

Winter 2015 Cruise



A unique three weeks' adventure with Chris' sister Véronique and brother in law Didier, who were visiting from France and had never cruised before!

Three weeks before our family cruise begins, Wade, assisted by two yachties and boat builders, Mike Kotrba and Merv Edmunds, and accompanied by Bengie, the ship's cat, takes our beloved catamaran north, from the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria, to Tin Can Bay in Queensland. On a mission to sail Take It Easy to the “cruise start” destination by 15th July, the team leaves Victoria on 20 June 2015. They brave freezing conditions, long sails, multiple overnights and rudder problems, and make the 900 nautical miles passage in 12 days, with a few days to spare!

The effort of Wade as skipper and his crew is what makes possible this magical 2015 Queensland Winter Cruise with my sister Véronique and her hubby Didier.

The first map puts distances in perspective. It's a long way from the Gippsland Lakes to our “holiday area”. The second map gives an overview of our cruising grounds.



15/7/15 – Arrival at Tin Can Bay

The French contingent arrives at Tin Can Bay after a three hour drive from Brisbane airport. It is a joyful reunion on board Take It Easy. Excitement, anticipation and joy of being together are some of the emotions we all feel.

We load our luggage on board. Wade and Mike have done a great job of tidying up the boat. It is always a bit messy after a long passage, especially with three guys on it! But it is sparkling inside and out and welcoming for Véro and Didier.

We are set up right at the end of an arm at the Marina, with water and electricity, laundry and restaurant facilities ashore, so it is at least a gentle start for our travellers.

We let them organise themselves in their cabin. I am sure they are a little apprehensive. I remember the very first time we hired a small yacht in the Sandy Straits funnily enough; I recall stepping on board, looking at the restricted space and thinking “two weeks on this, how on earth are we going to manage?” So I am pretty sure they feel something similar.

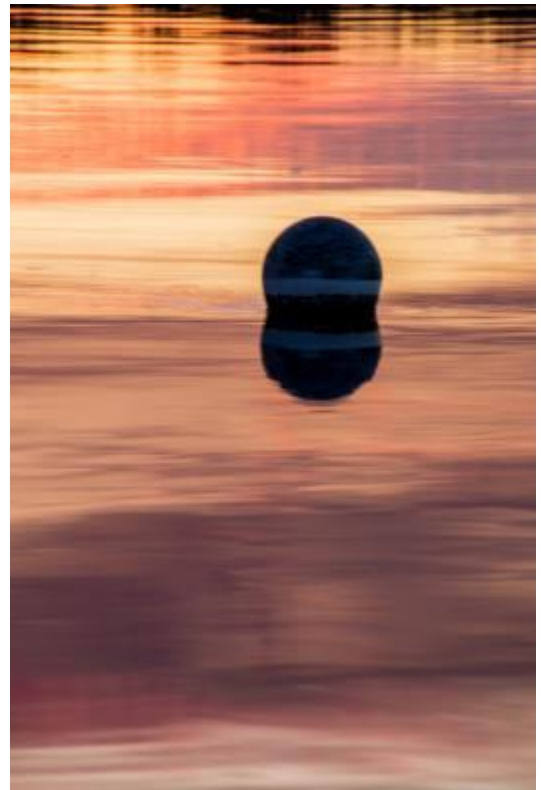
We get into shorts and T shirts. It is warm up here! It is time to go for a wander into the little township and do a small shop while we have the car, to bring back fresh meat, vegies and fruit. We buy prawns for lunch and celebrate in the cockpit in the sunshine. Then it is time for Mike to head off. He is taking the car back to Brisbane Airport, then catching a train to Toowoomba to see his grandkids and spend a week with his family before going home to Langford. We thank him for his help and wish him well.

You cannot be on Take It Easy for too long without being given a task: a climb to the top of the mast to spray silicone on the sail track for the mainsail, so it slides in the track more smoothly. Wade was having difficulty raising the sail. I go up, but then everybody wants to be winched up to admire the view, camera in hand. It is a bit like a rite of passage.



We then go for a wander along the foreshore, chat and are serenaded by hundreds of rainbow lorikeets and a new sighting for me, a blue-faced honeyeater. Later in the late afternoon we are treated to a magnificent sunset. We end the day with an easy meal at the marina restaurant, then off to bed very early, as our overseas travellers are exhausted.





16/7/15 – Departure for Garry’s Anchorage – Fraser Island

After warm showers ashore – the last ones for a while – we again go for a walk to pick up a couple more things. Then it is time to cast the mooring lines and start our cruise.

Being our first day away from the marina facilities, we brief the guys on power and water conservation, our usual ‘habits’, such as the use of the salt water tap for dishes, using the gas stove, the toilet... all the things we take for granted, but are foreign to anyone who shares our life on board for the first time.

There is a serious talk about water usage, which will be our biggest challenge. 180 litres is very little and although we will take the opportunity to top up every time we can, there is no facility to do so once we leave Fraser Island and head out to the reef. It will be the biggest thing our family has to get used to; water is for

drinking and cooking, and rinsing glasses and cups. Minimum cat washes and camp showers are the way beyond that. There is plenty of ocean for washing bodies and the salt water tap for dishes. It is most likely a shock to the system for Véro and Didier and it is one thing we have to be strict about.

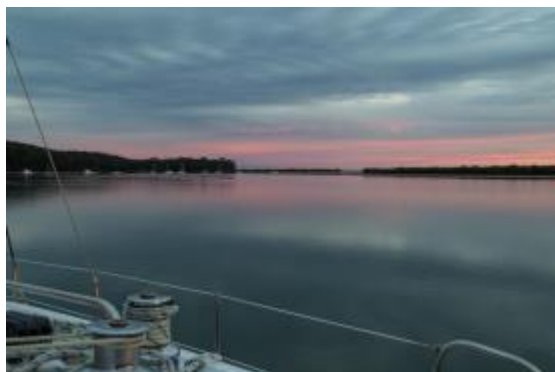
There is no doubt in my mind that we need to buy a water desalination device, such as the Rainman system, to make life on board easier. Treating seawater to produce enough freshwater for daily showers and a more relaxed regime for the dishes would make things much easier and more comfortable.

For our first sail, we head out to Garry’s Anchorage, a couple of hours away. We follow the Sandy Straits, a body of water separating the mainland from Fraser Island. We actually motor-sail as the wind and tide are against us part of the way. But it is nice to be underway. We are in protected waters, so the sea is flat as a tack... no risk of sea sickness, but it is a little boring, so a good excuse for a short nap. The guys do go out on deck to survey the surroundings and Véro starts recording her impressions in her travel diary.





When we reach Garry's Anchorage, there are lots of yachts there. We go and anchor at the end of the line, away from the others. It is the perfect placement for a spectacular sunset: blues and mauves to start with, deep pinks and purples at the peak; it is absolutely stunning. And looking south: a soft pink on the water line with a pale blue sky.



17/7/15 – Garry's Anchorage – Fraser Island

Lazy breakfast! Wade throws the pots in with prawn heads from yesterday's lunch in a bait bag. We count 14 yachts in the anchorage, 6 of them catamarans. There are many more multihulls in this region than down south!

Later we go ashore for a walk. We never see much of Garry's Lake, but it is nice to stretch our legs. We see a few interesting birds (scarlet honeyeaters) but I have the wrong lens on! Nice plants, some palms for interesting patterns, bright yellow flowers (guinea flowers), purple pea flowers, and the large leaf hop bush.



Back on board in the early afternoon. Wade and Véro go and check the crab pots in Peasy... empty... back they go in the water for a while longer. At dead low tide they go and check again, but they end up bringing the pots back as we have no luck: no crab for dinner tonight!



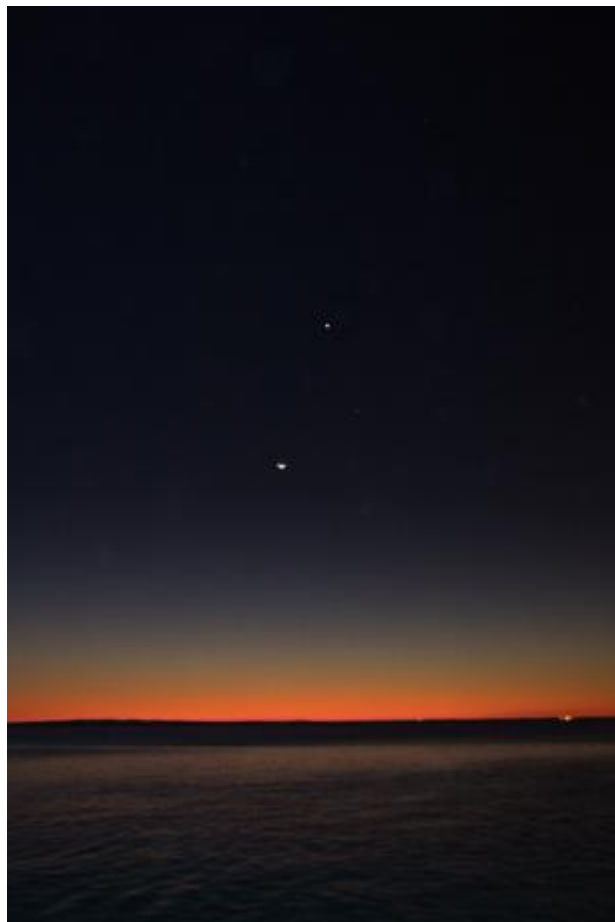
We spend the rest of the afternoon on board, enjoying the sunshine, reading, checking photos, looking up the names of plants and wildflowers. We observe an egret and I take a few shots with “the beast” (my big 100-400 lens), and realise this is a new sighting: a reef egret – small, top of the beak is black, bottom yellow, grey legs. She was fishing along the bank next to the mangroves. By 5pm you can feel the air become much cooler. We get nice sunny days – 21 today – but it is very chilly in the morning and by 4 or 5pm the temperature drops and we put the layers back on.

18/7/15 – To Kingfisher Bay – Fraser Island

We up anchor at 8.00am, bound for Kingfisher Bay, about 35 miles further North. There is a fair amount of current in the straits and it pays to play the tides. The trouble is half way along, the tide direction changes so we only get part of the way with the current with us. Although the sails are up, the breeze is far too light to allow us to sail downwind. Engine on all the way! George (the autopilot) has cracked up and does wild meanders along the channel. It might have died for good, but we have another arm. Unfortunately, that too meanders and we end up hand steering. Another job for later!



We get to Kingfisher by lunch time. The same fleet of yachts and cats that were at Garry's Anchorage moves to Kingfisher Bay. The afternoon is spent exploring, organising a 4WD for tomorrow, attending a briefing on driving on the rough tracks and on the beach on the island, then showers ashore and pizzas. We suffer from eyes bigger than stomach and bring back enough left over for lunch tomorrow.



19/7/15 – Fraser Island by 4WD

Big day with a very expensive (\$320 a day), but very useful work horse of a Land Cruiser for our island exploration. We have decided to hire for a single day and try and see as much as we can of what the island has to offer without rushing too much.

We start with heading down to Lake McKenzie. What a treat! We arrive reasonably early and have the moody, stunning, quiet place to ourselves. The water is crystal clear over white sand, and as it deepens it takes a shade of pastel green. A few small paperbark trees in the water make for some beautiful images. There is mist in the distance, shrouding the hills, the sky is very cloudy and the scene is serene. The silence and beauty take our breath away. You whisper rather than talk, such is the mystic feel of this place before hordes of tourists turn up. It is a really special experience.





