook, they all swarm over and sit on the screen. Very strange.

Today, everybody else seems to have remembered that it was my birthday. Which is great, because I had completely forgotten.

MARCH 27, 2009

An evening with Evie

The long-expected southerly has apparently been delayed until Friday, so on Thursday we motored over to Nelson Bay to pick up a few supplies and to take our new friend Evie for a sail. We managed to get the furler jammed when stopping for a salmon and wine lunch in Salamander Bay, and one thing led to another and (after suitable repairs) we ended up drinking the boat dry and then heading back into town for more supplies. We vaguely recollect trying to press-gang Evie into coming with us as crew. We vaguely recall that she almost agreed.



BRONWYN AND EVIE (EARLY IN THE EVENING)

Somehow we ended up anchored outside the marina at Nelson Bay, perfectly positioned for an early escape. If the wind comes.

MARCH 29, 2009

Port Stephens to Camden Haven

The forecast called for southerlies from Friday to Sunday, although there were strong wind warnings for the beginning of the change on Friday morning, along

with three metre swells, abating in the afternoon. After that, it looked like we were going to get a nice 15-20 knot SE or S wind which should neatly take us to Coffs Harbour, about 140 miles up the coast.

We accordingly had a leisurely breakfast and spent the morning preparing the boat for sea. This can take a little time but is always a nice way of tidying up. On deck, we dismount the wind generator, reconfigure it as a tow generator, and stow away the fan blades and tail. Then we tie the oars to the dinghy, hoist it on board using a halyard, and tie it down to the fore-deck. Fit the jack-stays, if they aren't already in place, take down and stow the sun shades, ensure that all the safety lines are secure, and clear the cockpit of clutter. Down below, all the washing up needs to be finished so that we can put away the washing-up bowls, and all loose items stowed somewhere where they won't move in transit (never wholly successful!). All the hatches and stopcocks must be closed, and the correct charts, wet weather gear, life vests and safety harnesses fetched out.

We set off a little after twelve. There was quite a bit of swell coming in through the heads and we didn't really want to have the sails up going across the bar, so we gunned the motor and took her through. It was a bit bumpy and we left a trail of smoke, which was a bit worrying; it was the second time that I'd seen engine smoke this trip. Put that on the 'to do' list.

Once we were clear of the bar, I went out onto the deck to attach the halyard so that we could hoist the main. This is never a pleasant chore at sea, as you get thrown around a lot and everything gets twisted. A few years back we did try attaching the main halyard early so that we could simply haul up the main from the comfort of the cockpit, but it's a long and feisty steel cable that swings with a lot of momentum, and it really enjoys wrapping itself around everything in sight. If you leave it alone for a moment, it has a particular affinity for the light cluster half way up the forward side of the mast.

Eventually with some co-ordination between deck and cockpit we disentangled it from the light cluster, put up the sails and headed out to the 50 metre line. The 3 metre swells were definitely very much still in evidence, and not very comfortable in the shallows close to shore, but they got less confused in deeper water and we set a course for the NE and gratefully turned control over to Harriet the Hydrovane.

The wind was actually an easterly, so we were close-hauled and getting a fair bit of water over the deck and some in the cockpit. One made it into the galley while I was getting a drink. We put in the second reef and then, when we hit 9 knots (a new Pindimara record!), the third one. The standard Bavaria 34 doesn't come with a third reef, and we are always very glad that we thought of having one put in. Far from abating, wind speeds were 25-30 knots and showing no signs of changing.

Petrels skimmed the swells around us, and dolphins showed up to say hello and to play in the bow wave. One scene will always remain in my memory. The swells had opened up, as they sometimes do, into a huge bowl-shaped depression with steep-sided waves on all sides. As Pindimara slid down one of the sides into the bowl, we realised that all the other sides were packed with dolphins, dozens of them, all surfing down into the centre with us.

As afternoon turned to evening, the wind and waves remained constant. We were feeling woozy from eating sea-sickness tablets, and very grateful that Harriet could take care of the steering, which would otherwise have been very hard work. Skandia, the maxi racing yacht and oft-times winner of the Sydney to Hobart, passed us by on the port beam. The Cunard liner Queen Victoria passed on the starboard. Apart from that, it just seemed to be us and the dolphins.



SKANDIA PASSES BY

We shook out the third reef at dusk, because the wind had eased to 20 knots and had swung around to the SE. Maybe we were finally going to get our perfect southerly? I grabbed a couple of hours sleep, and was woken by Bronwyn shouting my name from the cockpit. Rushing out onto the deck, I found her looking at a huge bulk carrier of some kind with very odd navigation lights. We couldn't figure out which way she was heading, but she certainly didn't seem to be at anchor. I got out the million candlepower searchlight that we keep for these occasions, and shone it first up at our sail, and then at their bridge. After a while she turned away and we realised that she was showing all white lights at the front and sides, with red and green navigation lights on the stern. Weird, and very disconcerting. It's customary to have them the other way around.

We were still travelling very fast, a steady 7 knots, and had cleared Seal Rocks with its associated shoals and reefs. Lightning flickered in the sky ahead, and I checked the BOM (Bureau of Meteorology) website on my phone to see if there was anything up there that we should know about. The forecast was still the same; apparently we should be sitting in 15 knots with 1 metre swells, not 25 knots with 3 metre swells. Ah well, it's not an exact science. We put the third reef back in.

Bronwyn was feeling somewhat the worse for wear and retired to the cabin, while I kept watch under the stars. Occasionally we hit 8 knots; not bad at all for a big fat tub, but our actual speed over ground was a knot or two less because by now we were in the East Australian Current which runs down the coast hereabouts. The usual advice is to stick close to shore to avoid it, but we had cut across a bit too far and the swells made it really uncomfortable to go back inland, so we just lived with it.

A large sailing boat came by in the dark. We did some mutual shining-the-spotlight-on-the-sails to make sure that we each understood what the other one was and where we were going. An hour or so later, another one showed up, this time on a collision course from behind. I had right of way, so I didn't change course but lit up my sails and played my spotlight over their sails until I heard voices. They got closer and closer, and I realised that it was another maxi travelling very quickly indeed with three enormous sails up. I hovered over Harriet, ready to disengage and take evasive action and a little concerned that they hadn't flashed me a signal back, but

figured that they were professional racers and probably knew what they were doing. She passed about twenty metres off to starboard, enormous genoa eclipsing the stars above me, and as she came level and I called out some cheery greeting, I distinctly heard a voice from the cockpit say "What was that? F___k me, it's a boat!"

The night passed, and the wind finally dropped as Bronwyn came up to take the dawn watch. It was now definitely a southerly and we furled the foresail and ran on reefed main alone. We needed to get closer to shore, but crossing the line of swell was really uncomfortable and neither of us was feeling too great. We agreed to keep on as northerly a heading as we could, because the shore curves around to the north east and we would intersect with it later.

The only entry in the ship's log between 07:40 and 10:00 is "Sloppy as all hell. Going backwards?".

By ten o'clock it was clear that at 25 miles offshore we were far too deep into the East Australian Current. We were travelling at 7 knots, but only making 3 over ground. The wind was a reasonable 15 knots and the swell a mere 1 metre of nothing, but the night had taken it's toll and we plotted a course for Port Macquarie and an overnight anchorage. Under un-reefed main alone we put the now SE swell behind us, which was much more comfortable except for the odd roller that tried to climb up into the sugar scoop.



A FOLLOWING SEA

We didn't much like the look of the description of the bar at Port Macquarie, and we'd be unlikely to be crossing it in daylight, so we looked for another option. We consulted Lucas, the definitive cruising guide for the NSW coast, and saw that he recommended an anchorage called Camden Haven, which was a bit closer and was described as having lead lights that were 'obvious from deep water'. Lead lights are land-based markers that, when aligned, point to safe passage through a shoal or reef. As we emerged from the East Australian Current our speed over ground was picking up, and we could arrive well before sundown. We set course for Point Perpendicular beneath Brother Mountain, which was in fact already visible on the horizon, albeit twenty miles away.



A PASSING PETREL

We arrived at the bar with plenty of time to spare before dark, but unfortunately just before low tide, so we hove to and waited for the water to get a bit deeper. While we were waiting, we cruised up and down to see if we could get the lay of the land and locate the lead lights.

Obvious from deep water, my foot! We easily located the causeway on which the markers were built, but even through binoculars it was clear that the area was littered with structures of various shapes and sizes, and completely unclear which of these were the ones that we needed to line up to get our safe passage. We experimented with a few combinations, but they all seemed to either take us through the solid harbour wall or across the obvious breaking shoal. All the structures were the same colour as the background, and all were obscured by the haze of the setting sun. We went back out to sea and waited for sunset, when hopefully the "real" markers would light up blue and show us the way.



THERE'S A GAP HERE SOMEWHERE

Meanwhile we'd been watching the bar itself, which to our dismay was regularly obscured by huge green rollers with foaming caps. Obviously low tide was not a great time to pass.

Two hours past low tide, at half past six in the evening, the setting sun went behind a cloud and we could suddenly see the correct markers, which were in fact none of the ones that we had considered earlier. This was much better than waiting for them to light up and having to navigate the channel in the dark, so we started the engine (which didn't smoke at all. Maybe it had just been clearing its throat after weeks of inactivity) and lined them up.

We'd noticed that the big rollers were coming in in twos, so we waited for two to explode over the bar and then powered ahead of the next pair. I surfed half the way on the first one, then picked up the second, dropping off the top just shy of the bar itself as the top started to curl. The wave hit the shoal just in front of us, and as it did, a whole pod of dolphins exploded out of it. They'd clearly joined us for the ride, and were going back to catch the next one. I couldn't stop to play, though, and dropped through and into the channel, powering up to escape the next roller, and then throttling back to nothing as we came to the shallows. We were through.

Arrival at Camden Haven

As the hull speed dropped, we realised that there was quite a crowd of people watching us crossing the bar. They turned away looking a little disappointed, so I guess we must have made a clean entry. Now we just had to navigate the channel up to the anchorage, which we already knew was going to be very shallow. We did have a chart, but it bore the warning 'Shifting sands change regularly. Ignore this chart and use the markers'. The channel was only a few boat lengths wide, and scattered with navigation buoys which led us a merry path back and forth with only a metre and sometimes less under the keel. One buoy took us very close to a fisherman on shore, who politely reeled in his line and then made humorous zig-zag motions with his hands.

I was simultaneously focussed on keeping the speed under 2 knots despite the following tide, and keeping an eagle eye on the depth sounder. That left Bronwyn to spot and call out the navigation buoys, a task made somewhat difficult by the fact that it was dusk and the automated switches that turned on their flashing lights were not particularly synchronised. Thus we would see two flashing port markers and a starboard, and then a minute later a previously unlit buoy which we had taken to be a sand bank marker would suddenly start flashing and change our route completely.

Eventually we fumbled our way to the end of the navigable channel in full darkness, dropped the anchor, and fell into a deep and undisturbed sleep.

The next morning I was awoken by the howl of full-bore outboards, and went on deck to see what seemed to be the whole local community going fishing, all racing their tinnies at full speed past the 4-knot speed limit signs. After the wakes had died away, I had a look around at our surroundings and found them to be very pleasant indeed. Oyster beds lined the shore, with drying sand banks here and there. To one side loomed Brother Mountain with an RSL (non Aussies - Retired Serviceman's League, a kind of pub with cheap beer and food subsidised by gambling) and a fishing wharf, and to the other were a few houses and a small marina. All around were pelicans balanced comically on pilings, and a handful of other yachts, mainly

apparently local and almost all much smaller than ours. No wonder we had stirred up so much interest when crossing the bar.



*CAMDEN HAVEN,
LOOKING UPSTREAM TO THE LAURIE TON FISHING WHARF*

High tide came, and with it a wicked overrun which pulled us out into mid stream and started dragging our anchor. We couldn't get it to re-set, so we hauled it up and dropped it on the inside of a curve next to a sand bank, with only a metre of spare depth and one boat length from drying sand, so we thought it prudent to test our GPS anchor alarm. After a little experimentation and some trigonometry, we found that it worked very well indeed.

We knew that this new spot would become untenable at low tide, so we looked around for another option. There was deep water over by the RSL, but the only other visiting cruiser was already at anchor there, and he was spinning violently in circles and from side to side, apparently under control of his wind-vane, and we thought it prudent to stay clear. We phoned Michael and Judy, the owners of Dunbogan Marina, and were assured that there was deep water under their swing moorings. The price was very cheap, and they had a hot shower... so we motored in and picked one up. After staring at the blinking depth sounder for a while - there

would only be 50 cm beneath us at low tide - we switched it off and resolved not to look at it again.

After setting up the wind vane and unlimbering the tender, we rowed to shore and had a long and enjoyable shower before walking to the RSL for a welcome Sunday roast and a few glasses of porter.

APRIL 5, 2009

Sojourn in Laurieton



DUNBOGAN BOATSHED, OUR MARINA NEAR LAURIETON

Because of the inclement weather, we haven't moved from Laurieton in Camden Haven. On the other hand, we would much rather be in here than out there. The news has been showing pictures of floods and mayhem; the locals are talking about boats dis-masted and abandoned, and the weather bureau reports wind speeds in excess of 60 knots and swells over 7 metres. All the while we have been bobbing more or less serenely at our mooring, although the wind did get a bit fresh now and again. One gust almost knocked us down in a flurry of flying crockery, and on another night although we couldn't see our actual wind speed indicator (it's on deck and we were warm and dry inside), our wind generator clocked 7 amps, which is a record and probably represents well over 40 knots.

OY! WHO YOU LOOKIN' AT?

The weather reports continued to broadcast doom and gloom, so we took a stroll down to the entrance bar to see what it looked like from the land. It was a pleasant walk past an enormous lagoon packed with oyster leases and along the causeway to the head, where we were greeted by shrieks and screams from the water. In fact it was only some kids boogie-boarding in the protection of the breakwater. They had some decent surf to play in, but the bar itself looked impassable, and the sea beyond was a maelstrom.



I USUALLY LIKE A WET BAR, BUT I'LL SKIP THIS ONE



NICE DAY FOR A SAIL

That night, I announced that rather than walk all the way around the bay, I would row us across the river to the pub, a distance of perhaps 300 metres. This would be the work of a moment on a flat lake or sheltered bay, but we had thus far avoided the attempt because of the fast-flowing tidal streams. It took me about an hour to row upstream to my suddenly well-deserved pint, and then, some hours later, about the same to row back in the dark against the now incoming tide. Not exactly a lesson learned, but certainly some calluses earned. Bronwyn will tell you with some glee that she even heard me muttering something about buying an outboard.

This is a pleasant spot to stop over. Flocks of pelicans follow the fishermen, and sea eagles float overhead. As well as the inevitable cleaning and maintenance tasks, we've been able to catch up and even get slightly ahead with our schoolwork, which has been particularly useful for Bronwyn because she suddenly found that in order to complete one particular assignment, she needs to learn how to use AutoCAD, which is not something you pick up in five minutes.



*I SAY, I DON'T SUPPOSE THAT
YOU HAVE ANY FISH ON YOUR
PERSON, BY ANY CHANCE?*

When the time came to go to the launderette (which is, again, across the river), we chose to take the whole yacht rather than just the dinghy, and to fill up with fuel, water and gas on the way. On that particular day, the marina was being manned by Graham, coxwain of the local Marine Rescue, and he was gracious enough to compliment us on our effortless docking in opposing wind and tide, commenting more than once that "not many yachties here could have pulled off a move like that", which gave us a pleasant warm fuzzy feeling. Luckily we didn't disgrace ourselves when docking at the Marine Rescue jetty opposite to offload the laundry, and we must have looked vaguely professional because Bob the radio operator invited us inside for coffee and a chat.

There was another cruising boat here, Liquid Motion, which we had seen in Port Stephens and which had arrived in Camden Haven shortly after us. We never did get to speak to the skipper, but we saw him attempt the bar shortly after we'd gone down to see it. He didn't make it, and came back, but on the next tide he was gone, after what Bob called "a lumpy exit". We wished him luck because he was heading straight into a nor'easter, but the word on the grapevine said that he was in a hurry to be gone.

We're in no hurry; we'll wait for nice friendly conditions before we leave. In fact, the weather is shaping us to give us a good start on the dawn tide on Tuesday, and we're aiming to bypass all the urban centres such as Port Macquarrie and Coffs and go straight to Yamba, where we intend to spend a few days exploring the Clarence River.

APRIL 7, 2009

The Mountain



*PINDIMARA (second yacht from the right)
AT THE FOOT OF NORTH BROTHER (LOOKS LIKE RAIN)*

Laurieton, where we remain at anchor sheltering from the storms, is dominated by a 500-metre mountain called North Brother, but known locally as Brother or just The Mountain. The locals hold it in some affection. It breaks up the wind, they say, and is an effective weather vane; if the top is in cloud, then it is going to rain. This is perfectly reasonable because North Brother is the first high point encountered by any incoming moisture-laden sea wind, which will have to shed at least some of its load in order to rise over the top. The slopes are therefore covered with dense rain forest, and Laurieton has a healthy rainfall. One morning we pumped nearly half a tank of fresh sweet rainwater out of our dinghy and into our depleted tanks; we'd have easily filled the 150-litre tank if the bottom half of the boat hadn't been a bit silty.

I have long held that humans are attracted to edges. If we see a lake, we go down to the edge and skip stones. If we see a beach, we go down to the sea and say that we are invigorated (and build retirement homes). If we see a cliff, we go to the edge (perhaps not too close... depending on the rubber band effect of your own personal manifestation of vertigo... but we still go) and look at the view.

This isn't too surprising. Life is all about edges. Walk through a natural forest, and you'll see that most of the action happens around the perimeter, where young trees can compete for resources and animals can see danger coming, and yet still hide from it. Deeper inside the forest, the number of species drops and the forest is relatively quiet (except where a glade opens up when a tree falls; but that's another, newly created edge). At the microscopic level, almost all of our biochemistry is mediated at the surface of the catalyst molecules that we call enzymes. We evolved from the moon-ministered tidal zone at the edge of the sea. Go diving, and it is immediately obvious that most of the life is congregated either in that tidal zone, or in a reef band further out just before the bottom slopes away into the deeps. Most of the rest is underwater desert.

To a greater or lesser extent, then, we all seek edges. Our urban and social life has removed our access to the more natural ones, and so we make up our own. How far can I swim? How high can I climb? How fast can I drive my car without going out of control? How close can I get to earning my salary without working too hard? How far can I push him before he cracks?

Having sat in the same stretch of river for a week, and having fixed and maintained just about everything that could be fixed and maintained, I was becoming increasingly obsessed with the idea of climbing to the top of The Mountain. On one particular day, with yet another set of storm warnings, gale warnings, and general mayhem out to sea, I shouldered a backpack and set off.

On the way through Laurieton, I stopped to ask about a footpath. It seemed that there was one, but nobody knew quite where it was as they usually drove to the top, so I just headed uphill until I found a trail and a NSW Parks sign said that it was a hard four-hour return trip. I know from experience that NSW Parks always inflate their figures by at least 100%, although I have never been able to decide whether this is to discourage the uncertain or to challenge the determined. Be that as it may,

I knew that I'd be up and back in a couple of hours, so I checked my watch. The temperature was in the high twenties, the humidity must have been in the eighties, and the sun was just reaching its zenith; perfect timing for an Englishman to go exploring. Humming Noel Coward, I set off up the hill.

The trail had been hacked directly toward the summit. It was bloody steep, and shored up here and there with tree-trunk steps. At first I leapt gazelle-like from bole to bole, thinking "Hah! Four hours my foot!", but before very long I slowed to a more reasonable pace. Sweat began to pour down my back, so that I first rolled up my shirt and then took it off and put the soaking rag into my pack. Venerable gums towered above, with a dripping understory of ferns, cycads and 'black boy' grasses. Birds shrieked in sudden startlement as I passed by; from the reaction of the animals and from the deep fallen brush along the trail, I could see that not many people passed this way. The trees were mainly scribbly gums, their bark decorated by the intricate maps of burrowing beetles.



A MAP TO SHOW THE WAY? SCRIBBLY GUM ART

Every now and then, an igneous rock outcrop thrust through the soil and towered over my head, making the way slippery underfoot with loose eroded pebbles. I began to pant in the heat, and to wonder if I was going to make it, the legacy of too

many months doing overtime in an office chair followed by days of sitting around doing schoolwork on the boat. I struggled on. I was glad to note that my heart wasn't pounding and that my breathing was relatively normal, but I was sweating buckets and my legs had begun to go rubbery when I emerged blinking into a clearing that marked the top of the trail and the beginning of what was described as 'the easy traverse'.

With sudden renewed energy I set off along the new path, which ran in a gladdeningly horizontal fashion before - horror of horrors - actually running downhill and robbing me of hard-gained altitude. Round the next corner came the punchline of the joke; the trail reverted back to the familiar vertical climb.

After an hour's sweaty effort, I emerged suddenly onto a neatly grassed forty-five degree lawn which turned out to be a launch pad for hang gliders. Spinning around, I was presented with a view that made the whole thing worthwhile. Not just one edge, but three, if you included the distant beach and the even more distant horizon. Far below, I could just make out the shape of Pindimara bobbing on her mooring.



PINDIMARA (topmost rightmost yacht) AT THE BOTTOM OF NORTH BROTHER, WITH LAURIE TON IN THE FOREGROUND AND THE CAMDEN HAVEN BAR IN THE BACKGROUND

A half hour for lunch while I drank in the views. Edges are good for the soul.

Then back to the trail, initially running with sheer exuberance until my legs turned to jelly, and then a more cautious descent to sea level, which was in its own way just as much hard work as the journey up.

Back at the marina I took a shower and then stood on the dock looking at the yacht. Usually I would call Bronwyn on my mobile so that she could row over and get me, but today the Vodafone signal was unaccountably absent. As I waited to see if she would happen to appear on deck, I saw a small movement out of the corner of my eye, and crouched down to have a look. A small leech was inch-worming its way across the wooden planking, mouth parts eager and stretching at the top of each loop. I stepped back to let it go by, wondering what it was doing in such a bare and unfriendly environment. It came to the edge of a plank and then snuck down into a crack, whereupon I became aware of a lot of crimson splashing; there was fresh blood pouring down my lower leg. I couldn't feel any pain, but when I wiped it away I could see a couple of fresh bite marks, so presumably I had been carrying more than just memories home from the rain forest.

Ah well. Salt water would fix it. I stashed my bags on the dock, and swam out to the boat.

APRIL 8, 2009

Escape from Camden Haven

At last, on Monday morning, the post that we had been waiting for arrived; a new bilge pump for the toilet and our set of digital charts from the Hydrographic Survey. We intended to leave Camden Haven on Tuesday's dawn tide, but while checking the weather on Monday afternoon we found that Tuesday's southerly change was going to be associated with gale-force winds. We decided to wait one more day and then follow the change up in the more well-mannered southerlies forecast for Wednesday. Since we'd already paid off and said our goodbyes at Dunbogan Marina, we went alongside the free jetty at the RSL instead.

I needed to pop into town to pick up some hose clamps for my ongoing toilet reinstallation, and Bronwyn wanted to pick up some food and medical supplies, so it was fairly inevitable that we ended up having a Guinness or two at the Laurieton Hotel. Two beers turned into eighteen (we know because the cash register was broken and the barmaid wrote them down on a post-it note) and very few of the urgent tasks were remembered that evening. We didn't exactly make Wednesday's dawn tide either, but we did end up being dragged down the channel in the overrun and spat out to sea before we were really ready.

In a previous blog, I commented on the tendency of our main halyard to wrap itself around everything when we try to hoist the mainsail in the slop at sea. David emailed us a suggestion, and we amended it to suit our boat and gave it a go; before leaving harbour (I actually did this balancing on the fore-deck while Bronwyn fought the tidal rip along the channel) we attached the main halyard to the sail and then lay a length of it halfway back along the boom, tying it off there with a piece of rope. When we got to sea, I just whipped away the rope along with the four normal sail ties. Bronwyn started the hoist from the helm, and by the time I'd nipped back to the cockpit I could take over and finish the job while Bronwyn concentrated on keeping us headed into wind. It worked a treat. Thanks, David.

I had previously decided that today was the day that I would wean myself off seasickness tablets. After all, we have to gain our sea-legs at some point. Maybe it was the Guinness, but the immediate result was that I spent most of the morning leaning over the rail and feeding the fishes. However, by ten o'clock I was feeling much more chipper, and launched the tow-generator. I reckoned that we would be needing the electricity, because we'd been stationary for a week and we now had to power one of the Macs so that we could use our shiny new digital charts.

The tow line for the generator was a little kinked from our test run outside Sydney harbour, and we'd certainly never tried it at the speeds at which Pindimara was now capable, so we were a little surprised when the generator set up a noticeable but not objectionable hum. We were happy to note that at seven knots of boat speed we were getting seven amps of power, and were even more delighted when the dolphins seemed to find the spinning torpedo greatly fascinating, and spent almost half an hour playing with it.

By early afternoon, it was clear that our bold decision to head straight for the Clarence River some 160 miles away was being vetoed by the wretched East Australian Current, which was robbing us of a whole two knots however we tried to avoid it. As light fell, we were both feeling decidedly queasy and decided to call it a day at Hat Head, where we experienced our first ever 'roadstead anchorage', which is a grand name for hiding behind a big rock and dropping your anchor in the sea.

In retrospect, we could have dropped the pick a little farther from the beach. We arrived at high tide and the night started comfortably enough, but as the tide dropped the beach swells began to start forming to seaward of our position, which made the boat roll unpleasantly and had me up and down every couple of hours checking the anchor (and on one occasion resetting the snubber, which had come undone with a disconcertingly loud "bang"). Still, once the tide had come back in, we slept well enough.

APRIL 9, 2009

Hat Head to Coffs Harbour

We hadn't got a great deal of sleep, but we'd had some rest and weren't feeling at all sea sick. We decided to start the day with half a sea-sickness tablet each and then try to finally get our sea legs. We hoisted the sail (David's method again working a treat) and set off up the coast, determined to hug the shoreline as close as we could to stay out of the pesky Eastern Australian Current. There wasn't much wind, but we spent a pleasant couple of hours sailing along the beach, occasionally bumping over some of the curious steps in the sea level that are common hereabouts. Presumably the edges of underwater currents or rips, they are marked by trails of spume - often yellow - and a noticeable drop of several inches.

Our first navigation point was called Fish Rock, and it did look extraordinarily like a prehistoric lobe-finned fish, crawling out of the sea on its way to evolve some lungs.



FISH ROCK

At about lunchtime, though, the wind died completely and we reluctantly started the motor. Motoring on passage is very tedious; the boat pushes through the waves rather than moving with them, and we have to hand-steer because Harriet the Hydrovane needs the wind to function. Admittedly this is rather my fault; we do have an Autohelm unit that will automatically steer us under power, but I took it apart some months ago to fix a rattle, and never got around to putting it back together again. I hereby move it closer to the top of my list of "things to do when it's quiet". On the other hand, Bronwyn took advantage of the gentle chugging to proof some dough and bake some bread and a pizza for lunch.

After a splendid meal, we not only got our wind back, but also hit the semi-mythical northern current, a retrograde offshoot of the Eastern Australian that allegedly and occasionally runs northward close inshore. For the first time, our speed-over-ground was higher than our speed-through-the-water. The rest of the afternoon passed with alternate sailing and motoring until dusk, when we began to think seriously about stopping for the night instead of continuing with a night passage. Although the roadstead anchorage at Hat Head had given us a break and we weren't feeling at all sea-sick (hurrah!) we were not feeling particularly enthusiastic about losing another night's sleep, so we decided to stop at Coffs Harbour. Our cruising guide said that although the anchor holding at Coffs was terrible, there were courtesy moorings inside the harbour.

We were really grateful for our excellent new charts. Coffs is a blaze of vari-coloured and flashing lights, not only navigation markers but also multicoloured aircraft beacons and a plethora of lights on the shore. As we approached, we slowly ticked off all the different lights on our chart until we finally sorted out the wheat from the chaff, rounded the beacon on Korfs Islet and picked up the clear lead lights into the harbour. There's no real bar at Coffs, and we surfed gently in on a swell.

There were no courtesy moorings. We tried to drop the anchor a couple of times, but the bottom seemed to be hard and flat and we couldn't get it to bite. We called up the local Coastal Patrol on the radio, and they confirmed that there weren't any moorings and suggested that perhaps we could try the fishermen's public jetty inside the marina. We had a look and then squeezed in front of a large fishing boat, hard up against some massive wooden pilings constructed for boats made of steel and twice our size. Bronwyn did a fine job of manoeuvring us in under the amused and somewhat inebriated eyes of the fishermen. After that we slammed into the jetty a few times because there was a tricky swell that alternately pushed us into the un-fendered pilings and then dragged us away. It was a bit of a juggle to get the mooring lines right, but eventually I was happy and we grabbed something to eat and went to bed.



COFFS HARBOUR

We'd come in on the top of the tide, so as usual I set the alarm for the falling tide so that I could get up and check the lines. However, this wasn't necessary because the low was heralded by a loud "crash" as our inflatable fenders shifted away from the pilings and allowed us to slam into the battered and pitted wood. After that, I was up and down every hour or so, discovering by trial and error that the best plan was to leave the fore and aft lines alone and simply play with the springers as the level changed. Finally the tide came back in and everything calmed down. I was just drifting off into my first deep sleep of the night when we were awoken by "Oy! Is anybody aboard? This is a working jetty, you know!". It was a fishing charter arriving early to pick up passengers. He was hoping that we could move up a bit to let him squash in behind us, but I really couldn't see how we were all going to fit, so we just cast off, motored into the main harbour, and bobbed about while we ate breakfast and prepared the boat for sea.

APRIL 11, 2009

The Solitary Islands

Since we'd spent much of the preceding evening steering by the flashing white light on South Solitary Island, we decided to go and have a look. Presumably the name is some sort of cartographer's joke, because there are many islands, rocks and reefs in the "Solitary" group, and they are all close in to shore. Our cruising guide mentioned that there were moorings on most of the islands, and when - after our problems last night - we double-checked on the internet we found that the whole group was part of a marine park, that anchoring and fishing were forbidden, but that visitors were welcome to use the courtesy moorings which were rated for boats up to 13 metres. An afternoon walking about on an uninhabited island sounded like a grand adventure, so we set off for South Solitary.

It was such a beautiful morning that we didn't mind that all we had was a gentle nine-knot northerly breeze. Petrels flocked around, and squabbled over their catch. A big black dolphin that escorted us yesterday came to say hello again, but at two knots we weren't giving him much chance to play in the bow wave, so he didn't hang around. The only other boat on the water was a local yawl who was also obviously heading for South Solitary, so we traded tacks with him until lunchtime, when the wind increased to the high twenties and we put in a reef. He didn't, and forged ahead.

By the time we got to South Solitary, the wind was consistently strong and the waves were pounding on the sea cliffs. We couldn't see any of the promised moorings, and even if we'd found one, we didn't fancy going close enough in to pick them up. We could also see that there were some buildings attached to the lighthouse, so perhaps South Solitary was inhabited after all.



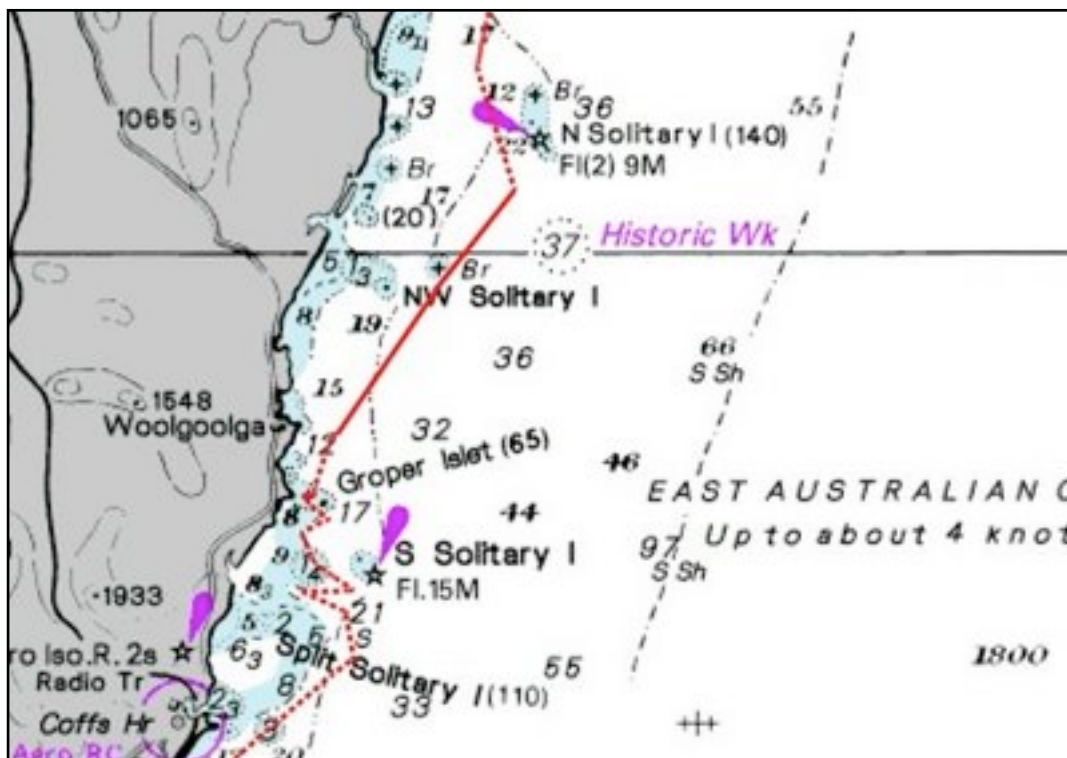
SOUTH SOLITARY ISLAND

Our old foe the Eastern Australian Current was back, making tacking progress very slow, so we decided to extend our shoreward tack and see if we could tuck behind - and maybe visit - and maybe stay on - South West Solitary Island (also known as Groper Islet) instead, which lies less than a mile from shore. Both our Lucas guide and the Marine Parks website told us that anchoring was forbidden but that there were courtesy moorings here, too.

