

# NORTHERN MIGRATION

Having chosen to retire in July to move on board *Take It Easy* and depart from their home town of Melbourne in the middle of winter, Chris and Wade had one goal in mind: to sail to warmer climes as quickly as possible. But the weather gods had something else in mind for them. **CHRISTINE DANGER** reflects on the start of their life afloat: a slow, very cold and very trying beginning to their full time cruising life, punctuated with wild rides.

Once you have made the decision to move to a new season in your life, you just have to get going. We had spent a couple of months getting organised, so were eager to leave our land life behind and move on board *Take It Easy*. After all, this was a long held dream. Of course, if you want some adventure, you have to take the good with the rough. We knew that starting in winter would be hard and uncomfortable, but we had not counted on experiencing stressful conditions, particularly along the southern NSW coast. So when we look back, cruising in southern waters in winter had it all: the good, the bad and the ugly.

## THE GOOD

By far the best part of starting our life afloat in the middle of winter was seeing the whales on their northern migration, just like us! The Victorian coast, especially around Pt Hicks and Gabo Island, and the NSW south coast past Eden and Batemans Bay were highlights.

Each day we saw humpback whales cavorting along the coast, sometimes spooking us by appearing right next to the boat. At the same size or bigger than our 38ft cat, and at 10 times its weight, we did feel a little nervous, but in awe as they lob tailed, slapped their flippers or just porpoised past us.

Another advantage of cruising in the off season in the south has to be the lack of crowd. Nobody else is crazy enough to cruise around these parts at that time of year! You can have stunning anchorages to yourselves. Popular coves are deserted and you get a special feeling of glorious isolation. You also enjoy these beautiful places in a particularly gentle light.

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winter's air has a special clarity which if you are a keen photographer is really beautiful. You get diffused light that does away with harsh, pesky shadows.

## THE BAD

It's ccccold! The only way to keep warm is to pile up the layers. We became specialists at wrapping ourselves like mummies, in layer upon layers! If you don't, it is really miserable out there. Low temperatures and wind chill factor combine to make things incredibly chilly. We wore a 'wicking' top next to our skin to take any moisture away, then would add a thermal breathable mid layer and a waterproof outer layer. We found that our kayaking gear, polytherm long pants and long sleeve shirt lined with fleecy material, provided great insulation under our mid layer and offshore bib and brace and jacket. The same could be said for gloves: inner silk gloves from our skiing days, then thermal gloves or possum fur and merino woollen gloves and an outer shell if it was wet. Oh yes, and you could not forget that 70% of body heat is lost through the head. So we got ourselves fleecy hats to avoid the ice cream headaches ... And warm socks and sea boots. Nothing sexy about that look of ours, but then who wants to get naked in this weather!

Apart from keeping warm on the outside, you have to keep warm on the inside and this means hot beverages and lots of them. A thermos can be handy to keep



Batemans Bay.

the hot water coming for your drink of choice. But be warned, remember the clothing layers? Well you will have to unravel that for frequent visits to the loo! For women, overalls that zip down the sides to allow the 'drop seat function' without having to undo the braces is a very convenient option. I invested in a Gill bib and brace. For guys, well you know the drill!

Not much daylight! With the days much shorter, as well as the effect of the cold on the water, we found we had to plan for much shorter passages. It is bad enough to be out in the cold wind, but add darkness and you really feel the drop in temperature. It is no fun to be sailing in these conditions. So our days were planned around daylight. We'd leave at first light and be anchored by 4pm. As much as possible we avoided doing overnights. We have never been a fan of these, but in winter they are even less appealing. If we had a longer passage to cover, we would choose to get up at 3 or 4am and keep going till just before nightfall, to cover distance.

## THE UGLY

Watch the weather! Cruising in winter in the south can mean a series of confrontations with strong conditions. The air is denser in winter so the wind packs more punch than in summer. The windiest months along the coast of Victoria and southern NSW according to the Bureau of Meteorology happen in August, when almost half of all storms occur. On the NSW coast





**ABOVE:** *Take It Easy* anchored all alone at Broulee Island.  
**RIGHT:** The calm before the storm at Greenwell Point.



the westerlies are at their worst and are very gusty. This makes for awkward sailing as the wind varies from 10 to 20kts in the lulls, but can reach over 40kts within seconds in the gusts. We have sailed a lot in southern waters and always reef early. But the gusty conditions surprised us. We found we were heavily reefed and would go from snail pace to fast and furious acceleration in exuberant winds. Our sails were set for the gusts, not the lulls! This probably was the most stressful aspect of our migration.

It goes without saying that you have to pay close attention to weather forecasts, be very conservative, reef even earlier than you normally do. At the other end of the spectrum you can also get extremely calm conditions, in crystal clear air, nil wind, when motoring might be required. On those days, you may well encounter sea fog early in the morning. AIS and a radar are then essential pieces of equipment.

Beware of open anchorages! We have never been keen to spend time in marinas. Our preference is to select open/ocean anchorages and over the years we have explored the Tasmanian, Victorian and NSW coasts and found gems that offer shelter for specific wind directions. But open anchorages are exactly that: open. They are not secure havens. The golden rules are to use these ocean anchorages in only light conditions and to anchor well clear of the outer surf line, where good holding and smoother waves are found. Lingering too long in what can be very pleasant and isolated anchorages may mean you find yourself suddenly

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on a lee shore, riding short, steep breaking waves driven into the bay by a nor'easter on the east coast or southerly on the south coast. We can vouch for the fact this is not fun and can lead to scary and expensive consequences. We still prefer open anchorages, but accept that we are vulnerable and keep a very close eye on the forecasts. We also always, always allow for a full 360° at anchor because sometimes localised conditions can change quickly and catch you unaware.

So would we do this again?

Probably not – we would wait for a kinder season to get started. But having said that, we learnt a lot in the 10 weeks it took us to reach the warmer climes. We sailed in stronger conditions we had ever been in.

At times we found ourselves in weather that was demanding on us and the boat. We altered our usual sail configuration to cope with this, often going with a double reef main and staysail rather than main and jib. This combination was easier to manage and balanced the boat well.

Having taken a few beatings along the way in over 40kts, when the forecasts were for significantly less, we felt it was better to be safe and cold for longer than push hard in very demanding conditions.



**ABOVE:** Brilliant sunset at the Crookhaven River.  
**RIGHT:** Wade looking like a happy little mummy!  
**BELOW RIGHT:** Threatening skies as we near Wilsons Promontory.



We have 'stay or go' rules in different wind directions and strengths. We revised these as we went along as we learnt what we were prepared to endure. Although the boat could cope, we did not need the tension. The aim was to reduce stress and discomfort under sail.

But we look back at these first two months in our life afloat and are stronger for having lived through this. It did a lot for our confidence and awareness of what makes for enjoyable cruising, no matter the season.



After over 15 years of holiday cruising, Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have retired and moved on board *Take It Easy*, their 11.6m Easy catamaran. They have finally become sea gypsies. You can follow their adventures on [www.sv-takeiteasy.com](http://www.sv-takeiteasy.com)

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