



Cat's cradle in the nook at Bittangabee Bay.

far from the maddening crowds

Things don't always go to plan. When the weather did not cooperate for another passage from the Gippsland Lakes to Lord Howe Island in last December and January, CHRIS and WADE decided they'd explore the NSW coast instead, in search of peaceful anchorages away from crowds.

Being used to pristine and secluded anchorages in Tasmania and the Bass Strait Islands, we knew we would have some adjusting to do when sailing along the shores of NSW. The December/January period is a busy time for boating there!

We had other things planned for our summer cruise on *Take It Easy*, but the weather was very fickle and we never got the conditions we wanted to sail to Lord Howe Island again, as we did last year. So our Plan B was to explore every nook and cranny along the NSW coast, between Port Stephens to the north and Cape Howe to the south, and find places to enjoy away from the crowds. Although we love sharing our sailing with friends, we are anti-social when it comes to anchorages. We like solitude.

With the exception of a couple of spots, we can happily confirm we found lovely anchorages where we were surrounded by dreamy scenery rather than dozens of other yachts.

Discovering spots that we have to ourselves is our definition of serenity. Discovering coves we have never been to is synonymous with adventure. Achieving both together is what we call bliss. What follows is a summary of our NSW coastal wanderings. It is not an exhaustive list of every anchorage we stayed at; we cannot divulge all our secrets! But there are 10 spots well worth exploring, marked on the map, which we found particularly satisfying.

Extremes of busyness

Here are three different spots that were crowded during the silly season, but can be deserted outside of it. And sometimes, stopping is worth the pain, particularly if there is something interesting to do while you are there.

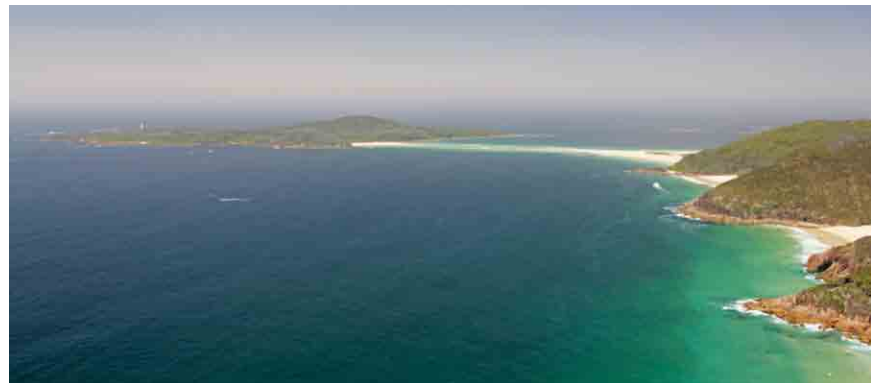
Jibbon Beach (1)

Thirty nautical miles from Sydney Heads, Jibbon Beach is normally a quiet spot with a few courtesy moorings and a great sandy beach to anchor in. It is a convenient stopping point, as you are sheltered from most conditions without needing to go very far out of your way. In the early January period however, this was the busiest spot we had ever been in. But sharing this anchorage with 35 other boats turned out to be okay. Initially anchored with five other yachts, a monster crowd joined us: boats and people everywhere! So we had to escape – ashore. We abandoned ship and went for an interesting long loop walk through the Royal National Park. Starting just behind the beach, we went up to the aboriginal engraving site of Djeeban. These engravings were grooved out of sandstone to form whales, skates, dolphins, kangaroos and mythical beings. We then continued on along the cliffs and later inland to the back of Bundeena and back down the hill to Jibbon Beach. When you are armed with an SLR and your new macro lens – thank you Santa – a few miles can take hours to cover, with no crowds along the track!



Broughton Island relax with friends on board.

Take It Easy is a 38ft (11.6m) Easy catamaran, made of marine ply and epoxy. She was the first Easy of this size designed and built by Peter Snell who launched her in October 2003. Chris and Wade acquired her in April 2011 after it had two other owners and was looking a bit tired. They lavished a lot of TLC on their catamaran with a major overhaul to carry out repairs, update her colours and make her truly theirs. For more information and to follow Chris and Wade's adventures, go to www.sv-takeiteasy.com



top: Crowded day at Jibbon Beach.

above l-r: Misty dawn on the Moryua River. Not wrecked at Wreck Bay. Dreamy Fingal Bay.