The northerly current was strong even close in, but we finally managed to tack along the southern, sheltered side of Groper Island, where we could quite clearly see that there were no moorings at all. Making good use of our new charting software (Passage Plus, with the Australian Hydrographic Survey digital chart pack), we threaded our way through a number of reefs, shoals, breaking rocks, hidden rocks and other hazards which littered the small space between the island and the shore,

before triumphantly emerging unscathed to tack along the north side of the island. There were no moorings there, either.

Evening was coming, so we gave up on our idea of overnighting on one of the Solitary Islands and began tacking in earnest to make some northing. Several hours passed as we zig-zagged back and forth between the 20 and 30 metre lines, heading northward into a northerly wind against a northerly current, and then the wind died. The current was now dragging us backwards at over a knot, so it was almost a relief to give up and to start the engine. We were going to have to head further out into the stronger current now anyway, because the shoals shoreward from the next island, North West Solitary Island, looked far too complicated to thread at night. We set our sights on the white beacon on faraway North Solitary Island, and powered into the swell. That sounds exciting, but even though we were motoring at over 5 knots, we were only making 2.5 knots over the ground. It was going to be a long night.



*MOST OF THE TIME THE GPS IS OFF,
SO MOST OF THE TACKS AREN'T SHOWN*

We settled into our usual night watch pattern of two and a half hours on, two and a half hours off. Pindimara is set up for single-handed cruising, which means that the helmsman doesn't need to set foot in the cockpit proper in order to control the boat;

everything can be done from the wheel. This leaves the cockpit clear, and it has become one of our favourite sleeping spots on night passages. We put down a soft mat and an inflatable cushion, and then sleep completely dressed in our sailing gear and still in harness. Being on the centreline, any rolling motion is minimised, and we are always available to leap suddenly into action if required. As a bonus, when we open our eyes we get to see the Milky Way.

I woke at around midnight when we were just coming abreast of North Solitary Island. We needed to do a bit of careful navigating to avoid a couple of nearby shoals, and then we knew that there wouldn't be any more danger spots until half past four. Bronwyn went down to the forecabin for a proper sleep, and I motored on against the current.

Apart from the tedium, the main problem with hand-steering under motor is that your bum gets very sore from sitting on the hard wooden helmsman's seat. Under sail, you get to move around every so often, to trim the sails or look at the view or just to stretch your legs. Properly balanced, the boat is quite capable of sailing itself for surprisingly long distances even with Harriet turned off, but under power it is much less forgiving and you need to keep a firm hand and quite an eagle eye on the compass.

I tried a few different arrangements before finding that I could lie on a soft cushion up in the aft corner, drape my arms over the targa rail, and steer using one of my feet while still being able to see the compass and the sea ahead. Much better.

Time passes remarkably quickly on watch. A few hours went by, and we swapped places. Usually we just sleep until we hear the sails flapping or a bad drop off a swell - a sure sign that the helmsman is getting tired - but this time I set my alarm for 4 am so that we could tackle the next shoal together. Since the tidal stream was still pushing us backwards and sideways, it was difficult to steer a course in the dark that would ensure that we stayed out of trouble, so it was much easier for one of us to steer and for the other to call out new headings from the GPS and chart computer.



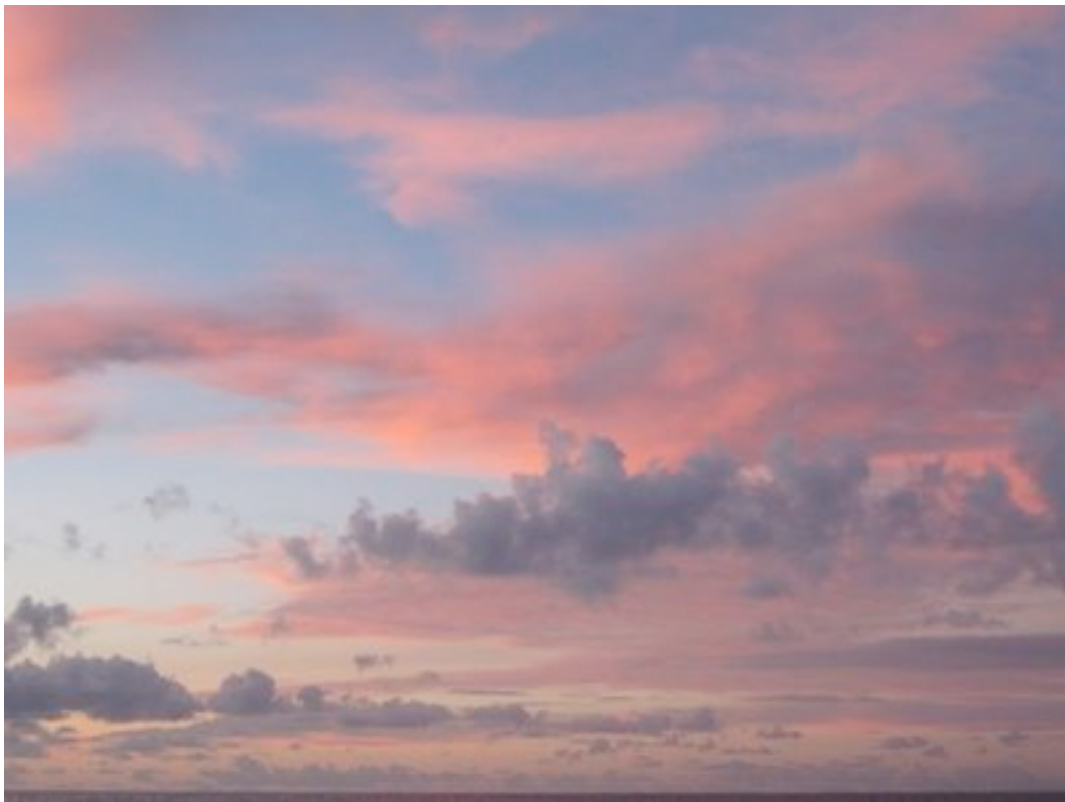
NIGHT WATCH

Once clear of the shoal, Bronwyn headed for bed and I sat and looked forward to the dawn. It rained a little, but our ever-so-expensive targa is brilliant at keeping the helm dry, and in any case I had my sailing gear on. The hours passed, the skies cleared, and the first vestiges of dawn touched the eastern sky.

The mind plays strange tricks when you're tired, and I find it particularly hard to judge the wind direction at the end of a watch. However, since we were still motoring along into a mild 9-knot northerly headwind, it wasn't terribly important. On one of my regular sweeps of the horizon I suddenly noticed a tall black sail silhouetted against the pre-dawn horizon. He was far, far out, and was not showing any running lights. Idly I wondered where he'd come from; had he tried to beat the current by going dozens of miles to seaward, or was he perhaps arriving from New Zealand? Perhaps he wasn't showing any lights because his batteries had died overnight, or perhaps he was so far away that for him it was already dawn and he'd switched them off. In either case, this part of the coast is all wilderness and he was going to be disappointed when he found out that he'd come in ten miles short of Iluka and would have to spend the next few hours tacking up the coast.

I chugged on, hoping that the rising sun would give me a change of wind. Every ten minutes or so I checked over my shoulder, and I could still just make out the dark shape coming toward me. The next time that I looked, his profile had changed and although he was still many miles away, he was now heading north up the coast. I wondered how on earth he'd managed that, since he was now going directly into a headwind, and pondered idly on dark ghost ships passing in the night.

Suddenly I realised that, of course, that the reason that he'd turned was that the wind had changed and we suddenly had a nice beam reach all the way to Iluka. I undid the preventer on the main sail, unfurled the headsail, killed the engine and gratefully accepted a blissfully silent four knots of speed. I glanced over to my dark companion to see how he was doing. The sun had now risen in a blaze of orange and blue, giving me clear visibility from horizon to horizon, and there was no other boat in sight.



I SEE NO SHIPS



JUST ANOTHER DAY AT THE OFFICE

APRIL 18, 2009

Waiting at Iluka

The bay at Iluka is a pleasant enough anchorage, and it is but a short row to the local pub and shop. More northerly winds were forecast shortly after we arrived, and we had to catch up on some schoolwork, so we decided to stay a while.

The winds improved, but we had some more work to do both for university and on the boat, so we stayed a few days longer, and now we're waiting out a 40-knot gale that is expected to last all weekend. Luckily the holding here is very good, because the boat is being thrown around like a child's toy even inland behind two breakwaters.



WELCOME TO THE OFFICE

It hasn't all been work work work. Iluka has a very pleasant walk that leads you to the impressive sandstone bluffs via an unusual beach rain forest ("beware the shiny-leaved stinging tree") and back via the very long beach itself. We've done the walk in both directions, and on one occasion came back through the rain forest at night. As our eyes became adjusted to the gloom, we realised that there were little scattered spots of fairy light both in the undergrowth and up in the trees. Thinking that they were glow-worms, we sneaked up on one with our trusty wind-up torch, and switched it on to reveal that we were actually looking at phosphorescent mushrooms. Very cool.



ILUKA BEACH



ILUKA BLUFFS

On the other side of the channel is the slightly bigger town of Yamba. As well as indulging in a bit of tourism, we needed to buy some items that weren't available in Iluka, so we took the ferry over. It is possible to take a yacht, but we didn't like the look of either the channel depths or of the anchoring options at the other end. This

was the first time that I regretted not having an outboard motor for the tender. The tidal flow would have made for rather too exciting a row to Yamba and back, but we could have motored the dinghy over without any problem.

Still, the ferry was very pleasant, and we had breakfast in the excellent Pot Belly Pie Shop (the serving lass was wearing a tight little T-shirt reading "I got my pot belly in Yamba"). I also badly needed some shorts to wear, having torn all my existing ones to shreds, so we dropped into one of the many surf shops to buy some board shorts, thinking that they probably had the right durability in sea water. Once we'd made our purchases, I found that there was something hard in one of the pockets, which turned out to be a very unusual combination comb and beer bottle opener. Welcome to the surfer lifestyle!



SURF BEACH AT YAMBA

We had a nice day clambering about on the rocks, watching the surf and the surfers, fossicking in chandleries, and yes, looking for second hand 3 horse power outboard motors. We didn't find a motor (apparently nobody hereabouts would be seen dead with anything less than 75 hp) but we did get enough other bits and pieces to finally allow me to add some finishing touches to the sewage tank in the head, and a replacement pump so that I can finally change the engine oil.

But not today. It's just a little bumpy at the moment.



FISH AND CHIPS AT THE BEACH



WHO'S THE COOL SURF DUDE?

APRIL 21, 2009

Gales, Rain and Wine

The next batch of weather has rolled in across the Tasman Sea, bringing heavy winds and rain. Although the ocean wind speeds are finally dropping to 30 knots, the gales have left a legacy of four-metre swells, so we're staying put until either the wind or the swell dies down a bit. Since we're now at the northern end of the Bureau of Meteorology's New South Wales report, we have been peeking at the southern end of the Queensland report. We notice with some jealousy that the Queenslanders have perfect sailing weather; if only we could make it around that last corner!

After so long at anchor and unwilling to risk slamming up against fishing jetties in the high winds, we were running very low on water. We couldn't use our water maker because the bay is thick with eroded mud from upriver, so I spent an afternoon rowing back and forth in 25 knot squalls to the nearest caravan park, repeatedly filling our 20 litre jerry-can and emptying it into our echoing 150 litre

forward tank. Pouring water from a jerry-can into a small hole in a pitching deck is exciting to say the least, especially when much of the working space is taken up by our emergency spare anchor (which is set up ready to be dropped in case the main one drags in the bad weather). Despite losing several litres here and there as the wind whipped the pouring stream over the side and into the anchor locker, I got the forward tank three quarters full before Bronwyn returned to shore with six bags of provisions and two sacks of clean washing.

Although the dinghy was quite heavily loaded, I reckoned that I'd be OK because I had the turning tide working for me, but half way back to the boat a headwind blew up and I found that I couldn't make any progress at all. The Walker Bay doesn't row very well with weight in the stern, so Bronwyn suggested that we row side-by-side instead. We have often done this in the sheltered bays of Pittwater, and after some hilarious circular routes we have become quite proficient at it. Usually Bronwyn takes the starboard oar and rows with both hands, while I sit with one arm around her waist and one on the port oar both stroking and steering. We hadn't tried it in heavy weather before, but we quickly found that with all the weight in the centre and both of us pulling hard we skimmed across the wave tops.

The reason that we so urgently needed water and supplies was that we were entertaining our Alaskan friends Alisa and Michael with their young son Elias from the neighbouring yacht Pelagic. We made it back to Pindimara in the nick of time and were able to quickly clean up and start cooking before they arrived. After some initial excitement when Pelagic's tender's new outboard failed in the wind and rain just short of us, we had a great evening of laksa, wine, cake and conversation. One advantage of the continuous wind was that the wind generator kept on pumping out power and we managed to keep the cabin lights and hi-fi speakers working the whole time.

A night of rain brought the welcome sight of a dinghy full to the brim, so we nipped out in a gap between squalls and pumped all that precious sweet water into the aft tank.

APRIL 23, 2009

Still here!

We popped out to the heads yesterday to have a look at the bar. Even under what would normally be ideal conditions of tide, it was completely impassable. Enormous white-capped green rollers were breaking across the whole width of the channel. Great for a professional surf competition, perhaps, but not so good for our little boat. Even the fishing trawlers are staying in harbour. Looks like we're not leaving the Clarence River any time soon.

Our Ampair wind generator started squeaking in the night. I took it down and disassembled it to reveal a worn bearing. I contacted the manufacturer in England, because it's only nine months old and we've had some other problems with it before. They're sending us a new unit, but we don't want to have to wait for it in Iluka, so we're getting it delivered to an address further up the coast in Brisbane (thanks, Kate) and in the meantime I've dropped our shaft into the local machine shop to see if they can source us a new bearing.

In other news... it's wet, it's windy, and it's even a bit cold. We're getting a lot of schoolwork done. We've used up all our internet allowance for the month, so the last couple of blog updates have come to you via satellite. It's nice to know that the technology is working, because we are likely to need it around the top end.

APRIL 26, 2009

Hello John, Got A New Motor?

Before we left Sydney, somebody - we can't remember who - predicted that we wouldn't make it far up the Queensland coast before I got fed up with rowing everywhere and bought an outboard motor for the tender. Up to now I've been happy to use the oars, but these last few weeks of wind and tide have forced me to reconsider. Having had some not so wonderful experiences with an old second-hand outboard, we bit the bullet and bought a brand new Yamaha 3 horsepower 2-stroke.

It's been a ball. We drove it straight out of the shop and over the river to an uninhabited little island near to Yamba, just because we could.



That was yesterday. Today, while Bronwyn's been working on her CAD assignment, I've been running back and forth to the shore, fetching water to fill our tanks, as well as going for the odd burn around the bay just for the absolute hell of it.

And I've had to learn new tricks. For instance, now that our dinghy has an engine sticking out underneath, I can't just run it up onto the shore, jump out and tie it up like I've been used to. Instead, I've bought a small anchor, and the sequence goes something like this: Approach shore, avoid weed and rocks, look for a shallow bit, slow down, lift the engine halfway out of the water, chug inshore until my nerve gives out, throw the anchor, put the engine in neutral, and step out into the sea. If it's too deep, I haul on the anchor rope until I float over to the anchor, pull it out of the water, throw it a bit further, repeat. This manoeuvre is called "kedging" and is remarkably effective. We just hope that we never have to do it with the yacht.

The motor is brand new, but doesn't run very well at the moment because we're using up the old and dirty fuel in our fuel can. We're kind of stuck with this, as there isn't a socially acceptable way of disposing of old fuel (chuck it in the sea and set light to it?), so we just have to keep using it up until it's gone and then we can

replace it with good stuff. Shouldn't be long now. I'll just pop over to the breakwater with the camera to see if I can photograph any lizards.



BASKING WATER DRAGON



WILL YOU STOP BURNING UP AND DOWN NEXT TO MY ROCK?

APRIL 29, 2009

Escape from Iluka

Bronwyn's homework assignment was finished and we were champing at the bit to move on. Pindimara was even growing roots, and I spent one morning scrubbing them off. We had enjoyed our stay in Iluka and had had some fun times with local people here and there and our friends on Pelagic, but it was a relief to catch the morning tide and sail across the bar and out into the open sea. It was a bonus to do it under a clear blue sky over glassy smooth water virtually unruffled by the perfect breeze.

The day continued as fun as it started. We were close-hauled and doing 5-6 knots, even managing to hitch-hike on a couple of the mystical 'reverse currents' that run sporadically and unreliably up the coast here. Pods of dolphins passed by, heading south. Fighter pilots flew training circuits around the boat, and one even waggled his wings at Bronwyn when she waved. The sun shone. We smiled a lot.



As evening fell, we found ourselves in a wide bay south of Ballina. The off-watch prepared food, each according to their ability. I made Bronwyn a peanut-butter sandwich. She made me a warm chicken and cous-cous spinach salad.

Bronwyn went to bed to get some rest before the night passage, and I started to put in some long tacks to get around the Ballina headland. Out there in the deeps, my old enemy the Eastern Australian Current was lurking, robbing me of two knots and making the easterly tacks pretty hard to judge. For about half an hour, I'm pretty sure that I made no progress at all.

Still, there was a lot to be happy about. I was sailing again, and I'd just finished - thanks to Bronwyn - an excellent supper of home-made meatballs with freshly baked sourdough bread, hot out of the oven. An orange sliver of crescent moon sank slowly beneath the sea. I turned down the lights on the cockpit instruments and lay back on deck to admire the stars. The sky was packed with them. Not just in the Milky Way, which was gloriously spectacular, but also from horizon to horizon I was hard pushed to find the smallest patch of empty black sky. Both of the island galaxies were there, and big fat shooting stars were dropping from the north.

There were stars in the sea, too. Phosphorescent micro-organisms were being churned up in our wake, leaving a line of bright fairy lights in the water on either side.

Magic.

APRIL 29, 2009

Arrival in Queensland

The wind died in the morning, but we persevered until we were completely becalmed and then turned the motor on. It took most of the day to chug up to Queensland and the Gold Coast Seaway (an artificial channel leading into the river system), where unfortunately the tide was out across the bar. We pored over the charts and decided that there was just about enough depth for us to get in, so long as we didn't veer from the channel. Actually sticking to the channel proved to be a

little exciting because the fishing trawlers were coming out, and they were deploying their tackle inside the breakwater which made them very wide indeed.

We managed to dodge around them, although we did attract the attention of a great number of black helicopters which kept buzzing our mast. They didn't have coastguard markings, so we ignored them. Maybe they were impressed by our outstanding seamanship.

After a couple of moments with only a metre of water under the keel (I was having kittens at the helm while Bronwyn was very calmly reading out the seconds until the next turn), we felt our way upriver and squeezed into a crowded anchorage outside Seaworld. I'm writing this at sunset with the barking of sealions in the background.



APRIL 30, 2009

Surfers Paradise

As well as the official marine charts produced by the Hydrographic Office, we have also been using the coastal cruising guides written by local sailor Alan Lucas. His books (Cruising the NSW Coast, Cruising the Coral Coast) are useful but frustrating,

comprising impeccably detailed research and surveys combined with often opaque or downright misleading editorial and layout. Still, they are a tremendous help and typically begin where the official charts leave off, being full of details and charts of otherwise uncharted inland waters.

We were particularly interested to see that Lucas has travelled in his own yacht up inland waters from Surfers Paradise to Brisbane, and had painstakingly surveyed and charted a route that seemed to be of sufficient depth for Pindimara, as long as we were careful to travel through a couple of shallower zones at the top of the tide.



THE RIVER CHANNELS FROM SURFERS TO BRISBANE

However, Lucas' surveys were done in 2003 in a boat with much shallower draft, and the rivers run over continually shifting sands, so we called the local Marine Rescue patrol and asked for their local advice. Often these groups are not keen to offer specific advice, but on this occasion after some muffled discussion they told me that their unanimous opinion was that our keel was too deep and that they advised against it. We were a bit disappointed, but we'll go with the experts.

In the meantime, then, we are sitting at anchor in Surfers Paradise, a rather strange and artificial concoction of high-rise holiday homes, beaches, and amusement parks. It's not exactly quiet due to the continual howl of high-performance engines from sea-doo's, jet-boats, helicopters, float planes, and speed boats from the adjoining Sea World amusement park, but there's certainly a lot to see while bobbing around in the sun.



JUST PASSING BY AT SURFERS PARADISE



COCKTAILS AT SURFERS PARADISE

MAY 2, 2009

Having a Swell Time

We left the Gold Coast on the dawn tide.

I just love that expression. It sounds like something out of an old pirate movie. In actual fact, with the tide turning at dawn, and wanting to wait for at least the third hour of flood before crossing the bar, what it really means is that we had a leisurely breakfast, prepared the boat for sea, and were lifting anchor at about ten o'clock. But "leaving on the dawn tide" sounds so much more impressive.

We had no problems going out of the Gold Coast Seaway, apart from "are those people in the water?". A quick check with the binoculars revealed that there were indeed a number of surfers swimming across the bar entrance, in amongst the continual trawler, fishing and yacht traffic. Crazy. But a passing police launch manoeuvred politely around one pair who were doggedly paddling down the main channel, so I suppose that this must be normal Surfers Paradise behaviour.

Despite our careful timing of the tide, there was still a bit of an incoming rip, presumably due to some kind of tidal overrun. Bronwyn kept the power hard on coming out of the bar (no smoke! A change of oil and cleaning the air filter seemed to have fixed that one) while I went down into the saloon to check on the location of the nearby shoaling reefs. Once into the open sea, Bronwyn kept the power on directly into incoming swells, running up each wave and launching off the top to drop into the face of the next one. Down below, I was trying to stay on the chart table seat while juggling a pile of electronics and paperwork, and I had some idea of what it must be like to go over the Niagara Falls in a barrel. I was feeling a bit battered when I emerged blinking into the sunlight.

We rounded the shoals and set off northward, heading for Moreton Bay and Brisbane. It was a beautiful day and we had a perfect light following wind. We experimented for a bit with flying the jib only, just to see what it was like, but quickly switched to the main and found ourselves running at six to eight knots. The only slight difficulty was a quartering swell which made steering quite an energetic task. When the swell approaches the boat on a diagonal, you have to corkscrew up and down each face as it passes under the boat. Still, we were fresh and rested and I enjoyed the exercise for a while before turning control over to the tireless Harriet. Being used to the NSW forecasts which only try to predict swell heights to within the nearest metre or so and are often wildly inaccurate (eg "Swell: SE 1 to 2 metres" may well turn out to be more than 3), we were quite amused to see that the Queensland forecast was a bit more precise; apparently we could expect to be sailing in exactly 1.7 metres of swell.

There were very few marine hazards on the charts, so we just concentrated in sailing as straight a line as possible. The Eastern Australian Current did have one last go at us around one headland, but after that it seemed to give up. Cashing in on this bonus, we decided to head straight across one large bay instead of hugging the coast, because that would put the swell directly behind us and to tell the truth we were getting a bit tired of the constant pounding. As we got into deeper water, a combination of fair winds and following surf got us up to eight knots, and we had to revise our timetable. We had planned to sail through the night so that we would arrive at Moreton Bay in daylight to negotiate the shoals across the entrance, but it looked like we were going to arrive in the middle of the night instead.

Keeping a lookout, I saw a squall racing towards us and shouted to Bronwyn, who was preparing a meal in the galley. She calmly asked me for a time check for her rice. Exactly seven minutes later we were triple-reefed and back on track, and Bronwyn went back down and took the rice off the stove just as the squall hit us with 35 knots and a flurry of rain. As soon as it had passed, dinner was served.



BRONWYN ON WATCH IN THE RAIN

The rain and the swell kept on harrying us but Pindimara was flying, and by late evening we were approaching the notorious Moreton Bay shoals in pitch darkness and zero visibility. One option would be to stand out to sea and wait for dawn, but we were feeling battered and bruised and just wanted to get out of the swell, so we hove to and got out the charts.

MAY 3, 2009

Running Blind

The official Hydrographic chart of Moreton Bay shows two beacons channels that lead from the sea and through the shifting sand shoals to the bay itself. The biggest

is the North West Channel, which is dredged to at least 15 metres and carries large cargo and cruise liner traffic to Brisbane. This can only be accessed from the far north of the entrance, some five hours away from our current position as we bobbed around in the rain, swell and darkness. Much closer to us was the North East Channel, and connecting us to it were two unmarked but still navigable channels known as the Inner and Outer Freeman. The Inner Freeman was far too shallow and had a notorious bar, but the Outer Freeman seemed to offer us good depths all the way across, apart from a bit at the far end where it dropped to six metres of shifting sands at either of two spurs that lead onto the North East Passage. With our 2 metre keel, this still gave us at least 4 metres of clear water even at the lowest tide.

The downside of this plan, of course, was that it was pitch dark and pouring with rain, and we were tired and had never been here before. On the other hand, our chart was only a month old and we had practised navigating with GPS at close quarters in the Solitary Islands. We really needed to get out of the swell, which was making us sick. We decided to go for it.

Navigating Pindimara by instruments requires co-ordinated teamwork and perfect trust. At the helm, Bronwyn was driving completely blind, focussed on steering a course by compass alone. This is very difficult. Usually you pick a distant object on the required bearing and aim for it, but Moreton Bay at night is a very confusing place. The shoaling area alone covers over a hundred square miles and is criss-crossed with channel markers and scattered with warning beacons both far and near, providing the helm with a shifting landscape of colour with few stable markers. Bronwyn's only option was to stare eagle-eyed at the red glow of the compass and to try to compensate for drift and windage.

Down below, my whole world consisted of a small blinking cursor that represented our GPS position on the chart, and the shouted depth soundings from the helm. I had to judge from the cursor's continually updated orientation and position how we were being affected by any currents or rips, and to call up course amendments as required, as well as trying to interpret Bronwyn's depth soundings in the light of the chart contours in front of me. Every few minutes I would pop my head out of the companionway and take a compass bearing on one of the few static lighthouses as backup; electronics can fail, and charts can be wrong.

At first (after a short break when I had to run up on deck and lose my dinner over the side) it all went well, with the depth soundings corresponding well to the chart. We successfully negotiated a couple of unseen shoals, and were approaching the zone of 6 metre shifting sands. It was time to decide whether to take the relatively wide northerly passage, or the more southerly gutter. The latter was two miles long and only 500 metres wide, but would cut an hour off our journey time. It was already midnight. The currents were manageable. We headed south.

The bottom rose rapidly as the sides of the gutter closed in. Just as we passed the 6 metre contour, Bronwyn called out "four", which was perfect because the sounder measures depth from the bottom of our 2 metre keel. I breathed a sigh of relief. The gutter was where it was supposed to be.

A following current began to push us along. Bronwyn called out "Three" and then "Two". I stared at the chart, which showed us perfectly centred in the six-metre gutter. The sand must have shifted. We had a hasty discussion and agreed that if we came too close to bottoming out - or indeed hit - then Bronwyn would turn sharply to port and try to retrace her course, although this was going to be increasingly difficult as the current continued to sweep us along. We knew that on either side of us, invisible in the darkness, were the two large and impenetrable Venus Banks. Presumably either one or both had been leaking or drifting into the gutter. Bronwyn called out "One point eight!"

We were one mile in, with another mile to go. If we made it through, then we would emerge right on top of a flashing red channel marker delineating the edge of the North East Channel. I called up the bearing, and Bronwyn said that she couldn't see the light. I ran up on deck with a couple of check bearings on surrounding lighthouses, but we seemed to be exactly where we were supposed to be, albeit in scarily shallow water. Perhaps the red beacon was hidden behind a sand bank. Perhaps.

How deep were we now? One point six metres. This wasn't so good. We were deep in a maze of continually shifting channels, in the pitch dark in the middle of the night, our gutter was steadily disappearing from under us and the channel that we were heading for had gone missing.

I know how scary it is to be driving blind when you know that you're lost, so summoning my best confident voice I called up course corrections to port and to starboard to see if by some miracle I could find deeper water. Bronwyn, on the other hand, knows how scary it is to be sitting there extemporising when your tools have failed and everything depends on you, so she omitted to mention that we now only had 60 centimetres under the keel. The minutes passed as we quested back and forth, sometimes a bit deeper and sometimes a bit shallower, never quite hitting the bottom but never quite gaining any depth. Then at about 1 am Bronwyn called "Two metres! Three!" and we were through.

There was still no sign of the beacon, even though it was supposed to be only 500 metres away, so I called a course change that would bring us out right on top of it. We arrived, and there was nothing there. Where was the channel?

We put the motor into neutral and drifted under our triple-reefed main in what the chart said was the middle of the North East Channel. There should have been a line of coloured beacons stretching out to the north, but although the far horizon sparkled with other lights, our channel was nowhere to be seen. The Port Authority must have removed the markers without informing the Hydrographic Survey, because our chart had only been updated a month before.



THREADING THE NEEDLE AT MORETON BAY

Here and there in the darkness we could make out the riding lights of tinnies and small fishing boats, and occasionally one would shine a torch at us in apparent disbelief. What on earth is that great big yacht doing out here?

We couldn't drift forever in these conflicting currents, so we went back to our instruments. Luckily the southernmost end of the North Eastern Channel was originally marked not by a navigation marker but by a westerly danger light, which was still in place. This gave us a friendly flashing point to aim for, and within half an hour we had squeezed between the danger marker and Moreton Island and were within clear sight of the main, North Western Channel.

The main channel was packed with seriously large container ships and cruise liners, edging slowly through the darkness and probably terrified of running down a fisherman. We chose to stay well away, and went looking for somewhere to anchor.

The obvious places were along the edge of Moreton Island, but first we needed to pass over a dumping ground for unexploded military ordinance. After that we tried for Sholl Bank at Tangalooma, but the anchor bounced off impenetrable gravel. At least it gave us a chance to drop the mainsail. It was three o'clock in the morning and we were very, very tired.

We pored over the chart, and settled on a remote and fairly sheltered bay about eight miles away. We worked our way through the last of the shoals and into Moreton Bay proper, where we found ourselves bashing into enormous head-on swells. We were so tired now that we were motoring in thirty-minute shifts, grabbing alternate naps in the cockpit in between.

The first tinges of dawn touched the horizon ahead, and I simultaneously spotted the shore-based navigation light at Kounungai which marked our chosen anchorage. This piece of Moreton Island was supposed to be uninhabited, so what were all those extra white lights along the shore?

The dawn light grew stronger and I started to laugh out loud. They were the mast-head anchor lights of other boats! Obviously the holding was good. We dropped the

pick in ten metres and, ignoring the bouncing swell, fell into a long, deep and exhausted sleep.

MAY 7, 2009

Brisbane

We remained anchored by the Sandhills dunes (imaginative Australian cartographers strike again...) in Moreton Bay for a few more days until all the weekend visitors had gone, and then hoisted our sails and headed across to the mouth of the Brisbane River. We had a nice beam reach at a consistent eight knots. Pindimara never used to go this fast. Either the boat's changed, or we have.

We'd been keeping half an eye on some distant rain clouds which were scudding past out to sea, and about half way across the bay we noticed a twister dropping down from the cloud base. We double-checked and it was definitely passing by outside the bay, but it was quite a fascinating sight. Neither of us had ever seen one before.



TWISTER!

Long term readers of this blog will know that we have been following the exploits of [Bob on Capricorn](#), also circumnavigating in a Bavaria but quite a few months ahead of us. In fact he had been coming up the NSW coast behind us, and when the waterspout formed, he was unlucky enough to be on the other side of Moreton Island and directly beneath it. His furler jammed and he got very wet, but luckily survived the experience without injury.

We arrived at the main Brisbane shipping channel and dropped sails for the long motor up the river to the city centre. We were sharing the relatively narrow lane with some seriously large commercial shipping, although they were travelling slowly to minimise their bow waves and some had time to wave cheerfully from the flying bridge.





Much of the first part of the Brisbane River is taken up by LPG tanker facilities, and the smell of leaking gas was pretty strong. On the other hand, there was lots to see and the depths and leading lights were uniformly excellent. Several hours later we found ourselves chugging underneath the girders of Story Bridge and into the heart of Brisbane itself.



PINDIMARA ARRIVES AT BRISBANE CBD

Many cruising guides mention the cheap pile berths by the Botanical Gardens, but we were aware of a lot of discussion in blogs and fora that suggested that they were permanently clogged with old hulks. We telephoned the Port Authority who run the pile berths, and they were quite definite that not only were the berths only for short term transient cruisers, but that there were currently a number of berths free, and gave us a list of berth numbers.

On our arrival, though, it was quite clear that not only were there no free berths, but that quite a number of boats didn't look like they had been capable of moving for some years.



OBVIOUSLY SEAWORTHY

We dropped anchor around the bend and found good holding close to some mangroves, and when we later investigated the pile berths on foot, we found a large sign stating that the berths were available for a monthly rate, directly contradicting our Port Authority spokesperson.

It's all worked out well because we're very happy with our anchorage, which is only a short row from a Botanical Gardens piling where, with a little acrobatic effort at low tide, we can tie up our dinghy in safety and stroll into town, where we've been meeting up with various friends, and have drunk far too much expensive Belgian beer for our budget.