We then make our way to Central Station where there is a board walk through the rainforest. As we arrive, we are amazed at the showy staghorn ferns. Rich greens, leafy hearts and long horns hang from hoop pines and kauri pines. You look up the very tall trees and see them adorned by these abundant staghorn cascading down.

During our rainforest walk we spot a kingfisher in its brilliant blues, too quick to allow us to photograph it, but the blue wings and buff belly are imprinted in our memory. We see a few kookaburras, the forest specie of the kingfisher. This time they are staying put on their perch and allow us to catch a few pictures, posing for us.

Back on the rough sandy track, we head for Lake Birrabeen, a nice, deserted perched lake, but not quite as arresting as Lake McKenzie.



After that it is time to hit the beach: we are allowed to drive on the Eastern beach two hours either side of high tide. It is fun and different to be so close to the ocean and breaking waves. We even have to share the beach with light planes! We make a few stops along the way at Eli Creek and the Pinnacles. The wreck of the Maheno is crowded, so we choose to leave it till the return trip. Lake Wabby involves a two hour return walk – we decide to give it a miss. Along the way we see several white-bellied sea eagles, beautiful creatures soaring in the wind.





We decide time won't allow us to get to Indian Head and the Champagne Pools. We opt instead to go as far as the turn off to Lake Allom. We drive off the beach, back on the inland track to the lake some 9kms away. It does not seem far, but it is a very rough track. It is worth the effort though! We see freshwater turtles on the edge of the lake, in the rusty coloured water – tannin from the tea trees. Again the water is crystal clear and we see numerous turtles swimming, poking their head up to check us out, then diving again. We wish we had more time to take a walk around the lake, but alas the hours are ticking away and we need to head back to the beach for the return trip, though not before photographing a gorgeous yellow robin posing for us.



We make a stop on the way at the Maheno Wreck and are lucky enough to have it nearly to ourselves. Gone are the buses and cars, just one 4WD parked far enough away to not spoil our photos. The rain has been falling on and off, the air is clear, the sky moody and the rainbows over the ocean cast beautiful colours. It is stunning. Such a great evocative shape of a ship stranded, half engulfed by the sand, rusting and decaying away. The shapes and features are interesting. A heavy shower starts, forcing us to retreat to the car and resume our drive back.



We are off the beach by 5pm and drive back up the inland track as quickly as possible to get back to Kingfisher Bay by 6pm, refuel and return the car. It is a challenging and bumpy drive in the dark. Surprisingly we only see one possum – no dingoes, no kangaroos.

This has been an eventful, great day of discovery. Such beautiful sights! We wished we had more time to walk to Lake Waddy, but it will have to be for another occasion. The 4WD hire is so expensive, and the ride very bumpy for our family not accustomed to off-road driving. Never mind, we have more to discover on Fraser: whales at the northern end, the Sandy Cape walk...

The dinghy ride in the dark finishes us off: we put its wheels down and drag Peasy along the sand to reach the deeper water. It is low tide so a long way to go, then it is a challenge to find Take It Easy since we forgot to leave the anchor light on! But we get back on board, relieved and quite tired. Time for a drink, a quick dinner, and then crash into bed!



20/7/15 – To Platypus Bay – Fraser Island

Véro is feeling rather iffy in the morning after a bit of rocking last night: not a lot of sleep, feeling a little claustrophobic in the cabin, tiredness of the 'bone shaking' day on Fraser Island, adjusting to our time zone, to life on the boat... It is all catching up to her. However after a hot shower ashore and a sea sickness pill, things settle down and brighten up for her.

Wade tops up water and fuel while we all freshen up. We are ready to set sails at about 11am and enjoy a nice sled ride with a light tail wind. Véro and Didier have a go at steering. The feel of the tiller, the wind, keeping a course, it all comes back quickly to Véro which is really nice and takes her mind off feeling ill. It also brings back a lot of memories and emotions from times past. She used to sail sailing dinghies as a youngster. It is sunny and enjoyable and we spend a few hours under sail, headed for the Southern end of Platypus Bay.



Anchored by about 2.30pm, Véro and Didier dinghy ashore for a wander along the beach, while Wade runs a check on the autopilot which has stopped working, and I sort through 260 photos taken yesterday! The afternoon disappears quickly.

We are not sure what is wrong with George, our autopilot. The new arm does not respond at all so it could be the unit or it might just need to be recalibrated. We will try doing this tomorrow morning in calm conditions.

21/7/15 – Platypus Bay – Fraser Island

Everyone had a decent night sleep and we wake up in a chirpy mood... so much so that we all jump in for a pre-breakfast swim – well when I say swim, it is more like a brief dip, although Véro is the bravest of all and actually stays in there the longest!

After that it is time to try adjusting and recalibrating the autopilot. It takes us a dozen attempts to successfully recalibrate it – doing circles for one and a half hours!

We have breakfast underway and sail to the Lagoon anchorage. But George still does not work properly. At least Véro and Didier enjoy steering in a 15 to 20kn breeze on a close reach. We will have to figure out what is happening to our autopilot though. Hand steering is OK for shorter sails but we will have trouble when we bring the boat south at the end of the year.

Anchored by noon, we have lunch then go ashore to explore. The sky is very overcast and gives a pale teal, moody look to the sea with the very white and fine sand. We walk to the lagoon. We could have taken Take It Easy in at high tide, but would have been locked in for 24 hours. It is interesting to explore up the creek with the mangrove and aerial roots. We discover some of the mangrove is in flower, bright red ones!

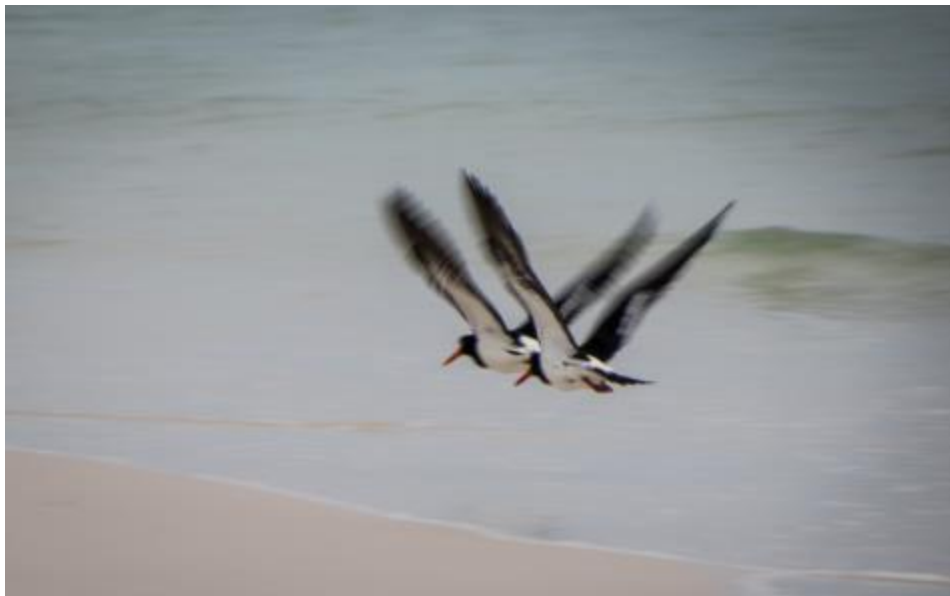




As is often the case when we walk along sandy beaches, we fossick for shells and urchins. There are oyster catchers along the shore and sea eagles soaring. We all feel pretty happy with our day and review photos later when we get back on board.

We are totally protected tonight, in a flat sea, just what Véro needs to settle her stomach, although she has felt good today!

We have a plan for tomorrow: go out in the bay in the hope of seeing whales, then off to Rooney Point at the tip of the island. It all depends on the wind. We would like to walk to the lighthouse and Sandy Cape, either tomorrow afternoon or Thursday, and then it is off to the reef!



22/7/15 – Platypus Bay to Sandy Cape – Fraser Island

We are hoping to see whales today. We have been told that these curious sea mammals tend to come in and frolic around stationary cruise boats and yachts, so we are joining a gaggle out in the middle of the bay. We go out in Platypus Bay, then come back close to shore, following a lone whale slowly swimming. We do manage to see its blow a couple of times, but are never close enough to see more. Then the cruise boats leave and we do the same and slowly sail along the coast up to Rooney Point where we hope to be luckier.

Whales can dive and disappear from sight for 20 minutes before surfacing again. It is a long wait between sightings, particularly if it is a single animal rather than a pod, and if it is travelling rather than milling about.

After Wade does more fiddling with the autopilot, making bushes for the tiller bar to tighten the linkages to each tiller, then restoring the factory settings, George decides to work... "When at first you don't succeed, try and try again!"

We have been sailing gently downwind on the jib alone. The sun is out; we are all sitting together at the nets, keeping an eye out for more blows, the tell-tale sign of a pod of whales. We see a blow at the very tip of Fraser Island, but that is it! What we do see clearly a brown boobie flying overhead. It should really be called a black and white boobie given how it looks to us! It is a handsome gannet-like bird.

As soon as we get out of the bay into the ocean, and turn eastward to follow the coast towards the lighthouse, the motion of the boat changes. We are at sea now! We see a few dolphins, but only for a few minutes.





Soon after, we are anchored and dingy ashore for the walk up to the lighthouse. There are great views from up there, although we are not allowed to get up the tower. On the return dinghy trip we get swamped by the waves and get awfully wet. Didier falls in the water... just as well we convinced him to put his camera in the dry bag! He was not sure it was necessary before this little misadventure, but now is! Salt water can destroy thousands of dollars' worth of photographic equipment in a flash. It simply is not worth the risk.





Our anchorage next to the dune is quite scenic, but the swell wraps around the point and it is a bit uncomfortable as we start rolling from side to side. We all have a dip – 18.8° , getting warmer - and then have dinner. However Véro feels very green and chucks up in the bucket a few times. So at 7.30pm we send her to bed with a Qwell and she falls asleep. It is much better to be horizontal and warm in bed when you feel crook. We all end up going to bed super early and read for a while, then give up. It is a bouncy night, so no one gets a great deal of sleep.

23/7/15 – Off to the first coral cay: Lady Elliott!

Bengie wakes us up at 6.00am, jumping on our chests and miaowing. It is as if she knows today marks the next phase of our cruise. It is time to get up and start our passage to Lady Elliott. It is a grey day and there is no wind to start with. We have both engines going for a while.

Over our 9 hour crossing, the longest we will have on this trip, we are lucky enough to see several whales and lots of dolphins. The first whales we spot are a fair way away but do spectacular tail slaps, which I catch on camera. It is amazing how a 40 ton mammal can leap out of the water like that. We see a few more along the way, some fairly close but travelling, so not always as exciting.



The dolphins though are magic. Several pods join us from the middle of nowhere at various times. One pod in particular stays with us for ages. It is a delight to see them frolicking at our bows. Véro and Didier are amazed and enthralled. The dolphins put on a great spectacle, leaping right out of the water, having great fun, and we

encourage them with our screams of delight. Somersaults, belly flops, tail slaps, swimming belly up.... It is all happening right in from of us, and it is brilliant! The best jumps we have ever witnessed!