Broughton Islands (2)

Friends from Port Macquarie came aboard at Port Stephens and together we sailed to Broughton Islands, 6nm further north, a first for them. Between Christmas and New Year the islands are not the place to go to for solitude. What was a deserted cove when we first arrived turned into a tightly packed anchorage for over 18 boats! But if you can't get peace and quiet above water, you certainly can find it underwater. The marine life is wonderful there, and we had an absolute ball with our friends, observing schools of darters, a few

moray eels, many urchins, beautiful kelp, kingfish and grey nurse sharks. Broughton Island is one of the breeding grounds for Grey Nurse Sharks. These creatures are harmless, protected and stunning to watch. What made this crowded anchorage enjoyable was the company of our friends, their enthusiasm for snorkelling and kayaking and the privileged moments at dusk or dawn when it is all quiet, and the colours of the ocean and coast become magnificently mellow. It does not matter how many boats are around, you are mesmerised, serene and happy. We might point out that outside the silly season, this is lovely, peaceful anchorage.

Lake Macquarie (3)

Lake Macquarie was where we spent the few days coming up to Christmas, after being let out through the Swansea Bridge. This beautiful region is half way between Sydney and Port Stephens. The water there was incredibly warm at

21°C. The lake is an interesting stretch of protected waters, a 110km² coastal lagoon with numerous bays, twists and turns offering varied anchorages and sailing conditions. A lot of the shoreline is built up, but there are areas where you are surrounded by bushland, particularly at the southern end of the lake where we were.

Havens of Quietness

The following four anchorages surprised us. We did not expect to be there on our lonesome and they were very scenic.

Port Hacking River (4)

The South West Arm of the Port Hacking River was a little treasure of tranquillity not far from suburbia. The river winds its way through the Royal National Park, just south of Sydney. Surprisingly, one can escape from the crowds and enjoy some peace and quiet, serenaded by cicadas and bird songs. There are a few courtesy

moorings, which are welcome as the river is deep (10m) where it is navigable. We explored up river in the kayaks, paddling all the way to the end and were very taken by the stunning Sydney Red Gums and rugged stand stone cliffs overlooking the river. But beware of the oysters covering the shores at low tide; they are sharp and unforgiving to tender feet and blow up kayaks.

Batemans Bay (5)

We discovered two lovely anchorages in Batemans Bay: Snapper Island and Chain Bay, which we had to ourselves.

Right inside the bay is Snapper Island, a rugged islet at the head of the Clyde River. Surprisingly it provides fine shelter from a variety of wind conditions and the holding is good. The islet itself is interesting with impressive folded strata lines and sea caves. No sandy beach here, just pebbles, but the geology is amazing. It is very small, so it is not an anchorage you will spend much time on, unless like us, you get caught in stormy,

rainy weather for a few days! But it is a quaint looking little dome of an island, with eucalyptus trees on top nearly as tall as the rugged cliffs.

Another good anchorage in the bay in northerly conditions is Chain Bay, although not totally private. The appeal for us was the change of scenery after three days of rain at Snapper Island and the easy access to small beaches further east of it for long walks ashore in the Murramarang National Park. It gave us a chance to stretch our legs, and the geology of the place is intriguing. Again, you get some interesting rock formations and sea caves, a feature of this area quite different from the sandstones of the coast further north.

Broulee Bay (6)

Just south of Batemans Bay, is the handy little spot of Broulee Bay. It works in a variety of conditions: in southerlies you can hide behind Broulee Island and in northerlies it is possible to get great shelter across the bay



Swansea Bridge – the gate in and out of Lake Macquarie.

at Barlings Beach. The history of the bay is interesting, as it was an active commercial port in the mid-1800's. The island of Broulee is separated from the mainland by a sand spit. The island is now a nature reserve. Broulee is a nice spot to swim, stroll, snorkel and even surf at the ocean beach of Bengello. So stopping there for a few days offers a variety of activities to occupy oneself, and the holding is good. It is a popular place for campers, but rarely visited by yachts.