PINDIMARA OFF GARDEN POINT

The city's been a bit of a shock to the system. Each morning the joggers sprint past as fast as they can with a desperate look in their eyes and headphones jacked into their ears. In the streets, everybody is hurrying around without paying any attention to anything. When we sit down in a cafe, waitresses rush up before we have a chance to get comfortable, and we find that we are infringing rules about who can sit where and when. We're finding it all a bit manic, even Bronwyn who is a self-avowed city kid and was looking forward to some bright lights. It is strange to think that only a few short months ago we were part of this same madding crowd, but already that whole life seems impossibly remote.

MAY 10, 2009

Escape from Brisvegas

It was nice to catch up with friends, but the attractions of the bright lights wore off pretty quickly. I hadn't really noticed before, but it's hard to buy anything useful inside a city. I needed some plumbing parts and miscellaneous chandlery. Bronwyn wanted a shower and a laundry. We found some inexpensive toilet rolls, a haircut

and some discounted novels, but otherwise there was precious little of value to the visiting cruiser.

It's been less than two months since we quit our careers and started sailing, but I was surprised to find how hard it was to relate to urban life. I was being bombarded with solutions that I didn't need to problems that I didn't have. Even the process of going out for a meal or for a beer seemed needlessly over-complicated, and it was always a relief to return to the boat where she bobbed quietly on the edge of the swamp at the Botanical Gardens.

We'd been in Brisbane for a week, and we'd seen everybody who wanted to visit us, so it was time to move on. Unfortunately we were almost completely out of both fuel and water, and we hadn't found anywhere where we could obtain either of those two essentials. Luckily we remembered that we'd seen a fuel bowser downriver at the city limits, so hoping that (a) it was open on Sunday, and (b) that it had drinking water, we hauled up the anchor and set off. We figured that we had enough fuel to make it that far, and if it was closed, then we'd tie up and go to sleep until it opened on Monday.

It was great to be moving again. The sun was shining and we got to see a lot of details that we'd missed on our arrival, when we'd been more concerned about lining up the leading lights in the gathering dusk. The great wool stores from the early 1900s were particularly impressive, enormous blocky brick buildings that seemed to run for miles. Presumably these used to be dockside facilities, but a great many slender modern houses have been squeezed onto what must be a new, reclaimed waterline, each with its own personal dock, although the docks were usually empty.

The fuel dock under the Gateway Bridge not only had water, but also very cheap diesel, which was quite a surprise especially when the attendant confirmed that this was now the only fuel dock left in the Brisbane area. On our travels we've come across dockside diesel that is almost twice the price of its roadside equivalent. I began to relax, and spent a happy half hour chatting to the attendant while Bronwyn filled the water tanks.

Fuelled and watered, we let the tide suck us down the shipping channel and out into Moreton Bay. The heat of the sun, the direction of the wind, the depth of the water, the course of the yacht ahead of us; these were important, these were reality. I felt the gritty crowded feel of the city slip away, and danced a little jig at the helm while Bronwyn rustled up some fresh home-made won-ton soup in the galley. When she brought the steaming aromatic bowls up into the cockpit, she remarked that this was the first time that she'd seen me properly smiling all week. I don't think that she was joking.

MAY 11, 2009

Mud Island

We were intending to head back to our old anchorage by the Sandhills dunes, but in order to get there we had to first round Mud Island, a long flat sandbank close to the Brisbane River shipping channel. As we came out of the lee of the island we got into some swell that had been building up as the wind crossed the bay from the other side.

The Sandhills anchorage is very picturesque, but it is rather exposed and does suffer rather from swell, particularly when the tide changes. Not only was Mud Island acting as a buffer for the south easterly swell, but it was also closer to the Main Channel that we would be taking in the morning, so we tucked in behind it and dropped the anchor.

The dinghy was absolutely filthy from its continual dunkings in the swamp mud at the Botanical Gardens, so I took advantage of our early stop to haul it up on a halyard and scrub it out.



CLEANING THE SWAMP OUT OF THE DINGHY

The shallow anchorage also meant that most of our chain was still in the anchor locker. I'd been waiting for a chance to work on it, so I sat on the bow and hauled it out onto the deck. Pindimara's original chain had been marked every 5 metres by coloured spray-paint, but this had quietly eaten away the galvanisation on the chain and suddenly, one day, it rusted into a big knot and we'd had to replace the whole thing.



THE EFFECT OF SPRAY PAINT ON A GALVANISED CHAIN

Not wanting to destroy our new chain with the same problem, we had marked the lengths with cable ties instead of spray paint, but were finding that these interfered with the smooth progress of the chain over the winch. In fact, while anchoring in the Brisbane River, the chain jumped completely off the gypsy and the whole seventy metres plummeted uncontrollably to the bottom. This was pretty alarming. Not only is there a lot of metal moving very fast alongside your feet, but the total stationary weight is about 100 kg and when it reaches the end, it can tear the D-ring right out so that you lose anchor, chain, and possibly quite a lot of hull. Only a couple of weeks previously I'd taken the precaution of adding a loop of tripled springy silver rope to the end of our chain, so all I could do was stand there and keep my toes clear and wait to see whether it would bounce or snap.

Luckily it held, but it was time to get rid of the cable ties. To this end I obtained some water-based acrylic paint, reasoning that it might not contain quite as many noxious chemicals as the spray variety. As the sun set behind and the moon rose over Mud Island in front, I sat on the fore-deck and painstakingly brushed on two coats of primer and two coats of colour, while trying very hard not to spill any paint. This started to get quite difficult when a surprise wind blew up, thrashing the boat around and splashing me with spray. I clumsily tied down the wet and sticky chain so that it wouldn't fall over the side, and went below for dinner.



JACKSON POLLOCK, EAT YOUR HEART OUT

The sea started to get pretty sloppy. As we climbed into bed later that night, we were very glad that we were not in the open water on the other side of the bay.

MAY 14, 2009

Escape from Moreton Bay

We'd been in two minds about going into Mooloolaba, which was the next stop before Fraser Island. We were keen to see it, but the official charts said that it was too shallow for us to reach the area marked off for anchorage, and we preferred not to pay for a marina berth. Our cruising guide stated that depths were good, but the accompanying printed chart told a different story. We knew that *Pelagic* had been there before so we checked with them. Not only did they say that it was plenty deep enough, but in fact they were anchored there right now, having made a fast 33-hour trip up from Iluka while we were in Brisbane.

The forecast for the next day was for very little wind, and since we wanted to arrive in Mooloolaba before sunset we worked out our passage plan for an average speed of 4 knots. This entailed a dawn start, but in the event we lazily emerged blinking into the sunlight after a long, comfortable sleep and finally hoisted the anchor at around half past eight.

Stretching before us were the hundred square miles of shoals and sand banks that had caused us so much stress on the way in. The dangers were, of course, completely invisible, lurking just below the surface of the innocently sparkling blue sea. In the pleasant sunshine, they seemed to taunt us.

Armed once more with our slightly unreliable chart, we took up the challenge. Rather than mix it with the large ships that were streaming out of the Brisbane docks and up the dredged channel, we chose to take an older, unmarked portion of the Main Channel for as long as possible, before joining them on the marked shipping route out to sea. Although requiring some more blind navigation, this had the advantage of giving us a fast beam reach in what turned out to be a rather decent southerly. Before long we were creaming along at 8 knots between the lurking sand banks and briefly considered reefing the main, but "damn the

torpedoes!" we put up with a bit of weather helm because we'd probably need every inch of sail when we turned into the northerly-running shipping channel.

During the morning, we saw a number of large tankers and freighters rumbling by ahead of us, but when we actually made the final turn there was only one left in sight, and that one far ahead of us in the haze. Despite our concerns, we had the channel to ourselves for the rest of the morning.

By early afternoon, we were almost out of the clutches of Moreton Bay. Rather than follow the final couple of doglegs in the marked channel, we cut the last corner across some 6 metre deep sand banks, which made life very interesting for a while because the shallow water amplified the swell on the beam and gave us an entertaining but very rocky ride. I believe that it was at this point that the coffee thermos emptied itself over Bronwyn's school books.

The wind was forecast to drop in the afternoon, but if anything it got a little stronger, and when we finally made it into the open sea and pointed our nose at Mooloolaba, we were running at 7-8 knots before 20-30 knots of breeze. Despite the late start, we dropped the sails and crossed the Mooloolaba bar just as the sun was setting. The bar itself presented no problems, but the school of fledgling outrigger-paddlers who straggled unheedingly across the entrance in front of us did cause us a few heart-in-mouth moments. In the end they sorted themselves out and got out of our way in good time, which was just as well because by then we were nigh-on unstoppable, lined up with the channel leads and being sucked in by the tide.

We chugged our way gently through the deepening dusk, and dropped our anchor in a few metres of water just a few boat-lengths away from *Pelagic*.

MAY 18, 2009

Mooloolaba

Mooloolaba is a very curious place. From the road it looks just like a standard eastern seaboard town, with malls and surf shops and miles of perfect beach. Arriving by yacht gives you a different perspective, because the best place to drop an anchor is in the sea canal at the end of the harbour, which is an extensive network

of artificial sandy channels lined with millionaires' mansions, each with one or two yachts parked at the bottom of the garden. It's like a cross between Venice and Florida.



MOOLOOLABA CANALS FROM THE TOP OF OUR MAST

We have stopped here for a while to do a little maintenance. Nothing major, but the masthead anchor light needs replacing, the water maker has a suction problem, and we are still badly in need of a replacement joker valve for the toilet. This latter has been annoying to us for quite some time, because we'd previously bought a cheap unbranded valve from Whitworths (ten dollars instead of near eighty for a full Jabsco service kit that contains lots of other parts that we don't need) and have regretted it ever since, because the inferior quality of the valve meant that old sewage slowly gets backwashed into the toilet bowl until it fills up. You can imagine what then happens when the toilet bowl gets sloshed around in a seaway.

There are quite a few chandleries in the Mooloolaba area, and we've managed to source all of these bits and pieces (including a genuine \$35 Jabsco joker valve! Hurrah!) as well as some new toys, such as running lights for the tender. I even managed to source a couple of oil filters for the engine, which have been mysteriously like gold dust all the way up this coast.



REPLACING THE MASTHEAD LIGHT

The shops and services are widely spread around the canal system, and I've been really grateful to have the new outboard motor because it would otherwise have

taken me half a day to row from one end to the other and back. It also gives us a chance to gawp at all the mansions and yachts as we trundle back and forth.

After a few days of working on the boat and on schoolwork, we got a little stir-crazy and looked around for something a bit different. As luck would have it, we happened on an advert for the Sunshine Coast Brewery, which is tucked away on an out-of-town industrial estate. A local bus driver took pity on us, and made a little diversion and dropped us off at the entrance to the park, which was a lovely thing to do and typical of the people who we meet every day here on the Queensland coast.

The brewery produces a great selection of European-style beers (we were particularly stunned by the Rye ESB and the Hefeweissen), plus some interesting variations on alcoholic ginger beer. We got chatting to Greg, the owner, and had a grand afternoon tasting all his excellent ales, after which he joined us in one for the road and took us back to town. A top man with a top brewery.



BRONWYN CORNERS FIVE BEERS AT ONCE

After we'd manhandled our case of beers out to the yacht, Bronwyn decided that she was still thirsty, so we took the dinghy back to shore and made our way to one of the local pubs where the beers were far inferior but we had an entertaining time

drinking with some locals and watching people falling over and being bounced by the door staff.

The next morning I was feeling just a touch under the weather, so we made our way to the beach and took it easy.



THE MASTER BUILDER AT WORK

Mooloolaba beach was very pleasant, and the water was calm and shallow and we were very glad to finally do some swimming. We've been conserving fresh water on the boat and haven't fancied a dip in the murky canal water, so we've been feeling pretty dirty and it was good to get clean.

MAY 20, 2009

Ongoing Precipitation

All this week, south-eastern Queensland has been getting a pasting from the weather gods. We're still anchored in Mooloolaba, waiting for the rain to stop, for the wind to ease, and for the 5 metre swells to die down. The rain's been astonishing. Sometimes I put my hand out of the companionway hatch and it feels

like I've stuck it under a bath tap. We hear stories of power lines down and major roads out of commission, with 150 mm or more of rain falling in just 12 hours.

The winds have been exciting, too. They were forecasting 45 and 55 knots (+/- 40%) out to sea. I haven't been monitoring our local wind speed (the indicator is on deck, in the rain) but during the nights the anchor chain has been groaning under the strain and at times *Pindimara* was bucking like a bronco. All around us, yachts have been dragging their anchors, which is not too great when you consider that we're packed like sardines into a canal lined with millionaire mansions. One guy on a 42 metre yacht woke up to find himself 50 metres downstream and practically inside somebody's lounge room. He wasn't the only one, and we've seen a few people motoring nervously about trying to find some extra swinging room. Our anchor has set just fine, and it hasn't moved at all... although with all the pressure on it I imagine it's pretty well dug in by now, and I'm not looking forward to trying to hoist it when we leave.

The canal water is thick and brown and full of flotsam from upstream. In a brief moment of calm I climbed the mast to fit a new anchor light, and from my vantage point I could see that the whole surface of the canal is slick with oil washed down the storm drains from the roads. There's a whole lot of water out there; the canal is running so fast that the tide didn't get a chance to come in, and *Pindimara* remained pointed upstream all day.

One day we went ashore to do the laundry. When we returned to the dinghy it was full of rain water, and I actually wore out my bailer trying to get rid of it. At one point, with the bailer splintered down to half its original size and a new cloudburst sweeping in from the sea, I found that I couldn't empty the boat faster than the rain was filling it. Thank goodness that all our nice clean laundry was sealed into dry-bags.

The yacht's usually pretty waterproof, but on one occasion we must have left one of the three locks on the head window ever so slightly loose. Usually this might have resulted in a few dribbles on the floor of the shower, but a couple of hours of this current downpour filled the bathroom with several inches of water, and when we got back the water was lapping at the lip of the bulkhead into the lounge. That would have been messy.

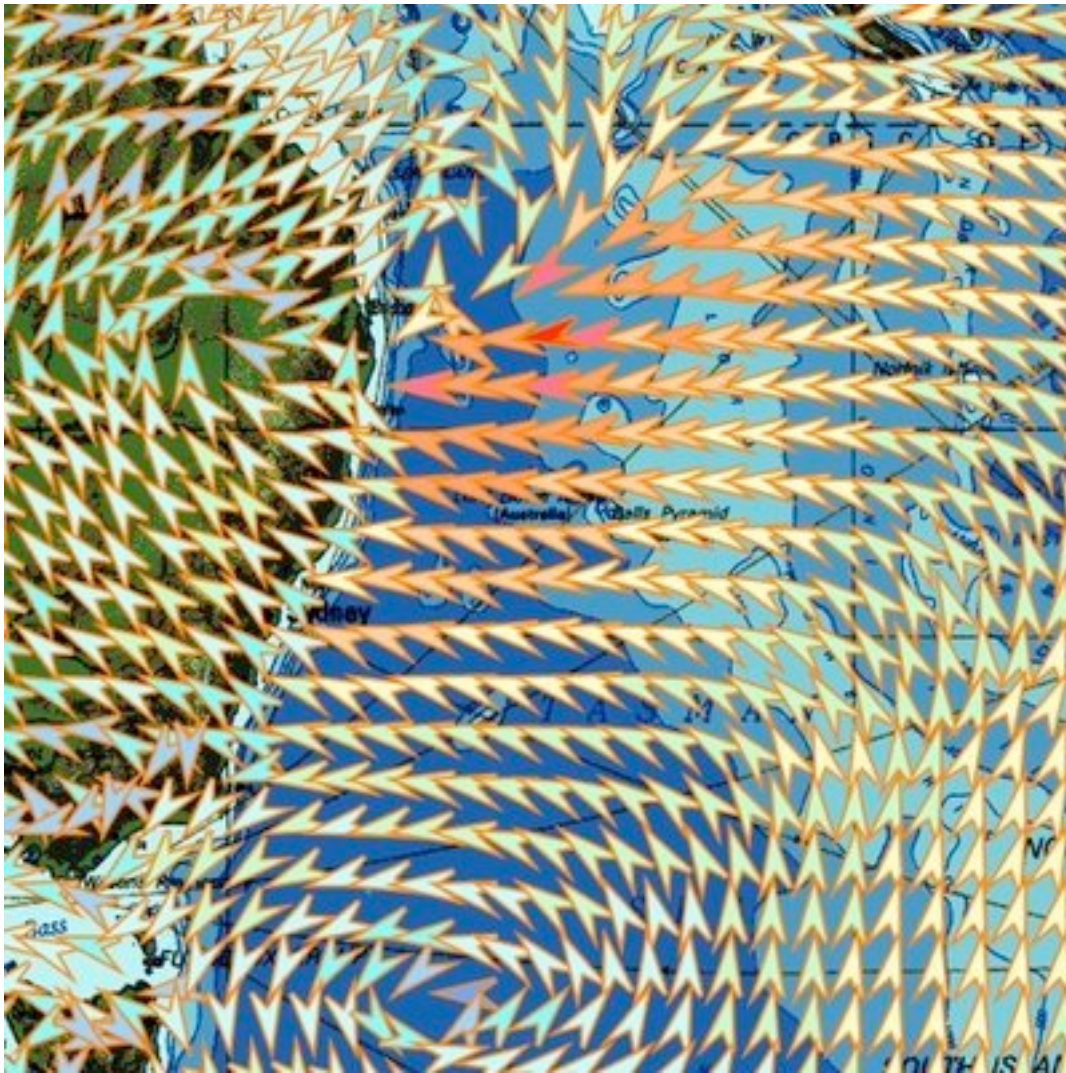
One good thing is that when the dinghy fills up overnight, we can pump the nice fresh rain water straight into our tanks, although this morning I did wonder if it would sink before I could get started.



NO WATER SHORTAGE TODAY

Apart from the gale warnings, the weather forecasts are quite vague, peppered with "depending on movement" and "maybe lower". I downloaded some GRIB files and quite frankly I don't blame them. It's anybody's guess what'll happen next.

Just for fun, here's a graphic representation of the wind strength data for earlier today. Red arrows indicate Force 8 to 9. See that confused bit where all the different coloured arrows are stacked up on top of each other? That's where we are.



WIND SPEED GRIB DATA FOR MAY 20 2009

Since we had so much fresh water, and since the canal is not really suitable for swimming, we decided to have a bath. We have a kid's inflatable paddling pool that exactly fits inside the cockpit. Add a dinghy-full of rain water and a few pans hot from the stove, and Robert is your mother's brother.



BATH TIME ON PINDIMARA

MAY 26, 2009

The Natives are Restless

We've been hiding from the storms that are currently destroying property all down the southern Queensland coast. Gale force winds, monstrous seas, and biblical rainfall have already claimed at least one life, and that was on land. Even if we were crazy enough to go out to sea, there's nowhere to go because the bars up and down the coast are all effectively closed to traffic.

There are a several cruising yachts packed into this little basin. Every day or so, one crew or another climbs up to the Caloundra lighthouse to see what the conditions are like out to sea, and then return shaking their heads.



SURF'S UP

One evening we noticed a harbour fisheries vessel going from yacht to yacht. Each visit seemed to involve a lot of discussion, and we assumed that they wanted to discuss fishing quotas or check our documentation, so we were a bit surprised when they arrived at our stern and began threatening us with fines and legal action for outstaying our welcome in Mooloolaba. In actual fact we were still within the ten days which local rules allow when hiding from inclement weather, but this didn't slow them down at all. With vague threats of heavy penalties, they advised us to abandon our yacht and move into a hotel.

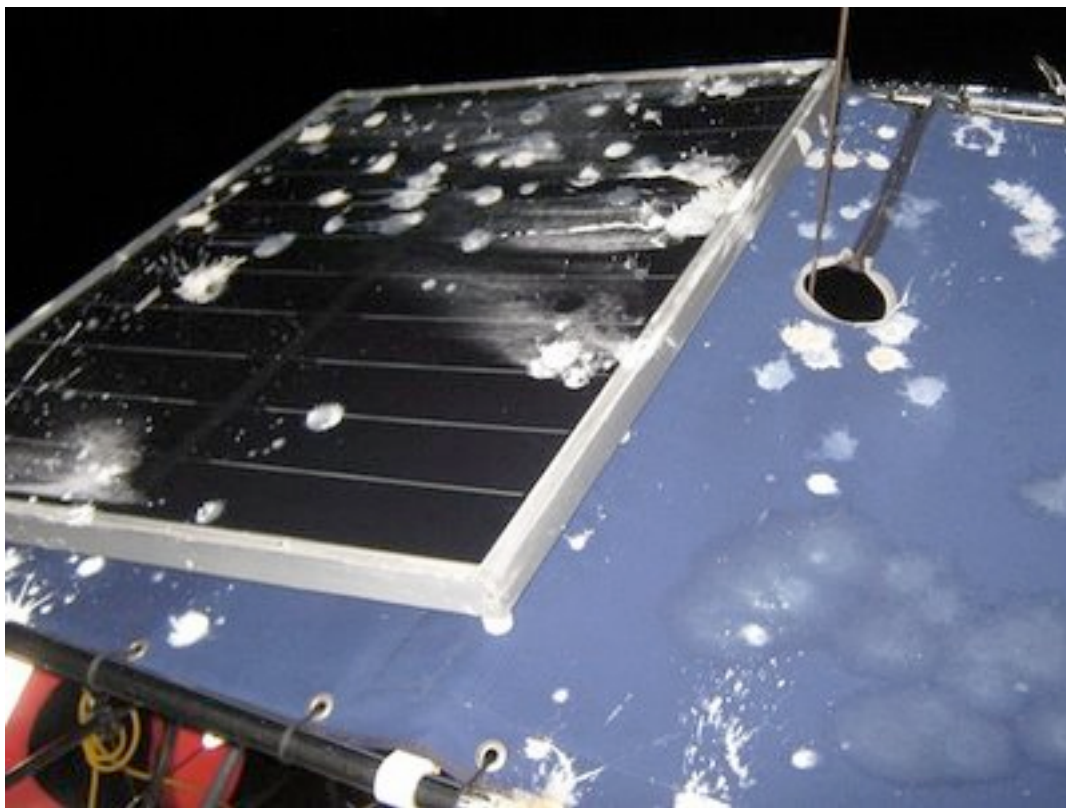
They spent a particularly long time on one of the larger yachts which has apparently been here for quite a bit longer than us. There seemed to be lot of paperwork being passed back and forth, and next morning when I was just thinking about puttering over to ask the skipper what it had all been about, we noticed that he must have left on the dawn tide. We can't imagine where he went, and hope that he found some safe harbour before the next 55-knot gale hit.

Days passed. Endless rain hammered on the deck. Wind howled in the rigging. Flood waters surged by, battering the hull from side to side. The mud-laden river was packed with wreckage from upstream, and sometimes one of the larger pieces of debris would bump up against our hull and scrape past on its way down to the sea.

On another evening we were down below, catching up on some paperwork, when we heard a soft thump from outside. We weren't overly concerned, as it didn't sound particularly alarming and was probably just something bouncing off the deck in the storm. A little later there was another one: thump.

The rain slackened off for a moment, and I got up to open the bathroom window because we had been getting the occasional whiff of an unpleasant smell and I thought perhaps that we should let some ventilation into the head. While I was up, I stuck my head out of the hatch to look at the weather and was greeted by a loud thump-thump on the deck and a strong smell of stale fish.

I turned on the torch and started laughing. There were two gannets roosting in the top set of mast spreaders. Every time they let fly with some droppings, the wind whipped them back at a sixty degree angle to impact just aft of the dodger. They can't have been there for more than a few hours, but the sheer volume of guano was astounding. The floor of the cockpit, both lockers, and both solar panels were liberally coated in up to a centimetre of foul-smelling paste.



GANNET GUANO

I waved my torch at the birds and they sulkily left to find another boat, but not before one of them scored a direct and very wet hit on the padlock for the locker containing the cleaning equipment.

We got the hint. It really was time to leave.

MAY 26, 2009

Escape from Mooloolaba

On our ninth day trapped in Mooloolaba, we became convinced that the morrow would finally bring an end to the inclement weather. We really, really wanted to get out as soon as possible, but we had to ensure that we reached our destination, the Wide Bay Bar, in the daylight and on the rising tide, while simultaneously managing to cross the Mooloolaba bar in a reasonable depth of water. The numbers worked out to a dusk departure on the following day.

We'd already discovered that there weren't any quality drinking establishments around (the Sunshine Coast Brewery is good, but sadly out of town), so we decided to celebrate in the Wharf Tavern, which we had judged to be the roughest of the local hostelryes.

Our radar seemed to be on the nose, for after requesting change for the pool table, we discovered that not only was the table broken, but the barmaid had given us some New Zealand dollar coins which wouldn't have fitted anyway.

After a few beers in a fishing town, Bronwyn always likes to mix with the trawlermen. For instance, long term readers of these annals will remember Wattie the tuna man in Lakes Entrance, who became a memorable part of our honeymoon when we discovered that the reason that the bar staff were so nervous about him drinking with us is that he had just been released from prison for stabbing the previous landlord. Here in Mooloolaba, Bronwyn was soon deep in conversation with Dave the prawn fisher, who popped off half way through to shoot up some speed, and then began calling up his mates to "sort out" a harmless young student who he had suddenly decided was a gay predator. All very charming.

Luckily I got chatting to a lovely lass who was celebrating her engagement while simultaneously plotting a career that would get her out of town. More power to your elbow, Emma! Hope to see you again soon, further up the road.

We had all day to recover from our cheap beer hangovers, and lots of time to ferry back and forth with fuel and supplies while preparing the boat for sea. After so long at anchor, it takes quite a while to get everything cleaned up and squirrelled away, but we got it all done and as the sun sank below the horizon we were chugging gently past the trawlers and out into the main channel. On the way out, we narrowly missed a bunch of unlit outrigger canoes which were invisible in the darkness, but then we were out in the ocean and free. Goodbye, Mooloolaba.

MAY 27, 2009

On to Wide Bay Bar

Once clear of the Mooloolaba bar there was only a metre or two of swell, which was far less than we'd expected after a week of storms. Even more conveniently, the swell was coming from the same direction as the wind, so although the breeze was light we still managed to get up to a reasonable cruising speed.

I'd re-plumbed the water maker in Mooloolaba, so as soon as we got into open water I popped down below to play with it. It was much improved, but still didn't seem to be building up enough of a hydrostatic head to get a good flow. I messed about with it for a while, but then the combination of close work and a quartering swell got me feeling somewhat green, and I went back up on deck for a lie down.

By the time I'd recovered, Bronwyn was also feeling the effects of the swell - obviously our sea legs had regressed during our long stay - so she went below to rest and I took the helm.

Very soon I was very hungry. Having eaten all the snack food in the cockpit, I went hunting below. I had to rush up and down in fits and bursts, as I was hand-steering because the wind was too variable to trust that Harriet would steer a close compass course, but eventually I found a large helping of ravioli that Bronwyn had prepared before we left, bless her, although she was herself still ill and dead to the world.

It was a moonless and cloudy night, very dark indeed, and "keeping a lookout" really meant glancing around in the pitch black every now and again to see if there were any lights out there. The rest of the time was spent either staring at the compass and trying to hold a reasonable course, or marvelling at the bright luminosity of our phosphorescent bow wave.

At one point I became rather confused by a fast-moving fishing boat that was displaying no navigation lights at all. I had to get close enough to see its deck lights reflecting in its wake before I could figure out which way it was heading, and take evasive action. I'm not sure that he ever saw me.

On a separate occasion, I noticed what I took to be the masthead lights of a stationary trawler, so I gently eased over to one side to give him a wide berth. I was quite shocked when the apparently distant vessel suddenly turned into a man in oilskins standing on a metal raft only a few boat-lengths away, holding a lantern and peering into the water. It's funny what you see, out there on the ocean.

Eventually the wind died and I started the motor. This meant that steering became much more of a chore, because I couldn't just balance the sails and let her run, I had to fight her every moment because the prop really wanted to turn to put the quartering swell behind us. At around midnight I realised that I was very, very tired, and although I felt guilty about it I dragged Bronwyn up for a stint while I napped on the floor of the saloon.

A couple of hours later, I was back in the saddle. Bronwyn wasn't looking good at all, a combination of sea-sickness and the tail end of a nasty cold, and she was very glad to crawl back into bed. Luckily I was feeling quite chipper after my break, and especially so when the stars came out and the wind returned, and I found myself gliding silently beneath the Milky Way. A few hours later, Venus rose brighter than I have ever seen. It actually cast shadows on the boat and laid a Venus-beam across the water. Gorgeous.

As dawn broke we were coming abeam of Double Island Point, a common roadstead anchorage. We'd had half an idea to rest there for a few hours before risking the nearby Wide Bay Bar which was bound to be hairy after all the recent weather, but I

spoke to the Tin Can Bay Coastguard on the radio and he said that it was "a bit rolly, but not too bad" before giving me the latest waypoints around the shifting shoals. Bronwyn appeared on deck feeling much improved, and was able to spell me for an hour or so across Wide Bay while I took a nap, so we decided that since we were on a perfect rising tide we might as well go for it.

Wide Bay is (don't you love Australian cartographers?) about ten miles across, and much of the north western corner is continually breaking shoals. There are leading lights on the shore, but the bay is so big that you can't really see them until it's too late, so the coastguard maintains a set of coordinates that you can follow to keep you out of trouble. We dropped the sails and got to the first waypoint easily enough, but just had to trust the course to the next one, because it looked from our vantage point as if we were motoring into a wall of breaking waves. I think that the cat behind us didn't have the coordinates, because it chickened out of the leading line three times before committing to following our trail. I don't really blame them as it did look very intimidating ahead.

Just before the second waypoint, a gap magically appeared in the wall of white water and we chugged through. It reminded me of the time I paddled out of a lagoon break in Samoa, with huge walls of water towering on either side and my kayak slipping unharmed in between.

Bronwyn called up the course to the third waypoint from her position below at the chart table. I turned to the west and we entered the zone known locally as "The Mad Mile".

It was completely crazy. I could just make out some leading lights in the distance, but without the waypoint course I wouldn't have believed it possible. Enormous rolling surf surged across our path, breaking into curving rollers to the left and to the right. Huge mountains of water lifted up and dropped away, sending thundering walls of water across our route. Despite my best efforts, Pindimara began to roll violently. The gunwhales were almost in the water, and we shipped some green ones across the deck. Down through the hatchway, I could see Bronwyn's knuckles tightening on the companionway banister as she tried to keep herself in her seat. The computer is held down by a velcro strap, but the GPS and cabling is not, and I could hear vague crashings and tinklings from below over the roar of the waves.

Bronwyn says that she saw all of our coffee mugs leap off the shelf and then magically set back down into their positions. On deck, the binoculars leapt from their usually safe shelf under the dodger, spiralled through the air and landed unharmed on the other side.

I spied another yacht coming towards us, obviously using the same waypoints to get out to sea. He was about our size, and on several occasions I saw clear air under at least half of his hull; presumably we looked exactly the same to him. I would have loved to fire up the video camera, but I was fully occupied with staying at the helm and keeping the bow out of the water. It was all I could do to give him a cheerfully nonchalant wave as he flashed past in a welter of foam.

And then... the sun shone on the placid waters of Wide Bay Harbour, and the quiet sandy shores of Fraser Island stretched out to the north. A low-sided landing craft chugged across in front of us, laden with tourists. I looked over my shoulder. Behind us, the seas still raged, but it all looked out of focus and unreal. We had arrived.

MAY 27, 2009

Garrys Anchorage

We found ourselves at the mouth of Tin Can Bay at the southern end of the Great Sandy Strait. The Strait is an area of low-lying islands and shoaling sand banks that separates the four hundred square miles of Fraser Island from the mainland. The official chart doesn't show very much detail, but the depths shown suggest that it is practically un-navigable. In reality the Great Sandy Strait is a very popular cruising ground provided you remain vigilant about the state of the tides. Our plan was to overnight in Tin Can Bay and then ride the flood tide up to Garrys Anchorage, sleep there and then ride the next tide up to North White Cliffs.



THE SOUTHERN PART OF THE GREAT SANDY STRAIT

We did start to head for Tin Can Bay, but then realised that we were so pumped with adrenalin from crossing the Mad Mile that we might as well make use of the rest of the tide and get to Garrys Anchorage a day early.

The southern part of the Strait was wide, deep and placid. Because of the high tide, we weren't able to see the sand banks which lurked in the shallows, but they were well marked with navigation beacons.

The rest of the morning was an absolute delight. The sun shone down, birds soared overhead, and we chugged in perfect solitude between endless mangrove-fringed sandy islands.



ENJOYING THE CALM

Garrys Anchorage proved easy enough to find, a calm and shallow strip of water between Fraser Island itself and the small Stewart Island. It was by now late morning. We consulted the tide tables, anchored in five metres of water, and went straight to bed.

We awoke in the afternoon. I went for a quick swim to have a look at the bottom of the boat, which was in good condition and completely free of marine growth. We lazed about and enjoyed the utter peace.

When we'd anchored at high water, we were sitting in a large and placid lake. As the tide fell, muddy banks rose eerily from the water with a damp crackling sound. It was slightly alarming to find ourselves dropping steadily into a muddy canyon, but our calculations were sound and we remained safely in the narrow channel.



WHERE DID ALL THAT LAND COME FROM?

It was blissfully quiet after the continual traffic of the Mooloolaba canal. We could see one other yacht in the distance, joined later in the evening by a second one, but the only sound was the piping of the oyster catchers, the slurping of the sand bars, and the gentle crackling of crustaceans underneath the hull.