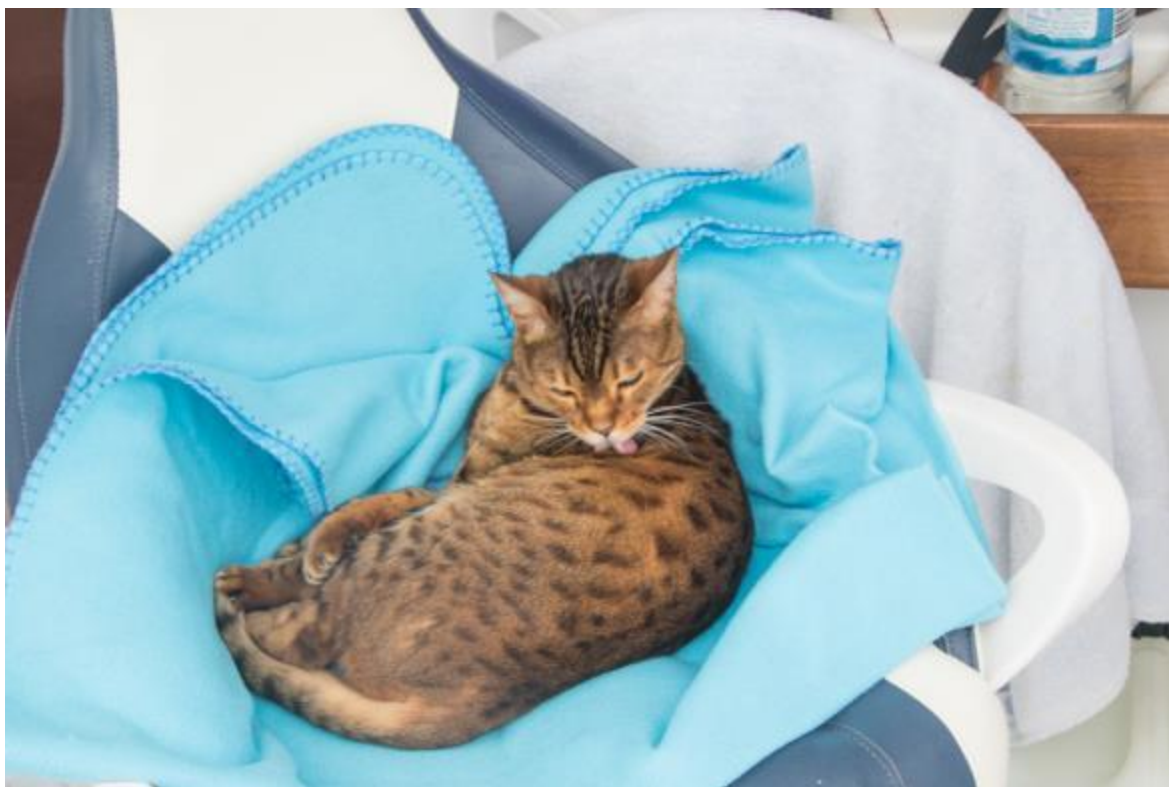




It is a long motor-sail though and a bit boring. This is yet another passage that convinces us we are not big on long stretches. Short sails are so much better! So we are glad to see the little island appear 9 nautical miles out. After seeing nothing but dark grey ocean for hours, it is a welcome sight, although there is not much of it above water; just a strip of dark vegetation and a lighthouse to one side. We will stay there overnight and will

move on tomorrow morning to Lady Musgrave, where we can enter a lagoon and be protected – another 21nm further.







We anchor just outside the Marine Park markers in 9 metres of water. It is not totally calm, but a lot better than at the Sandy Point lighthouse. Light rain starts, and with it comes a rainbow. Birds come and visit: a reef egret, and one in dark phase, very deep grey, lands on the cabin top roof which sparks the interest of our ship's cat! And a pod of whales come charging past, between us and the island, so very close!

The sunset is colourful and after dark, when the sky is still red on the horizon but darkness sets in, hundreds of shearwaters return to the island.

Véro is feeling fine, but now it is Didier who feels unwell, not sea sick, but cramping stomach. He slept a lot on the way, which helps keep sea sickness at bay and is one way of dealing with boredom, but he probably won't sleep too well tonight. Let's hope once we get to Lady Musgrave and stay put for a while, everybody settles down and enjoys themselves. We all feel a bit tired and it is obvious the guys are finding it hard to adjust. So many aspects are new to them and testing them physically and mentally.





24/7/15 – Sailing on to Lady Musgrave Island, our second coral cay!

We get up at about 6.30am. First sight this morning from the bathroom window: a whale lolling about!

Lady Elliott having a small resort, may have a nurse or doctor on site. So we check how Didier is and asks if he wants to go ashore. But he feels much better, so we head off to Lady Musgrave, 21 nm further north. There is no wind at all; therefore it is a motor most of the way, except for the last hour.



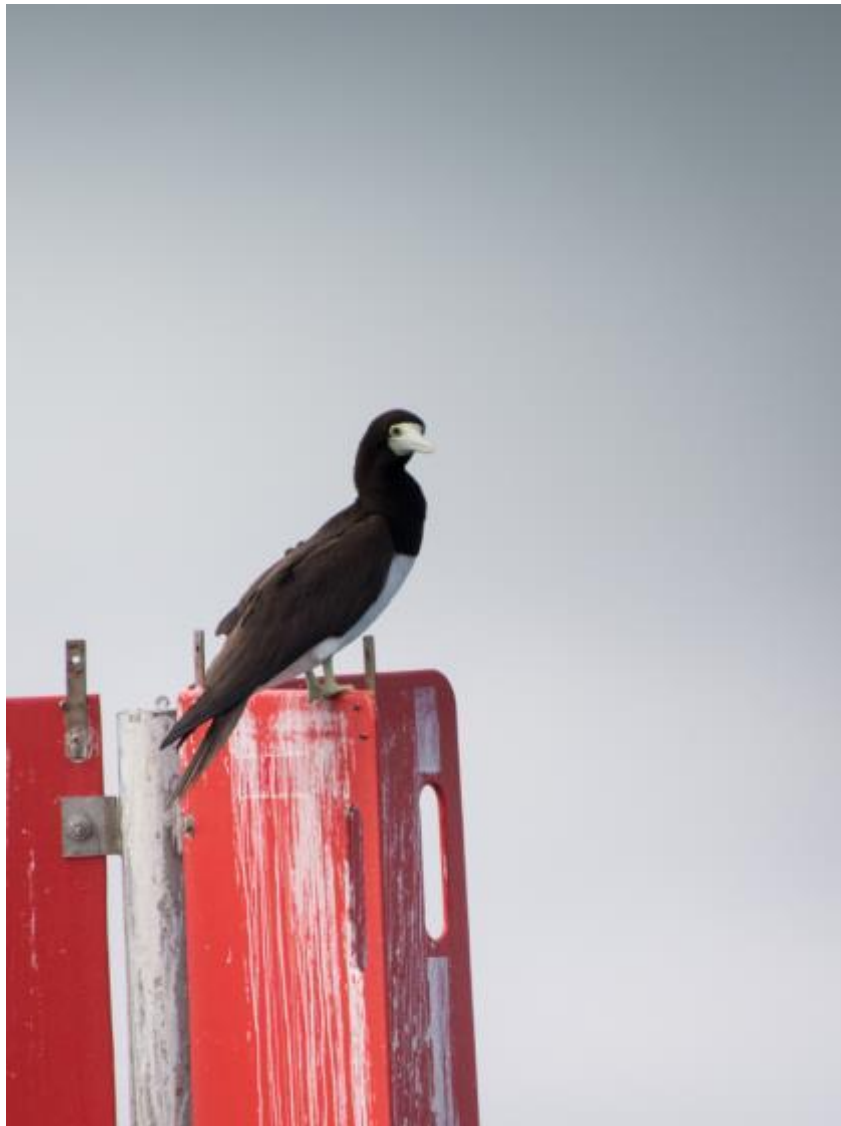
Again we see whales in the distance. We can see some breaching on the horizon line, a few pass a bit closer, doing tail slaps and waving flippers. It is quite amazing the number we have seen along the way! It is the beginning of their migration from Antarctica.

With some lumpy swell on the beam, the ride is not particularly comfortable, but we are all getting used to the motion. The guys often comment on how rocky the boat is and yet the sea is calm. “We’d hate to try it in strong weather!” They walk on the deck like drunken sailors, their balance being tested.

Véro and I are at the nets, chatting. It is really special to spend some time together and I am ever so grateful to Wade for looking after everything on board. I am definitely not doing my fair share on the navigation, sailing and cooking front, and we are all leaning on him heavily. I often feel he must feel the odd one out with so much French being spoken, and not a lot of English conversation going on. But it is better for me to focus on my family. He really is the perfect skipper and host.

Three hours into the passage, the coral cay appears on the horizon: a slip of vegetation then a huge coral barrier where the surf is breaking. It is about 5 miles from the island to the edge of the coral. It is a very large expanse. The entrance to the lagoon is quite narrow, marked with green and red markers, guarded by brown boobies. These are handsome gannet-like birds. The colour of the water changes as we enter, from a deep ultramarine outside, to turquoise and totally flat inside the large lagoon. It is surreal. There are three other yachts in there and we negotiate the bommies and anchor as close as we can to the marine park markers.







It is 11.30 by the time we are settled and treat ourselves to scrambled eggs and bacon, the reward for our passage with hardly any breakfast.

The water is stunningly aqua, warm – 22.7⁰ - and it is so peaceful yet so strange to find ourselves in this place in the middle of the ocean.

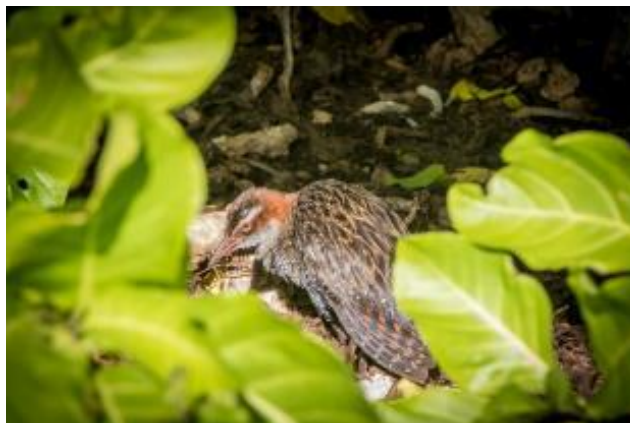
On the way we caught two mackerels on the trawling lines: dinner tonight! Wade cleans them up on the sugar scoops under the watchful eyes of his little ship's mate.



We get the toys out. It is high tide so perfect for a paddle on the kayaks. A lesson in paddling and handling the two banana boats and we send Véro and Didier off for a circumnavigation of the island, while we tidy up and Wade prepares the fish filets. Bengie enjoys a bit of raw mackerel!! Then it is off to the island for a wander for us too.



