



passage to Lord Howe Island

Every summer Chris and Wade take six to eight weeks and have a big sailing adventure, typically south, either around the Bass Strait islands or Tasmania or both. This year they decided to break the southern habit and give themselves a huge challenge: sail to Lord Howe Island from the Gippsland lakes and back. Christine Danger relates the story of their epic voyage.

Lord Howe Island lays 425nm NE of Sydney. It is another 350nm from the Gippsland Lakes to Sydney, so the whole passage was a major undertaking. Yachty mates of ours thought we were crazy and overly ambitious. "You are braver than us, it is a horrible place to get to. You will get beaten up along the way and it is rolly once you get there." Whether you chat to other sailors or look up articles on the internet, all you hear about sailing to Lord Howe are negative reports. But it does not have to be that way, particularly if you take your time, pick

your weather and sail on a catamaran. So for once, here is a positive story.

Summer cruises are a mix of things for us: the love of sailing, the excitement of exploring new destinations and revisiting favourite anchorages, the challenge of stretching the boundaries and learning along the way, the intense pleasure of reaching places less-travelled, and the fun of meeting new like-minded yachties. But although some people see us as adventurous, we don't like to scare ourselves and are cautious, conservative sailors. We investigate, we plan carefully and we only go when the conditions are right.

GETTING ORGANISED

Once we locked onto the idea of Lord Howe, we went about doing our research and preparing the boat. As well as the usual annual maintenance, we changed the rigging and lifelines – needed after 10 years to get insurance – we organised for a third reefing point to be put in the main.

We obtained two charts for the passage:

- Aus 4602, Int 602 – Tasman and Coral Seas, 1:3500000
- Aus 610 – Approaches to Lord Howe Island, 1:150000



main pic left: Approaching Lord Howe Island at dawn.
above: Important crew member: Bengie.

We studied the wind roses, talked to Phil Brown, a friend of ours and Craig, Wade's brother, who are both meteorologists overseas. We talked to a couple of Lord Howe residents and sailors whom we met during an earlier flying trip there.

With Lord Howe Island being a world heritage site there are processes to follow. About a month prior to departure,

you need to contact Lord Howe Port Operations Manager, currently the Police Officer on the island, on (02) 6563 2199, and book a mooring with the Lord Howe Island Board Administration office on (02) 6563 2066. You are asked to provide information about your yacht, size, weight, draft, which dictates which mooring is allocated to you. You should advise the LHI Port Operations Manager when you finally leave the mainland, so they know when to expect you at the lagoon.

ON OUR WAY

We had two months to complete the entire trip, and needed southerlies all the way there, and northerlies to get back, so we knew we would do big hops, punctuated with pauses when the wind was blowing in the wrong direction. We like going downwind; we don't like sailing to windward!

We started our adventure on December 9, 2013, headed for Sydney, where we were picking up our friend Sue. It took us a week to get there with stops along the way at Broulee Island, Jervis Bay and Jibbon Beach in Port Hacking. We entered Sydney Harbour on a sunny Sunday afternoon: a frightful experience with hundreds of crafts of all kind out on the water and mega wakes.

Having picked up our friend from Hen and Chicken Bay, well past the Harbour Bridge along the Parramatta

River, our wait for our passage to Lord Howe Island in the right conditions started. We used the time to explore the harbour. Bantry Bay at the end of Middle Harbour was an unexpected find in the National Park. We stayed there for a few days, then exited Sydney Harbour with a brief bout of southerlies, moving north to Broken Bay. Again we got trapped by the northerlies for several days, before using another SE day to sail to Broughton Island, just past Port Stephens.

This was a fairly frustrating period. The southerlies were only lasting a day and switching back to northerlies far too quickly for what we needed. We had also given ourselves a deadline: if we had not left the east coast by the end of December, we would not attempt a passage to Lord Howe as this would not give us enough time to get there, enjoy the island and return by the end of January. So although we had time we were very much aware the clock was ticking.

In all, we had to wait for 12 days before we got the conditions we were looking for: three days of southerlies. The consequences of leaving in less

Easy sled ride under Big Red – the spinnaker – with Sue and Chris at the front.



above left: The crew – Chris, Wade, Sue.
above right: Our two little hitchhikers: two white terns.

than ideal conditions would have been a rough passage, tough on the crew and the boat – something we were not interested in. We were lucky enough to get a dream run: SW 20-30, gradually switching to south at a similar strength, and then SE at 15-20.

We had a fast sail all the way in strong but manageable conditions. The ride was comfortable for the first 24 hours, with the wind on our tail. As the apparent wind shifted to our beam, the sea became less pleasant, particularly during the second night. But there is nothing like seeing the outline of the island in the distance at dawn. I was the lucky one on watch at daybreak. I remember thinking as I took a photo: "I wish I could be more ecstatic about witnessing this, but I just feel like chucking up in the bucket again!"

We completed the crossing in exactly 48 hours, averaging 7.5kts over the 355nm passage, and sailed straight into

the lagoon at high tide. We clipped onto a mooring at Dawson's Point (North Passage) initially, and then got directed to our allocated mooring at Comet's Hole in the middle of the lagoon for the rest of our stay.

Conditions in the lagoon were fine for catamarans. The lagoon was however never totally peaceful, except for two hours either side of low tide. This is where cats are at a huge advantage compared to monohulls. Although we danced around on the mooring, we were never uncomfortable.

The lagoon is very shallow: a little over one metre at low tide with a few deeper holes where the moorings are. Traffic in and out of the lagoon is done at mid to high tide. There are three main groups of moorings: one at North Passage at the main entrance, another at Comet's Hole in the centre of the lagoon near Blackburn Island, and the third at the southern end near Man of War Passage.

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ISLAND DELIGHTS

For 11 days we enjoyed Lord Howe Island and its impressive diversity.