TINY VISITORS

MAY 30, 2009

North White Cliffs, Fraser Island

We left on the dawn tide.

Of course that's complete rubbish. What we actually did was have a leisurely breakfast before motoring gently out of the creek some time during the mid morning. But we did make very sure that the tide was still rising, because the Great Sandy Strait is far too shallow for us to navigate otherwise.

Large sea turtles poked their heads out to watch us go. They were very nervous, only popping their noses up long enough for a quick snort of air; by the time you'd turned your head to see them, they had gone, leaving only a spreading circular ripple. Some of the heads didn't look quite the same, and we realised after a while that some of them were dugongs rather than turtles.

There wasn't any wind, but we were happy to motor along in the sunshine, navigating from channel marker to channel marker. There were plenty of markers, but there were also plenty of sand banks and channels, and often it wasn't exactly clear whether the marker that you could see was in your channel or in an adjacent one. I wouldn't have liked to do it in the dark, or even on a cloudy day.

We only had a few hours to get through the really shallow portion of the Strait, but the 2.4 metre high tide carried us through with little cause for alarm. We did pass over a few places where we had less than a metre under the keel, confirming that we would never have gotten through at low tide.

When we reached the North White Cliffs which mark the end of the shallow portion of the passage, we plonked down our anchor for a few days of relaxation.



CLIFFS, WHITE, NORTHERLY.

The beach is only a few tens of metres away, consisting of sand eroded from the overhanging cliffs overlying some exposed coal measures.



BARBECUE, ANYONE?

From here it is but a gentle stroll to the Mackenzie Jetty where steam trains used to haul milled timber out to waiting barges. The mill and the associated houses have all gone, but most of the jetty still stands and there's some abandoned hardware on the beach, including an old locomotive boiler.



REINHARD PLAYS TRAINS



REINHARD PLAYS TRACTORS

A little inland is the site of the wartime headquarters of Australia's secret Z Squadron, from where they launched training limpet-mine missions against presumably good-humoured local boats and businesses, and real and very dangerous missions into Asia and the Pacific. Most of the base has rusted away, but the history and photographs were interesting. I was bemused to see that the old tyres from their abandoned vehicles are still practically useable after over fifty years of lying in the bush. No wonder tyres aren't welcome in landfill sites.

We're also on the edge of Kingfisher Bay where there is a small resort. We had formed high hopes of sundowner cocktails at the beach bar, but it turned out to be just a standard schnitzel-and-cheap-lager joint, so we gave it a miss. The resort itself seemed pleasant enough, but had an aura of neurosis about it, being completely surrounded by a tall dingo fence behung with pictures of slavering hounds and dire warnings about letting children play unattended. We were exhorted to "attack vigorously" if approached by angry dogs. Instead, we had a champagne picnic.



CHEERS!

Fraser Island to Bundaberg

We left on the dawn tide, more or less, pausing only for a leisurely breakfast and a few household chores. The top end of the Great Sandy Strait isn't particularly shallow, so we weren't in fact concerned about the state of the tide, and simply followed the navigation markers to the north west. Even so, the proliferation of sandbanks and channels was a little confusing, and we were glad to find an old large-scale map in our collection which showed a lot more detail than our supposedly up to date GPS chart, which was missing most of the cardinals and channel markers.

By lunchtime we were out of the Strait and into Hervey Bay itself, sailing before the wind at a respectable 5 knots. I started up the engine and let it idle so that I could experiment some more with the water maker, reasoning that (a) it probably needed the electrical boost from the alternator, and (b) it probably needed the hydrostatic boost of the engine's water pump. In the event, I think that both assumptions were correct, because after about five minutes we got our first few spoonfuls of fresh water. Hurrah!

A couple of seconds later, the fuse blew. Ah well, back to the drawing board.

There wasn't too much swell, but we've obviously been at anchor for too long, because we both started to feel a bit nauseous. We kept up a steady stream of snacks and hot drinks, which seems to be the only reliable way of keeping it under control.

We weren't helped by the fact that there was absolutely nothing to look at. Even though Hervey Bay is more or less enclosed, the surrounding land is so flat that we had a virtually undisturbed 360 degree horizon. As far as the eye could see, we were the only thing moving. It was Sunday lunchtime, typically a busy time out on the water, but today there were no boats of any kind, not even a solitary fisherman in his tinnie. No planes passed overhead. Neither were there any birds, turtles, fish, dolphins, or dugongs. It was almost boring.

Thankfully the wind got a bit more exciting in the afternoon, and soon we were flying along at over seven knots with a large following swell. Wheeeee!

As night fell we came into sight of the commercial shipping lane into Bundaberg, lines of green and red flashing lights marching arrow-straight across the sea. It seemed to take a very long time to get into the channel itself, and through that whole time we didn't see a single other vessel. Once into the lane we dropped the sails, and discovered that although the lane was very long it was pretty narrow. It was also disconcerting that all the lights had been programmed to switch on and off simultaneously, which meant that for three seconds in every four it was pitch black and we couldn't see a thing. Then we got a single second of bright colours all the way to the horizon, and by the time we'd worked out what we were looking at it had all gone dark again.

With the help of some large-scale charts of the Burnett River entrance and the GPS we worked it out and made our way upriver past a few marinas, past the molasses plant (yum, great smell) and dropped our anchor in a few metres of water just before the cane sugar cable ferry. We'd come in at low water and were close to the edge of the river, so we had to be certain that we'd paid out enough chain to cope with the 2.5 metre tide without giving us too much swinging room for the size of the channel. We had dinner and a welcome glass of wine and did some route planning with - oh go on then - just another glass of wine and it all seemed to be working splendidly, so we went gratefully to bed for a calm and undisturbed nights rest.

JUNE 2, 2009

Bundaberg

We were anchored in what was technically Bundaberg Port rather than in the town itself, which is a few miles upstream. It is theoretically possible to take a keel boat all the way up to Bundaberg itself, but there was a shallow section that would only be passable on a good tide and we were happy where we were, so we unlimbered the tender and prepared ourselves for a little expedition.

This whole outboard motor thing is still new to us, so we didn't know how long it would take us to motor the six miles into town and back, with or against the tides and with or against the prevailing winds. We packed a variety of clothes and some spare fuel, and set off.

The river is very wide and, as we found when I flamboyantly decided to cut a corner, quite shallow enough in places to beach an eight-foot dinghy. One bank seems to be mainly mangroves, while the other is taken up with a sugar cane plantation. A little way along, we chugged past what is presumably the cane farmer's house, very nice indeed with a large ketch moored at the bottom of the garden.

This was the only boat that we saw on the river, and we were once again surprised at how quiet it is here. We have come to expect that waterways are always packed with fishermen in tinnies and people in runabouts, but there had been nothing moving at the port and there was nobody around here. Only when we reached the outskirts of the town did we see one or two men with rods standing on the shore.

Mind you, we were grateful for the peace. The headwind was opposing the incoming tide and we had to contend with some pretty large waves without the additional excitement from the wakes of full-bore fishing tinnies.

It's almost six miles from the Cane Ferry to Bundaberg, and we discovered that the Walker Bay with its 3hp outboard will run for five miles before it runs out of fuel. The whole journey took about an hour and a half. So now we know.

Bundaberg itself was small and compact, and contained the kinds of stores that suggested that people come in from the country to get supplies. The most interesting architecture was (as usual) to be seen in the pubs, which stood on every corner.



*THE OLD BUNDY TAVERN
PERHAPS WE SHOULD HAVE DRUNK HERE INSTEAD?*

Since we were standing at the centre of the mighty Bundaberg rum empire, I expected to see a great many rum-related motifs and interesting rum products for sale, but this wasn't the case at all. Even the pubs didn't carry anything more elaborate than the usual Bundy-and-coke in a can.

We had intended to visit the distillery, but by the time we got there it had closed for the day. We had heard, though, that the tasting room does not present the usual display of grand old vintages that you might expect, but instead focusses on all the different mixers that you can put into your Bundy to make it taste better. This seems reasonable to me, because - grand old Australian institution as it may be - it does taste pretty nasty on its own.

We had with us a fairly esoteric shopping list, but the town managed to come up trumps with the whole thing; Croc boat shoes, a circuit breaker, a European pillow case, an adjustable wrench, a computer fan and a cribbage board. We even found somebody to make us a three metre steel leash for the tender.

Spotting an Indian restaurant, we decided to splash out on a celebratory meal. It wasn't open yet, so we waited over indifferent beer outside an indifferent pub, counting the teenage mothers as they strutted past in the gathering dusk.

The restaurant itself occupied a fine old corner building, possibly an old bank or post office, and had been rather lovingly restored with hardwood dado rails and original brass electrical fittings overlain by the usual Indian restaurant colour scheme but executed with rather more taste than usual. We asked for the wine list but they turned out to be BYO, so Bronwyn popped out to find some wine while I ordered a vindaloo and a jalfrezi.



INSIDE 'SPICES PLUS' RESTAURANT

Some time later, Bronwyn had still not returned. I drank my third glass of water and grinned helplessly at the waitress who was hovering uncertainly in the wings. Another two couples arrived and ordered, and then finally the door opened and Bronwyn arrived triumphantly brandishing a bottle of white. There were, it seems, only two places in town where you could buy wine. The RSL wouldn't serve her unless she was a member, and she couldn't become a member without a driving licence, although they were happy for her to drink at the bar. The off-sales counter at the neighbouring pub was happy to sell her a bottle until they discovered that

they had run out of brown paper bags. Apparently this was a big deal, because they refused to sell her wine without a bag. Eventually they came to an agreement where she paid the more expensive pub price, and then they "forgot" to open it and Bronwyn smuggled it out under her jacket. I'm sure that there is some logic in that somewhere.

Finally we were all set to enjoy our meal. I had deliberately ordered both dishes "hot" because the Australian taste is for very bland food and we fancied a bit of spice. In the event, I suspect that the chef merely wafted a couple of chillies over the pan before putting them away for the next mad Englishman, because even the vindaloo was exceptionally mild. Still, the dishes were well made and the staff friendly, and we had a lovely evening. It made a nice change for somebody else to do the cooking and the washing up.

It was full dark by the time we left the restaurant and made our way down to the river to our tender, but the river was smooth and calm and the clouds drew back to reveal a crescent moon. We motored back along past the fields of sugar cane, with the moonlight glinting off the water and the Milky Way shining above. It was absolutely glorious.

JUNE 2, 2009

Burnett River to Bustard Head

Motoring out of Port Bundaberg, we gave way to a couple of fishing trawlers coming in after a night's work. They were accompanied by the usual flocks of seagulls eager to catch the guts and scraps thrown overboard as the fishermen cleaned their catch, but in addition they were accompanied by at least half a dozen sea eagles also vying for the same thing.



GOT ANY FISH?

We must have missed a good party, too, because somebody had driven their ute into the river.



DRIVEN TO DRINK

Once out into the open sea and running at a useful six knots, I fired up the engine and idled it to play with the water maker, which was now running through a shiny new circuit breaker. It worked beautifully, generating ten litres of water in three hours. Not exactly enough for a bath, but sufficient to maintain our independence from marina water. My next task is to see if I can power it using the tow generator rather than the engine, but the tow generator is out of service at the moment because I have cannibalised some of its parts to fix something else.

Although the weather was beautiful, we could see the occasional squall moving past in the distance. We've noticed that they do usually march past either out to sea or inland of us, leaving the strip just offshore generally free from rain. Later that afternoon, though, an almost invisible squall came out of a double rainbow in a cloudless sky and hit us broadside. The rain was so perfectly horizontal that one side of the cockpit stayed completely dry while the other ran with storm water, soaking us instantly. After a minute or so the squall moved on, leaving behind it a much improved wind direction that enabled us to put the swell behind us as night fell and we headed for the reefs of Bustard Head's innovatively named Inner, Middle and Outer rocks.

It was now quite dark and we were navigating by GPS again, aided by the two lighthouses on the shore. Just as we arrived at the gap between Outer and Middle Rocks, another squall came through to the south of us and eclipsed the lights; quite a feat in the case of Bustard Head which is rated at 19 mile visibility and we were only a couple of miles away. A big swell picked us up and we surfed through in complete darkness, very exhilarating.

We were heading for Pancake Creek, a sheltered patch of water under the double peninsular of Bustard Head and Clews Point. We had a number of charts which disagreed on the navigation markers that we might find. Popping up and down between cockpit and chart table, I quickly realised that the reality was different from any of them. I was getting very nervous; the admiralty charts showed us approaching shoals and rocks, in the dark and carried along by the tide. Bronwyn, however, was at the helm and had been watching the instruments. She was confident that the depths were looking OK, so we ran the gap and stopped only a few boat lengths between a port marker on a rock, a starboard marker on a roaring

shoal, and some sort of iso marker on a rock ridge. The anchor bounced a few times on rock and then caught solidly in the fast-flowing current. A few minutes was enough to convince us that we weren't drifting anywhere, so we put out a little more chain to counter the rising tide - but not too much to allow us to swing and hit any of the three navigation lights - and went to sleep.

JUNE 4, 2009

Pancake Creek

The anchor made a few dragging noises in the night, but when I ran up on deck it clearly hadn't moved at all, so we put it down to the chain clattering over some underground rock shelf as we swung.

In the morning we got a clearer view of our anchorage. The starboard beacon about twenty metres away marked a very active shoal ground, whose frothing waves we had seen glistening in the moonlight when we arrived.



HERE BE DRAGONS

The white iso beacon on the other side of us marked a rocky outcrop projecting into the channel. There was room to get past this rock at high tide and into the inner bay

and beach where we could see a number of other boats at anchor, but we were happy with our privacy and with our ability to leave quickly without worrying about either daylight or tide, so we stayed where we were.

Pancake Creek turned out to be our favourite anchorage so far, and we stayed for a couple of days. One afternoon we pumped up our inflatable kayak and went exploring.

There were many miles of secluded little beaches, some showing signs of repeated return visits in the form of home-made swings, tables, firepits and the occasional beach chair. We paddled past a few of them and then dragged the kayak up over the water line while we went ashore, where we soon found an old boardwalk. The boards themselves were almost completely rotted, but the path was still a reasonably clear and ran in a dead straight line up through the woods of the peninsula.



OUR GUMOTEX KAYAK



A WALK IN THE WOODS



THE BEACH ROCKS

Although there weren't many visible flowers, the forest was delicately perfumed and alive with butterflies and birds. We passed banksia trees heavily laden with pods, and grasses bearing tall rushes several metres high.



REINHARD'S TICKLE STICK

The track eventually led out onto the dunes and finally up to Burnett Head itself, where we found a lovingly restored lighthouse with pristine white out-buildings. We met the caretaker, who was part of the voluntary group that maintain it and who was doing his one-month live-in stint for the year. He claimed that the fully automated light, which we had seen at a distance of 20 miles, is powered by only a 100 watt bulb. He also told us that our boardwalk was the original mule track that was used to ferry supplies up from Pancake Creek, but that now they came by "Larc", which is an amphibious tourist bus that regularly visits the seaward side of Bustard Head.

We strolled out a little way along the Larc track which gave us a tremendous view across Pancake Creek's (non-navigable) rear entrance and inner waterways. It looks like a tempting cruising ground for a shallow-draft dinghy or perhaps even a trailer-sailer, and we'd love to come back and spend some more time there.



VIEW SOUTHWARD FROM BUSTARD HEAD

Back in Pancake Creek we stopped for a refreshing sunset bathe on the beach before paddling back to the boat where we played cribbage and drank wine while our yorkshire pudding baked in the oven.

It's a great spot, but since it's out of range of both telephone and internet, we couldn't stay for too long because it was time for both of us to do our exams. I needed to fly to Kalgoorlie for a field course, and Bronwyn needed to find a university that would provide her with an invigilator; nearby Gladstone seemed ideal because it had a marina, an airport, and a university. We set sail and had a very pleasant trip, arriving in the late afternoon.

The port was curiously quiet. We sailed along the wide commercial shipping channel, surrounded by enormous gravel loaders and industrial plant, all of which were shut down and silent. Just when I was beginning to entertain fanciful theories about a worldwide plague virus that had struck everybody down while we were away, a bulk carrier emerged from behind a headland and thundered gently by.



SIGNS OF LIFE

JUNE 13, 2009

Side trip: Kalgoorlie

One of the reasons that we had to stop in Gladstone was that I needed to get to a field course in Kalgoorlie, clear across the other side of Australia. Since both Gladstone and Kalgoorlie are mining towns, we reasoned that I would be able to get a reasonable connection. We looked into buses, trains, and cars as well as

aeroplanes, but flying was by far the cheapest option, and when I boarded the planes they were awash with fluoro shirts of mine workers changing shifts.

We arrived at dawn, and I got a good look at the landscape. I had expected it to be completely flat and red, and indeed it was, but I was surprised to note that it was lush with free-standing gum trees, marching in green rows to the horizon.



EASTERN GOLDFIELDS

As we came in for landing, we flew over a number of open-cast pits. We didn't fly over the Super-Pit, because overflying that enormous cavity was banned after the updraft caused an airliner to crash a few years ago.



KALGOORLIE SUPER-PIT

For scale, the tiny truck on the far right is about ten metres wide

Since I only had about twenty kilos of luggage, mainly text books, I decided to hike in rather than catch a taxi. I like to approach a new town slowly so that I can get a better feel for it, and I certainly needed to kill some time before anything opened, so I set off. It was strange to wear shoes again after all these months, and in addition they were brand new steel-toe work boots that I had been trying to break in on the beach, which must have looked quite amusing.



MADE FOR WALKING

It was a very pleasant walk, and I was amused to see that most of the horizon at ground level is taken up by the artificially straight lines of mine tailings. I passed some pricey-looking new residences with expensive cars outside, and a number of scrubby little trailer parks, some of them glorying under names like "your golden nugget holiday home". When I finally arrived at the hostel (The Kalgoorlie Backpackers), I found it to be clean and presentable, and after a brief snooze on a sofa I was shown to my room for the week.

Most of the days and indeed the evenings were taken up with field trips, study and revision, but I did get out to see the town once in a while.



WA SCHOOL OF MINES



CAUTION!

Most of the buildings date from the late 1800s, and the town is very well preserved. Clearly the mine companies bring in a lot of money. The schools look nice, too, although all of the shops had stickers in the window announcing that they would not serve children during school hours. There are enough shops and small restaurants to make it interesting, as well as a good number of pubs.



THE YORK HOTEL

The streets are very wide indeed, apparently a hangover from the days of horse-driven road-trains, and the council has recently gone to the effort of replanting all the central reservations and borders with native flora. The only problem with native grasses is that they aren't good to walk on, so where pedestrians might be expected to pass, they had laid down astroturf instead of concrete. This might sound a bit strange, but it provided a nice contrast with the red mud and somehow didn't look out of place at all.

When I'd been searching the internet for a hotel, I had noticed that several of them offered "brothel tours" as a standard service. I wasn't entirely sure whether they were referring to historical museums or to working girls, but I was soon to find that on the other side of the street to my hostel was 'Questa Casa', claiming inevitably to be Australia's oldest brothel, but which offered tourist visits by day and more traditional services by night.



QUESTA CASA

On our final night, a few of us went out for a meal at a Thai BYO (bring your own alcohol) restaurant one night, and it fell upon me to go out and find some wine. The first place that I tried was the Exchange Hotel, one of the three main central pubs. There were the usual dress code signs on the door, including an embargo on steel toe caps after 9pm. Since I was wearing mine, I wasn't sure if they would let me in, but as it turned out the bouncer was leaning on the juke box having a chat with some mates rather than paying full attention to the door, so I presume that they don't get a lot of trouble. That was a pleasant start; I have a deep and abiding hatred for officious door staff. I ambled around a bit, peering between the guys at the bar to see if I could spot any bottles of wine amongst the racks of beer and coke, and suddenly realised that there were a couple of semi-naked girls bouncing up and down trying to get my attention. The barmaids were all wearing lingerie and little else, and a pleasant bubbly blonde laughed when I asked after wine and sent me to the Irish pub next door. I guess it isn't a wine sort of place.

Paddy's had a selection of two red wines, so I picked one and ambled back to the restaurant. Some of the guys had been to Kalgoorlie before and they laughed when I mentioned the barmaids; apparently they're called "skimpies" and work every night at the Exchange. It seems that they used to be quite ribald but there was a crackdown recently and now they're much tamer.

The Thai meal was nicely presented and very tasty, although of course (being Australia) very mild. At the end, the chef came out to see if we'd enjoyed it, and seemed on the point of apologising for using too much chilli before she took in our effusive thanks.

Having eaten and drunk everything in sight, we decided to go on to the Exchange where they were happy to serve us unlimited pints of lager and stout, but no spirits, not even over ice. I asked one of the lasses about it and she said that this was a specific rule at the Exchange; you could only drink spirits with mixers.



THE EXCHANGE HOTEL

The pub had a pleasant blokey atmosphere. Most of the patrons were wearing fluoro shirts and boots from a day at the mines, and some were drunk enough to be dancing on the pool table and using the chalk to write on the ceiling. The skimpies came out often to chat to the drinkers and panhandle for tips ("If we get enough tips we might take some more clothes off"), and it was all very friendly and nobody hassled them. There were only two female customers, two young girls who seemed to be regulars and went everywhere together, although nobody seemed to pay them much attention, even though they weren't wearing very much either. The two of us who were still standing at two in the morning did try to make it to one of the other pubs, but it seems (thankfully... we had an exam next day) that everything closes at the same time, and we staggered back to our hotels.

As I sat on the plane home, trying to ignore the pain in my head and looking forward to a week of exams in Gladstone, I reflected that Kalgoorlie would not be a bad place to live at all.

JUNE 21, 2009

Gladstone Marina

Usually when we need to stay at a marina, we rent a swing mooring and commute to land by dinghy. A mooring is usually cheaper and more private than a berth, but still allows you access to the marina's showers, laundry and other facilities. It lacks a fresh water tap and shore power, but those are not things that we regard as at all important, being largely self-sufficient with our large water tanks and wind and solar generators.

On this occasion, though, our greatest concern is revising for and taking our exams. Mine are conducted online, so I use my computer at the local library, but Bronwyn has had to arrange for an invigilator at the nearby campus of the University of Central Queensland. To make it all easier, and to ensure that we have the necessary power for late night study, we have committed ourselves to three weeks plugged in to a marina berth.

Gladstone Marina is operated by the Port Authority, whose main job is to handle the freighter traffic servicing the local coal loader, smelter and gas plant. The marina is overshadowed by the coal loader which continually lays down a thick layer of black dust while beeping loudly to let you know that, even though you might have gone to bed, they are still working. The marina is also in the middle of a refit, so there are labourers disassembling and reassembling the pontoons to the sound of power tools and local radio, backed by a loud and smoky dredger running at all hours of the day and night.



PINDIMARA SULKS ON A BERTH



THE MARINA AND COAL LOADER

Where there is a marina, there is usually a sailing club. On the whole, we've been completely unimpressed with all the sailing clubs that we've visited so far, but we persevered with the nearby Port Curtis Sailing Club. In their favour, they poured Guinness in pint dimple jugs. Actually, that's probably the only thing in their favour. The beer was poor and overpriced, the interior lacked any kind of atmosphere, and we didn't manage to engage anybody in conversation at all. The food was... perhaps I should merely draw your attention to the sign in the gents lavatory. While extolling the advantages of paying your club membership fees, this poster tantalisingly exhorted: "Your membership entitles you to discounts at our infamous restaurant". Enough said, I think.

We had a far better time at some of the local pubs, particularly at The Grand Hotel, which is always friendly and welcoming. One night we found ourselves drinking there with some coral trout fishermen celebrating their return from a four-week stint, who later took us to The Queens, which we had previously avoided because of its unprepossessing exterior but which turned out to be a lively and fun local haunt, full of interesting characters. I was also served one of the best steaks that I have eaten in Australia. It actually came 'blue' as ordered, and I could cut it with a fork. Superb.

I joined the locals that night in their tippie of choice, Bundaberg rum and coke, after which it all got a bit messy. Much, much later we set off on the kilometre or so walk back to the marina, and somehow got completely lost, even though the town is only a few minutes across. Luckily Bronwyn flagged down the driver of a passing petrol tanker, who took pity on us and drove us home.

Most of the boats here at the marina are long-term liveaboards. This doesn't mean that there are lots of cruising sailors to talk to; on the contrary, it's more like living in a waterborne trailer park. Most of the denizens seem to live on enormous self-built trimarans, all trailing great strands of coral and mussels testament to their complete and permanent immobility.



PERHAPS THEY ARE STARTING A CLAM FARM?



I'D BE FASCINATED TO SEE HOW THIS RUNS

While hosing off a couple of weeks of coal dust from Pindimara's deck this afternoon, I noticed that even our neighbour's inflatable dinghy had nearly a metre of coral beard hanging from its underside.

While waiting for service at the sailing club, I idled away some time by reading their notice board, even perusing the race standings (it was a very long wait). Since then I have now seen most of the boats listed, including all those with high handicaps, and almost all of them are trailing festoons of coral and shellfish. I'm not sure exactly who is kidding whom.



THIS YACHT IS HIGH IN THE CLUB STANDINGS

We're here in Gladstone for a very specific reason, but I must admit that life at the marina is slowly driving me stir crazy. The rhythm of our day has all changed. Because we have permanent electrical power, we no longer go to bed at dusk and wake at dawn. Instead, we laze around in the evening watching videos and reading books, and wake up whenever our neighbours start to make too much noise in the morning. I've also lost touch with the weather. Usually I feel in tune with the boat, waking reliably whenever the tide changes or whenever there's a change in the wind. At sea, at anchor, or on a mooring, the boat feels restless when there's a change in the air. Here at the marina berth, I have no idea what is happening out

there. The wind gusts or the sun comes out with no warning, and I feel disconnected. Hah, listen to me. We've only been at sea for three months, and already I sound like a hoary old sea dog.

But the exams are going well. Only one more week to go.

JUNE 26, 2009

Gladstone

The tourist board brochure claims that "Gladstone is a gourmet paradise...creating flavours you will remember long after your holiday". We are not convinced. Apart from pub food (with an honourable mention to the Queens Hotel Steak House - see previous blog entry), and a scattering of rather second rate cafes, there are only a handful of real restaurants in town, and most of those are boarded up with 'for sale' signs on them. The list of 'restaurants' in that same tourist brochure even includes the McDonalds... and mysteriously fails to mention the one diamond in the rough, the stunningly good Rock Salt in Roseberry Street. When we showed up without a reservation on a weekday evening the place was packed, although they were perfectly happy to light up a gas heater and let us sit outside on the patio. The service was cheerful, the wine list and prices acceptable, and the food very good indeed. We're counting our pennies to see if we can justify another visit before we leave.

We found a self-guided pamphlet tour of the town, which was only two kilometres long and took in all the historical attractions. Unfortunately, most of it reminded us of a similar tour that we once did in Shanghai, where we would find ourselves looking at a car park and admiring a small plinth stating "Here stands the former site of the former Korean embassy". The main highlight is the climb of 111 steps alongside the Rotary Club artificial waterfall to the top of Auckland Hill ("Spectacular... multicoloured vistas of the city... magnificently preserved buildings from times gone by"), from which vantage point you get a good view of the mineral loader, the coal loader, the power station, both bauxite refineries and the smelter.



GRAIN SILOS



FUEL AND HYDROXIDE

This encouraged us to take a number of the free 'Industry Tours', in which we were ferried every day by bus to a different plant site. The Queensland Alumina refinery was an interesting nest of pipework and towers, stained either bauxite red or alumina white depending on which part of the process was in progress. We weren't allowed out of the bus or to take photos, but we did get to see behind the scenes that are not normally visible to the public. Bronwyn was particularly struck by the large quantities of junk lying around everywhere, and we couldn't help noticing the phenomenal amount of welding and repair work that was going on. When there are hundreds of thousands of kilometres of pipework carrying hot caustic soda, I imagine that equipment doesn't last very long. On the way in, a sign proudly proclaimed "Days since last serious injury: 2"

We also visited the Boyne Smelter, where the alumina is reduced using astonishing amounts of electricity to make aluminium ingots, bars and billets for export mainly to Asia. Once turned on, it's a bad idea to turn the smelter off because the molten metal will set irreversibly in the crucibles, so there was a continual tale of keeping up the supply of electricity and making sure that they've made enough anodes to replace the ones that burn out every few days.

Another local industry is the RG Tanna coal loader that is the source of the black dust all over our deck. They take coal from bottom-dumping train cars, blend it, and then load it into bulk carriers at a rather amazing 6000 tonnes per hour. Our bus driver took us right out along the loading pier, where coal was pouring into ships from a conveyor moving at five metres per second... a barrage of statistics, but an interesting and enjoyable tour.



PASSING A CALCITE STORE ON THE WAY TO THE COAL LOADER

And now the week is over. I have sent in my final assignment, and Bronwyn has completed her final exam. We are free to go! There are nice SW winds forecast for the weekend. We're fuelled up, watered up, provisioned up. I've hosed the coal dust off the deck (again). We've washed and polished and vacuumed, charged all our rechargeable stuff using shore power, finished colour coding the anchor chain, and reinstalled our tow generator. I've even - I think - fixed the ventilation problem in the head.

We leave on the dawn tide.

Gladstone to Great Keppel Island

As the sun rose above the loading docks, we slipped quietly out of Gladstone. There are three routes out of Gladstone Harbour. The main shipping channel to the south - the way that we came in - would be quite a dogleg for a northerly trip. The Narrows is a shortcut direct to our destination of Keppel Bay, but is dominated by a six mile drying stretch called the Cattle Crossing and you have to be absolutely sure that not only will the tide give you enough depth to get through, but that you have enough power to fight the tide all the way to the other side before the water disappears again. The Northern Passage is a middle way, saving us about 20 miles on the shipping channel but with only a short drying area right by the bar.

Since the drying area is at the bar at the far end of the channel, we had to time our trip up to cross the bar at high tide. This meant that we were fighting the incoming tide all the way, but luckily it was only running at a knot or two. We were motoring up at about half tide, which was just enough to cover the sand banks and reefs. We had the somewhat surreal experience of navigating up thin unmarked winding channels that we could see on the chart, but to the naked eye we were zigzagging meaninglessly across an apparently unobstructed lake of unbroken water.

Bronwyn was steering, I was navigating down below.

"Thank goodness for GPS" I thought as we approached a particularly thin section. Just then, something crashed and we lost all our navigation systems. Great. I called course headings up to Bronwyn from memory while frantically changing batteries in the GPS and rebooting both computers, one as backup in case the main one didn't recover. Everything came back online just as we needed to do a sharp turn to avoid another invisible sand bar. The computers behaved from then on but, thankfully, we had now entered a marked ferry channel and the leading lights took us between a couple more reefs and out into the open sea.

We were free! We grinned like maniacs and rushed to put the sails up. Gladstone wasn't a bad place, but it had hung over us like a black cloud because we were forced to stay there. The freedom that we'd started to take for granted had disappeared, and the lack chafed our souls.

No matter. We'd done what needed to be done, and now we were on the move again.

It was one of those perfect sailing days. We were close hauled and flying along at 6-7 knots, but the sea was calm and smooth and so it wasn't uncomfortable at all, just pure fun. We steered manually all the way.

We could take advantage of the NW winds all the way up the coast, but we knew that the final westward section toward Great Keppel Island was going to be a long hard beat into wind. Halfway through the day I fired up the computer and downloaded the GRIB files for the next three days. Technology to the rescue! GRIB files are meteorological data that can be overlain onto a suitable digital map. In this case, they showed that at about four in the afternoon we could expect a westerly change, and then another one to the SW in the evening. This was perfect! It meant that rather than taking lots of time to tack back and forth, we could just gently curve around with the wind until we arrived.

And that was exactly how it happened. After 13 hours and 58.6 miles (an average 4.5 knots, much of the latter part against an evil 1.5 knot current, so the boat was really travelling much faster than that) we dropped anchor under the Milky Way and a crescent Moon, next to Second Beach on Great Keppel Island.

After a restful sleep - how wonderful to feel the boat rocking beneath us again! - I stood on deck under the rising sun and marvelled at the blue sea, the blue sky, and the peaks, beaches and islands scattered around us. What a beautiful spot.

We had intended to spend the next day hiking over the island, but first I had to repair the electric anchor winch which had given out the night before. I quickly traced the fault to a lazy wiring job at the sharp end; I mean, if you were going to install a wiring connection at the end of the boat that spends a lot of time immersed in sea water, wouldn't you try to waterproof it a little? Apparently not. Luckily I had my trusty gas-powered soldering iron and spliced in a new section.



DANGER. ELECTRICIAN AT WORK

Standing on the bow, we realised that the water was so clear that we could see the anchor. This reminded us that we hadn't been swimming in ever such a long time, so we decided to snorkel over the reef at the end of the nearby beach instead of going for a hike.

Since we'd arrived at night, we had anchored a prudent distance from the invisible shore, and daylight revealed that we were a good 600 metres out. We donned masks and fins and set off. Half way there, Bronwyn got stung in the face by a jellyfish, but after that things started to look up.

At one end of the beach is a secluded clearing marked by a rather bizarre sculpture consisting of forty or more beach-combed floats and buoys suspended with string from a large tree. Next to it is an unusual swing and an enormous hammock fashioned from a fishing net. We spent some time lazing in the hammock in the sun, chatting idly about this and that, before putting on our fins and splashing out to the reef.

It was less a reef and more a collection of rocks fallen from the island, but it was home to as relaxed and varied collection of fish as you would find on a scuba dive.