If, like Véro and Didier, you have never been to a coral cay or a tropical lagoon, it is an amazing experience. The turquoise, crystal clear waters, the fishes, turtles and corals are wonderful, the feel of being right inside a protected basin is quite amazing and other worldly. Even if you have been to a coral cay before, it is a treat to come back or discover a new one. We are lucky to see Lady Musgrave at its best: calm, sunny, in silence and uncrowded. Even the birdlife is stunning: brown boobies, oystercatchers, reef egrets, a white one and a dark phase one always paired up, buff-banded rails in the forest on the island. And the boat sits totally flat – no more stumbling about the decks... Just bliss!





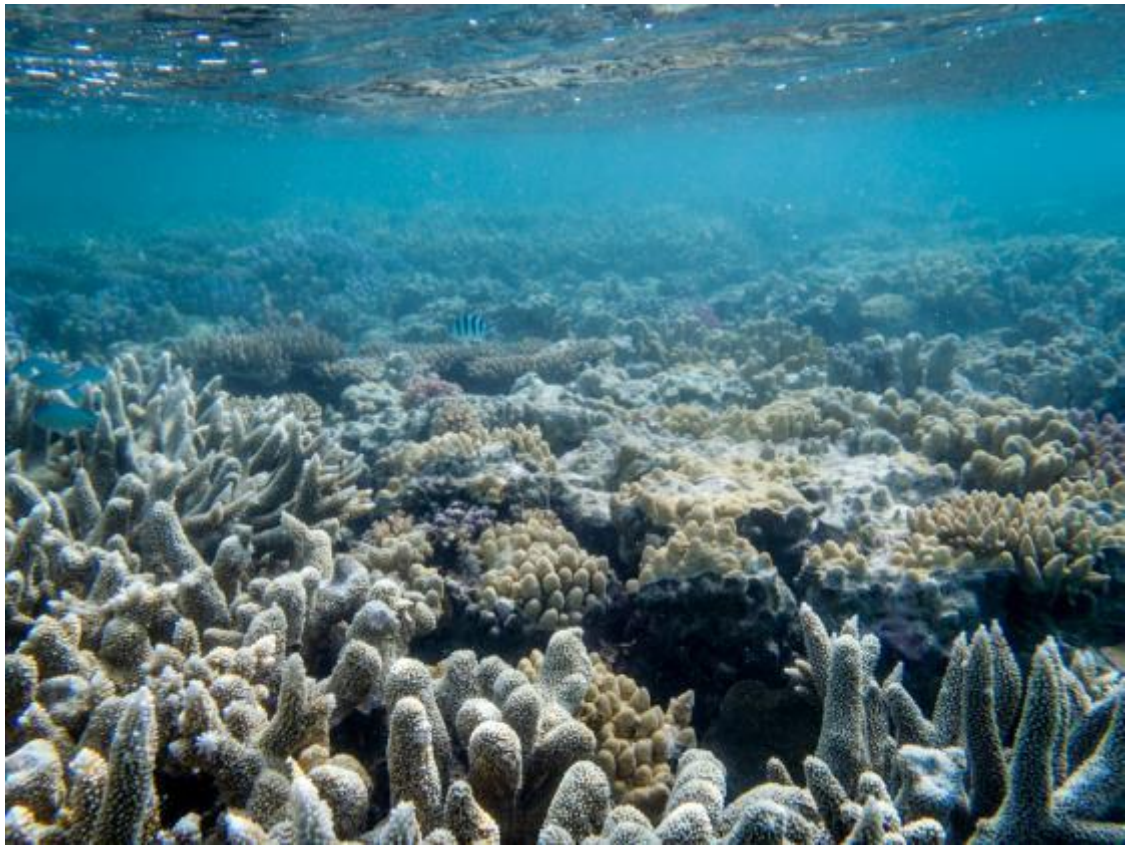
25/7/15 – Lady Musgrave Island

It is a momentous day for Didier and Véro. After a quiet night we wake up to a light breeze and sunny day. The tide is low at about 9.00am... time to go for a snorkel. However neither Didier nor Véro have ever done it and although they bought themselves a snorkelling kit, their attempt at breathing through the snorkel and wearing a mask at home did not give them a great deal of confidence.

In fact the thought of struggling to breathe makes Véro so anxious that tears come flooding. They are both quite worried and doubtful they can manage. We encourage them along... wetsuits on, another new experience, breathing practice with the snorkel in the cockpit, which only produces gagging and more anxiety.

But we know that gentle encouragement and promises of amazing seascapes may get them to try. So we pile into the dingy and go, even though they are very reluctant. I sit with them in shallow water and little by little they give things a try: first looking through the goggles, then breathing through the snorkel. Eventually we slowly swim away from the shores onto the reef. Gone is the dread and the amazement begins! Once started, there is no stopping them... lots of gorgeous colourful fishes, a turtle. It is great to snorkel, and it is really special to know how amazed and blown away they are by the underwater life. "I never imagined there was so much down there and so beautiful." That is why we coaxed you to manage your fear and try! Every day brings so many discoveries for us and for Véro and Didier and it makes this cruise even more special.









After a while we all get cold and head back to shore, to dinghy back to Take It Easy and warm up in the sunshine. Warm drinks, a check of the photos I took with Wade's camera underwater. They have come out beautifully! We have a rest, some lunch, then decide Véro and Didier will take the dinghy ashore to walk around the island and through the forest. Wade and I paddle in the kayaks and do the same in a different direction. There are lots of buff-banded rails in the forest, scratching around the leaf litter, and when we end up back on the beach, couples of reef egret, one white one charcoal, can be seen along the shores, and a few sooty oyster catchers. There are lots of corals, clam shells and we can't help ourselves; we have to collect a few.





Wade and I get back from our walk around and paddle back to Take It Easy. We leave Véro and Didier to continue their exploration.



Later I go back with my camera and tripod and paddle back ashore with the gear in the dry bag, to capture a few shots of the beautiful reef egrets, and long exposure shots along the reef. I even spot a whale breaching as I pack my camera. It looks so close that I mistakenly think it is inside the lagoon. But a check of the charts back on Take It Easy confirms it is on the outside, just close!

After fresh water showers in the last of the sunshine, we celebrate the eventful day with drinks! And we check out the charts and weather forecast. The weather will change on Monday afternoon and Tuesday will be windy. We need to decide whether to stay here till Monday morning, or motor 30 miles to Fitzroy Reef tomorrow, then leave that lagoon on Monday. The consensus is to enjoy another calm sunny day here, then head back to the mainland on Monday. There won't be time for another lagoon, but there will be other islands!

26/7/15 – Lady Musgrave Island

The emotions of yesterday take their toll on Véro who wakes up with a migraine. It puts a damper on things! While she lets medication take effect, Wade tries his hand at spear fishing – without success. I paddle in the kayak till I realise I dropped the Olympus Camera in the drink while getting into the kayak! Fortunately I can see it in the clear water and Wade dives to fish it out. I suspect my sunnies are in the same spot as the camera went... overboard! I spend ages looking for them and give up in the end.

Next, the tide is dead low and it is time to go snorkelling. We leave Véro to recover and take Didier with us for another wander around the corals. We go to a different spot, with less colourful coral but many more fishes. Wade has the dinghy rope around his ankle and tows Peasy with him whilst peering at the sea life, since we are not allowed to anchor over reef. We stay out for quite a while such is the richness of what we see. But then we get cold and it is time to climb back into Peasy... Not a very easy or elegant re-entry for some of us!



When we get back to Take It Easy, Véro is up and feeling better. So we warm ourselves up a bit then Didier and I take her back to the reef for a quick snorkel. It is not as good since the tide has risen, and we try a couple of spots, one of them close to the boat. She is happy we have taken her back, but she gets cold quickly. Climbing back into Peasy is reasonably straight forward for Véro and I, but Didier struggles and can't get in, despite repeated and exhausting attempts. I suggest he grabs the side of the dinghy and we tow him back, but that does not work. We leave him to swim back and we motor back to the boat, but I notice he is not making progress and in fact is swimming to the wrong boat. I go back towing the kayak at the back of Peasy, thinking he should be able to get into that, but he can't, so finally he hangs on to the kayak and I tow him and the kayak back to TIE! Rescue at sea!

After all that physical effort, we have a long rest and some lunch. The afternoon passes pleasantly. We go through all the underwater photos to select the ones we will keep and use in a post. We have got some great shots.

The wind is picking up a little. Véro and Didier decide to go ashore on the island for a wander and a read in the sunshine. I paddle on the kayak, camera and macro in the dry bag. Wade stays on board reading in the cockpit. The paddling with a cross wind is a serious workout.

We all get back on board happy with our photos. Véro and Didier got some great shots of buff-banded rails preening each other – very cute – and I come back with macro shots of coral with varied patterns and a lovely hibiscus flower.



By the end of the afternoon it is time to pack up the toys and ready the boat for a passage tomorrow. This involves deflating the kayaks, putting the snorkelling gear away, and storing away anything that might fly in the crossing. We have studied the cruising guides and will be heading off to Pancake Creek, along the mainland, some 38 miles away. Let's hope the wind picks up in the right direction!





27/7/15 – Bound for Pancake Creek on the mainland

No sooner are we out of the Lady Musgrave lagoon that we see a pod of whales frolicking then dolphins and a big turtle. What a start to the passage!



The breeze is quite steady and we are sailing at good speed – 7.5 to 8kn with a reef in the main and a roll in the jib. There is a lot of spray coming off our bows! Now that is sailing!

We take turns at the tiller for a few hours, then put George in charge once the wind lightens and Wade shakes the reefs off. The wind switches to our back quarter. About an hour off the coast, we have slowed down a lot and decide to launch Big Red. It goes up without a hitch and we pick up speed again.





We reach Pancake Creek at 2.00pm and anchor near the mouth of the river at first, and go ashore in search of fresh water – unsuccessfully, contrary to what the cruising guide indicates.

A bit of hand washing happens, and since we have internet and phone coverage, we catch up on emails, messages and schedule a couple of posts for our website.

It is quiet in the river. There are half a dozen yachts anchored along various beaches. We will be comfortable here, although we move further up river when we hear the forecast has changed to southerlies. We will be hiding here for three nights probably, while there is a strong blow, and then will head out to the reef again if we can.



28/7/15 – Hiding in Pancake Creek

We spend a much quieter night than we expected. The wind did not pick up inshore during the night. We check the forecast and it is quiet inshore but windy offshore, so we were right to come here. There are a few more yachts and cruisers coming in during the morning, no doubt to take shelter. After a tidy up and change of sheets and towels, we dingy ashore, for a walk to the Bustard Head lighthouse.



It is a varied walk. The Pancake Creek Anchorage looks peaceful at low tide. We walk a few metres into what looks like a mangrove flat with lots of dead trees. It is eerie and stark, but quite beautiful. We then follow a track up the ridge where we frequently stop for macros: beautiful flowers, butterflies, a grasshopper on a grass tree flower head, orb spiders, passionfruit flowers, native bee hives. We get to a lookout over Aircraft Beach... a nice spot for a walk tomorrow. Finally we reach the light house with extensive views to the ocean.





The lighthouse caretaker directs us to a lookout over Jenny Lynd Creek a few miles on. We are so glad she told us about it as the views over the ocean beach, fields of blackboys and the meandering creek and mountains in the distance are breathtaking. On the way back, we stop at a small cemetery where a few graves are evidence of how dangerous Pancake Creek is, with a few having drowned in it in the late 1800s. It certainly flows fast at the anchorage.