A birdwatchers’ paradise, the island is home to over 200 different birds and reportedly has one of the highest numbers of breeding seabirds. We saw tropic birds, noddies, sooty terns, masked boobies and white terns to name a few. At this time of year, you also get to see the birds with their chicks.

The coral reef houses over 500 species of fish and 90 different corals. It is the most southerly coral reef in the world. We snorkelled at North Beach, Ned’s Beach and in the lagoon at Comet’s Hole and Erscott’s Reef and saw countless numbers of colourful wrasses, stripeys, butterflyfish, different types of urchins, trevallies, sharks, etc.

Back on land, almost half of the 240 plants are found nowhere else in the world. Every walk is a pleasure for botanists and bushwalkers alike. There are many walking tracks catering for different levels of fitness, from the long and difficult ascent up Mt Gower, where a guide is needed, to the more approachable one or two hour climbs, right down to the flattish rambles

Tourist numbers have long been capped at 400 at any one time, so even in high season like at Christmas and in January the island is serene and does not feel crowded

amongst the palm and banyan trees. We covered just about every track. Our value for effort pick is Malabar Hill, which affords wonderful views of the whole island and surrounding islets, and the breathtaking sight of thousands of red-tailed tropic birds playing in the air currents off the northern cliffs.

Tourist numbers have long been capped at 400 at any one time, so even in high season like at Christmas and in January the island is serene and does not feel crowded. You can snorkel or walk with no one else around. In the lagoon, *Take It Easy* was one of only eight yachts.

If you are so inclined, you can go on organised dives, fishing trips, sea kayaking excursions. And you can treat yourselves to a few dinners out at one of the local restaurants. Our preferred

hangouts were Earl’s Anchorage and Pandanus.

BEYOND THE ISLAND

Although we sailed around the island one morning, we missed out on seeing Ball’s Pyramid up close and personal, as the conditions were not right for us to sail there and back. And we would have liked to explore the Admiralty Islets. But this will be an excuse for another trip.

Where we lucked out was getting the permit and the weather to sail 100 miles north to Elizabeth Reef. This is a very beautiful atoll with a tiny sand cay, a large lagoon and fringing reef. You arrive at your GPS destination and there is nothing much to see at a distance: just a change of colour in the water and some breaking waves around an oval shape. We arrived at low tide, found a spot to anchor and looked at the atoll in awe.



far left: Admiralty Islets from Malabar Hill.
left: Sunrise over Mt Liddbird and Mt Gower.
below: *Take It Easy* anchored at Comet’s Hole.



Views of Lord Howe Island from Mt Eliza.

The graduation of blues, teals and aqua was extraordinary. Later, standing on the tiny sliver of a sand cay, surrounded by turquoise water, with waves breaking over the reef and the ultramarine endless ocean in the distance was an amazing experience. You could see the curvature of the earth. There were lots of fish in the lagoon. We were going to dive in one of the deep holes – that is until we saw the number of sharks around, including the one that heavily nudged our dinghy! So snorkelling or diving was off the agenda for us scaredy cats, but fishing was great. Amazingly, our anchorage was very well protected from east and north-east weather. We were there for a couple of days, anchored just outside the reef, in 5m of water over sand, in calmer conditions than we had in the Lord Howe lagoon!

RETURN TRIP

We left from Elizabeth Reef to head back to the big island. We enjoyed light to moderate northeasters. The passage to Port Macquarie took us 51 hours. We had a 10-15kts breeze on our tail for most of the time, except a few hours during the second night when we motored on one engine. The sea was calm and the passage very comfortable. We had the delight of having two little

hitchhikers on deck: a pair of white terns that flew with us initially, and then rested on our cockpit roof for many hours. It is such a treat when wild animals are unafraid of us to the point of letting us touch them ever so gently.

With three weeks left to get home from Port Macquarie, our descent south was a series of spinnaker runs in very hot northerly conditions. It was an excuse to sit in the nets in the shade of *Big Red* while George the autopilot was in charge of steering. We made overnight stops in Forster-Tuncurry, gorgeous Fingal Bay just south of Port Stephens, Quarantine Bay in Sydney Harbour, Jibbon Beach in Port Hacking, Wreck Bay south of Jervis Bay. We spent three nights behind Broulee Island where we caught up with a few friends while southerlies dominated, then onto Eden, where we stayed for a couple of nights at Boydtown, Nullica Bay in totally calm waters. Another absolutely beautiful spot was Bittangabee Bay, a small nook where we went deep into the bay, spider-webbed ourselves into the shore and sat out a SW gale totally protected. This is one special anchorage added to our favourites. Another interesting stop was Gabo Island. You hear the name on Victorian weather forecasts, and we have gone past in the

night a few times, so we were keen to see it up close and personal for once, just for the experience. From there, we set off for our final leg and overnigher: we sailed straight past Lakes Entrance, and as friends had offered to take our car down, we kept going to Port Albert, another 90 miles on, where we have a mooring. We tend to leave the boat there over summer and autumn, for easy escapes to Wilsons Promontory, Hogan or Deal Islands.

Mission accomplished

We covered an amazing 2000nm in eight weeks and sailed all but 350nm of it. This was our first true offshore trip, our longest, furthest, most ambitious summer cruise and an extraordinary adventure. We learnt a lot, had a ball, laughed, ate well, felt good about our achievements, and experienced the most wonderful moments aboard our beloved catamaran. *Take It Easy* lived up to its name once again. And most importantly, we did not scare ourselves and enjoyed kind seas and weather conditions.

Take It Easy in an 11.6m (38ft) Easy catamaran, the first 11.6 designed and built by Peter Snell. Of marine ply and epoxy construction, it was launched in October 2003, and acquired by Chris and Wade in May 2011.

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