We spent a happy few hours paddling around before beginning the long swim back to Pindimara. Just as we set off, we were passed by a shoal of pike barracuda each almost a metre long. Spectacular.

JUNE 30, 2009

Keppel Islands to Percy Islands

Before we left Great Keppel, Sue and Steve showed up on *Tenacious D*. Sue and Steve were not only our neighbours when we were preparing for our voyage back at Gibson Marina, but they were also the only long term cruisers that we really knew, and as well as being lots of fun they did a grand job of putting up with all our stupid questions during our final months of preparation. It was great to catch up. We had a bit of a yarn over a pancake breakfast and then they had a lunch date on another boat, so we hoiked up the anchor and set off to the north.

We had a long way to go, and there was very little wind forecast, but we managed to bravely leave under sail. It may have been slow, but it was peaceful. We noticed that the water was sparkling, and dipped a bucket in to see the diatoms and flagellates swimming about. We followed a lunch of chilli tuna salad on freshly baked bread with a small bottle of champagne and some lime jelly.



LIFE'S PRETTY GOOD

As the sun set prettily over the Queensland hills, we heard the dull thump of army munitions. This whole coastline is sometimes taken over for army training, and we'd heard on the grapevine that they were using it today. This meant that our intended half-way anchorage at Port Clinton was out of the question, so we were intending to travel all night to the Percy Islands.

The military zone extends quite far out to sea, so we had to arrange our course to avoid it. Pretty soon the wind died completely, and we spent the rest of the night chugging up the military boundary line under motor. Given the forecast, we felt pretty lucky to have had the sails up for as long as we did.

Bronwyn went below and I stood the first watch. Since there was very little swell, steering was pretty easy even though we were motoring, and I found that with the aid of a head torch I could steer and read a novel at the same time. The watch passed pleasantly swiftly, punctuated by the occasional yellow star shell drifting over from the military manoeuvres on shore.

Bronwyn took over from the small wee ones until pre-dawn. A sea fog threatened to roll in from the east, but it was low on the water and left the sparkling stars bright and clear above. Thankfully the fog never developed.

I was back at the helm just before dawn, which revealed another clear blue sky but still no wind. South Percy Island was in sight all morning. Most cruisers visit Middle Island rather than South, but after staring at it for so many hours we thought we decided that rather than simply steering around it, we would stop for the night.

There was quite a lot of debris in the sea, tree trunks and large branches, as well as a substantial quantity of what seemed to be an orange algal bloom. Half way up the eastern coast, and over a mile from shore, we encountered a large yellow snake swimming by. It was a metre long and looked a lot like a python rather than a sea snake, and had tied the end of its tail up in a knot, presumably for buoyancy or for balance. It stopped and regarded us with interest when we slowed and did a circuit around it, and then began once more swimming strongly out to sea. We wondered how it could see where it was going, with its head that close to the water.



JUST PASSING BY

At half past two in the afternoon, we dropped anchor in a delightful sandy bay in the north eastern corner of South Percy Island.

JULY 1, 2009

An island of our own

There were two other yachts close in to North West Bay on South Percy Island, but we anchored farther out in our usual 10 metres, which put us a good half a kilometre off but still out of the tidal race that runs between South Percy and nearby Middle Island to the north. After a meal and a rest, we chunked the tender over the side to go take a look at the beach. We considered rowing, but were aware of the three knot tidal rip and invisible reefs, so we clamped on the outboard instead.

We spent a pleasant afternoon pottering about on the beach, after which Bronwyn sat down and sunned herself while I clambered about on the rocks and erosion gullies behind the tide line.



BEACH BABE



ROCK DUDE



BEACH DUDE



"INTERESTING" EROSION GULLY

Over breakfast next morning, we noticed the other two boats sailing out of the bay. It was only when Bronwyn said "Great! Now we have the island to ourselves!" that I realised that this was what I had been waiting for. Great Keppel had been nice, and I had been expecting to make use of the extensive hiking trails around it, but when it came down to it I'd been happy that we had gone snorkelling instead. Now we had the whole of South Percy Island to ourselves, and I had seen on my brief expedition the day before that there were no trails or paths at all. Perfect for exploring!

We packed some vittals and took the tender over to the headland. We landed on a different beach which showed a few footprints and signs of human passage. Behind it was a pebbled gully full of flotsam, mainly timber and empty coconuts that must have floated in from Polynesian or Indonesian vessels, although there was an interesting pile of pumice on the high tide line.

Above the gully, though, the green hills beckoned. I started the long climb to the top, and found it hard going. The tufty grass was ankle deep and crunchy, hiding rocky voids and small clumps of prickly pear cactus. This was excellent news, as it seemed to me pretty unlikely that most people would persevere, and I could continue my daydream of exploring a deserted tropical island.



PRICKLES



OUR ISLAND

As is the way with these things, the top revealed another higher peak beyond, and then a third one. From there, though, I had a great view of the surrounding ocean and islands, and of the bay far below where Pindimara sat patiently at anchor.



OUR HOME

There were no trails or any other signs of human activity. I jumped up and down and waved to the little dot of Bronwyn far below, who years ago decided that I am a loony and best left alone in the presence of climbable peaks.

Later that day we decided to explore North West Beach, which looks like a great anchorage on the chart but which is described as having a difficult-to-see reef line. We went at low tide, in the tender. The tides here are four metres, and so at that time of day we could clearly see parts of the reef that you would normally only see when snorkelling or scuba diving. It was a curious feeling to be first motoring, then rowing, and finally walking along towing the dinghy through gardens of soft coral scattered with small fish and giant clams. I had to be very careful not to put my foot on anything that might get damaged, but it was an amazing experience.



YOUR CARRIAGE, MA'AM?



O SOLE MIO

As the tide comes in over a reef, fish that have been hiding in rock pools or beneath the sand emerge and head out into deep water. We saw a few schools of fish milling around in the shallows waiting for their opportunity, and then suddenly realised that we were wading through the school of sharks that were waiting for them. We're still not sure what species they were, but they were a metre long, brown with orange black-tipped dorsal fins, and very wide. They obviously detected that we were much

bigger than them because they stayed at least five metres away, but it was still a weird experience to be paddling through a school of big and clearly very hungry sharks.



VERY BAD PIC OF SHARK

JULY 2, 2009

Middle Percy Island

We had intended to move on from South Percy Island the next day, but the forecast was for a light nor'wester and our route was to the north west. Tacking for hours into a light wind held no attraction, and we didn't really have enough fuel to spare to motor it, so we decided to stay another night at South Percy. With only light winds for the previous few days, I had become a bit complacent about the weather. Although I knew that the nor'wester would blow right into our little bay, I just assumed that it would maintain the same negligible wind speed that we had become used to, and in this assumption I was supported by the GRIB file that I had downloaded (via satphone: no internet out here) that showed a predicted wind strength of a barely perceptible 3 knots.

As the evening wore on, the nor'wester began to blow a good 10-15 knots and brought with it an uncomfortable swell. By the middle of the night we were being thrashed around as Pindimara bucked like a bronco, being held side-on by the tide to an ever-fiercer north westerly swell.

We decided to wait til dawn and then run for cover in Whites Bay, a SE-facing shelter under nearby Middle Island. In fact I was up well before dawn, washing up and generally tidying away, so that by the time it was light enough to see, we were

ready to go. The sideways swell was getting really rough, and it wasn't possible to stand upright without hanging on.

Whites Bay was only a few miles to the north, and we could see that there was a single yacht already at anchor there. When we were about half way across, a whole stream of yachts appeared around the south western corner of the island, all heading in our direction. We guessed that they had been caught out by the wind change while anchored on the western side of the island, which is the usual tourist destination because of the world famous "A-Frame" cruisers' meeting place on the shore. This was later confirmed by Jace on *Eveready* who said that there had been a bit of a sundowner at the A-Frame the previous night, and by the time they'd all got back to their boats, the wind had already changed and nobody felt up to moving on.



VIEW TOWARD SOUTH PERCY FROM MIDDLE ISLAND

Once we had all anchored, Bronwyn and I went over to the shore for a walk. There was a dune which I inevitably climbed, and which proved to be very interesting only a few metres from the top where the steep surface had been hardened to the consistency of concrete before being lightly sprinkled with fresh sand. Very slippery.



IT'S A LONG WAY DOWN

We didn't explore very far into the island, though, because we intended to go to bed early and leave in the middle of the night.

JULY 3, 2009

A Fishy Tale

We were anchored in Whites Bay, Middle Island of the Percy Isles, hiding from a surprisingly strong nor'wester. The forecast was for another change, this time from the south, blowing a healthy 15 knots directly into Whites Bay some time between 22:00 and 04:00. The dual attraction of a decent sailing wind and getting out of the bay before the swell started, saw us going to bed early with the intention of leaving as soon as the southerly change came through.

The change woke me at 03:30, and seemed to contain rather more wind than forecast, up to 20 knots inside the protection of the bay. Still, the developing swell was rapidly making it too choppy to sleep so we decided to stick to the plan. After a quick breakfast on deck to acclimatise our eyes to the darkness, we motored out of the pack of sleeping yachts and into the Percy Islands tidal race which was, for once, running with us rather than against us.

The southerly wind was working against the incoming tide to build some pretty big waves, and we had a bouncy time getting out of the group. Once out into the open sea, the wind ramped up to over 30 knots, officially gale force. With triple-reefed main and our cruising jib, we soon found ourselves creaming along at over 9 knots. The log records a maximum speed of 9.54, the fastest that we have ever gone.

Since we were moving in a straight line, we thought that we may as well throw the trolling line over the stern. This line has a long history. Several months ago, Bronwyn decided that she wanted to learn how to catch a fish while cruising, and we made a deal that if she can get one on board, then I'll kill, clean and fillet it. Since then she has been chatting up fishermen and pestering tackle shop owners in an effort to find out the easiest way of catching our supper. It was surprisingly difficult to get a straight answer. Most of them said "Ah, you just throw a line over the back and you'll catch something. No worries", but when you actually tried to pin them down for some specific advice, such as "What line? Which lure? How deep?" they would often as not change the subject or offer wildly divergent advice.

My theory is that since it is quintessentially Australian to be born with a fishing rod in one hand and a barbecue spatula in the other, it is not manly to admit that you've never done one or the other. Certainly when I announce that I have never fished in my life, I attract pitying stares and an embarrassed shuffling of seats. Much better for a woman to do the asking.

Bronwyn did eventually manage to find a couple of guys who seemed to know what they were talking about, and by May had put together a dream kit of all the tools necessary to catch, land, and process a small tuna. Since then we've tossed the gear over the back whenever we thought about it, but never got a sniff of interest.

Back to the story. There we were, screaming along in excess of seven knots in gale force winds, alternately burying first the gunwales and then the bow into mountainous swell. Naturally this was the moment that I glanced back into our foaming wake and saw a large fish tail-walking at the end of our line.

We had repeatedly memorised all the necessary steps for landing our first fish. After making sure that the hook is firmly set, we were supposed to stop the boat. Yeah, right. The obvious solution was to heave-to, but in these conditions this simply

meant that we were making six knots backwards instead of nine knots forwards. Still, the important thing was that while hove-to we could forget about steering for a while and concentrate on the fish.

With four pairs of hands we managed to land a rather spectacular Spanish Mackerel, some two thirds of a metre long and weighing about seven kilos. We were quite impressed!



BRONWYN'S FIRST FISH

Now we had to quickly regain control of the boat before we ended up back in the Percy Isles; in the excitement we had gone backwards for over four miles. Back on our beam reach, we shared our bucking and heavily slanted cockpit with a washing bowl full of salt water and a very large and slippery dead mackerel. By the time we reached the Guardfish Cluster, our feet were soaking wet and there was a lingering fishy smell, but our mackerel was intact and, thanks to a swaddling tea-towel, relatively cool.

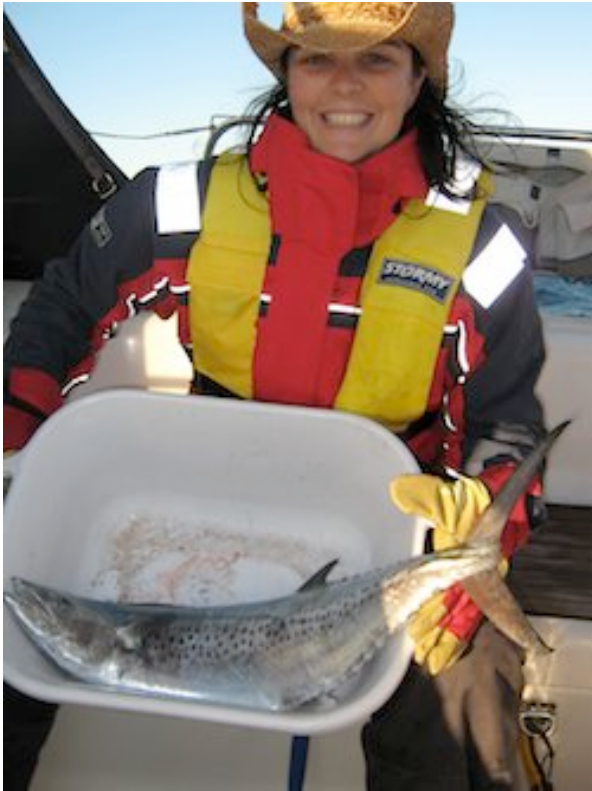
As we approached the first turn inside the Cluster proper, I again glanced out of the stern and spotted a young humpback whale practising a series of launches out of our wake. Beautiful.

Once we were safely anchored between the drying shoal and the rocky reef, I hauled out our shiny new filleting knife and reduced the mackerel to four enormous fillets.



SPANISH MACKEREL FILLET

Three went in the fridge, and the fourth we had for lunch, gently heated it in a little olive oil. It was sweet, succulent, and absolutely delicious.



BRONNIE THE FISHIE



BRONNIE THE CARNIVORE

JULY 6, 2009

Mackay Outer Harbour Marina

We popped in to Mackay on the mainland to provision for our upcoming sojourn in the Whitsunday Group. The harbour is completely artificial and there isn't anywhere to anchor, so we reluctantly rented a berth at the marina.

It has to be said that the marina is excellent. It is not unreasonably priced, and is clean and secure. It is handy for a selection of waterside restaurants and a pub, and there is a bus service that takes you into town for shopping.

After a welcome shower to rinse the thick layer of salt out of our dreadlocks, we checked out the restaurants. After some weeks of cruising, most of our fresh supplies had run out and we urgently felt the need for fresh food. There were a number of restaurants in different styles from cafe to pub steak to haute cuisine, but since all the prices were the same - \$30 a main - we plumped for the best, the very highly recommended Latitude 21 restaurant underneath the Clarion Hotel. The food was excellent, the service was superb, the ambience was just what we needed to ease us back into civilisation.

We had lost track of the days, and anyway had forgotten that there are things like Sundays when the shops aren't open, so the next morning we found ourselves with a day to kill. We spent most of it catching up on paperwork and then headed off to the Sails pub, where we had a very good time, met a number of interesting people, drank far too much and ate far too little.

Shopping in Mackay was a bit of a shock. It was the school holidays, and the mall was packed. Who'd have thought that there were so many people in the world? Still, nursing our hangovers over fruit juice and coffee, it gave us a chance to see what the burghers of Mackay are like, and the word that sprang to mind was: prosperous. It's a good looking and manicured town full of good looking and manicured people. From the bus we also notice that there were a lot of infrastructure projects in full flow, so business seems to be booming. Certainly there were a great many bulk carriers outside the port waiting to get in.



PARK YOUR TANKER, SIR?

The supermarket was a real eye-opener. After the rather sad and wilted selection of fruit and vegetables at the Woolworths in Gladstone, the Mackay branch of the same store presented us with a stunning array of beautiful fresh produce. It was hard to stop ourselves from filling our trolley with more than we have room for.

We're now provisioned up, watered up, and stuffed to the gunwales with fresh meat, fruit and vegetables. We've had a brief fix of night life, and even managed to hose

some of the salt off the decks. Tomorrow morning we'll refuel, and then it's back out to sea.

JULY 7, 2009

Goldsmith Island

We bade a leisurely goodbye to Mackay Outer Harbour, and ran gently up the coast before a light breeze. It was a beautiful day and a relaxing cruise in a turquoise millpond sea.

At one point we saw a big old turtle, drifting backwards in the current, his shell completely invisible under a waving portable reef. Bronwyn saw another snake. An enormous eagle flew out from a wooded island to see if we were edible. And those were the day's excitements. Very serene.



THE TURTLE JUST AFTER WE STARTLED IT

We had planned a route that would take us through three island groups, all with suitable anchorages. We just kept going to see how far the wind would take us, with Harriet steering and the human crew lounging around on deck reading books.

We got as far as the Sir James Smith Group, where the cartography is delightful. Rather than the usual dull names that litter Australian charts (Black Rock, Flat Island), some unsung hero had waxed lyrical on the theme of "Smith". Thus Goldsmith Island is flanked by the Ingot Islets, Specie Shoal, and Bullion Reef. Similarly, Blacksmith Island is accompanied by Hammer, Bellows, Forge, Pincer and Anvil Islands. Off to the south of Tinsmith Island is an islet with the name of Solder. And so on. Very cute.



SERENITY

There were only two other yachts in the main anchorage at Goldsmith Island, but there was a lot of reef lurking beneath the surface and it was hard to see if there was enough swinging room. In any case we couldn't get our anchor to bite, so we moved around to the north west and got it down in the next cove up. We'd had sou'westers all day, and it was now blowing from the north east, but since the two arms of the cove had both of these directions covered, we thought that we'd be fine.



ALL PACKED AWAY. HOW ABOUT A SUNDOWNER?

It was quite comfortable until the middle of the night when we mysteriously got a developed swell coming in from the north west, broadside on and very uncomfortable. Shortly after dawn it got noticeably worse and the wind start to howl in the rigging, so not even stopping for coffee we quickly upped anchor and went back to the shelter of the first anchorage, where the anchor bit first time. While we were manoeuvring about, the depth sounder showed some very deep holes in the sea bed, which may have accounted for our problems on the previous night.

As we poured the coffee, a sou'easter blew up at close to 20 knots and dark storm clouds rolled in overhead. There was no internet reception, but I plugged in the satphone and got a forecast for 20-30 knots and rough seas. We changed our mind about exploring the island by dinghy and made breakfast instead.

JULY 9, 2009

Lindeman and Hamilton Islands

We had a pleasant enough sail to Lindeman Island, and then some amusement trying to find an anchorage that would protect us from the SE wind and the persistent SW swell. Lucas' cruising guide was a bit vague, with some clear inaccuracies on his chart, but we decided to try his recommended anchorage of Boat Point anyway.

Once there, we took the dinghy to shore and found a delightful little beach, very muddy but full of life - hermit crabs and snails underfoot, cockatoos and lorikeets above, scattered with attractive mangroves.



THE MUD FLATS AT BOAT POINT, LINDEMAN ISLAND



SOME OF THE WILDLIFE IS A LITTLE STRANGE

A National Parks trail clearly led around the island, and although we didn't have time right then - the tide was coming in and the dinghy was quite far out on the mud flats - we thought that it would be great to come back here later in the week.



FETCH THE DINGHY, WOMAN, AND BE QUICK ABOUT IT



PINDIMARA SUNSET

The anchor set well and the land gave us protection from the wind, but the SW swell continued to roll in and throw us around. It wasn't very pleasant. We took to sleeping crosswise across the cabin, which was much more comfortable but not ideal as there is only just enough width.

Early next morning we motored round to the other side of the island to try to get out of the swell. We found a suitable bay to eat breakfast - toasted bagels and cream cheese, fresh avocados - but the sea was still disturbed even though not overtly swelly. Some of this was likely attributable to the 20+ knot winds.

Now a fast run to Hamilton Island Airport to pick up Mikayla, with whom we will spend a week circumnavigating the Whitsundays. Conditions were a bit gnarly, with washing-machine swells and 30 knot gusts, but it meant that we got there pretty quickly and picked up the biggest mooring rope from the biggest mooring buoy I have ever seen. The rope was so big that it wouldn't fit around our deck cleat, so I had to quickly make an extension for it.

It was a bit of a wild ride across to the airport because the moorings are on the opposite side of the channel, up against neighbouring Dent Island, and the wind was still blowing nicely.

Wandering around waiting for the plane, I was bemused by all the holidaymakers decanting from nose-to-tail flights and piling into golf carts. There were golf carts everywhere! When Mikayla had arrived and we were walking back to the marina where I had tied up the dinghy, we were passed by streams of them on their way to their hotels. We got some strange looks; it's the Club Med set, and they obviously don't get many pedestrians in Hamilton.

The water in the channel to Dent Island was still running pretty fast on the way back and we got a bit of spray into the dinghy, but the scariest thing was watching Pindimara bucking around and flinging from side to side in some huge surf. Now we could see why they'd over-engineered the mooring buoy. Poor Bronwyn was inside trying to cook lunch.

On the way over, we'd noticed that one of the smaller free public buoys had become available, and that the water was much calmer mid-channel, so we let go our marina buoy and motored over to the other one, not only making everything so much calmer, but also saving ourselves an overnight fee.

JULY 10, 2009

A Tirade Against Mooring Buoys

There are two ways to construct a mooring buoy.

One is to attach a rope to a heavy weight on the bottom. At the free end of the rope, you attach a small plastic floating ball. In order to moor, you pick up the floating ball and bring it aboard, tying it to something. Your boat is then attached to the heavy weight on the bottom of the sea.

The other method is to attach a large floating buoy to the end of the rope, and then to attach a second rope to the top of the buoy. In order to moor, you pick up the end of the top rope and bring it aboard, but the buoy stays in the water.

The first method is simple, effective, has few parts and is trouble-free.

The second method is more complicated to build, and if there is any tidal flow at all, then the big buoy will spend at least a third of any 24 hour period banging against the hull. Naturally, almost every public mooring is of this second type.

I spent a lot of the night at Hamilton Island fending off the buoy and creating ever more ingenious cradles of fenders and ropes as it repeatedly smashed into our soft fibreglass hull with thunderous booms. Every now and then the whole buoy vanished beneath the surface and scraped its way laboriously along the bottom of the hull before popping up on the other side and starting to bang there. Stupid thing. It is quite possible to hate an inanimate object.



EVIL INCARNATE

JULY 11, 2009

Whitsunday Island - Cid Harbour

Having picked up Mikayla from the airport, there was no real point in staying amongst the resort high rises of Hamilton Island. We were all tired of being tossed about on the mooring in the continuing gale, so we headed north to see if we could find a quieter spot in Cid Harbour on Whitsunday Island.



MIKAYLA TAKES COMMAND

The availability of anchorages in the Whitsundays is to some extent ruled by the presence of bare boat flotillas. Cid Harbour is famous for its calm anchorage, but is also very close to the charter base at Hamilton Island. We had assumed that, since it was Friday and most charters begin and end on a Saturday, Cid Harbour would be packed with holidaymakers enjoying a final night. There were about twenty boats there when we arrived, but there was still room for us to squeeze into Sawmill Bay where we had beautiful flat calm and an undisturbed night's sleep. Thanks go to John and Nancy for suggesting it.

Following on from our discovery of Alan Lucas' misnaming and misrepresenting a bay a few days ago, we began to suspect that he hadn't actually been to Cid Harbour either. Although it is indeed a fine anchorage, Lucas talks about showers and

barbecues, and there is certainly nothing of the sort there, and no sign that there ever has been.

Turtles and dolphins swam all around the bay, and there were four coral beaches to explore.



MIKAYLA TAKES THE OLD GUY OUT FOR A SPIN

We also found a short bush trail leading from the main beach to nearby Dugong Inlet, and half way along this we noticed a minor tributary trail heading straight up the hillside. A passerby told us that this led, after one and a half hours, to the top of Whitsunday Peak (434m) from whence, he said, there were marvellous views of the island.

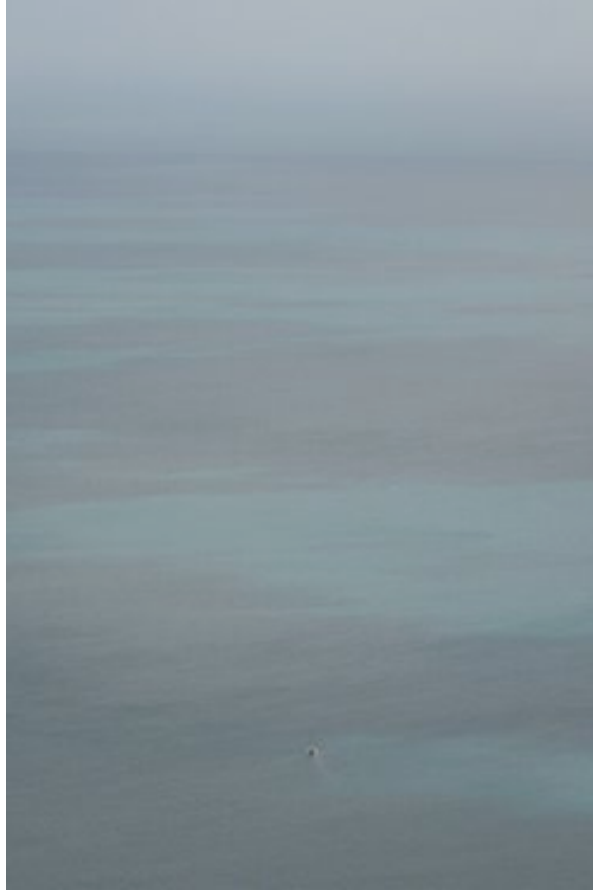
Naturally I was champing at the bit to climb it. The girls were more inclined to sit on the beach, so they went for a swim at Dugong while I set off. It was quite a climb, and obviously didn't see much traffic, but the trail was reasonably obvious and the vaguer parts had been unobtrusively marked with surveyor's tape.

After an hour of hard climbing, I came across a scattering of dome tents in amongst the trees. A little later the trail improved markedly to a neat path, and I began to hear the sounds of voices and tools. Half a dozen park rangers were working on the trail, painstakingly chopping out roots, marking its edges with a border of stones,

and where necessary fitting steps by half-burying large boulders and packing them with dirt. They were glad to stop for a chat, and told me that they had been there for about forty days, and were expecting to finish in another month or so. When they were finished with this particular trail, they would set up camp on another part of the island and start work on another one. They had been living and working in the Whitsundays for at least a year. It struck me that this would be my perfect job.



RANGERS AT WORK



A YACHT SAILS OUT TO SEA

The views from Whitsunday Peak were spectacular. I could see our anchorage in Cid Harbour on one side, and across to Hamilton Island on the other. A vast expanse of islands and coral seas stretched to and merged with the horizon. It really is a lovely piece of paradise.

Back down at the beach, Bronwyn and Mikayla had had an enjoyable if slightly cool swim, and had attracted the attention of a hungry crow and a pair of young goannas, not to mention some members of the tourist subspecies of homo sapiens.



VIEW FROM WHITSUNDAY PEAK

One particular group arrived after the arduous 1100 metre trek from Cid Harbour and rang their yacht to send a tender round to pick them up. They assumed that Mikayla and Bronwyn were resting before the laborious trek home!



MIKAYLA AND FRIEND

By the time that I had clambered back down to sea level, we had the beach to ourselves and were all glad of the chance of a good wash in the clear waters.



THE NOW OBLIGATORY 'DANIEL CRAIG' PHOTO

Suitably refreshed, we headed back to the boat and fired up the barbecue for a nice veal roast before sleeping for a full eleven hours.

JULY 13, 2009

Whitehaven Beach

We spent a gentle day circumnavigating the northern half of Whitsunday Island, finishing up at the popular Tongue Bay. A line of yachts was wedged in against the south-eastern shore, but as we approached the pack broke up and many of them left. Quite a few of these seemed to be old J-class racing yachts, apparently being run by the tourist resorts as they each had over a dozen people aboard.



MIKAYLA BRINGS US IN TO ANCHOR

Those of us that remained suffered a mild but unusual swell for the rest of the night. I went up on deck a few times to see if I could work out what was happening, but although throughout the night the wind and tide had us facing almost every point of the compass, on every point we were getting a mild broadside swell. Very odd.

After breakfast we popped around the corner to the famous Whitehaven Beach, apparently home of the finest white sand in the world.



WHITEHAVEN BEACH

It was a glorious day. We anchored a couple of hundred metres from the shore and then swam in. The sand was almost painfully white, and the consistency of flour. We amused ourselves by following nicely defined animal tracks in the dunes, and watching the numerous sting rays foraging for food in the shallows around our feet. I've never seen so many rays being so bold. They weren't bothered by us at all, and one big one was perfectly happy for me to wade alongside it as it swam slowly up the beach.

Apart from some clusters of resort folk over a mile away at each end, we had the beach pretty much to ourselves. After swimming back to the yacht for lunch, everything changed; power boats and jet boats roared up to the shore and discharged dozens of people with cool boxes, and a helicopter flew in to deposit another load. Tenders came in from two super-yachts out in the bay, one of them an astonishing mirror-finished ketch which must have been a hundred feet long. It was time to leave.



POLISH YOUR BOAT, SIR?

There was no wind at all, but the forecast was for a northerly change, so we motored over to nearby Hasleton Island and anchored up against the reef in Whites Bay. There was nobody else there, which made a nice change, although a small liveaboard showed up later. The skipper commented in passing that he'd been

hoping for some peace and quiet, and then anchored so far away from us that we could barely see him in the gathering dusk.

Standing in the dark with the moon still below the horizon, we noticed intermittent flashes of light in the water. This wasn't the usual phosphorescence of tropical plankton but something different. We spent a happy half hour or so hanging over the rail with a spotlight trying to work out which of the myriad creatures was making the light. We narrowed it down to either the millimetre swarms of zooplankton, or the yellowish thumbnail-sized fish that were feeding on them while simultaneously either laying eggs or defecating, or the finger-sized silver-blue fish that were coming up from below to feed on everything else.

Satisfied that we had in fact no idea what was going on, we settled down to a quiet evening of baking, eating, and cribbage.

JULY 16, 2009

Mikayla sails us to Lindeman

Our next plan was to go back to Lindeman Island and to have another attempt at exploring it, after abandoning our previous attempt due to an uncomfortable swell.

Lindeman lay a few hours to the south. Mikayla did the whole of the day's sail, from motoring off the anchor to putting up the sails, through steering all the way to Lindeman Island, to dropping the sails and the anchor when we got there.



THE CREW, HARD AT WORK

There really wasn't much left for us to do apart from laze around on deck.



THIS IS THE LIFE!

We were running low on fresh food, so we put out the trolling line to see if we could catch our second ever fish. On the way through the fast-running Solway Channel we hooked something silver, but didn't have too long to get excited about it because it jumped off what turned out to be a blunt hook. We didn't get another bite all day, and made a note to get out the sharpening file later that night.



THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Because the wind had come round to the north, we headed for a lee shore on the other side of the island from our previous visit. We wandered around the beach and I hoped to connect with the national parks trail that we'd seen on the northern tip, but the plant growth was so thick that we couldn't get more than a few tens of metres inshore.

Giving up on walking, we explored in the dinghy, and found a pebble beach where we spent a happy afternoon looking at stones and coral.



GEOLOGIST AT WORK

Exhausted after our gruelling day, we returned to the boat, where Bronwyn knocked up a fine repast from dried and canned ingredients. No more fresh food until we get to Cairns.

The night was reasonably comfortable but the forecast gentle northerly turned into a proper storm as the promised ridge came through early. The boat got thrashed about a bit, but the swell stayed on the bow so we weren't overly unhappy.

The ridge brought with it a southerly change, so instead of continuing our exploration of Lindeman, we decided to hop over to nearby Shaw Island where there was a convenient lee shore. Before we left, though, Mikayla and I went back to the pebble beach and collected enough spheroidal rocks in different colours to make up a set of boules, along with a chunk of white coral to use as a jack.

Once ashore on Shaw, we put them to the test, and had a fine boules tournament up and down the beach.



THE LADY HAS BALLS



PETANQUE!

JULY 18, 2009

Completing the Circuit

We woke after a comfortable night under Shaw Island to find turtles browsing the reef, and a whole school of 40 cm batfish cleaning the bottom of the boat.



BATFISH

After breakfast it was time to close our circumnavigation of the Whitsundays Group and take Mikayla back to Hamilton Island airport.

Good things and bad things happened on our trip up through the Whitsunday Passage. There was a fair wind, but a quartering swell. We didn't get any bites on the trolling line, but we did get a spectacular aerial display from a young humpback whale and her calf. Then, as we were admiring the picturesque lighthouse on Dent Island, something enormous must have sneaked up and eaten not only our hook and spoon, but also half of the metal trace line. All we got back was a few frayed metal ends.

The forecast was for southerlies, but we were getting northerlies, so we decided to drop anchor in the protection of Refuge Bay in Nara Inlet. It was a little crowded but we found room to squeeze in and anchored in millpond conditions as the wind raged overhead.

We woke up at 4 am to give Mikayla a taste of night sailing. The southerly was finally blustering through as we raised sail under the stars, and Mikayla took us up to seven knots toward South Molle Island as the first touches of dawn tinged the sky, topping it off by baking a bread loaf that was crusty perfection itself.



SEVEN-KNOT NOY



DOUBLE CONE ISLAND. VERY STRANGE.

You're not allowed to go ashore at South Molle because it is a private resort, but we anchored just off the cliffs for a leisurely brunch before tackling the fast tack across the somewhat wild strait to Hamilton Island. At the marina they actually had a valet

waiting outside the entrance to guide us in, which I suppose is the flip side of paying nearly \$100 a night for a berth.