When we get back to the shores, we are shocked to see the number of cruisers that have invaded the anchorage. 19 boats are anchored in our little bend, when only 5 yachts including us were there this morning! They are all so close, and definitely cramping our style! It seems they are all from a motor cruiser club, as they all fly the same flag. They have set up a big barbecue area on the beach, and people congregate there! They must not have been warned about the sand flies!



We spend the rest of the afternoon reviewing photos, reading, making bread, and keeping watchful eye over a couple of cruisers who are anchored awfully close to us. The wind has picked up a lot and we are all dancing around at anchor. Being a catamaran, we have a lot of windage and move around a lot. It would be easy for us to collect a few unsuspecting crafts! But nothing untoward happens and as the tide changes, we are a little more spaced out.

We have a roast for dinner and decent wine – a pre-celebration to Didier's 60th birthday tomorrow.

29/7/15 – Hiding in Pancake Creek

What else do you do at Pancake Creek, on Didier's 60th birthday but celebrate with French pancakes? It is a slow but cheerful morning with plenty of good crepes, Chantilly cream and jam.

Then we are off to the ocean shores of Aircraft Beach, a long deserted spot to escape the crowds of the anchorage. It is still very windy but will abate tonight and we will head back to the reef tomorrow hopefully.

We start our outdoors activities by going for a wander on the sandbank opposite the anchorage. The patterns in the sand, the vastness of the bank, the armies of soldier crabs make for interesting photography. Surprisingly it is good if you observe the little things: patterns in the sand, tiny creatures, reflections... Wade has stayed on board for this little excursion of ours, so we go and pick him up afterwards for the main part of the activities for the day.



We go ashore, leave the dinghy high on the dry sand and decide that we should go to Aircraft Beach the long way, following the headland all the way to Clew Point, around the other shore and down to the beach, since the tide is low. This takes us through incredibly varied scenery. We discover the mangrove region with interesting trees and their aerial roots, heaps of oyster beds (we should have brought a knife with us), beaches with coarse sand and lots of shells, rocky outcrops of pink granite which remind Véro of Brittany if you ignore the mangroves! Till then we go bare feet, but after that we move onto boulders which demand at least we wear our sandals.





There are areas with paths of green rocks with some sort of copper ore in seams, looking like solidified lava channels. It is intriguing and geologically really interesting. By then we have been going for three hours. We keep going around Clew Point and have to climb to the top of the cliffs to get around.

We finally descend down to Aircraft Beach via a garden like slope covered in grass and everlasting daisies.

The actual beach is broad and long and the wind whips the sand along. We can see why at low tide you can land small planes here. Having done so much walking and reached our destination, we strip off and go for a dip. The water is rather refreshing, but it is good to have a break and a wash in the ocean. By then it is 3pm – time to take the inland track back to the Pancake Creek Anchorage, another 1.8kms away, but much shorter and quicker to get back.





We are a bit ravenous by the time we reach Take It Easy and hoe into the boat baked bread with butter and a soup.

Soon the sun goes down. We check our photos, sort through a selection for a post and then it is sundowner time and dinner.

It has been a great, long and varied wander – about 8kms – a fantastic way to enjoy this place. And even though it was just a long walk, it still brought new discoveries for all of us and endless photo opportunities.

With the number of photos we are collecting on this trip, I am thinking I will document a normal journal, but also put a nice photobook together to really showcase our best and most interesting images.

30/7/15 – Off to Masthead Island – our 3rd Coral Cay!

We are off to the reef this morning – Yay! It is still windy, but will abate.

First things first: quite a few boats have left and we now have no one behind us. So it is serious wash and shampoo time on the sugar scoops for all of us... rather overdue and timely with slack water instead of the creek rushing by! The tide runs so fast normally that you have to hang on not to be taken away by the flow!

We leave a bit before 9.00am and we have a great downwind run on the jib alone, bound for Masthead Island. There are lots of white caps and the sea is short. It is chilly in the wind, but Véro and I move up front and chat in the sunshine and the shelter from the wind, all rugged up. It takes us just 4.5 hours to cover the 30 miles. The arrival at Masthead is a little different again from the other two cays we have been to. This time there are other reefs nearby; we pass between Polmaise Reef and Masthead Island. There is another small islet in the distance: Erskine Island. All you see of Polmaise Reef is the line of breaking waves once you are really close, since there are also waves in the ocean making it hard to distinguish what's what. There is no island. We would not like to be here at night!

Masthead itself has the usual strip of greenery, with the change of water colour as you get close. Today the water goes from deep ultramarine to turquoise. It is low tide and the reef is exposed all around the island. No one is there. We have the island to ourselves. What a change from Pancake Creek!



We have some lunch and a rest, waiting for the tide to rise so it is easier to land the dinghy. By 3pm we motor to the edge of the reef, as close as we can. We lift the dinghy up on a shallow flat part of the reef, throw the anchor in the water and we then venture ashore. There are sea stars, cucumber fish and a lot of rubble like rocky platforms to negotiate before we reach the coarse sand. This island is supposed to be a 'significant site' for birds. We don't see a lot: mainly reef egrets and oystercatchers, and white-bellied sea eagles. But I spy a

kingfisher and hear lots of different calls in the trees and bushes covering the island. We will explore tomorrow, but for now we walk along one side to the southern end, then retrace our steps as we see the sun starting to go down. Wade has charged ahead and manages to do a circumnavigation. We curse him for rushing without us and leaving us behind, and we are preparing ourselves for a swim to the edge of the reef where we left the dinghy. But when we get back to our starting point, we see Wade sitting next to the dinghy on the beach. He has redeemed himself and got the dinghy to the shore for us!



It is obvious to us the inner lagoon is very shallow and won't offer any good snorkelling. We will give the outside rim a try tomorrow.

When we get back to Take It Easy, the boat is doing the pendulum as the swell wraps around the island. It is very rock and rolly!

It is funny. Véro and I were talking about her impressions during the passage from Pancake Creek. She noted quite rightly so that you have to earn your idyllic diving conditions: long sail there, sometimes uncomfortable seas and rolly anchorages. "People just see the photos of turquoise water and think it is paradise all the time but it is not!" And she is right. It is all part of the deal. You have to put in the effort. Wade and I are so used to this that we don't really notice anymore.

We warned Véro and Didier that tonight the anchorage would likely be uncomfortable because the wind has been strong for days. "It will get better as the wind abates, but be ready for a rolly night – or we can spend another day at Pancake Creek." But the resounding response was "let's get back to the reef"... Of course you can be warned, but it is another thing to experience the discomfort. I think they feel a bit average tonight. It was hard for them to eat their dinner and they went to bed before 8pm. Better to be horizontal!

I think this cruise experience is a very big revelation for Véro and Didier. It gets them to appreciate you have to adapt and learn to cope; you have to do without some things on a boat, be cautious with food, water, power, because it is all in limited quantity on board, and you can't just get to the shops at the drop of a hat. It teaches you to think about what is essential and what is superfluous; it teaches you to do more with less, to be measured, and not wasteful. The cruising life is not for everybody, but at least now they have an appreciation of what the day to day life afloat entails: the good, the incredibly magic, and the constraints and not so pleasant bits.







31/7/15 – Masthead Island

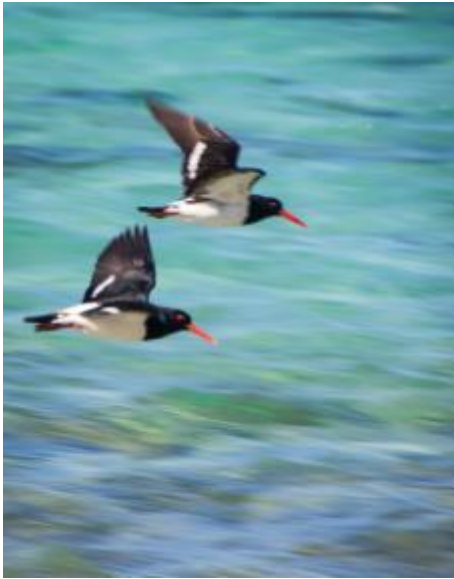
The swell and wind abated during the night. We had a reasonable night sleep although Véro and Didier feel a bit seedy and have to take sea sickness tablets this morning. These are examples of how 15 years of casual but frequent sailing make a huge difference to your level of comfort. So do your expectations. Wade and I are used to the constant motion, the little noises, having to hold onto things as you move about the boat, not spending too long 'down below' when there is swell about, and we no longer take conscious note of this. Véro is upset she is not faring well, saying "I can't be like you", but we think they are both doing really well in such a short time. They are taking it all in their stride. We are just sorry there are ups and downs in how they feel.

After breakfast, we get off the boat, go ashore at high tide and we all go for a walk in different directions. We start in the pisonia forest, but there is not track. Véro and Didier go one way; Wade and I cross over to the other side and walk to the Southern end as I would like to photograph some of the fallen trees I saw last night. They will be in the sunshine today and look quite sculptural with the turquoise sea in the background. The destructive power of wind and sea is evident on this side of the island, with many pisonia trees uprooted and fallen over. You wonder how long the island will remain.



We see lots of reef egret which seem to roost at the end of the island. I suspect we are at the wrong season for other species... may be we will come back with Sue in summer when we bring the boat back.





The walks seem to have helped the guys chase away the blues. We get back to Take It Easy. Wade decides to fish at the back of the sugar scoops and I start some dough for a loaf of bread.

All of a sudden it's action stations at the back of the boat: we have caught a squid which promptly inks Wade up. It is a funny sight. Véro thinks the squid is too pretty and we should let it go. I know how good it tastes and declare we are keeping it!



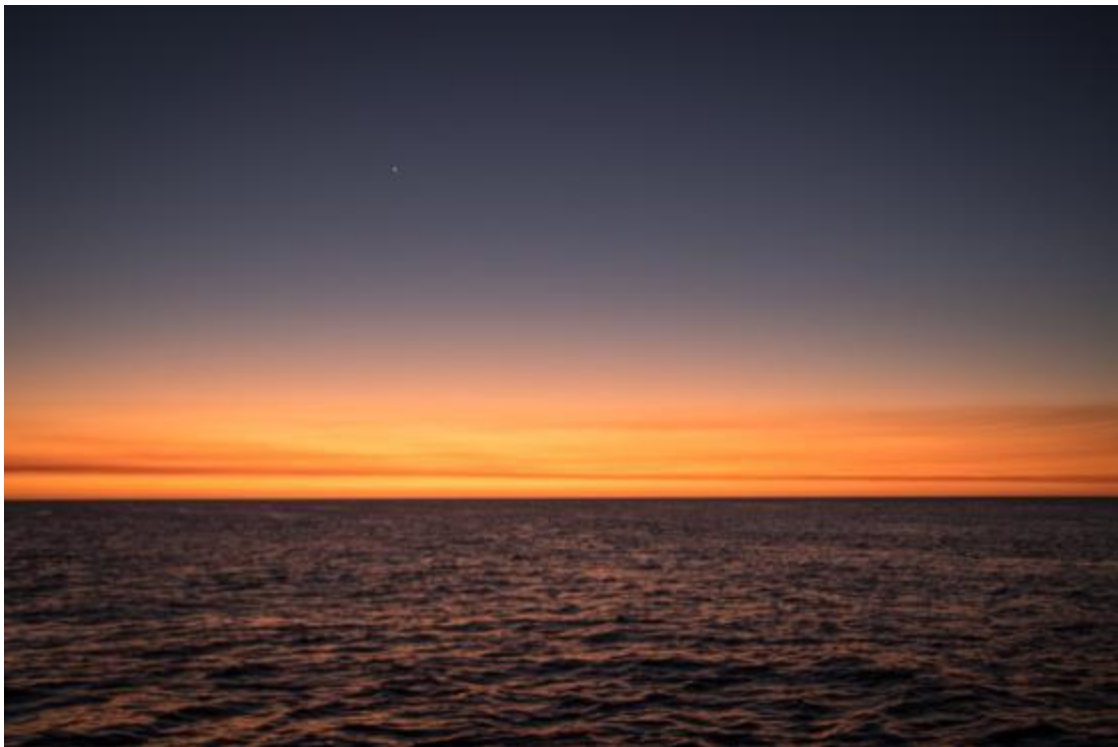
Later, all three of them start fishing and end up catching four breems. Véro catches the largest, wondering why it is so hard to wind the line in! She gets it out in the air and screams "Wadie, help!" After that, since we have enough for dinner, we pack the fishing gear away and have some lunch.