Moruya River (7)

We had never explored up a barred river and being weather bound for a few days, we chose to motor up the Moruya River and tie up at the jetty before the bridge, three miles upstream. The river is best negotiated on a rising tide. There was one part with only 1.9m depth at high water. We ended up tying up at one end of the jetty, with the bows sticking out a few metres beyond it to give the local fishing charter vessels enough space to do their business. It was delightful to be able to step off the boat and go to the weekly Saturday market right on the banks. There is fresh water at the jetty, two large supermarkets in town, a laundromat and a service station across the bridge, so it is a handy location to replenish supplies and sit out contrary weather. But the highlight for us was our arrival and departure in the early morning stillness and mist. Such beautiful reflections and dreamy scenery!

Total Bliss

These are our three all-time favourites, offering secluded shelter, sensational scenery, great swimming, kayaking and beautiful walks ashore.

Easy cruising under Big Red, our spinnaker.

Fingal Bay (8)

Just outside the Port Stephens Heads was a dreamy anchorage to have to ourselves on New Year's Eve. We picked up a patch of sand in between the weed, and were set for the night. Tucked in against Point Stephens Island behind the sand spit in 3m of water, we enjoyed a bit of solitude and a stroll to the lighthouse. You can also walk across the spit at low water, but beware of the tide!

Wreck Bay (9)

A good alternative to popular Jervis Bay, Wreck Bay offers a choice of secluded little coves in northerly conditions. With each small bay surrounded by rocky outcrops, you need to be cautious where you throw the pick. However the fishing is great, the water is crystal clear and turquoise, and chances are, you will be on your lonesome. But don't get caught there in a southerly change or it might live up to its name!



Bittangabee Bay (10)

Just south of Eden is an absolute gem of a find. This is not an anchorage for everyone, and there are times when the conditions won't allow you to get into the narrow entrance. But in calm weather it is wonderful. The 'official' anchorage is in front of the ruins of a storehouse, in about 3m of water over sand. However shoal draft vessels may be able to sneak around the corner in the creek and tie themselves to the shore. But if you do this, be prepared to sit on the bottom at low tide as the creek is extremely shallow. We have been tucked inside that little nook in a 40kn blow and did not feel a thing! A walk from Bittangabee to the Green Cape lighthouse is a delight with many rainbow lorikeets amongst the banksias, and we saw several lyrebirds during our walk north to Hegartys Bay.

Secrets of a Great Cruise

For us one of the secrets of a great summer cruise is flexibility and going

with the flow. Beating into wind in more than 15kt breeze is not our thing, neither is heading off in more than 25kt on our stern. With a boat's name like *Take It Easy*, you can guess what we like doing!

We have an intended destination in mind, but if conditions don't allow, we change the plan. We live in the moment. We find that it is best not to 'expect'. The memorable moments are the ones you are not looking for.

Another big secret is to be curious and take the time to explore. This trip was all about exploring, checking out coves for ourselves, not just relying on the main anchorages and the well beaten track. It is well worth doing this. A little cove might not be right today, but might just be perfect for different conditions on another occasion.

And then there is the easy sailing. We don't mind demanding conditions in small doses, and we certainly experienced rowdy seas around Jervis Bay on the way north. The ocean looked like a pot boil and the motion



above left: *Take It Easy* on a courtesy mooring in the south west arm of the Port Hacking River.

above right: Map reference for the 10 anchorages listed in this article.

was chaotic, however we managed. But what we love most of all are 'cruisy' sails under Big Red, our symmetrical spinnaker. Once launched, it is effortless, stable and fast. No 'divorce' sail on this catamaran and no pole to contend with. Our spinnaker is housed in a sock which makes it easy to launch and douse. Big Red is our most often used sail, particularly coming down the east coast in summer!

So there you have it. We took our time. We let nature steer our course. It provided unexpected thrills along the way.