Then... showers! Blessed unlimited streams of piping hot water! Followed by a leisurely beer as we watched the golf carts bingle up and down the waterfront, and then an enjoyable fresh fish dinner at the rather nice Mariners restaurant. Not a bad end to a great little holiday. Next week we start cruising again.

JULY 20, 2009

Hamilton Island

Hamilton is a resort island currently owned and run by the Oatley family corporation, and there is very little room there for independent enterprise. This gives the whole place a slightly surreal and unearthly flavour, perhaps a bit like if Disney owned the Isle of Wight. The road system is tiny, but everybody drives around in golf carts, which are provided to staff and hired by the day by tourists.



RUSH HOUR ON HAMILTON ISLAND

Most of the restaurants and cafes are stamped with a lowest-common-denominator sameness, and it is slightly strange to keep meeting the same staff serving in each cafe.

There is no beach on the island, so they made one by bringing in sand from Whitehaven and dumping it on top of rocky drying mudbanks in Catseye Bay. The effect is a bit strange if you look closely, and is anyway somewhat marred by the large amount of floating pumice that has since washed ashore... you can't mess with geology.



CATSEYE BEACH FROM A DISTANCE



WE PLAY TOURIST AT CATSEYE

On the other hand, Hamilton is a pleasant enough place and everybody seems to be reasonably happy. Even the nightclub bouncers are friendly. Payment of your somewhat outrageous marina fee allows you to use any of the resort facilities, which is just as well as the official marina shower blocks aren't really up to scratch.

We were also lucky enough to be introduced to residents Pam and Bill (thankyou, Nicky) who made us very welcome indeed and showed us some sides of island life that we would not have otherwise seen. And we drank a lot of wine with them. Oh yes.

We had only really intended to stay on the island for a couple of nights while we did some chores at the post office and laundry, cleaned the salt off the boat, and overhauled the toilet system (hopefully for the last time). However, we had such a grand night at the steak house, pub and nightclub that we overstayed the third morning, and anyway Pam and Bill had invited us over to dinner, so...

JULY 24, 2009

Bowen

It was very shallow squeezing between Gloucester Island and the mainland - only a metre under the keel - but we got through just before some nasty looking weather. There were some mooring buoys bobbing around close in to the shore where we intended to anchor. They said 'Eco Resort' on them but there was no phone number and the resort didn't respond to VHF, so we picked one up. As it happened, the squall passed us by, but the bay remained calm so even though it was only lunchtime, we decided to hang around until the next morning.

What a lovely calm mooring it was! The buoy was well behaved and didn't bang against the boat at all - or if it did, it was made of nice soft plastic and we probably wouldn't have noticed. Mooring makers, take note! It is possible to make your buoy out of something soft and squishy instead of something hard and sharp that rings like a bell on impact.



GOOD BUOY

There was little swell and we scotched our plans of an early start and had a luxurious long lie-in instead.

It was a long slow calm trip over turquoise calm seas to Bowen, where we dropped anchor and took the dinghy in through the astonishingly shallow channel (we didn't dare try it in the yacht) to get some provisions. On the way there, we'd noticed a catamaran with 'Jailhouse Steak House, Launceston' on the side, which we'd seen at almost every marina on the way up, so on the way back to Pindimara, loaded to the gunwhales with provisions, we chugged over and said 'Hi'.

Don, who had built Cisco in Tasmania and is sailing her up to Darwin (The steak house had once sponsored him in a race), was glad to see us and we spent a lovely evening drinking wine and shooting the breeze, after which he kindly illuminated our yacht with his spotlight so that we could get home, because we couldn't see anything in the dark.

Back on board, we put on some music and tucked into some welcome fresh meat and vegetables, followed by our first gin and tonics in months. The swell blew up a bit, but it was all on the nose and so just made the yacht buck a little, and didn't disturb our sleep.



GLOUCESTER ISLAND, VIEW FROM BOWEN

We decided to stay for another day so that we could explore Bowen itself. The town is small, pleasant and friendly, and adorned with striking murals on every spare wall. It seems that there is an annual mural festival, and new ones are continually being added, usually commemorating the history of the area.



MIND THE GAP

We had a very pleasant time hunting them all down, along the way acquiring a great many bags of shopping, including torches and lamps and fishing gear and an eclectic selection of books from the local charity shop.

We also checked out the local pubs and ended up at the one that seemed to hold the most promise, the Grand View. Sure enough it didn't take too many pints before we were chatting to some prawn fishermen, and the night degenerated into a pleasant blur.

There was no wind forecast for the following day, so we pottered gently around the boat, reading our new books, having a bath in the cockpit, and generally being nice to our hangovers.

The wind got up in the afternoon, so we'll be moving on tomorrow.

Dragging: A Hard Day's Night

Over 20 knots of wind and a 3 metre swell blew up from the south-east and our anchor dragged. The first we knew about it was the sound of our keel impacting the ground , not something that I ever wanted to hear again, although I was destined to hear it many more times that night.

I tried to reset the anchor while motoring to maintain our position, but found that it was wrapped in a blue nylon and rubber sheet, presumably somebody's discarded wet weather gear which had caused our anchor to slip. We were pretty much wedged on the sand alarmingly close to shore. After running uselessly at full throttle - we weren't going anywhere - the engine overheated and had to be shut down. A quick check revealed that the seawater coolant tubes were dry. I assumed a mud blockage in the sail drive intakes. The night was pitch black. The depth sounder was reading 0m under the keel. The GPS showed that we were 600m from where we had originally anchored.

I started to kedge, which means that I carried our spare anchor out in our dinghy, with waves breaking over my head, dropped it somewhere vaguely close to where I wanted us to be, and then climbed back on the yacht to haul us along the anchor rope by hand. Then repeat. It's back-breaking work, and after moving the yacht a little over ten metres, we stuck fast and I could not move us further. I left the kedge anchor in place because it was stopping us from drifting further inshore.

I called for assistance on the emergency Channel 16, but none of the relevant authorities were listening, which was not surprising given that it was the middle of the night. Eventually I was answered by Reef Watch, a commercial organisation related to the coal industry, who passed on our message to Townsville Water Police who passed us on to Voluntary Marine Rescue Bowen. A sleepy VMR Bowen crew arrived on a small catamaran shortly after dawn and tried to tow us off, but failed because we were completely stuck.

We agreed to wait for later in the thankfully rising tide. Pindimara was bobbing, but seriously listing to one side and slamming into the ground with every wave. Tony from neighbouring yacht Loyalty arrived and coordinated the second rescue

attempt, using his own dinghy attached to our masthead spinnaker halyard to drag us even further over until our gunwhales were in the water, thus releasing the keel from the mud. Alarming for him, his outboard kept cutting out, which meant that Pindimara would stand up and lift him and his dinghy backwards out of the water until he could get it started again. Meanwhile Matt from VMR and myself worked on the increasingly wet and sloping foredeck to kedge us out on our two anchors while the little VMR rescue boat attempted to tow us out on a line. Eventually we came unstuck, and since our engine was disabled and the local harbour was too shallow for our 2m draft I requested that we be towed to one of the many private mooring buoys in the area.

Once secure, with the assistance of Tony from Loyalty we cleared our blocked intakes and started our engine. We could engage forward gear but not reverse, so I guessed that we had a problem with our propeller and dived on it to remove several metres of chewed-up rope which was jamming our propulsion.



STRING, STRING, WONDERFUL STRING

Finally, we seemed to be in the clear. It had been a long morning.

During the process we'd met the crew of not only one, but two nearby schooners, Tony on *Loyalty*, and Annie and Robyn on *Joshua C*.



“JOSHUA C” AND “LOYALTY”



HELPING TO BRING “LOYALTY” TO ANCHOR

It seemed reasonable to spend the evening celebrating.



ROBIN, BRONWYN, TONY, ANNIE ON "JOSHUA C"

JULY 26, 2009

Some New Tactics

We had a terrible night on the mooring although just for a change it was not the fault of the mooring itself, which behaved impeccably. Following last night's grounding, we kept waking up at the slightest sound or movement and running up on deck to check the surrounding anchor and navigation lights. Even in our dreams we were still listening out for the 'thump' of a grounding keel.

At dawn we gave it up as a bad job and began clearing away the debris of the rescue attempt. The decks at this point were cluttered with ropes, chains and bridles, and liberally spattered with bottom mud. The interior looked as if a bomb had hit it after the boat was purposely knocked down to free the keel.

The wind continued to blow, and we realised that we weren't going to get peace of mind until we went somewhere else where the memories weren't as fresh. Fortunately Queens Bay was only around the corner, which had the advantage of being spacious and uncrowded but the disadvantage of being renowned for its beam swell.

On anchoring with most of the afternoon still ahead of us, we worked out a few modifications to our nightly routine. Although our ship-board GPS comes with an anchor alarm which warns you if you stray too far from a pre-set position, we have only rarely used it because the only way of powering up the GPS is to turn on all the navigation systems at once, which unnecessarily uses up a lot of valuable power. I rewired our GPS onto its own circuit so that we can fire it up on its own for use as an anchor alarm. It is on now.

Secondly, we had time and space to try an idea that we have been discussing for some time. The problem with swell is that it doesn't always come from windward, so that the boat (which always tries to face into wind) takes the waves on the quarter or on the beam, which produces an uncomfortable rolling action. We reasoned that we could hold our bow into wind by putting out a kedging anchor at the stern and hauling it in until we were angled into the swell.

We've never seen this idea discussed anywhere in the literature. However, given our success with the kedging anchor during our grounding, we applied our newly honed skills and tried it out. It worked perfectly, and while we can see that all the other boats in the bay are being thrashed abominably, we are pointing directly into the swell and are only experiencing a pleasant rocking motion. Hopefully we'll be able to get a good night's sleep, our first in three days.

JULY 28, 2009

Red Tide

The anti-swell kedge-anchor worked! We had a beautiful undisturbed nights sleep, while the other yachts in the bay were obviously rolling badly.

Strong winds were forecast for the next few days, but they looked like reliable trades and we thought that we could quickly run the hundred mile trip to Townsville in a night and a day. We set off optimistically in light morning breezes, expecting things to pick up later. The sou'easter stubbornly refused to materialise, and we spent a couple of hours drifting along marvelling at the orange bloom on the turquoise sea.



ORANGE TIDE



CLOSE UP AND PERSONAL

According to some news reports (thanks, Virginia) these particular blooms are caused by *Trichodesium* and Townsville is waiting in some trepidation for their arrival, as it seems that they wash up on the beaches and start to rot.

Eventually our speed tailed off to less than three knots, which is our usual sign to reluctantly start the motor. After this, we made good time until late afternoon, when the wind finally started to blow, and we hoisted the sails and were screaming along at 6-7 knots. Thinking idly about dinner, I unwrapped our brand new trolling line (replacing the old one that mysteriously snapped) and began to unwind it overboard to see if we could snare our second ever fish. The spoon had barely hit the water when the reel was nearly snatched out of my hand, and before very long we'd landed another mackerel.

By the time we'd filleted, cooked and eaten it (yum) the wind had died again and we were becalmed. The promised gale was clearly somewhere else entirely, and we didn't have enough fuel left to motor all the way to Townsville, so rather than bob around in the dark we dropped the anchor in four metres of water in Shark Bay, under the lee of Cape Upstart.

With seven times rode out and an anchor alarm, we settled down to some schoolwork before being distracted by some loud splashing outside. Shoals of Long Toms were leaping out of the water around the boat, and we found that we could trigger mass flights by shining the spotlight onto them.

Tired out from all this excitement, and hoping for wind on the morrow, we went to bed and drifted off to sleep.

JULY 29, 2009

Sitting out the gales

With the dawn came the promised gale. We wrote off the morning and did some advance passage planning instead. At around lunch time, a few yachts crawled into the bay and dropped anchor, much closer to shore than us. They seemed to be much more scared of the wind than of the shallows. Presumably it was a bit rough out there.

The wind died to a more reasonable 20-25 knots over lunch, but leaving then wouldn't have got us anywhere useful in daylight hours, and we were pretty convinced from our detailed poring over the GRIB files that the night was going to

get gnarly. Still, we had bread to bake and schoolwork to do, and a new batch of novels that we'd picked up in Bowen, so Townsville could wait.

The afternoon died in a sky of lowering maroon clouds shot through with fiery red flashes. With sunset came the real winds. They came up over Cape Upstart and slammed down onto the boat at over 30 knots. Pindimara reeled with the punches. Like any keeler she is designed to point into wind, but the sheer force caught her on the bows and lifted her up and over, first to one side and then to the other, whipping her almost broadside on before the anchor chain hauled her back so that the wind could slam into the other side. This continued on relentlessly, time after time, two or three times a minute, for hours on end. The anchor chain stretched out, but looked as if it would hold.

The view from deck was somewhat alarming, but down below it was surprisingly calm, if you ignored the demon howl of the wind in the rigging and the frenzied hum of halyards vibrating like violin strings above.

We thought it prudent to consult the Bureau of Meteorology website, but (in common with many of our Queensland anchorages) the only internet connection that we could get involved standing on deck and balancing the laptop on either the dodger or the targa frame. With the boat thrashing from side to side and the laptop threatening to tear itself out of my hands and fly away, this was not the easiest task, especially when we started to get waves over the bow. I saw enough of the forecast to tell me that conditions would probably improve overnight, and went below.

With nearly 40 metres of chain out, we would usually expect Pindimara to swing through a wide arc and would set the anchor alarm accordingly. In this strong wind, she was dancing on the end of her stretched-out chain and not swinging at all, so we set the anchor alarm for a much smaller radius. After a couple of trips around the deck attempting to tie down or move all the more obvious bangs and rattles, we went to bed.

The gale continued to rage, but our bodies were quite tired from endlessly rebalancing our bodies and so we fell quickly asleep.

In the middle of the night, the anchor alarm went off. I was instantly awake and ran onto deck, but then started laughing; the wind had gone, and we were still firmly anchored but drifting aimlessly around the chain. We reset the alarm radius and went back to bed.

JULY 31, 2009

Cape Bowling Green

Cape Bowling Green is, presumably, so named because it is as flat as. In my opinion, it's not really a cape at all, more of a long sand spit enclosing a shallow bay. We had no intention of stopping there, because it's so flat that it is little use as protection, and because a number of people had warned us that it is a pretty uncomfortable anchorage.



ROUNDING THE "CAPE"

Nevertheless, after a nice day's sailing before 10-20 knot winds, we found ourselves coming abeam of the Cape with gusts in the mid-thirties and swell that was big enough that we were surfing down it. Clearly last night's gale was coming back to blow again, and we decided that we really didn't want to be out in it.

The wind itself wasn't too much of a problem, as even in 30 knots we were comfortably cruising at 6-8 knots under full sail, but controlling gybes while surfing is tricky enough in daylight, and we didn't fancy tiring ourselves out with it at night, especially if the developing swell was going to get any bigger.

We tucked around the end of the sand spit and anchored in 4 metres with plenty of rode and an anchor alarm (we're learning...). There was nobody else in the enormous bay apart from a couple of humpback whales who were gently cruising around in the shallows. I guess they like to get out of the swell as much as the next mammal.

The wind went straight up over 30 knots and stayed there. Although we were sheltered from the big sea swells, we were still far enough downwind from the sand spit to experience some pretty big waves as they built up across the shallows, and Pindimara began to do a passable imitation of a nodding dog. Still, it was all on the bow and pitching is nowhere near as bad as rolling. We didn't exactly sleep the sleep of the just, but by the morning the wind had died down enough to move on. The sailing conditions were just about perfect, and we had a wonderful cruise into Townsville.

AUGUST 4, 2009

Magnetic Island

After picking up Patricia from Townsville airport, we sailed across to nearby Magnetic Island for the weekend. Captain Cook named it "Magnetical" because he believed that it was affecting his compass, but it seems that he was mistaken.

The island may lack magnetic anomalies, but it does have some beautiful bays and walking tracks. The best anchorage is in Horseshoe Bay to the north, offering good protection from the SE trade winds, so we dropped anchor there for a few days while we explored. Although it was a busy bay, there was plenty of room for all, and there was no appreciable swell despite continuing strong trade winds.



HORSESHOE BAY

A couple of thousand permanent residents are scattered around a number of small settlements connected by a circular bus route. Apart from one younger chap, who was presumably new to the job, the bus drivers tried to make the route more interesting for themselves by keeping the accelerator pedal firmly to the metal at all times. They would only grudgingly switch to the brake pedal when a few metres short of a bus stop, and they made up for this by stamping heavily on it and performing an emergency stop. Passengers quickly learned that it was necessary to wait for the bus to stop bouncing on its springs before daring to stand up to get off.

The other mode of transport on the island is the Mini Moke. I had no idea that there were so many of them left in the world, but this may be because they are all now collected in this one spot. Most are for hire, fulfilling the function of the golf cart on Hamilton Island, being usually piloted by slightly inebriated tourists making their way home from the pub.



WHERE THE MOKES WENT

Tourism is the only industry here, but Magnetic ('Maggie' to its friends) has escaped the resort frenzy that has claimed Hamilton. Most of the accommodation is low key and comprises individual houses or cabins rather than hotels. The ferry to the mainland is the island's lifeline and the key to its prosperity, as can clearly be seen in Picnic Bay which used to be a thriving commercial quarter but which is now largely a ghost town because the ferry terminal moved around the corner to Nelly Bay.

There are no such problems at Horseshoe Bay, which is the jewel in the crown and whose few but excellent beachside bars are presumably adequately serviced by visiting yachties. The Barefoot cafe and art gallery is particularly relaxing, and an honourable mention must go to the 'Noodies' Mexican restaurant next door for the opportunity to sit margarita in hand while watching dugongs in the surf and people messing about on the beach.



MESSING ABOUT ON THE BEACH PATRICIA TAKES COMMAND

The island also boasts a number of easy walking trails. Perhaps the most spectacular is the Forts Walk which hits you with a triple whammy. Firstly, the views of the surrounding shorelines are superb. Secondly, the path takes you up to a historically interesting WWII gun emplacement, and lastly the trail is lined with koalas.



LOOKING DOWN



LOOKING UP



LOOKING IN



LOOKING OUT

We were sad to leave Horseshoe Bay when it was time to take Patricia back to the mainland, but the weather co-operated to give us perfect sailing conditions back down around West Point to complete our circumnavigation of the island.



SIX-KNOT READING

A Tale of Two Marinas

We had never intended to stop in Townsville. However, Patricia was flying out to wherever we happened to be at the beginning of August, and Townsville airport was within striking distance. This also meant that she could join us for our exploration of nearby Magnetic Island.

Townsville has several marinas, and we randomly chose The Breakwater which seemed at first glance to give easiest access to the sea. The chart showed dredged depths of 1.1m which should have allowed us in at most points of the tide, but luckily we rang ahead and found that in fact the channel was really only 50cm deep.

We'd arrived only a few hours before high tide, so we hung around hove-to until it was deep enough and then motored in. In retrospect this was a wise decision, because when the tall ship *Joshua C* followed us in a few days later, they found themselves dredging their own channel with their keel.

It seems to be a point of honour among marinas that they never adequately signpost their berths, and Breakwater was no different. We endured the usual stress of searching up and down the narrow and crowded channels of an unfamiliar marina, until eventually we located our assigned berth. Because of the combined effects of wind, tide and surrounding boats, you usually only get one chance of getting cleanly in to a berth, so Bronwyn swung the bow round in a fast turn while I stood on the foredeck with a handful of pre-prepared lines. As the little slot twisted into view, I jumped onto the pontoon and prepared to tie off and help warp her in, only to find that the wood was so rotten that all the cleats had fallen out. Looking around for any sort of projection that I could use, I shouted "It's up to you!" to Bronwyn, who executed a flawless parallel park while I hunted around for something to tie up to.

Most of Breakwater Marina was like that. The pontoons were all falling apart, the staff were distinctly strange, and the fee structure was impenetrable and changed from one day to the next, not only in terms of dollar amount but also with the tax charged. After a few days, we went to the office clutching a handful of mis-matched invoices and asking for clarification. We were told that although we had requested a 10m berth, "none were available" and so they had "put us in a 12m berth" and

charged us accordingly. This is gibberish, because the berths are largely all the same and it is the length of your boat that should determine the fee. It wasn't just us; we heard later that the *Joshua C* was also charged randomly changing amounts with each passing day. The marina also tried very hard to keep our key deposit when we left, by conveniently "forgetting" to keep a note of our card details so that they were unable to credit our account.

Patricia arrived, and we set off to explore Magnetic Island (see the previous [blog entry](#)). The Breakwater marina notwithstanding, we had thoroughly enjoyed our initial impression of Townsville itself, and wanted to stay on a bit longer when we brought Patricia back to town. We decided to try out the Townsville Motor Boat and Yacht Club marina, which is down Ross Creek in the centre of town. Access is via the commercial harbour shipping channel, so we nipped in ahead of an incoming bulk carrier and found good depths all the way.

After the usual hunt for our berth, we tied up to a warm welcome by Mark, the marina manager, who called a taxi for Patricia and went out of his way to make our stay as enjoyable as possible. The pontoons were all sturdy and new, the club's facilities were being completely refurbished, there was a lively bar on site, the other marina residents were universally friendly and interesting, and to top it all the berths were considerably cheaper than at Breakwater.

Leaving Pindimara in safe hands, we happily set off to explore the town.

AUGUST 7, 2009

We like Townsville

We spent several days enjoying the cafes and pubs of Townsville. The Palmer Street restaurant district is just behind the TMBYC marina, and from there it is but a short stroll to the Flinders Street East pub and club circuit. We didn't have a single bad drink or indifferent meal in Townsville. We became regulars at the Townsville Brewery, situated in the impressive old General Post Office building and home to seven or eight enormously impressive boutique beers, and Cactus Jack's which offers excellent margaritas in its rooftop bar with views out over the town.



TOWNSVILLE BREWERY

The other big draw is The Strand, which is the area backing Townsville's long beachfront. The town planners have done a marvellous job here in creating something akin to *La Rambla* in Montevideo and many other latin countries. The beach remains pristine, but is now backed by a wide boulevard dotted with palm trees, sculptures, memorials, and playgrounds for young and old alike.



THE STRAND

One of these playgrounds is a fountain designed for playing in, complete with water cannons and a big bucket which periodically soaks everybody in the area.



WATER PARK

The Strand is delightfully uncommercial. Some low-rise hotels sit unobtrusively far back across the road, and the occasional cafes and restaurants are tucked away in secluded corners so as not to detract from the sweep of the bay. Bronwyn's favourite was Juliette's, a gelateria that makes its own gelato on the spot and which does cracking business well into the night.



BRONWYN AND PATRICIA AT JULIETTE'S

As well as the beach itself, sections of which are protected by stinger nets to guard against jellyfish, The Strand also boasts a pool at each end. The Tobruk pool was used for training by Australia's olympic swimmers in the sixties (the entrance hall alone is well worth a visit for its collection of photos from that period), and the Kissing Point Rock Pool is an artificial swimming lagoon designed to provide safe swimming in the stinger season.



KISSING POINT ROCK POOL

We got the feeling that Townsville is destined for good things. It has not escaped the world's current financial problems; for instance, the central mall was closed down and scheduled for major prestigious redevelopment, but this project has been put on hold so that a large part of the centre now sits idle and locals have to travel to the suburbs to do their shopping. All around, premium apartments have been built - neither too high nor too offensive, more kudos to the town planners - but we understood that hundreds of them stand empty awaiting buyers who never came. On the other hand, the town's prosperity was never derived from tourism, and the constant flow of mineral, agricultural and livestock wealth continues to flow from the North Queensland interior to the various loaders and refineries to the south of the town.

Day followed perfect day, and we began to think that we would never get around to leaving. It was nice to be stuck somewhere because we wanted to be, instead of - as has happened so often on this trip - being trapped by storms. In the end, though, we realised that if we were going to get around the northern coast of Australia before the advent of the cyclone season, then we needed to get moving.

But we really like Townsville, and will return.



GOODBYE, TOWNSVILLE. WE'LL BE BACK.

AUGUST 10, 2009

Hinchinbrook Island

We rode a nice nor'easter out of Townsville and back past Magnetic Island, where the evening weather made a mockery of our plans for a night cruise and left us bobbing in a perfect millpond sea without a breath of a breeze. We went below and cooked dinner before submitting to the inevitable and starting the engine.

It was extraordinarily dark, but after a while a red moon rose and drowned out most of the stars, revealing the scattered islands of the Palm Group as we threaded our way between them.

Bronwyn had gone below for a nap, and in order to counteract the mind-numbing tedium of motoring, I had loaded some Spanish lessons onto the new ipod that we'd bought in Townsville. It was a pleasant way of passing the time, and nobody was around to hear me declaiming loudly about my requirement for an explanation of the precise route to Santiago railway station.

A little later, my lessons done, I searched through the music files that I had randomly downloaded from my computer onto the ipod, looking for something that

would suit motoring by moonlight through a crowded island group in the middle of the night. After a few false starts, I rediscovered some old live Whitesnake recordings, and spent the next few hours cheerfully navigating to the strains of Micky Moody on guitar.

We were heading for the passage behind Hinchinbrook Island, and in order to cross the bar we needed to wait for both sunlight and the tide. There are a couple of islands to the north of the Palm Group that provide convenient anchorages, and we dropped our pick in a mirror-smooth bay behind Fantome Island.

We had a great night's sleep. In fact, the weather was so still that we could probably have slept floating on the open sea. In the morning we woke easily to the alarm and began motoring the final few hours to the southern entrance to Hinchinbrook Passage.

According to the official charts, the bar is too shallow for us to cross. However, there is an active three-mile long sugar loader with leading lights across the shoals to a jetty, showing that the channel is regularly used. In addition, we'd emailed Nancy and John on [Alana Rose](#) who had recently crossed the bar, and they told us that they'd had good depths at high tide.



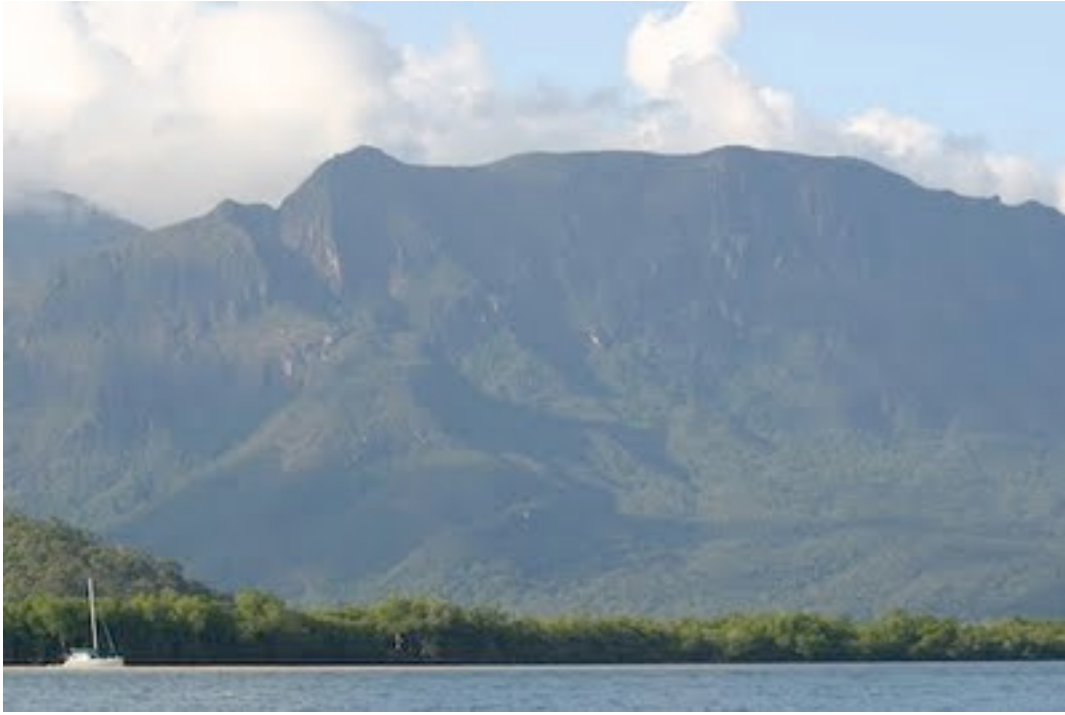
BRONWYN AND THE SUGAR LOADER

We had no problems getting across. The leads and navigation buoys took us so close to the sugar loader and the old molasses jetty that it was possible to chat quietly to the fishermen as we glided past.



FISHING OFF THE MOLASSES JETTY

There was still very little wind, so we motor-sailed up the passage (or 'did a Bob' as we call it, in honour of another blogger who circumnavigated Australia in a Bavaria with, as far as we can tell, his engine running most of the time). Hinchinbrook Channel is about twenty miles long and allows you to squeeze between the mountains of Hinchinbrook Island to the east, and the coast-hugging Cardwell Range to the west. The Channel is lined with mangroves which provide a vivid bright green contrast to the darker green gums behind, while the stark rock of the mountains looms impressively in the background.



HINCHINBROOK MOUNTAIN FROM THE CHANNEL

After a very scenic day, we pulled off the main channel into Gayundah Creek, one of the many drainage creeks that cut down from the mountains and through the mangroves. The breathless quiet was broken only by the occasional call of a bird or splash of a fish in the shallows. In the background we could hear sporadic 'clunk' noises that sounded vaguely like a branch snapping, or somebody slapping the water. We guessed that they were either made by frogs or by air bubbling up from the swamp mud, although we never did get to the bottom of it.



MORNING MIST IN GAYUNDAH CREEK

The many secluded and winding tributary channels just cried out to be explored, so we unshipped the dinghy and spent a happy afternoon alternately motoring and paddling in the shallows.



CREEK, PADDLE

The creeks were teeming with life, from rays and bait fish in the water, to crabs and white herons on the mud, to scintillating kingfishers flashing through the air.

Rested and content, it was time to put in some northerly miles. There was no wind at all behind Hinchinbrook Island, but we assumed that it was still blowing out to sea. A few hours later, we poked our nose out around the northernmost tip of the island and picked up a lovely nor'easter that had us flying along towards the next set of islands, the Family Group.

As dusk fell, we came abeam of the resort island of Dunk. We passed into its wind shadow, and then never came out. The wind had died completely. I downloaded some GRIB files and found that the forecast was for no wind at all for the next few days. We considered anchoring at Dunk, but felt that we hadn't really made any progress - Hinchinbrook was still in sight - so we decided to motor for a few more hours and anchor off the Barnard Islands instead.

AUGUST 12, 2009

Are we cruisers yet?

One way of spotting a cruising boat is to see how much junk is hanging off the back.



2005



2009

Do we qualify yet?

AUGUST 13, 2009

Slow Boat to Cairns

Since we didn't have any wind, we arrived at the North Barnard Islands later than anticipated, after dusk but before moonrise. It was very dark indeed. We slipped into the usual routine of one of us on deck steering with night-accustomed vision and the other down below watching the GPS and chart and calling up course adjustments. We knew from the chart that we were rounding Kent Island at a distance of a few tens of metres, but we could barely make it out as we slipped between it and an equally invisible breaking rock.

When we got into the reef between Kent and neighbouring Jessie, we found another yacht already there, thankfully with anchor lights correctly lit, but there was room for both of us.

A mild but continual beam swell made for a restless night, but the morning brought no wind so we took it easy. While standing on deck admiring the scenery, I spotted a derelict old dugout canoe floating towards us. I got out the binoculars (a bird-watching present from my parents when I was about ten; who'd have thought then that one day I'd be using them on a yacht in the Pacific?) to have a closer look, but there didn't seem to be anybody aboard.



ABANDONED CANOE?

As I watched, the canoe vanished and then reappeared, and I suddenly realised that it wasn't a boat at all but the tail flukes of a whale hanging head-down in the water. It was pretty shallow, so I can only assume that it was resting with its head on the bottom.

There was still no wind. I attempted to update the blog, but found that I only had one bar of signal. This was an excellent chance to test out the antenna that we'd bought in Townsville. We hadn't been able to source either a mount or a patch cable to attach it to the modem, but I'd knocked something up using copper wire, aluminium foil, gaffer tape and string. It all worked perfectly, first time, with four bars of broadband. Not a bad upgrade for \$100.

While washing up after a leisurely brunch, we felt a faint zephyr of a breeze and realised that there was a distant rain squall marching across the horizon. Guessing that we were on the edge of a small weather system, we quickly cleared the boat for sea and set up the sails for the anticipated sou'wester.



JESSIE ISLAND. NOT MUCH TO HIDE BEHIND

It did come, but it came slowly, drifting us along at only a couple of knots. For the rest of the day the squall stayed stubbornly on the horizon and refused to come closer, so that in order to make any headway we had to sail wing-on-wing in the light breeze. This entails keeping the main sail hovering on the edge of a gybe and flying the jib on the wrong side, which takes a bit of concentration when you don't have a pole to stop the jib from collapsing. In the end we pulled in the foresail and let Harriet bumble us along at 3 knots on the main alone.

As evening drew in, even that little breeze dropped and we started the motor. We were a little low on fuel, and dislike motoring at night, so we decided to hide behind nearby Normandy Island, one of the Franklin Group. The last dying rays of dusk allowed us to spot a couple of other yachts and some other mysterious floating objects through the binoculars before we arrived in full dark, which was just as well because when we arrived they were largely unlit.

One yacht was showing an anchor light, but a large cat which really should have known better had only hung out a handful of dim little garden solar lanterns. There were also two vessels belonging to the Cruise Franklin company, one with a single solar lantern that ran down its batteries and went out as we watched, and the other completely dark and which we were lucky not to run down.

We had hoped to get some shelter from the SE swell, but in the event it parted around the island into two streams which hit us simultaneously at 90 degrees to each other, rolling and pitching at the same time. We made the best of it until 3 am when it all died down and we were able to get some proper sleep.