Then it is low tide and time for a snorkel. The water is a bit murky with the waves churning the sand, but we still manage to see some coral and nice fish. The coral is different here: flatter leaves, rounded balls... less ornate and less colourful. It is obvious the power of the waves makes it a tougher environment for coral to survive. The effect of large storms is also evident with a lot of dead coral broken away on the edges. Without the protection of a deep lagoon, it is a different underwater seascape, far more exposed to the elements.

The rest of the afternoon is spent pleasantly. The boat is now sitting flat. It is sunny. The guys are up at the front chatting. I worry they are finding this cruise difficult. They seem to get real highs, then lows, depending on how they are physically. It is a fragile thing.

We enjoy a lovely sunset on one side and the full moon rise on the other. It is beautiful.





1/8/15 – From Masthead Island to Yellow Patch

We up anchor at 6.30am, after a more bouncy night than we expected and a strong smell of bushfire all night which makes Véro and I feel a bit ordinary. A yacht has just arrived and anchored a little way away. It must have travelled overnight. Sunrise is glorious as we head off and raise Big Red straight away.



We thought it would be a slow passage, but we are making really good speed. At this rate we will get to Yellow Patch at high tide! We are level with Cape Capricorn by 10.40, a very imposing rocky headland. An hour later we have anchored at Yellow Patch.

Getting into Yellow Patch is a little tricky as there are no marks and you must find the channel through the shallow sand banks, but the colour of the water shows clearly where the deeper area is. It is a must to get in at mid or high tide and with the sun high in the sky. There is not enough water to get in or out at low tide, even for us. In fact, once in, when the tide goes down you are locked in! But what a place to be locked in! This would have to be the most stunning anchorage we have been to. There is an amazing dune, with ochre shades, a vertical wall of sand towering over us. It is incredibly impressive and the colours are so rich. What a fantastic place to come to!



We are one of two catamarans anchored here. No sooner are we settled that we have a very late breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon on toast.

Since we are anchored right next to the dune, we swim out in the fast current, struggling to get ashore, but making it across, although a long way downstream. We climb to the top of the dune and are in awe of the panoramic views. It is absolutely breathtaking. We all say: "wish we had our cameras!"





We decide to get back down, swim back to the boat, trying not to let the current rush us past TIE. We all pile into the dinghy so we can take our cameras this time. Back up the dune we go, and click away to our hearts' content. We later dinghy further up the creek, where sand flats extend as far as the eyes can see. There are lots of interesting patterns in the sand, made both by waves and small crustaceans: curly, ornate tracings, lots of little balls of sand, ridges and troughs, plenty of interesting textures.

Back on board a little while later, we realise looking at the charts that we are at latitude $23^{\circ}30'$ – exactly on the Tropic of Capricorn for August 1st! Véro, being of the Capricorn star sign (January), is particularly impressed with this, not only because you don't cross this latitude every day, but also because this stunning anchorage is totally flat... in fact it feels like we are high and dry after being rocked around in the ocean. No motion, not a breath of wind... flat as a tack... for a short while! As the tide comes back in, we get a slight motion, like being in a gentle cradle. It is a lot more comfortable than at Masthead Island in the middle of the ocean.

This has been a great day: swift sail on Big Red, stunning anchorage and a nice wander full of amazing scenery. This is a jewel along the Capricornia Coast.

In the quietness of the late afternoon, at slack water, the ochre dune is reflected in the calm water and everything glows. Didier and I hop into the dinghy to take a few shots of TIE against the golden dune. Then the sun goes down and we are treated to yet again a beautiful sunset.





2/8/15 – From Yellow Patch to the Keppel Isles

We escape out of Yellow Patch at high tide this morning and slowly make our way to Hummocky Island, some 15nm North. It is a slow spinnaker sail in the sunshine.

Along the way we cross paths with another Easy “Forever Dreaming” who comes on the radio, having recognised us... a reader of our articles. We are hard to miss and quite distinctive with Big Red flying!



They are based in Gladstone and heading to Yellow Patch. We have a chat on the radio, and talk about spinnakers. They need to get one and are considering different types. We too need to do some research as Big Red is getting old, and being used so much, there will come a time when we will have to replace it.

The breeze is so light that Big Red is barely staying up. So we end up dropping it and finishing the last few miles under motor.

Hummocky is quite an imposing island with two rugged peaks. We round the island to get into the north facing beach. We will anchor and have a look around, but will probably end up moving on to another island of the Keppel Group as the forecast is for a northerly breeze tonight, which will make Hummocky untenable. It is a beautiful warm sunny day and it is very pleasant out in the nets.

We hang around at Hummocky for an hour or so. Wade and Véro swim ashore; Didier and I take the dinghy. The tide is ebbing but still fairly high. There is no track to get up to the saddle and the tide is not right for snorkelling, so



we decide to move on to Humpy Island, next to Great Keppel. By then the tide will be low and we can enjoy good corals and fish life.

It is a motor to Humpy Island. The arrival is spectacular with Humpy, Half Way as well as Great Keppel Islands forming a large protected bay. There are a few runabouts fishing, but no other yacht. We anchor next to the Marine Park markers and jump overboard for a snorkel.



It is different underwater yet again: velvety looking corals with algae and seaweed, lots of tiny but colourful fishes. We follow small channels and find deeper holes where fish gather.

Later as we warm ourselves up back on Take It Easy, Didier sees and hears the blow of an odd looking beast. He is not sure what it is. We are all intrigued and stand on the cabin roof, waiting for it to re-surface. And it does, several times, right around the boat! It is a dugong! First ever sighting for all of us, it has a big nose, a heavy body, a mermaid's tail. We take lots of photos, none particularly clear, as he surfaces for a few seconds before disappearing for 10 minutes at a time. You just don't know where he will appear and by the time you have spotted him, he is gone again!







Sunset on this magic day is colourful. We are the only boat here and it is totally calm and silent. What a beautiful place: several islands around us and the Capricorn Coast in the distance to the West with a hilly skyline.

Later in the evening, we review our photos of the Dugong. “I have got a back” says Didier, “I have a tail” I add, Véro pipes up “here is a nose with a big nostril, but you really have to know what it is!” Maybe we can build a composite in Photoshop! Never mind, it was very special to have this gentle creature swim around TIE for a while! They are big herbivores, eating sea grass. They weigh between 250 and 420kgs and are 2.5 to 3.3m long! We are very privileged to have seen one since dugongs have been declared vulnerable.

We have a few good underwater photos too. The guys are now more comfortable in the water. Véro in particular is loving it. So we are glad we will spend the last few days of the trip in the Keppel Bay region where corals and tropical fish are plentiful.



3/8/15 – Humpy Island and Monkey Bay

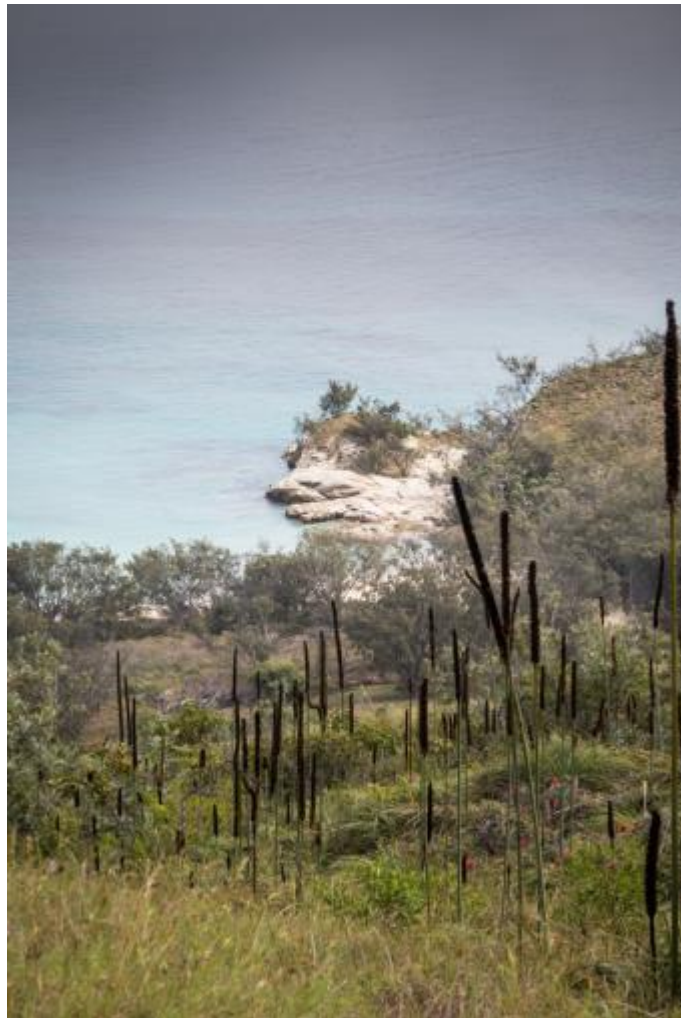
We wake up to a foggy morning. We see nothing around us for ages. It is quite eerie, but little by little the fog lifts to a brilliant, still, sunny day.

We chat for a while over breakfast, and then go ashore for a look at Humpy Island. There are toilets, a couple of bush showers, picnic tables under the she-oaks... very civilised!

We fill up four barrels with rainwater from the island for a round of laundry, as we are all running out clean knickers, shorts and T shirts!

But before the chores, we go for a beautiful walk: the ridge loop walk. It is scenic, there are lots of red grevillea in flower, both the upright and prostrate forms and this unexpected find is very beautiful. The sides of the hills are covered with these lovely red flowers, there is a sweet aroma in the air, and the views are to die for. The Keppels are still shrouded in fog, but our little Humpy Island is now in the sun.









Once back on board, it is lunch time. We eat tuna salad on boat baked bread, while a load of laundry goes on – the generator is noisy, but the chores get done! The boat looks like a Chinese laundry with all our clothes hanging on the life lines.

Véro starts a bread loaf. The first rise happens while the boat is underway to Monkey Beach on the Western side of Great Keppel Island, where we are hoping to snorkel at low tide and stay overnight. It is all very close – a couple of miles – and with no wind, we just motor there.