The next morning brought the lightest of winds again, and in the end we motor-sailed the last stretch into Cairns. Where are the famed continuous trade winds when you need them?



NORMANDY ISLAND ON A STILL DAY

AUGUST 16, 2009

Cairns and Beyond

We've stayed in Cairns before and found it be simply a tourist conduit for the Great Barrier Reef, so we only popped in to run some errands and to buy some fuel.

We also needed to do quite a bit of printing for our schoolwork, so rather than anchor in the duck pond in the main river we booked a berth at the Marlin Marina where we could access shore power. The marina was OK, but not particularly friendly and surprisingly - and annoyingly - lacked any kind of chandlery.

What did amaze us was the shorefront development that has sprung up since our last visit. We had previously found Cairns' night life to be somewhat dull (always excepting the excellent [Kanis](#) seafood restaurant), but now the waterfront is ablaze with interesting pubs, restaurants and cafes and local people having a good time.



OBLIGATORY BEACH PHOTO



BRONWYN AT KANIS

We had a great time at the bar there and met a lot of interesting people, but our chores were done and there was no reason to stay so we cast off and motored back out of the river. Unbeknownst to us, the *Alana Rose*, which has been a week or two ahead of us all the way up the coast, had returned to Cairns to repair some electronics, so we must have passed within a hundred metres of them on our way out without noticing. That was a shame, because we've only ever spoken to Nancy and John via email and it would have been great to meet them in the flesh.

Out in the channel, we discovered that yes, there was still no wind at all. We really wanted to make some northing, so we resigned ourselves to a day of motoring in the stifling heat.

As well as a few whales, which surfaced to breathe but which otherwise didn't show themselves, we came across another of those yellow swimming snakes, which decided after a while that it didn't like the look of us and dived vertically downwards.



SWIMMING SNAKE, MILES FROM LAND

As evening fell it was clear that the situation was not going to improve, an opinion which was backed by the GRIB data that I downloaded which did, however, intimate that things might improve on the morrow.

Rather than burn fuel all night, we checked the chart for likely anchorages and settled on the Low Islets, which are really just a mangrove swamp sticking out of the sea. Naturally we arrived in full dark, to find a good sprinkling of yachts already there - including a large number of unlit tourist punts, which our Lucas cruising guide had warned us about - and found some swinging room at the back in about 12 metres of water on a sand and coral bottom.

Bronwyn magically produced a full roast lamb dinner with all the trimmings. I don't know how she does that.

In the morning, there still wasn't any wind.



LOW ISLETS. PRETTY LOW, HUH?



LOW ISLETS LIGHTHOUSE AND RESORT

AUGUST 17, 2009

Careful what you wish for

There was still no wind, so we idled away the early morning on little chores, grumbling in a mild sort of way about a whole week of still days and dull motoring.

By ten o'clock the promised trade winds arrived as a gentle breeze. We cleared up below and prepared for sea. While hoisting the anchor, we noticed a very large fish taking an inordinate amount of interest in our hull, over a metre long and very powerfully built. Even when we started to motor out of the bay, it kept station with us, and we noticed a big propeller slice just behind the dorsal fin. Perhaps it was used to being fed by tourists.

And tourists there certainly were, in plentiful supply. As we left, they began to arrive in droves on large commercial sail boats of all descriptions, including an enormous cat ketch and a pseudo-oriental junk. All these people were decanted either onto the beach by the lighthouse, or into one of the many fishing punts and jet skis that littered the shore.

Already far from the madding crowd, gentle winds pushed us northward. To our left, the Great Dividing Range marched impressively along the shore line, cloud-shrouded thousand-metre peaks rejoicing in such names as Mount Sorrow, Mount Surprise, and Mount Unbelievable. Captain Cook had a bad time along here, hence also Cape Tribulation, Struck Island, Weary Bay, plus of course Endeavour Reef where he grounded and only got off with quite serious damage which had to be repaired ashore in what later became Cooktown.



MAYBE THERE'LL BE WIND TONIGHT?

For all that we've been sailing inside the Great Barrier Reef for several weeks, it has always thus far been far out to sea and hasn't had any direct impact on us apart from its pleasant calming effect on the swell. From here on in, it comes close inshore and is a navigational force to be reckoned with, comprising hundreds of scattered reefs lurking invisibly just below the waves. There is a marked shipping channel which is presumably well charted, but on the other hand this is full of large ships moving ore up and down the coast.



THE NEAREST HUNDRED MILES OF REEF

A humpback whale treated us to an aerial display in our wake. Dusk fell, the wind picked up to the low twenties, and our speed increased to 6-7 knots under full sail. Harriet was doing a fine job of sailing, so while Bronwyn went below to rest, I was free to sit in comfort and idly formulate an elaborate metaphor for the process of sailing through the reef at night time.

Imagine getting in your car to drive to the next town. First, however, you spray-paint the windows black so that you can't see out. Then you tape your mobile phone to the dashboard and log on to Google Maps. You start the engine and put it into gear, and from now on you are completely at the mercy of the accuracy of the map and where your phone says that you are. You can be reasonably certain that all the streets and intersections are marked, as well as perhaps the more obvious light poles and roadside furniture, but you just have to deal with curbs, speed humps, trash bins, dogs and cats as you feel your wheels bump over them.

Thankfully there is little other traffic, but you know that if you leave the twisting side-roads and venture onto the highway, you will be sharing the road with fully laden trucks. You also know that they can't see you either, and that in any case all their brake lines have been disconnected.

As I lay in the cockpit spinning this tale and watching meteorites blaze across the milky brilliance of the starry sky, yacht ploughing blindly into pitch darkness at close to hull speed, I thought happily that I wouldn't trade places with anybody.

The hours passed, and the wind crept up to the mid twenties. Pindimara was now quite overpowered, but there were few gusts and the swells were predictable, so I left full sails up. In any case, Harriet the Hydrovane was coping superbly. In fact she was tracking better than ever before, and I realised what Hydrovane meant when they coined the slogan 'survive your dream'.

In the early hours of the morning, the wind crept up into the high twenties and our speed to over seven knots. Enough was enough, so I called all hands on deck to reduce sail. To say that the crew tumbled eagerly out of their bunks would be an overstatement, and when Bronwyn did clamber painfully out, she commented that her 'rest period' in the bucking bunk seemed to have consisted mainly of two hours of strenuous Pilates exercise.

We were at this point in the shipping lane with bulk carriers and trawlers passing on either side, so we quickly reduced sail and got back onto course. As is our usual practice on night passages, we'd gone straight to the third reef, but Harriet soon picked up the pace to a respectable 4-5 knots. I was pretty tired by now so I gratefully put my head down while Bronwyn took a watch.

At a little after 4am I took over again, and immediately got my feet wet as a wave curled over the stern. The swell was now well over 2 metres, and the wind was touching 30 knots. It had also swung around onto the beam, and even with the third reef in, we were overpowered for a reach. The wind was howling in the rigging, and the hull was thrumming and making odd little banging sounds under my feet. I seriously considered replacing the main with our storm trysail for the final four hours to safe haven on Lizard Island, but instead chose to put our tail between our legs and run for nearby Cape Flattery, which at 260 metres high looked to be big enough to hide behind.

The wind was easier to manage with it behind us, but continued to increase and of course now we were surfing down 3 metre swells in the darkness. As the Cape

loomed out of the gathering dawn light, I once again roused Bronwyn who navigated us in to shelter between the Cape itself and a sunken wreck.

Anchoring for once in the light, we immediately fell into bed and slept until lunch time. Although we were snug in our bay, the 30-knot wind continues to howl over our heads. Be careful what you wish for.

AUGUST 20, 2009

Lizard Island

We woke behind Cape Flattery to a weather forecast telling us to expect 30 knot winds again in the evening and all of the next day. We could have stayed there, but it was pretty dull and not very well insulated from the swell. Lizard Island beckoned from less than 20 miles away, giving us ample time to get there and hide before the blow started again.

When we poked our nose out from behind Cape Flattery, we found a reasonable 20-25 knots which took us to Lizard in no time at all.

We'd heard good reports of the island and were keen to stay for a while to explore. When we arrived at the Mrs Watsons Bay anchorage, we were a little surprised to find more than a dozen cruising boats packed in among the coral heads, as well as a fair sized but inconspicuous resort on the shore.

The bay is named after the eponymous wife of a beche-de-mere fisherman who was attacked there by aboriginals while her husband was out fishing. She and a servant and her newborn child escaped to sea in a cast iron boiling tub, and eventually washed up on what is now called Watson Island, where all three of them perished.

The water was blue and crystal clear; we could actually see the anchor on the bottom. The island gave good protection from the developing swell, but very little from the actual wind, so we put out all 70 metres of chain in preparation for the night ahead.



ROOM FOR ONE MORE?



PINDIMARA AT THE EDGE OF THE REEF

It did indeed blow that night, 30 knots or more, and all the boats got a good thrashing. I kept being awoken by strange sounds that had me running up on deck, but the anchor held. We were a bit tired the next morning, and simply stayed below all day as the wind continued to howl.

The next night was a little calmer, and by lunchtime the waves had died down enough that we were finally able to lower to outboard into the tender and go ashore.

We found a trail leading across the island and through the Pandanus swamps that fill the level ground between the rocky hills.



OFF INTO THE MANGROVES



PANDANUS SWAMP



LOCAL BEACHCOMBER

The trail led to the 'Blue Lagoon', an unusual geological formation in that coral lagoons are usually features of reef rather than of continental islands. In the case of Lizard Island it also provides yacht anchorage in calm weather, but those conditions certainly didn't apply today and nobody had tried it.



THE BLUE LAGOON

There were, however, a few kite-surfers playing around, having sailed around the island from the resort.



JUST PASSING THROUGH

Lizard Island is also famous for having a peak that was climbed by Captain Cook when he was trying to find a vantage point from which he could plan a way out of the Great Barrier Reef. We set off on his trail on the following morning. It was a pleasant clamber over enormous granite boulders, shaded here and there by gums, and the views down into the reefs of Mrs Watsons Bay were spectacular.



BRONWYN AND MRS WATSON



THE WAY TO COOKS LOOK

From the top of the hill, we could faintly make out in the distance the dark blue of lurking ribbon reef, and the lighter blue of safe passages. If Cook hadn't successfully spotted the gap, then he might not have made it back to England and Australians today might all be speaking French. It was very satisfying to stand there on a hilltop on an island in the far Great Barrier Reef, staring out to sea and feeling the connection to the history of our adopted country. Bien sûr.

Back at shore level, we went for a welcome swim in the gloriously clear water, and used the coral sand to scrub away the weeks of sun tan lotion and grime before returning to Pindimara for a rare and welcome freshwater shower.

We'll definitely be coming back to Lizard Island again. It has genuinely beautiful white coral beaches, a very pretty landscape, some serious rocks, and a warm and easily accessible reef. Wonderful.

But now, it's time to move on. The Torres Strait beckons.



WE GO THATAWAY!

AUGUST 21, 2009

A Fishy Tale Too

Coming abeam of Watson Island (where Mrs Watson's body was found), Bronwyn tossed out the trolling line to see if she could catch us a fish supper. Within half an hour or so, something struck hard. It fought mightily in the distance, but eventually Bronwyn managed to slowly haul it in hand over hand so that we could get a look at it.

We realised that instead of catching dinner, we had hooked well over a metre of something that looked very much like a shark. It was very muscular with a flattened body, brown above and white below, a wide mouth like a catfish, and big dorsal and pectoral fins. It wasn't in any of our fish books, but it certainly didn't look like anything that we wanted to share our cockpit with, so we decided to let it go.

The only problem was that it had swallowed our one and only trolling spoon, and we needed it back. For almost an hour, Bronwyn played the enormous beast back and forth, trying to tire it enough to get it close to the boat so that I could pull out the hook and let it go. We got so engrossed in the task that I forgot to look where we

were going, and got a real shock when I checked our course over my shoulder and found that we were about to T-bone a sand island.

At that precise moment, the wind increased to 30 knots and stayed there, leaving me with only a tiny slot between the edge of the island and a 7-knot gybe. At the same time, the fish was experiencing a whole extra knot of speed, and Bronwyn's shoulders were aching with the effort of keeping it with us.



NOT SUPPER

A few minutes later, with disaster averted, we pointed the boat into the (suddenly well-behaved) wind and then cursed as the fish made a sprint under the boat. If it got the line wrapped around the propeller, we would never get it back. However, it seemed to know what it was doing, because the line went slack and the fish swam off, leaving our tackle behind and apparently only slightly exerted by several miles of hard fighting.

We decided to eat canned soup for dinner.

AUGUST 25, 2009

Onward to the Torres Strait

We had embarked on a four-day passage up through the Great Barrier Reef and out into the Torres Strait. The trade winds were blowing fairly consistently and the weather forecast was good. It was also stinking hot, and we discovered that some of our eggs had cooked themselves inside their shells.

The Great Barrier Reef is much more than the outer ribbon reef that protects the eastern coastline from the open ocean. Inside the enclosed lagoon are tens of thousands of square miles of shallow water dotted by uncountable reefs and islands, many of them still uncharted. The reefs are mostly invisible and lurk just below the surface, so the only way that you can know where they are is to pay diligent attention to the charts.



LIZARD ISLAND TO CAPE YORK

I really have to take my hat off to Captain Cook who sailed these waters with no idea what lay beneath. It is a wonder that the Endeavour only suffered one serious accident here. Bligh also passed through in his open boat after having been set adrift by the mutineers on the Bounty. We passed a few of the islands that he stopped at on his epic journey from Tahiti to Indonesia, a feat that he achieved by navigating entirely from memory.

Those men were giants.

One thing that Bligh and Cook didn't have to contend with were the ore freighters which continually forge their way up and down the coast. With a good chart, it is possible to thread a large vessel through the reefs in any number of ways, but the maritime authorities have now designated a few specific routes and have made it illegal for commercial vessels to stray from them. On the one hand, this guarantees safe passage for the ships without fear of encountering an unmarked reef, and it means that we always know where they are likely to be, and where they will be heading. On the other hand, the designated channel is often the only reasonable route through, creating pinch points where all vessels, commercial and private, must come together. This is especially exciting at night when you are tired and alone on deck and find that your fragile cockleshell is suddenly the focal point of three enormous cargo ships.

We planned a route that largely avoided the shipping channels in the daytime, but which used them at night when we could take advantage of their navigation beacons.

The days passed and we settled into shipboard routine. The sailing was generally easy, although the trades tended to blow harder at night. In the day, they sometimes died right off, or we'd be hit by a squall, but we made good time and rounded Cape York at around three in the morning of the fourth day.



SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT



ROUNDING THE CAPE

Cape York is the northernmost tip of mainland Australia, and a milestone on our trip. It gave us an immense sense of achievement to have made it all the way up the east coast. We had now turned the corner, and from now on would be sailing into the sunset.

AUGUST 25, 2009

Horn Island

There is a cluster of islands a few hours north of Cape York, out in the Torres Strait and on the way to Papua New Guinea. Although they are part of Australia, most of them have been placed off limits to visitors by the Torres Strait Islanders who live there. In the middle of the group, though, are two islands that we can get to.

Thursday Island is well known in the yachting community because it is a convenient place to stop and rest if you are following the trades from the Pacific to destinations westward. In some ways this is a bit odd, because TI (as it is known) offers few facilities to yachts, and the anchorage is poor holding in a vicious current.

We chose to anchor a mile away across the channel by Horn Island, which boasts a calm and comfortable anchorage and a regular ferry to TI.



HORN ISLAND FERRY TERMINAL

After sleeping for most of the day, we ventured out onto Horn Island to look around. It comprises only a couple of streets and seems to exist mainly to service the local airstrip (TI itself is far too small to land planes on).

We naturally gravitated to the only pub, the Wongai Hotel, for a cold beer. Before long we were chatting to Charlotte the barmaid, and then to Matt the off duty duty manager, and then before not too many more beers we seemed to know everybody in the pub.

As the night wore on we switched from beer to wine, then from wine to spirits. The pub closed, Bob the landlord invited us back to his pool for a swim and some more beers, and then there was an increasingly blurred round of house visits until finally we found ourselves back on *Pindimara* mixing cocktails as the party continued.

A great pub, a great night, and I really don't know how I managed to wake up and ferry Matt and Lucy back to the dock in the tender in the morning. Certainly the crew of the ferry said later that it had been very funny to watch. I didn't even see any darn ferry.

AUGUST 26, 2009

Thursday Island

Rather than take our little 3 horsepower tender across the rather unpredictable channel between Horn Island and TI, we caught the ferry.

TI is less than a square mile of tropical island, and very pleasant. The people that we met could be divided into the ones that were working in the shops, who were either grumpy or apparently bemused that we wanted to buy anything, and the people who were not working in shops, who were universally happy and smiling and having a good time. Certainly the pubs were doing a roaring trade. I was particularly taken by the sign outside the Royal Hotel, which as well as offering "the loudest music in town", issued the stern declaration that it would refuse to serve anybody "with visual armpit hair".

We visited the very pretty catholic church, and also the island's graveyard which contains a great many memorials to islanders who died far too young while diving for pearl and trochus shells. There was also a section for Japanese fisherman who had died chasing the same dream.



One other curious feature of the graveyard was the popularity of the grave markers as scaffolding for termite nests.

Australian Customs regards TI very much as their front line against not only immigrants but also pests and diseases. Their big launch was continually running up and down the channel, checking out the boats and boarding incoming yachts and confiscating their fresh food supplies.

We had heard that, even though we were not arriving from abroad, we would still need to get a certificate of authenticity from the supermarkets which would allow us to keep our fresh food if we were stopped on the way back to the mainland. There was a colourful but uninformative sign on the ferry dock which seemed to back this up, but when we asked at the supermarket they said that all we needed to do was to keep the receipt. We kept our purchases to an absolute minimum just in case, and then ran into a uniformed AQIS (quarantine) guy at the dock. He told us that we didn't even need the receipt, but then admitted that he'd only been on the job for a week and really had no idea...

AUGUST 30, 2009

Into the Gulf

There are a number of channels out from the Horn Island anchorage, each leading in a different direction between different islands. There are two that are potentially useful for a south-westerly exit toward the Gulf of Carpentaria, and each has its own collection of interesting tides and currents. There was quite a bit of detailed discussion about them amongst the yachties anchored behind Horn, including a fair bit of third hand local knowledge.

To us it seemed fairly simple. Option One was to fight the notorious Boat Channel with its 6 knot currents and shoals, then to double back through Endeavour Strait with its rocks and shifting sandbanks. Option Two was to slip out of Normanby Passage on a rising tide and to cross into the Gulf using the shipping lane at Booby Island.

Low tide was at dawn, but by the time we'd had breakfast and cleared the boat for sea it was closer to eight o'clock and already approaching the top of the tide (the tides are pretty strange around Thursday Island). This suited our planned relaxed start and we accepted the 3.5 knot boost down Normanby and ran gently over to Booby Island, from whence it is a hundred mile straight run down the Gulf into the company mining town of Weipa.

For a while we marvelled at the feeling of travelling southward, a first for this trip. Then we sat back with Harriet at the helm and admired the pale blue skies and azure seas sparkling in the sunshine.

The marine weather forecast had been unusually precise, with 15-20 knots from the southeast and no change expected for the next three days. As we came abeam of the exit to the Endeavour Strait, I noticed a few wispy mare's tails high in the sky. These are rarely a good sign and, thinking about the very shallow waters in the strait to the east of us, I commented that this would be pretty nasty place to get caught in a storm. Bronwyn replied with something like, "When was the last time that we saw any rain? I can't remember."

It was Bronwyn's watch so I went below to get some rest. After a while I became aware that the bunk was shuddering as if we were travelling at high speed, so I looked out of the saloon window and noticed that we were heeled over so far that the deck rail was in the water.

Up on deck, I found Harriet steering perfectly and Bronwyn looking in some bemusement at the huge squall that was spewing out of the Endeavour Strait and rolling towards us. Hurriedly we shortened sail and Bronwyn got into her life vest and harness while I hid in the companionway under the shelter of the dodger.

It was quite the squall, with driving rain and 35 knot winds. Bronwyn grinned at me through the water pouring down her face as we hit 8 knots. "At last," she said, "I'm finally washing off all that sea salt."

Then a big wave reared up and landed on her head.



THANKYOU, ENDEAVOUR STRAIT



EIGHT-KNOT BRONWYN

When we emerged from the other side of the squall, we found that while we were inside, the world had gone grey and there were more squalls and storms on every quarter.

I quickly went below to check that everything was battened down and then lay down on the bunk. Bronwyn had waterproofs, safety gear and the helm and by far the safest place for me to be if the boat was going to get a thrashing, was in bed.

Night fell, and the worst of it was over. Bronwyn came below to scrape off the salt, and I went on deck for my watch. The storm had left a legacy of 25 knot winds and lumpy beam seas which made everything a bit uncomfortable. The rain had stopped, but I spent most of my watch under the dodger watching the helmsman's position disappearing under spray as confused waves slammed into the boat. I was very glad that the wind vane was doing all the hard work.

The sun came up, and we were out of sight of land and becalmed under a motionless blue sky . Flying fish scattered across the surface like little jewelled helicopters, frightened by an enormous swordfish that swiped at them with its bill. A hammerhead shark cruised by, cocking its curious head sideways to see if we were worth eating. Up above, petrels and terns wheeled and dived, taking inordinate interest in the rigging.



BROWN BOOBY

It was all very beautiful, but it wasn't getting us any closer to Weipa. We fired up the engine and motor-sailed.

SEPTEMBER 1, 2009

Weipa

Weipa is a Rio Tinto company town of 3500 souls (a third of them children!) that exists to service the largest bauxite mine in the world. Many of those bulk carriers that we encountered in our journey up the reef were carrying bauxite ore to the smelters that we visited in Gladstone, so we were interested to see this end of the process as well.

From the chart we could see that there are two rivers that flow past Weipa, Mission to the north and Embley to the south. The Embley River is the shipping channel and well provided with navigation markers. The Mission River is much, much closer to town but has no markers and nobody in the literature seems to mention it as a potential anchorage. We went with the herd and put our anchor down in Embley across from the ore loader, in a large natural harbour ringed with beaches and mangroves.

We could see some houseboat moorings against the north shore, and there seemed to be a couple of other yachts anchored over there, but they were close to the ore loaders and we decided instead to shelter under the lee of the southern shore. The anchorage was calm, comfortable and quiet, except at the bottom of the tide when there was a 4.5 knot rip but it only rocked the boat for an hour or so in the morning. Occasionally a Panamax-class bulk carrier came by, but the harbour is big enough that we didn't really notice, except when they eclipsed the sun.

The only way to shore is by Evans Landing, a public jetty that gives access to Steve the houseboat guy's premises and little else apart from a telephone box, which you will need because the only realistic way into town from there is to call a taxi. Evans Landing was a mile away across the bay from our anchorage, but not a problem for our little 3 horsepower dinghy as long as we avoided low tide.



AN ANCHORAGE FAR, FAR AWAY

Naturally the first thing that we did when we got to shore was to hunt down the pub, in which we were stymied because there is no pub, or indeed any real town centre. Since Weipa was originally just housing for the mine, it hasn't grown up around a traditional centre, and has more the feel of a bunch of haphazard suburbs.



SPQ (SINGLE PERSONS' QUARTERS)



CHURCH, ALSO USED AS CYCLONE SHELTER

There are, however, two clubs. Several people told us that the reason that Weipa has a Golf Club and a Lawn Bowls Club is because these are the two sports that you can perform while drinking. We randomly chose the Bowls Club, and had a great time and met (and drank with) a large number of interesting and colourful characters.



CRAZY WEIPA LASS



BRONWYN AND MOIRA

We also managed to eat some local prawns. This may not sound much of a feat, but all the way up the Queensland coast we have been trying to eat local seafood, only to find that all their catch is frozen and sent to the city. When the local restaurants need fish, they have to import it frozen from the usual sources.

The Weipa Bowls Club had Banana Prawns straight from the Gulf of Carpentaria. They were excellent.

A couple of days later, we got on a tour bus and went to the mine. It was another fascinating trip, not least because it is a far cry from your traditional open-cast mine. Bauxite is near as dammit just lying around on the surface, so all the miners really have to do is come along with a scoop and pick it up. Of course, it is slightly more complicated than that, and they get to use some very big scoops...



BELLY LOADER PASSING BY WITH 170 TONNES OF ORE



TOO SMALL FOR BAUXITE. THIS LITTLE CHAP IS FOR MOVING TOPSOIL



BRONWYN BEFRIENDS THE TRAIN DRIVER

Tomorrow we're heading out on an extended passage across the sea to Gove. Since the Bureau of Meteorology clearly has no idea about the weather in the Gulf, we haven't read the weather but we have downloaded some GRIB files which tell us that we will have decent winds during the day but nothing but motoring at night.

Making Water

We are the proud owners of four thousand dollar's worth of Katadyn Powersurvivor 40E desalinator, but so far we had never managed to get it running properly. With the coast-hopping segment of our voyage behind us and some long non-stop passage-making ahead of us, I really wanted to get the wretched thing working once and for all. The opportunities for filling up with clean fresh water over the top end and down the west coast will be few and far between.



KATADYN POWERSURVIVOR 40E

The problem with water-makers is that you can only test them when you are out in deep clean ocean, because any trace of organics (as found inshore) or chlorine (as found in tap water) can permanently and expensively kill the osmotic membrane. Since arriving in northern Queensland, we had been pretty permanently sailing through orange algal bloom, which is no good at all.

The story so far was that sometimes it made water, and sometimes it just blew bubbles, and there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. I variously

replumbed, bypassed and short-circuited different parts of the machine in accordance with the instructions in the Katadyn manual, and after carefully following the troubleshooting flow diagrams, arrived at the conclusion that it was bugged.

I sent it back to the dealer, who fired it up, said that there was nothing wrong with it, and sent it back (a process that spanned several weeks and as many marina office drop boxes). I plumbed it back in, and hey presto it worked first time. We waited a couple of days and then tried again, and sure enough it refused to make any fresh water at all. It seemed to only work when I was testing it, not when I actually wanted some water. The dealer didn't have any opinion apart from "there's something wrong with your installation, maybe an air bubble somewhere". Thanks a bunch.

Far too late in the day, I thought of consulting Nigel Calder's excellent "Boat Owner's Mechanical and Electrical Manual", and found that the limiting factor was whether or not the unit could build up enough water pressure on the osmotic membrane. Since the unit doesn't have a pressure gauge, there's no way to tell whether it has or not. There is, however, a direct correlation between the amp-hours in the house batteries and the pressure in the unit, but unfortunately the distinction between 'the batteries are charged enough' and 'the batteries are not charged enough' is too subtle to be picked up by our boat's instrumentation. It would be great if the water-maker had either a pressure gauge or a warning light, but it doesn't have either of them. Katadyn, are you listening?

Before installing the unit I had done the math and knew that I would have to run the tow generator at the same time as the water-maker in order to get enough power. On paper it looked fine, but perhaps the reality was different.

I experimented some more, and after considerable frustration and more than one occasion when I announced that I was chucking the whole thing over the side, I settled on first running the tow generator alone for an hour or two to make sure that there was enough reserve in our (apparently already fully charged) batteries, and only then firing up the Katadyn.



IT WORKED!

We can now reliably make five litres of water an hour. If the sun is high over the solar panels and we're pulling the tow generator at over five knots, then we can run the unit for three or four hours without unduly stressing the system. Since we can get by on about 15 litres of water a day, we are now borderline self-sufficient in fresh water. Hurrah!

SEPTEMBER 5, 2009

Across the Gulf

It was time to embark on our first proper ocean passage. Although we have done many multi-day non-stop passages, we've never really been more than 20 miles from land and there's almost always been some island or cape within a few hours sailing that we could hide behind if the weather turned nasty.

The trip from Weipa to Gove is a 300-mile straight line across the Gulf of Carpentaria, with no islands or shelter of any kind. We already knew from our [voyage to Weipa](#) that the weather in the Gulf was very changeable, but although our

GRIB files reflected this, there was nothing really nasty in the forecast for the next few days.

We set off up the channel out of Weipa harbour, carefully giving the working dredgers a wide berth, and crossed into the open sea with a good following wind. The water was so clear, and the seabed sand so yellow, that the terns wheeling about our mast became magically green in the reflected light.



RARE AUSTRALIAN GREEN TERN

Dolphins came to see us off, jostling each other to get the prime position just under the bow. For some reason, a dolphin's idea of a good time is to have five tonnes of yacht crashing repeatedly down on his head. Each to their own, I guess.



ME NEXT! ME! ME!

The flat landscape of Cape York soon dropped over the horizon, and we were alone in the blazing heat. The instruments told us that the boat was moving, but there were no points of reference and we might as well have been standing motionless in an eternity of blue.



NOBODY HERE BUT US CHICKENS

Later that afternoon, the wind died and left us becalmed. We began to take the sails down in preparation for starting the motor, and then noticed a curious rippling in the surface of the mirror-smooth sea. We looked around a little nervously at the clear blue sky. Nothing was visible, but we were very aware of a breathless pause. Something was about to happen.

Suddenly the cockpit was full of insects. Hundreds of them swarmed all over the boom and the Hydrovane sail, and spun in a motley cloud above the targa. I examined the nearest handful and saw that they were small brown beetles. I assumed that we had encountered a migratory swarm, but then Bronwyn shouted "Ow!" as something bit her, and we realised that there were dozens of different species of all shapes and sizes. In addition to the beetles, which seemed to be a kind of grain thrip, there were enormous black and white horseflies, dung flies in yellow

and green, a variety of moths, and some big and evil-looking red-headed wasps. There were even some flightless creatures, scuttling ants and spiders.

In short, it looked as if something had sucked up all the insects from a crop field, carried them twenty miles out to sea, and then dumped them on our boat.

Some years ago, I watched small dust-devils sucking up hay and making crop circles in a field in Belgium, and only a few months ago we saw a waterspout that dropped its load of sea water onto Capricorn which was passing by, so I can only imagine that something similar happened here. The sea is surely a very strange place.

No sooner had we swept the nastiest of the insects overboard, then the wind shifted 180 degrees and we were hurriedly re-hoisting the sails to go close-hauled. It was time to go sailing.

For several days and nights we continued, with fair winds and with none at all, with large swell and small, alternately running, reaching and motoring as conditions dictated. We didn't see a single other vessel.



KEEPING A VIGILANT LOOKOUT

When the wind was blowing, we let Harriet the hydrovane do the steering, except when the wind dropped too much and the size of the swell exceeded the force of the breeze and made the boom slap at the bottom of every trough. Eventually I worked out a way of tying the boom down, which solved that little problem.

The wind tended to die off completely at night. We came to hate the periods of extended motoring, for the following swell demanded full concentration to stay on course, hour after hour after hour. I cursed the Raytheon dealer in Sydney who was supposed to have repaired our autopilot, but who just wasted our time instead. Our problem was exacerbated by the lack of landmarks, so that instead of simply aiming for a cape or a lighthouse we had to stare continuously at the compass, which is a very tiring way of motoring. At night we had a full moon, which was good for visibility but bad for steering because it washed the stars out and gave us nothing to steer by.

When the sails were up, even without the hydrovane the yacht was balanced and we were free to get up and walk around. Under motor, we were glued to the helmsman's position. Our backsides became raw from sitting on the hard cockpit seats in the rolling sea, forcing us to adopt ever stranger seating positions in an attempt to bring some new part of our anatomy to bear that wasn't already red and raw. I cut up some foam and made deck cushions, which made a tremendous psychological difference but which in reality only took the edge off the pain.

The third night was the worst. Turn and turn about, our spells at the wheel became shorter and shorter before we had to call down for a change of watch. Repeatedly roused from less than two hours of sleep, we rested our chins on the wheel and stared at the compass through scratchy, red raw eyes. We were so tired that the boat was veering as much as sixty degrees to either side. Shortly after dawn we gave up, killed the engine and just let her drift unmanned while we both collapsed gratefully into blissful oblivion.

When we awoke, the sun was high in the sky and the sea was as still as a mill pond. We made breakfast and then fired up the motor again.

The day passed slowly, with no signs of life either human or animal. And then - Land Ho! A distant beach shimmered on the horizon.

We now have some inkling of how those early sailors must have felt when their destination hove into view after months at sea. Our hearts swelled, and we began to grin maniacally. Land! Land! Finally we had something to steer for, and we began to talk about what we would do when we reached land. Would there be showers? Would there be cold beer, would there be steak? Which would we have first?

The shoreline crept closer, until we could distinguish the passage between the mainland and Bremer Island, where aboriginal fires were burning. We'd heard that this was the traditional place for teenage delinquents, who were taken there to re-learn cultural values if they had transgressed against society. If this was still the case, then they certainly seemed to be busy at the moment.

A small yacht sailed out from behind the headland, crew waving cheerily as they passed. Sweaty, smelly, salt-encrusted and weary, we waved back. We had arrived.



WHERE THE HECK DID YOU COME FROM?

Gove and Nhulunbuy

Gove is another Rio Tinto bauxite mining site, but quite different from the operation on the other side of the Gulf. Whereas the town of [Weipa](#) was purpose-built in the wilderness to service the mine, there were already existing settlements on the Gove peninsula when the miners came so they had to fit in around what was already there.



REFINED

Around the harbour itself are situated the Rio Tinto Alcan bauxite refinery and alumina loader, the Perkins delivery barge terminal, fields of sodium hydroxide tailings, and the Gove Yacht Club. Everything else is in Nhulunbuy Township a dozen kilometres down the road.