We anchor just behind the Marine Park markers at Monkey Bay. Armed with oyster knives, we go and taste a few oysters on the rocks. Next it is time to go for a snorkel.

As soon as we are in the water we are surrounded by hundreds of little blue fishes. As we swim over the reef, the water is clear and the quantity and variety of fish is astounding. Everywhere you look there is an amazing range: blue fusiliers, yellow butterfly fish, bat fish, angel fish, whiting, banded coral fish... stunning! The coral is quite good too with an underwater garden of brilliant green, purple, white and beige corals.

This place actually beats Lady Musgrave in the fish quantity and this is hard to do! The coral colours are not as good, but the fish numbers are extraordinary! We stay in the water longer than usual, such is the spectacle. When we finally go back to the boat, we are very cold! The water here is only 19⁰!

Véro finishes making us another big loaf! It is a winner, even better than my last one. It is so tasty!







4/8/15 – Great Keppel Island - Monkey Bay to Butterfly Bay

My birthday starts early: the wind is picking up, the tide is low but rising. Véro and I decide to go for an early snorkel. It is chilly in the wind on the sugar scoops as we put on the wetsuits, masks and flippers, but the water is not too bad. The boys are staying on board. We see lots of fishes again, notably the angel fish, fusilier, spotted sweet lip, a huge ray, lots of star fishes. The water is not as clear and the sun is not high in the sky to light up the underwater garden, but it is still worth the effort. We don't stay in the water for long though and it is hard to get back with the chop and tide. It takes us ages to warm up afterwards!



Wade moves us to Butterfly Bay to be sheltered from the Southerly wind. It is a fairly rugged part of Great Keppel Island. We anchor, have breakfast then go for a walk ashore, which takes us across a dune to another beach: Wreck Bay, a deserted sandy beach with the wreckage of some ship.

On the way we are incredibly lucky to see and photograph four new birds: a red capped dotterel on the beach, an osprey, the brilliant yellow-bellied sunbird with an iridescent blue throat, a bright yellow belly and long curved beak, and the rainbow bee-eater, an absolutely stunning bird. I wish I had my big lens, but the Tamron did a good job of catching clear shots even though both the sunbirds and bee-eaters were small, very active and a long way away. What a brilliant outing!



The beach walk also showed us a less attractive side of visiting tourists. Someone has obviously had a fire on the beach and a cook up, then abandoned camp, leaving their rubbish behind. There were empty drink bottles and cans, an empty dog food bag, a few tent pegs, and a couple of new looking frying pans. Everything was spread all over one corner of the beach. I can't understand how people can come to such a pristine place and leave their crap behind! But finders keepers, Wadie picked up the two pans, washing them and they are now replacing our old battered frying pan on Take It Easy.

After a late lunch on board, Didier and I return to the beach, armed with the big bird lens, but we don't see any! Later Wade and I go to the rocks and pig out on oysters while Véro and Didier nap then try their hand at fishing. And Didier caught a good size flathead! It was funny, they were not sure how to get it out of the water without losing it. "Are they coming back yet? They will never believe we have caught it if we lose it!" As we came back on Peasy, we pointed to the fish net. "Get it into that and put it in the bucket!" Véro is very squeamish: "How do you kill it? Shall we put it back?" No comes Wade's reply, "it's good to eat" and he puts a knife in between its eyes. "Oh yuk, poor little fishy!"





We decide not to go for another dive today and instead chat, and end the afternoon with a fiery sunset for our last official anchorage night.

Tomorrow we will have a last snorkel together then head to Yeppoon so the guys have ample time to sort themselves out. We have hired a car for Thursday to do some present shopping in the morning in Yeppoon and take them to the airport at Rockhampton in the afternoon.



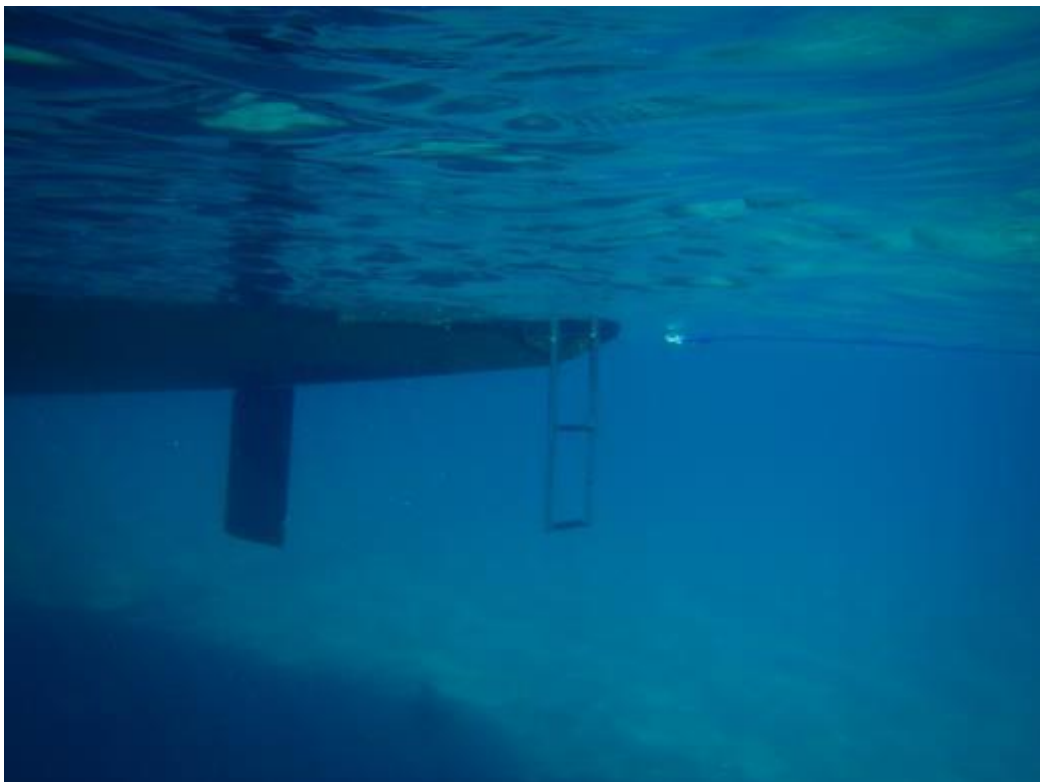
5/8/15 – Butterfly Bay to Rosslyn Bay

After a bouncy night we move to the beach next door, at the NE end of Great Keppel Island where there are corals for a last snorkel together. It is amazing how different each site is. In this location the corals are the main feature with beautiful colours and shapes: pale blue, deep blue nearly purple, iridescent blue tips, bright greens, mauves, whites. There are small fishes, but not in the quantity we saw at Monkey Bay.





Our favourite piece of coral is in the shape of a heart... very appropriate! We get cold and tired quickly as the current is strong. It takes us a couple of hours to warm up again afterwards!



After the dive, we motor to Middle Island to spend a few hours somewhere different before heading to Rosslyn Bay. We are incredibly lucky to observe an Osprey on its substantial nest of sticks on a rocky cliff, and then in flight with a fish in its talons. It is magic!



We take a walk on the beach, having fun taking photos of patterns in the sand and the pandanus trees, and crystal clear water breaking into wavelets. It is another beautiful spot. Maybe we will come back with Sue to visit the osprey.

Just on 1.30pm we up anchor, bound for the Rosslyn Bay marina. The breeze is light, so we motor-sail the 10nm under main and jib. We all feel a little subdued.



By 3.30pm we are in our allocated pen in the marina. Wadie did a sterling job of getting us in... "too easy". We check in at the office and very quickly put on three loads of washing! More to do tomorrow with the rest



of the sheets and towels! We are connected to fresh water and power and it is rather novel to use water at will, even if it does not seem right to waste so much of it on dishes!

We all have very long, warm, luxurious showers, and then have dinner at the Marina's restaurant, courtesy of Véro and Didier.

6/8/15 – Rosslyn Bay

Packing starts early for Véro and Didier on this Thursday, their departure day. We continue the washing loads! Bengie has discovered she can go ashore and explore the jetty, crouching low to the ground to start with, but gradually gaining in confidence. The boat is her refuge though: every time someone walks by, she runs back to Take It Easy.

While Wade looks after the rest of the laundry, changes the oil on the two outboards and catches up on some work, Véro, Didier and I take the hire car and drive to Yeppon for some gift shopping. We find a few suitable presents for the family back in France and also do the reprovisioning of TIE while we have transport.

After lunch we decide to go for a walk along the rocky shores next to the harbour and are delighted to spot sea turtles. So how cool is this: two hours before their flight home, Véro and Didier were watching turtles in the ocean - a nice way to conclude their cruise.

We took them to Rocky to catch their flight to Brisbane and as I write this, they are on a plane back to France. Parting was a little sad, but we will see each other this time next year in France, and we will be comparing notes and exchanging photos of this amazing cruise for weeks to come!

Véro's camera takes particularly good macro shots and panoramas. Didier takes a nice mix of landscapes and textures. I do a bit of everything, but close ups of birds is my thing. Wade's Olympus is used for the underwater shots. So between us, we have a serious record of the trip!





7/8/15 – Back to the Keppels

It is another sunny day, but chilly as we leave the marina for the final two days of our cruise, only this time, it's just the two of us and Bengie! We are sailing on a close reach in rather bouncy seas. On the program: a slow circumnavigation of Great Keppel Island over Friday and Saturday. We will stop where we fancy, snorkel, walk along a sandy beach or two. Véro and Didier are probably in Dubai by now.

The sail across is lively, we are averaging 7 knots and bouncing our way to the Keppels, taking a lot of spray across the bows. It makes for some interesting photos. But it is rather uncomfortable. This is why we don't like going to windward! And it is very chilly!





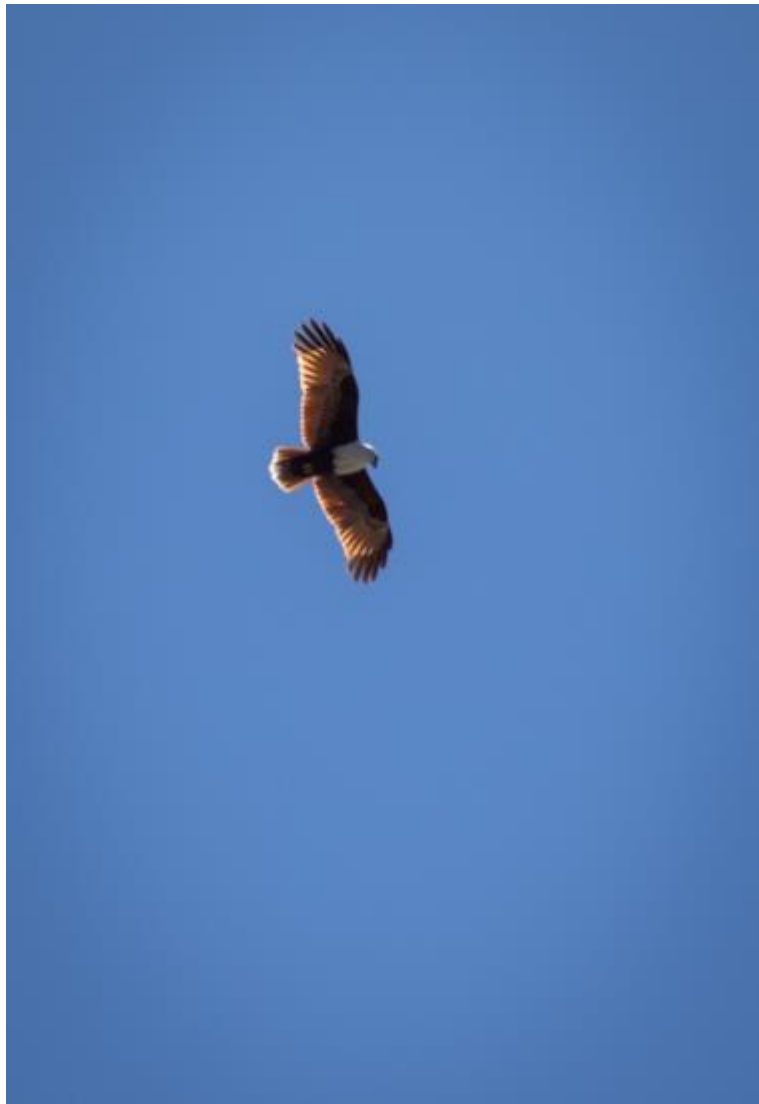
We drop anchor at a small beach just next to Wreck Bay. The wind is swirling around so we won't stay here overnight, but it is nice enough as a stopping spot. Wadie puts the fishing lines out and soon catches a little flathead, but it is too small so it goes back in!