YACHTS AND TAILINGS

The yacht club gave us a warm welcome, and for a few dollars we purchased temporary membership which gave us access to a shower block and laundry, as well as a key to get in the back door of the pub which was handy when the front door was locked against drunken and screaming aboriginals, an all too frequent occurrence.



GOVE YACHT CLUB

The clientele of the club was a mix of aboriginal drinkers from the dry townships down the road, visiting yachties like ourselves, and workers at Rio Tinto who chose to live aboard rather than in town. The harbour contained quite a few wrecks of old liveaboard boats that had sunk when their tenant moved on to another mining contract.



GOVE HARBOUR FROM THE YACHT CLUB

The taxi service from the yacht club into Nhulunbuy was enormously expensive, so by far the best way to get there was to hire a car for the day. The cheapest service was run by local resident Manny (08 8987 2300) who charged us fifty dollars for the day's use of a decent Hilux Twin-Cab, immediately saving us money over the cost of a taxi each way.

The ute enabled us to provision, although not to buy alcohol because the township is dry and you need a special license just to buy it from the supermarket.



FORBIDDEN FRUIT

One of the recurrent conversational themes at the club was how difficult it was to get fuel from the Perkins barge dock. Not only was it tricky to manoeuvre in and out, but there were quite a few tales about how reluctant they were to service yachts at all. We threw some fuel cans into the back of the ute and filled up at the service station in town.

Nhulunbuy had little character and could be described as a number of houses of various sizes scattered around some small apartment blocks. There were a couple of small and run-down malls offering a supermarket and take-away food, a bank, a few clothing stores and a post office. The civic pride that was so obvious in Weipa was missing here, and the streets were lined with discarded junk.



DOWNTOWN NHULUNBUY

Since we had a car, we braved the "no entry without a permit" signs to visit the art gallery in neighbouring Yrrkala. The gallery was interesting, and so was the museum of artifacts and the photographic record of the conscripted aboriginal forces in WW2, but the gallery prices seemed to us to be rather high. It didn't seem to hurt their business, though, because the building was scattered with brand new computer equipment and bark and wood paintings that had been packaged up for delivery to satisfied customers.

We spent several evenings at the yacht club and met a lot of interesting people. A bunch of backpackers had recently been abandoned there after crewing for a yacht which had promised them flights back to Perth from Gove. The yacht sailed off into the sunset leaving them stranded on the beach, and they'd made the best of it by working at the club. Some kind soul had put them up on one of the boats in the harbour.

We also met Jan and Neville on *Panache* and Selina and Stephen on *Westward II*, as well of course Paul on the 'big grey cat' who entertained us with tales of his extraordinary life sailing from place to place. Gerry and Alan gave us a tour of *Black Gold*, probably the highest-tech power boat in Australia, which can run on

practically anything - old sump oil, chip fat, coconut oil - because it has been built around a miniature hydrocarbon cracking refinery and computer controlled blending station. On the outside it looks like a rich man's plaything. Very impressive indeed.

Time passed, and it became clear that Gove is one of those pleasant black holes where your life can slip away in a blur of alcohol and gossip. Some yachts had been there for years. Even the GPS didn't know what time it was, never really deciding whether we were in Northern Territory or Queensland.

The only real irritant were the sandflies. Almost completely invisible, they were always attacking our lower limbs. We tried nets and mosquito coils and sprays and even set off an insect bomb on the boat, but they were completely unstoppable. According to the chemist in Nhulunbuy, they weren't actually biting us, but were peeing on us and their pee is really toxic. Bronwyn was particularly susceptible, and all her sandfly sores turned into violently itchy welts.



ATTRACTIVE TO FLIES

It's a feature of aboriginal life that they love to set fire to things. You can always tell if an island on aboriginal land is inhabited because of the enormous pall of greasy

smoke that hangs over it, and here on the mainland it was no different. Every piece of bush was continually burning. Even when a roadside verge had already been reduced to stark black sticks, somebody on the way back from the pub would still try to light it. Long term yacht residents talked of weekly deck washes to remove the stray ash, and indeed *Pindimara* wasn't looking too clean herself.



FOOTPRINTS IN THE ASHES

We woke one morning to find the whole peninsula in flames and the anchorage disappearing into the smoke. We took one last trip to shore to load up with water, hand in our key and say goodbye, then set our sights on destinations westward.

SEPTEMBER 14, 2009

The Hole in the Wall

The first barrier to our westward route was a group of three long island chains, all running parallel to each other SW to NE. The first set were the Bromby Islets sticking up ten miles from the top of mainland Arnhem Land. Then we had to cross a channel called the Malay Road and squeeze between a couple of the English

Companys Islands, before finally crossing Donnington Sound and finding a route through the Wessel Islands.

The most obvious route (apart from the long way around over the top of the Wessels) was to sneak between the Brombys and Cape Wilberforce at the top of Arnhem Land, run the gap between Cotton and Wigram Islands, and then take the Gulgari Rip between Raragala and Guluwuru Islands.



WESTWARD

The only problem with this plan was that each crossing demanded a particular time of the tide. Get it wrong and we could, for instance, face a 12 knot opposing current through the Gulgari Rip.

After a little thought and some work with the guides and tide tables we realised that if we left Gove shortly after midnight, we could use the moonlight to get out of the harbour and be crossing the Brombys at slack tide just after dawn. Then we had just enough time to get across the Malay Road and through the English Companys

before the tide started flooding, after which the sail across Donnington Sound would bring us to the Gulgari Rip at the top of the following tide.

One disadvantage of the plan was that the literature was quite vague about the exact time that the tide turns in each of the passes, but we thought that we had probably figured it close enough.

We arrived at the Brombys in the pre-dawn light. The channel was half a mile across and we crossed it without any problems.



THROUGH THE FIRST GAP

The gap between Cotton and Wigram was more of a dogleg and reputed to have a four-knot rip. Even though we must have been close to slack tide we still got sucked through, and had to do some fancy footwork to avoid an area of boiling rip at the western end, where the seabirds were having a breakfast feeding frenzy.



CLIFFS OF COTTON ISLAND



BREAKFAST AT THE RIP

It's about fifteen miles across Donnington Sound to the Wessel Islands, so we took it in turns to sleep.

The Gulgari Rip between Raragala and Guluwuru Islands is also known as 'The Hole in the Wall' because it is so narrow and difficult to see. Decent winds saw us arriving half an hour early, and we were a little disappointed at first to see that from

the our direction the gap was really obvious. We didn't want to get too close without committing, but through the binoculars I could make out whitecaps which suggested that the eastward rip was still running towards us. We hove to and drifted in the sunshine for an hour while we ate lunch and waited for the time that we believed that the tide would turn.

At the appointed hour, which was slightly after high tide at faraway Gove, we reset the sails and discovered that the hole had disappeared. Even though I had memorised the surrounding cliff structure when we arrived, the gap was still completely invisible until we found precisely the right approach angle. Our first sight of it must have just been very lucky.

Hoping that we were now at the top of the tide, we sailed into the bay that funnelled us in to the gap, arriving at about half past Gove high tide. We knew that the gap was about 70 metres wide with 30 metres of that navigable, but that's still only 3 boat lengths across and as we approached it at 5 knots it looked terrifyingly narrow.



APPROACHING THE GULGARI RIP

Once through the jaws, the surrounding cliffs shielded us from the winds and the sails went slack. We'd expected this and had the engine idling in preparation, but we didn't need it because the boat started to accelerate as the Rip sucked us in.

After that, the ride got surreal. We glided with slack sails between picturesque stacks of rock on either side, with nothing to do beyond keeping the bow pointed at the far end. Here and there, people had smeared graffiti on the rocks to show that they had been through; the crew of HMAS Wollongong were particularly obvious. Tiny bays opened out on either side, and it is rumoured that some of them are deep enough to shelter in if you found yourself halfway through and fighting too strong a rip. I can't imagine trying to get into one of them with your boat already out of control.



JUST PASSING THROUGH

The Rip spat us out into the Arafura Sea, and we popped around the corner to a safe anchorage in Guruliya Bay to get some sleep. In the morning we had a long passage ahead of us.

Epiphany at Black Point

The Black Point anchorage had a pronounced roll and we awoke irritable and grumpy. We were getting bored with the continual mileage and were going more than a little stir crazy, having seen little in the last thousand miles much more interesting than sea water and the inside of a few pubs. Without our university work to keep us occupied and to fuel our discussions, we probably would have cracked long before this. Were we going too far, too fast?

Port Essington is part of a national park, and there is a ranger station at Black Point. I called up the ranger on the radio to see if it was possible to get a permit to go ashore at the nearby historical settlement of Victoria, and received the welcome news that no permit was required for day visits. Eager to see a new face after a week at sea, I tossed the dinghy over the side and rowed to shore to get more details. Just as I was setting the anchor on the beach, the ranger's helicopter lifted off from behind the treeline and headed off seaward. Darn!

I went up to his house anyway and found the visitor centre, which was closed. Persistence paid off as I found an unlocked rear entrance and spent a happy hour or so wandering around the nice little museum there.

On the way back to the dinghy, I stopped on the beach and dug my feet into the baking hot sand. Scattered around me were hundreds of shell and coral fragments. I picked up a handful and realised that I was looking at more individual new things than I had seen in the entire past week.



The realisation hit that, although sailing is fun, I am first and foremost a land mammal. There just isn't enough variety on the water to keep me that interested. Rowing back to Pindimara, I imparted this new-found wisdom to Bronwyn, who of course had worked it out for herself weeks ago and was waiting for me to catch up.

We decided to take a little holiday from our holiday, and instead of moving west took off southward deeper into the bay in the direction of the ruined town of Victoria some three hours away.

It felt good to be heading for a real destination that we could walk around on, rather than just another palm-fringed inaccessible beach on the way to the next one. In addition, Port Essington is sheltered from the swell but not from the trade winds, so we were soon creaming along at a steady seven knots. Flying fish sparkled across the water before us, dolphins cruised serenely alongside. Even heeled over, the boat hung reasonably steady in the flat azure sea, and Bronwyn popped below for long enough to bake a batch of scones.

Things were looking up.

Across the Arafura Sea

We didn't have permits to go onto aboriginal land anywhere across the Northern Territories, so we did not get off on Raragala Island and did not plan to set foot on land again until we got to Darwin. Cruisers who were doing the distance more slowly had applied for permits with variable results. One boat's applications got 'lost'. Another boat got every permit that they asked for, but dated in such a way that there was no way that they could possibly use them.

We were also aware of the ticking of the cyclone clock and decided to skip the bureaucracy and thus the Arnhem Land coastline, which all looks pretty similar anyway. We drew a straight line on the chart across the Arafura Sea to the Cobourg Peninsula near to Darwin.



ACROSS THE ARAFURA SEA

We were at sea for two days and two nights, during which time we sighted no land, no ships, no planes, and only three items of interest. The first was a banded coral snake. The second was a very lost ten-inch crab, swimming at the surface miles from shore. The third was a juvenile petrel who roosted on our dodger for most of the second night, completely unconcerned with the comings and goings of crew with bright lights and cameras.



SAILING INTO THE SUNSET (A FIRST!)



PIDGE

On the morning of the third day we sighted land and dropped anchor on the southwestern side of Grant Island for a rest. We couldn't go ashore, because even this was aboriginal land, but we couldn't face any more sailing and needed to get some decent sleep.

After a few hours the swell turned around and began to hit us on the beam, which is never comfortable and a sure fire trigger for lost sleep and tinkling crockery. The good news was that the sea conditions were right and there was room to swing about; I could finally try a trick that Virginia had mentioned months ago.

Picture this: We're at anchor. Boats at anchor are designed to point into wind, so the wind is coming from dead ahead. The swell is slapping into us from starboard (right hand side). I got a long rope and tied one end to the anchor chain where it dropped over the bow roller, and the other end to the port stern quarter (left back) of the boat. Back at the front of the boat, I let out ten extra metres of anchor chain, dragging that end of the rope far under water. Strolling back to the stern end of the rope, I attached it to a winch and wound it in, dragging the stern around to port, and pointing the bow into the swell. Rather than streaming off the anchor in a straight fore-and-aft line, the boat was now hanging sideways on a Y-shaped harness.

The rocking stopped. Brilliant. Thankyou, Virginia.

In the morning we got up and looked at the perfect and inviting beach. Ah well. We had no permit, and anyway it was time to move on. We hoisted sail and headed out of the bay.

Just for a change we had a perfect combination of strong following winds and a swell that was directly astern. We could move around the yacht freely, read books and concentrate on small tasks without feeling seasick. It seemed as good a time as any to learn how to make an eye splice.



SEAMANSHIP

We'd planned to reach Black Point in the large bay of Port Essington by midnight, but we were making cracking progress and turned into the entrance shortly after nightfall. It was a pitch black moonless night, and much of the territory up here is not well charted. There are some spot heights and guesstimated contours, but even these are only 95% certain to be within 2 metres vertically and 500 metres horizontally. Nevertheless there wasn't much that we could do about it, so we charged in at something over six knots and, navigating by GPS, dropped anchor in complete darkness in 5 metres of water a respectable distance from the invisible reef and the invisible shore.

Once everything was ship-shape, I got out the big spotlight to have a last check for any hazards, and illuminated Black Point Beach right in front of the bow. We hastily weighed anchor and backed off a few hundred yards before putting it back down again.

Victoria

We anchored off Adams Head, deep in Port Essington, and set off in the relative cool of the morning to explore the abandoned settlement of Victoria. The temperature was still in the thirties.

In the early 1800s, England had settled parts of the eastern coast of Australia but was concerned that the northern reaches of this vast continent might be vulnerable to Dutch and French expansion from their colonies in the East Indies.

Two military bases were set up, Fort Dundas on Melville Island and Port Wellington on the Cobourg Peninsula, but both settlements failed due to the harsh conditions. The English government persisted, and in 1838 set up the civilian settlement of Victoria at a site much farther inland, at Adam Head on the shores of the large Port Essington bay.



ADAM HEAD (WITH LATERITIC PROFILE)

Surveys had shown that there was a plentiful supply of fresh water, and also that the area might support a successful trepang trade. We've seen traces of similar activity (trepang are also known as beche-de-mer, or sea cucumbers or sea slugs) all over the northern islands and coasts. Mrs Watson of Lizard Island was there because her

husband was a beche-de-mer fisherman. The sea slugs themselves were traded at great profit to the Chinese who regard them as a delicacy. I tried one once in Shanghai, and it was indeed very expensive but also tasted pretty much the way that you would expect.

The settlement began bravely, with a prefabricated Governor's House, a church, a hospital, thatched and shingled cottages, and a military barracks.



CORNISH CHIMNEYS OF THE MARRIED QUARTERS

For food they had vegetable gardens, imported water buffalo, and a peaceable trading relationship with the local aboriginals and with visiting Macassan (Indonesian) trepang fishermen.

Unfortunately the original survey had been conducted in the wet season, and for the other six months of the year the colony had to rely on ever deeper wells.



THIS WOULD BE A LAKE IN THE WET

A cyclone hit in the second year, and destroyed much of what had been built. The supply ships came only intermittently, and the soil turned out to be so poor that their gardens were barely better than subsistence. Malaria became a way of life, eventually killing almost a quarter of the residents.



ONE OF THE FEW SURVIVING GRAVESTONES

At times fully half of the population were in hospital, not only from malaria but also from dysentery, influenza and scurvy.

After eleven hard years, the political situation had changed and foreign incursion was no longer regarded as a threat. The survivors were shipped out and the settlement was abandoned.

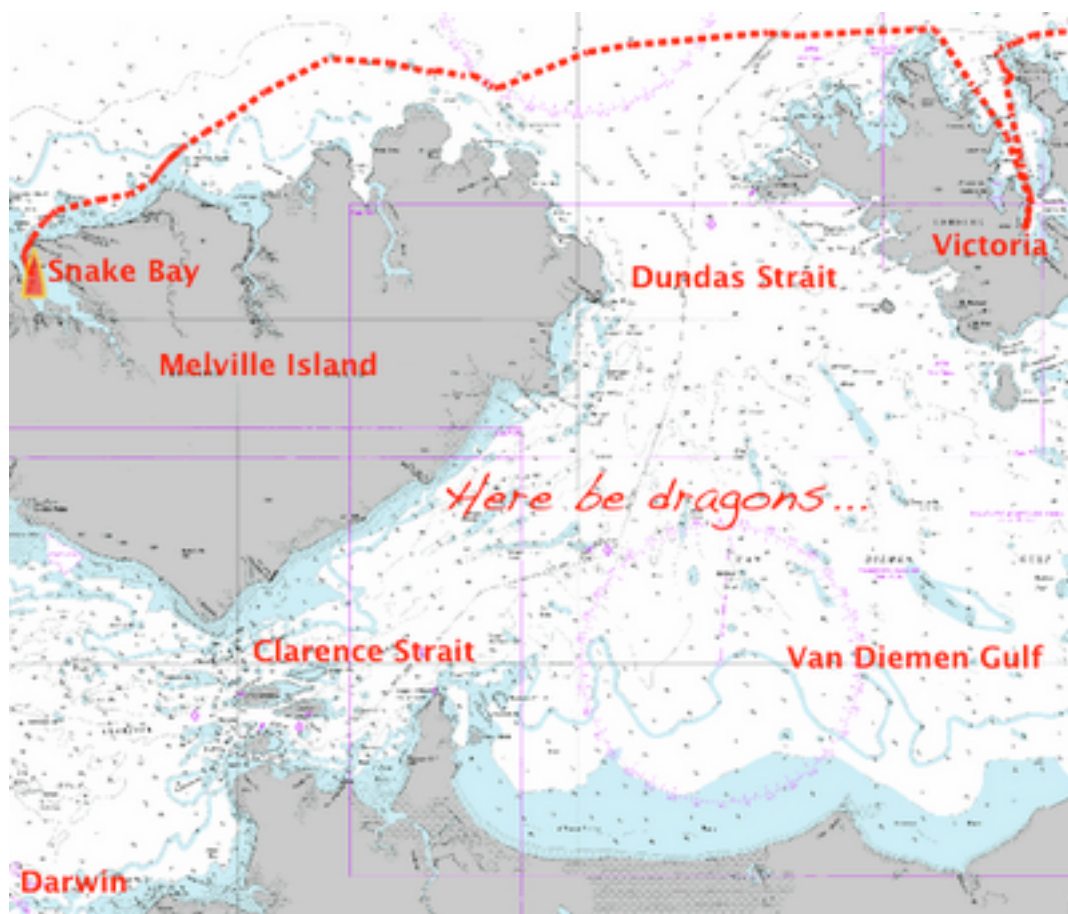
Some of the buildings were subsequently and intermittently used by freelance trepang fishermen and hunters tracking the now wild water buffalo, but the bush soon moved back in. It didn't take long for most of the signs of civilisation to be erased.



SOME INTERESTING TREES

Snake River

Ahead of us were the infamous tidal flows of Darwin and its guardian Dundas and Clarence Straits, two or more days of irresistible rips and crucial tide timetables. For a clean run, one writer claimed that we needed to maintain an *average* speed of eight knots, which even allowing for a following current is a bit of an ask. Lugubrious cruising guides spoke of yachts that had mistimed it and anchored up, only to be sucked out of their safe bays by the marauding rip. On top of this, it's the end of winter and we're heading into the spring tides when the tides exceed nine metres and everything is just that little bit worse.



DUNDAS AND CLARENCE STRAITS (SCALE: 90 MILES)

Jimmy Cornell in his influential book 'World Cruising Routes' states quite bluntly that it should not be attempted, and recommends taking the longer route around Melville Island, even though this adds a hundred miles to the journey and ends with seventy miles of beating into wind to get to Darwin.

Even taking the northern route, cautious tidal planning is still necessary. We left Port Essington on a falling tide, hoping to get sucked out of the bay and at least half way across the entrance to the Dundas Strait before having to fight the easterly set. The plan began well, but inevitably we ended up in a hard slog against up to five knots of current. Luckily the trade winds were behind us and we could make a few knots of headway.

Evening fell as we fought free of the influence of the Strait, and then we had a hard nights sail across the top of Melville Island. The currents were increasingly difficult to predict and we zigzagged wildly. Even at the large scale of the chart above, you can see that our route was not exactly straight.

We sailed all night and most of the next day. We didn't see any other boats, but we did spot a bird floating along on the sea. You might not think that this was so strange, but the bird, apparently a black and white booby, was nonchalantly standing upright on the surface. As we got closer, we realised that it was standing on the back of a turtle that was swimming along at the surface. The pair were still together when they passed over the horizon.

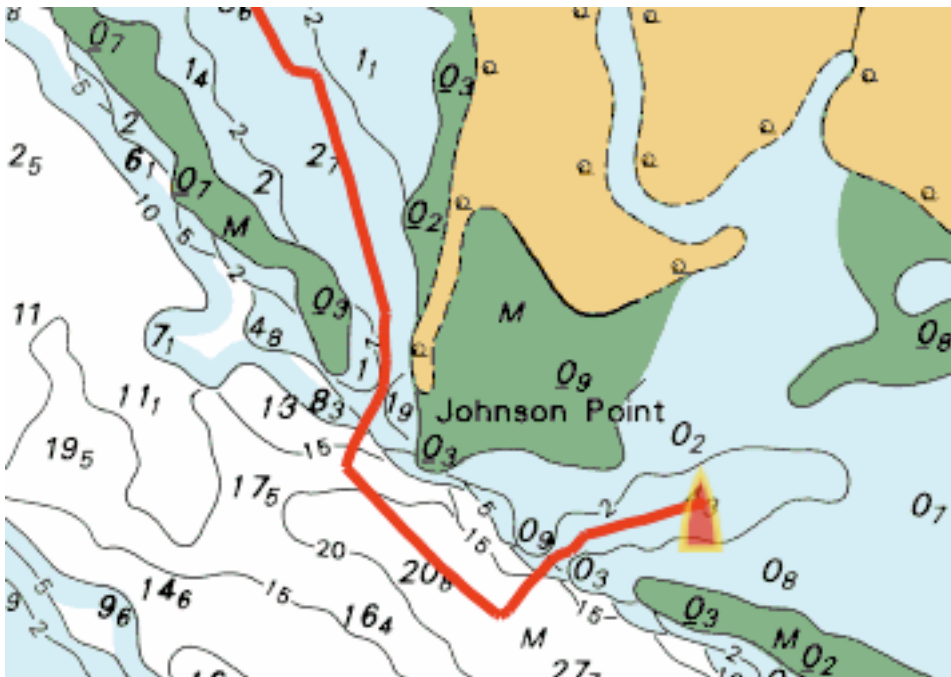
By mid afternoon we were entering Snake Bay. We knew nothing at all about this area apart from the fact that it was a north-facing river entrance that should give us protection from the south-easterly trades, and that the aboriginal community there had a broadband mast. We'd been out of touch for well over a week, and quite apart from updating this blog, we needed to check on our university work and deal with some business.

Snake Bay is divided into easterly and a westerly channels, and judging by the patterns of the sand banks on the chart it looked as if the eastern side would have less current. By the time we got there, though, the wind had shifted to the NE and was blowing straight at us, building up an uncomfortable chop. Aware that the charts only had a zone of confidence of C ("depth anomalies may be expected"), we crept further upstream looking for shelter, but found none.

It was time for Plan B. I had previously noted that it seemed to be just possible to squeeze through a 30 metre gap in the shoals and access the main western channel,

before tackling a 30 metre wide bar between two drying banks which would drop us into a 5 metre deep pool inside a large drying mud lake.

In a nifty and stylish piece of navigation (I can safely say this in retrospect, since we didn't hit anything) we arrived at the centre of the 100 metre square pool and dropped anchor in millpond smooth waters.



APPLAUSE!

After catching up with the outside world and sipping a G&T or two, we collapsed into bed for our first sleep in 48 hours. The wind shifted in the night, and blew ash and smoke from the aboriginal fires through the cabin. I imagine that it kept the mosquitoes away.

SEPTEMBER 19, 2009

Musings in Milikapiti

When we awoke in our little mud pond in the Snake River, I sat on deck and looked across the water at the settlement of Milikapiti. It seemed strange to be anchored so close to a shoreline aboriginal community, to be connected to their broadband mast and choked by their bush fires and yet not have any social interaction.



Firstly, we are not allowed on to aboriginal land without a pre-arranged permit. Secondly, the residents of the Arnhem Land coastline, even here on the island, did not seem to make any use of boats. Although their houses and cars line the beaches, they never seem to have any jetties, tinnies or even canoes. We have passed woven branch fishing traps within wading distance of the shore, but we never once saw an aboriginal person out on the water.

The upshot of this is that we couldn't visit them, and they couldn't visit us. It does feel a bit strange.

And then, just as we were leaving, three enormous aluminium powerboats came flying down the river and were whisked up a ramp and out of sight. I thought that I would have to revise (or even delete) this blog entry as it looked like I was wrong.

I couldn't really see who was in the boats, so I fired off a couple of dozen shots with the telephoto lens. Later that day I blew up the images and realised that the people in the boats were all white, possibly pearl fishermen. So my comments still stand.

Decisions at Gordon Bay

We had an exciting ride out of Snake River in a strong nor'easter which took us at 7 knots to Cape Van Diemen, the northern tip of Melville Island. For the rest of the night we followed the coastline southward, riding the winds until they faltered in mid morning. We were starting to notice an opposing tide, so rather than waste fuel we anchored off Bathurst Island in about 70 square miles of sheltered and shallow water. Only the southern part, Gordon Bay, has been named or charted, so we dropped anchor there in about 10 metres and spent the rest of the day pottering around. I really should have been doing my schoolwork, but after many night watches with my iPod I had finally almost finished organising our music collection, so I finished off that job instead.

Although we still carried a couple of month's worth of dried and tinned ingredients, we were desperately short of fresh food. We ate our last orange, leaving us with one sweet potato and two onions. It was decision time. Wyndham or Darwin? We had to provision at one or the other before tackling the Kimberleys. Each town had its advantages and disadvantages.

Darwin has evil spring tides, an approach route that leads into the teeth of the trade winds, and nowhere simple to stay. The choice there is between anchoring in Fannie Bay and dragging the dinghy through half a mile of mud, and booking through the lock gates into one of the marinas. Because of the drying tides, all of Darwin's marinas have lock gates that only let you in and out at certain times, considerably restricting your freedom. On the other hand, if we could get into a marina then shopping would be easy.

Wyndham lies at the bottom of the Bonaparte Gulf and was still several days away. The winds in the Gulf are notoriously inconsistent, and the GRIB showed that we would encounter confused light winds coming from every direction. The only place to anchor is in the strongly tidal river, the jetty is apparently only useable for a few hours each day, and the actual town is a taxi ride from the river. After provisioning, it's a long hard slog back out of the Gulf. On the other hand, we'd never been there before and it has the dubious pleasure of having Australia's hottest average temperature (32C).



THE JOSEPH BONAPARTE GULF

The trade winds were set to slacken. We also fancied a meal in a restaurant. We chose Darwin.

SEPTEMBER 21, 2009

Beagle Gulf

Carefully timing the tides, we went to bed for some rest before getting up and leaving at midnight. It was a starry but moon-less night, there were almost no lights on the shore of Bathurst Island, and there was no wind at all. The backwash from the steaming light off the back of the furled foresail gave a strange, misty air to the world, so that we seemed to be cocooned in an ethereal blanket. We may have left a

little late, as I forgot that it would take nearly 2 hours to get out of Gordon Bay, but the tide sucked us out and then gave us a 3.5 knot boost toward Darwin.

Despite the complete absence of any wind, the water got quite exciting, a roller coaster ride. At one point we were smashing through standing waves and I was wondering how Bronwyn, even though she is a champion sleeper, could possibly be snoozing in the fore-peak. As far as I could imagine, she must have been in the air half the time. Then the whole yacht went airborne off one wave and ploughed into the next, washing the decks of the accumulated mud and ash, and replacing them with sand and shells. A tousled head appeared in the companionway. "How fast are we going?" she asked, before heading sleepily back to bed.

A little later the propeller didn't seem to be able to get any traction. Bear in mind that it was completely black. I peered into the small pool of light cast by the stern light, and could just make out that the water was bubbling and boiling beneath us. Presumably there was so much air in the thrashing water that the prop was cavitating.

Sliding sideways into the Beagle Gulf, I suddenly had an inspiration and realised that I might be able reprogram part of the autopilot to display the GPS 'course over ground'. Then I could judge the tidal set without continually going below to check our position on the chart. I don't know why I didn't think of it before. It worked a treat, and while I was at it I added a display for the water temperature. For the record, in the middle of the night in September, it was 27 centigrade. No wonder it is popular with crocodiles.

The sun came up, and the sea became flat and placid in all directions. We couldn't see the shore and were completely alone.



NOBODY HERE BUT US CHICKENS

Suddenly an enormous cargo ship appeared, in a great hurry to get somewhere. It passed us by and disappeared again.



WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?

Time passed. There was not a breath of wind. We motored.

The tide started to pick us up as planned for the final approach into Darwin, slowly increasing the boost until we were doing over 10 knots.



LEFT - LOG SPEED. RIGHT - SPEED OVER GROUND

We could see the Darwin skyline, but we couldn't get a mobile phone connection. Broadband internet was working, though, so we used Skype to call the closest marina, Cullem. They explained that although they did have a free berth, we would be charged \$240 for the privilege of opening the lock gate. I think not. We called Tipperary Marina, who were able to fit us in at a more reasonable price. Although they were another four miles upriver, the continuing tide made mincemeat of the distance.

The approach to Tipperary was interesting, up a river which dries out at low tide. We maintained radio contact with Keith the lockmaster, and as we were passing a seemingly unbroken rock wall, he asked us if we could see him waving. Eventually we spotted him in the dusk, and realised that there was an all-but-invisible break in the wall. It was like the Gulgari Rip all over again, but this gap was only seven metres wide.

We negotiated the lock without any problems, and found ourselves in a trim and tidy little marina full of smart long-term liveaboards. Keith was wonderfully helpful and did a great job of making us feel welcome.

The showers were wonderful.

SEPTEMBER 25, 2009

Darwin

There isn't too much to do around Tipperary Waters marina, although the two cafes on the shore are very good and we understand that a bar will be opening soon. The Dinah Sailing club down the road is the only place to get a drink, and it isn't exactly spectacular. However, public transport is cheap, and it only costs two dollars to get the bus into town and about ten to take the taxi back again.

After so long in the back of beyond, it was surprisingly great to get a good dose of civilisation. We had some excellent tapas at the Moorish Cafe in town, and together with Rob from *Ku Ching* we tackled the enormous seafood platter at Crustaceans On The Wharf.



We also had a good party session up and down Mitchell Street, which is the restaurant and bar district, and met some fun and interesting people (that's you, Carlee).

It's funny that we're seeing a completely different Darwin to our last visit. That time it was christmas and there was nobody here and nothing was open. Right now in September, the place is hopping. Last night we went to the famous market at Mindle Beach. As well as the crowds milling around in the market itself, there must have been ten thousand people sitting quietly on the beach watching the sunset.



MINDLE BEACH SUNSET

We're very aware that the wet season seems to be coming early this year. It is very hot and very sticky, and although it isn't actually raining, the sky is continually threatening.



Two yachts that were heading for Perth recently gave up and turned around and came back, saying that conditions are impossible. Since that's the direction that we're heading, we've spent a lot of time canvassing the local cruisers, and even though we're aware that one man's "impossible" is another woman's "fun sail", there is a solid consensus is that we're looking at a very hard trip down the coast.

Faced with a rough ride, and aware that since we've started rushing along the coastline we haven't been enjoying ourselves half as much as we ought to, we've decided to leave Pindimara in Darwin for the wet and cyclone seasons, and to come back and finish the trip in the middle of next year. Not only does it give us a chance to do some work and replenish the coffers, but it also means that we'll be able to take our time cruising the Kimberleys rather than continually rushing along and checking over our shoulders for a cyclone.

SEPTEMBER 27, 2009

Cyclone Proof

It was quite incredibly hot. Darwin was going through 'the build-up', which is the crossover period between the two seasons. The humidity starts ramping up from the dry season (hot, dry) to the wet season (hot, wet), making the weather more and more muggy but without providing the release of actual rainfall. For the greater part of the day it was literally too hot to move, and we found ourselves sitting in a stupor beneath our electric fan. The boat needed to be cleaned and prepared, but even the smallest task brought rivers of sweat pouring down our backs and legs. Occasionally we made a foray to the cafe so that we could sit under the air conditioner, and another steaming day was spent at the mall.

This was crazy. It was time to move on. We made use of the cooler periods of the morning and evening to hose months of accumulated salt from the fibreglass. In preparation for the cyclones we removed everything from the deck, stowed the foresail, lashed the mainsail to the boom, and doubled up all the mooring lines.



AN OVERHEATED BRONWYN HOSES THE DECK

In preparation for the humidity of the wet season, we ate or discarded our remaining fresh goods, filled the fuel and water tanks, sprayed the bilges with mildew preventer, laid cockroach traps, lifted all the seat cushions and topped up the batteries. The marina laundry took a beating as we washed every piece of fabric and packed it all away into vacuum bags.

In the hot periods of physical lassitude we spent hours on the internet looking at flight schedules and job opportunities, and then spent a few minutes packing for a round the world trip. That's one of the great things about living on a boat; if you have to catch a plane, you don't need to spend a lot of time deciding what to bring. Everything that you own goes into a small bag, and off you go.

We arranged for Keith the wonderful and obliging lockmaster to occasionally check and ventilate the boat over the next six months, took a taxi to the airport, and headed for SIngapore.



VACUUM BAGS! WHAT A WONDERFUL INVENTION



STAY SAFE, PINDIMARA. WE MISS YOU.