We go ashore for a wander and I take my big lens, as well as the Tamron, just in case we see birds. There are small trees growing to one side, shaped by the prevailing

winds. They look great in silhouette against the aqua ocean and blue sky.



We luck out and see a few goats with large horns and a beautiful Brahminy Kite with its chestnut back and wings, pure white head and breast. It is perched on a scraggly tree. I swap lens, steady myself with the monopod and slowly approach closer. What a striking looking raptor. On 400 zoom, you see beautiful details of the soft, pure white plumage, sharply curved beak and dark eyes.





We grab a bit of lunch back on board: prawns we bought last night on the way back from Rocky. It is a tasty treat which we eat sitting in the sunshine on the sugar scoops.

Although this is a nice and deserted little cove, the swell is coming in on our beam. By 2pm we decide to up anchor and motor around the headland to the coral beach we last snorkelled at with Véro and Didier, next door to Butterfly Beach. This way tomorrow morning we can take a dive at low tide.

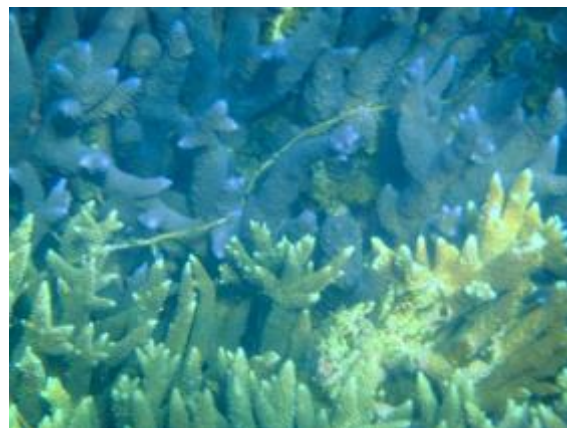
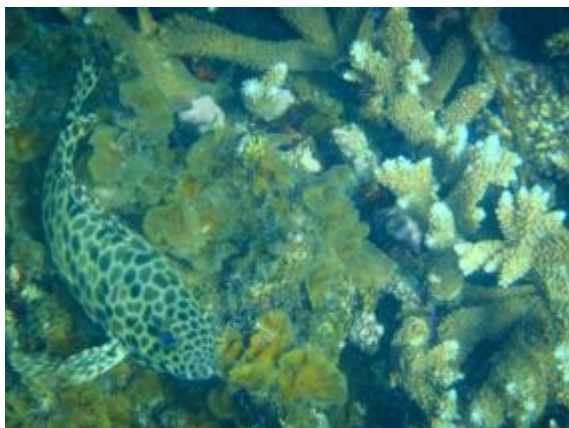
We feel a little too lazy to go ashore again and simply stay on board. Wade has a half-hearted attempt at fishing, but only little coral fish nibble at the bait. He then comes in to read, while I look at my photos of the Brahminy Kite and discover there were two in the tree, not just the one! Lucky find. A few are nice and clear and including one of the Kites in flight, panning with a 400 zoom lens being a real achievement for me!

Sunset does not disappoint. It is amazing how many colourful sunsets we have had on this trip. Just about every night we enjoy a fiery display. In fact last night I was going through a few of our sunset images and ended up loading half a dozen new photos for the headers on our website, replacing all the previous series. Very happy with that!

Today has been enjoyable but quiet. It feels odd to be on board on our own. Sharing is definitely a large part of our enjoyment with sailing, and doing so with Véro and Didier has been even more precious. The boat feels silent and empty.

8/8/15 – Last day at the Keppels

What a wonderful last day in the Keppels. We start our morning with bacon and eggs then a dive at low tide – about 9.30am. The water is cold but it is good to be out snorkelling. There is a large ray not far from the boat, flat on the sand. Then as we get over the reef, we admire the usual school of fusiliers, butterfly fish of various kinds, a spotted sweet lip and colourful corals. The purples and deep blues are very striking. The current is not bad today, so it is easier to hover, take a few photos and just enjoy the underwater garden.



We get back to Take It Easy, peel the wetsuits off, always a struggle – like skinning a rabbit – then move to Butterfly Bay where there is a little less swell. We anchor there. I have decided to put my big Canon 100-400 lens on – “The Beast” – in the hope that we will be able to see some of those stunning birds we saw there last time.

For a start, we see the little red-capped dotterel we spotted last time. I take a few shots, then we notice she is pretending to be injured, no doubt to lure us away from her nest. And we do come across the well camouflaged nest, just a scrape in the sand and an assembly of pumice stone with two brown spotted eggs, hard to distinguish from the rest of the coral rubble in the sand. Gorgeous, but it certainly explains Mum’s behaviour: lots of flapping, looking like she has a broken wing, and calling out. We move away so as to stop distressing her too much. She slowly walks back to her nest – such an amazing sight.



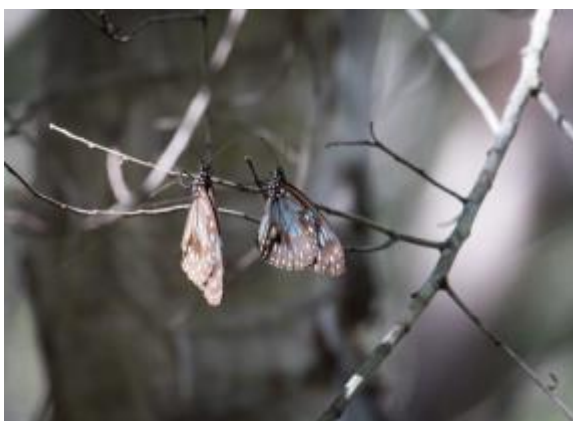


Next, we walk up the dune, hoping to see sunbirds and rainbow bee-eaters, but no such luck, so we head back along the beach to take the track at the other end to Svendsen's Beach.

There, we discover why our bay is called butterfly bay: hundreds of blue and black butterflies – blue tigers – I am so glad I have the 'beast' with me. I will have to tell Mike Powell about these, a Wordpress photographer from the US who specialises in birds and insects! We follow each other's sites and chat on line.



The track takes us through shaded forest and it is like walking through a butterfly enclosure, such are the numbers!



Later we come to a small lookout with two chairs, facing the sea – very civilised. Wade spots a nest suspended from light twigs: a wonderful construction with leaves, cobwebs and feathers with a little entrance porch. We sit a little way further with the nest still in sight and wait.



And bingo: a little bird with a bright yellow belly appears. It is a female sunbird! And the male with its dark blue iridescent chest is not far away, perched in a nearby tree.



Have I said it before? I am so glad I took my big lens and monopod, even if it is a pain to carry. I can't remember if I mentioned this before: I love my monopod. The boss at work gave me a sizeable gift voucher for my 30 years with National Mutual/AXA/AMP in April, with the recommendation to "get something good". So I did, I bought a Gitzo monopod to steady myself when I use the big lens. It makes a bit difference. I love the Gitzo gear, my tripod is a Gitzo too. You can't get much better equipment than this and both will last forever.

We will be leaving Take It Easy tomorrow. So by late afternoon, we head back to the marina. We still have a bit of work to do: wash down the boat and all the crockery and cutlery in fresh water, pack our bags, check what food and gear we need to bring next time we come up.

I look at Bengie snoozing away and have butterflies in the stomach just thinking she will have the worst day of her life tomorrow: she will be in her cage from 10.30 in the morning – an hour in the taxi to the airport, then two planes to get back to Melbourne at 6.30pm, and another cab ride back home! Poor little critter will be so stressed.

We are tied up at the marina by 4.45pm.



9/8/15 – Homeward bound!

We fly home today. It takes all day to get back. Bengie does her maiden flight and fares surprisingly well. She is one very adaptable little critter! We get lots of purrs, licks and cuddles once we all make it back to Brunswick. She certainly does not hold a grudge, and we feel less worried about having to put her through this long plane trip again at the end of the year, when we come back up!

This cruise has been a treasure trove of discoveries, intense emotions, with enough memories created to last us for a lifetime. There were so many firsts, especially for our family, which were elating at times, but sometimes challenging too!

First time on a catamaran, first time cruising, first time sleeping on a boat, first time nearly rolling out of bed in the swell, first time snorkelling, first time in the tropics, first time seeing whales, dolphins and a dugong, first time having to wash yourself in salt water, first time in a lagoon, first time being eaten alive by sand flies, first time on a coral reef, first time driving a dinghy, first time having to watch every millilitre of fresh water you use, first time kayaking, first time swimming with reef sharks, first time running out of knickers and T shirts and doing your laundry in a bucket, first time seeing tropical fish in the wild, first time being in a mangrove, first time catching fish off the back of the boat, first time steering a yacht, first time losing sight of land, first time doing without a 'real' shower for weeks, first time balancing on a heaving deck, first time eating sashimi fish, first time chucking up in a bucket, first time being winched up a mast, first time being drenched by an incoming wave, first time doing dishes in salt water, first time seeing so many new birds, first time living in a restricted space, first time swimming with a school of fusiliers, first time minimising power usage, first time seeing sea turtles, first time picking oysters off the rocks, first time witnessing spectacular daily sunrises and sunsets, and the list goes on!

It has been a unique opportunity for my family to get an insight into our passion and experience the wonders as well as the constraints of the cruising life. It has been a thrill for us to share our dream with them and see their excitement. There is no doubt sharing intensifies the experience. They will be back. We will be back. In fact this cruise has re-confirmed for us that this is the life we want to live after we give up work. So many more adventures to plot, so many amazing seascapes to explore... It can't come quick enough.

And now, we are all sorting through hundreds of photos and diary notes. Our illustrated journal is the first cab off the rank. Next a photo book of our best images will be published and magazine articles will be written. So it is not over! It is just going to take time, and this in itself is not such a bad thing, since it makes this unforgettable 2015 Queensland Winter Cruise last longer.

