

Tasmanian West Coast Foray

PART 1 MACQUARIE HARBOUR

Gale force winds, driving rain, cold temperatures, a small sprinkling of sunny days, and all this in late summer... Any takers for a foray down the West Coast of Tasmania? This is where **CHRISTINE DANGER** is sailing us over two issues.

Coming down the west coast, even during the so-called best season, is not for the faint hearted. It is committal, it is challenging, but when it all goes smoothly on a well-equipped boat, you are in for a treat, a bit soggy, but oh the scenery!

We made it our goal to sail along the west coast of Tasmania during our first year of living afloat. It was the one part of the island we had not explored while still working. But now that we are retired and living on *Take It Easy*, we are in an enviable position: plenty of time, no deadline, no schedule. Everyone knows that the worst thing on a boat is a calendar. It leads you to take risks, go when you should not and turn what should be an enjoyable trip into an uncomfortable or scary cruise.

Our expedition started from Melbourne in late February. We sailed west to Apollo Bay, then south to King Island and the Hunter Group, and there we waited for the right conditions to start our descent. It did not take long at all to get the desired north east forecast.

When you sail down the west coast, especially the first time, it is daunting. There are not many places to hide. But as we found out, in the right conditions we could make our way down during daylight hours, avoiding the overnights we dislike, and actually see the coast we were sailing along. And of course we had ample time to explore the two iconic spots along this fabled coast: Macquarie Harbour and Port Davey-Bathurst Harbour.

So over two articles, we will share with you the sites we visited and impressions we formed. The first focuses on Macquarie Harbour, the second on Port Davey.

MACQUARIE HARBOUR WILDERNESS

We chose to venture down in March-April. Between February and April the weather is more settled, with significantly less winds over 30kts, and a higher proportion of north easterlies than the normally predominant westerlies. As we have already mentioned, we try to avoid overnight sails, preferring to day sail and put some effort into discovering shelters to rest in along the way. The passage from the northwest tip of Tasmania to Macquarie Heads is

100nm. Add another 22 when your starting point is at Three Hummock Island. So one or even two stops can be made along the way.

We studied two anchorage guides which are our bibles: *Cruising Tasmania* by J Brettingham-Moore, and *Tasmanian Anchorage Guide* published by the Royal Yacht Club of Tasmania. We talked to Tasmanian friends who know the area well and picked the brains of cray fishermen to find out about anchorages they use along the coast. There is a wealth of knowledge out there and people are generous with information. All you have to do is ask.

So we found out about a couple of spots to stop at on the way to Macquarie Harbour when the breeze is in the east quadrant. These were Ann Bay, about 15 miles down the north west tip of Tasmania, and Venables Corner, just on the north side of Sandy Cape, about 48 miles from the tip. Both offer reasonable shelter, although are subject to some swell, as with most west coast anchorages. We ended up stopping at Sandy Cape and spent a gentle night there.



The coast is quite scenic: a mix of scrub, sand dunes, rocky outcrops that create spectacular waves even in calm conditions, and impressive granite tors standing erect like Easter Island statues, particularly around the Pieman River.

We had a great run, passing Cape Grim under spinnaker, then using a combination of main, staysail and jib as the breeze switched to the southeast, finishing the first day motor sailing. The second day was excellent and we sailed all the way to Hells Gates. The mountains of the western wilderness were in the background all along, some distance from the shores but looking majestic.

TOP: Strahan with its old buildings ... a welcome sight after many hours at sea.

ABOVE: Passing Cape Grim.



TOP: Sunset at Sandy Cape.

ABOVE: Grey day as we enter Kelly Basin, an anchorage full of history.

The arrival at Hells Gates was daunting. The name itself conjures doom and gloom, but the convicts named Macquarie Heads that way to refer to the life awaiting them there, rather than the roughness of the entrance itself. Still you can't help but be nervous and a little awestruck as you approach. We had the ideal run in, with totally calm, sunny, spectacular conditions.

Once in the harbour, the size of the site is overwhelming. When you think harbour, you may well have an image of a port, with artificial structures and jetties. But picture this: an enclosed waterway six times

the size of Sydney Harbour; empty it out of people and townships, and instead fill it with rainforest wilderness right down to the water. The surrounding untamed forest and the mighty Gordon River that flows through it make for an outstanding, otherworldly setting, wonderful for cruising, with numerous isolated anchorages. The only settlement is the village of Strahan with its fine old buildings dating back to the 1800s and the mining and timber boom. The rest is grandeur, isolation and the jewel in the crown of Tasmania's Western wilderness. There is no one around, it is so big and breathtakingly beautiful.

We discovered Macquarie Harbour in all its moods: sunny when we arrived, then misty, rainy at times, and above all rugged, dramatic and unpredictable. We came here wanting to see as much as we could,

learn about the history, experience different anchorages around the Harbour, and go up the Gordon River.

We started our stay with the compulsory trip to Strahan. It was as much to see the little village, as to replenish our supplies and do a few chores. If you are lucky, you may find a jetty side spot to tie up to, but most are taken by the local cray-fishing fleet and tour operators. So it is easier to anchor out in Risby Cove and dinghy in.

One of the useful things we did was to obtain two mud maps of the region, showing anchorages and points of interests for both the Harbour and the Gordon River. These have been produced by Trevor Norton, a local, and are well worth the \$20 a piece investment. Trevor runs a commercial yacht, *Stormbreaker*, up the Gordon for overnight trips, kayak pick-up and delivery and he is a great source of knowledge.

Having got the chores out of the way, we headed out. It is worth noting that once out of Strahan, there is no internet or mobile phone service. You can pick up weather forecasts from TAS Radio Hobart in some anchorages, but once up the Gordon, there is no contact. We have an inexpensive HF Receiver to listen to the forecasts and it gets used a lot in remote areas.

Part of the joy of cruising is getting to scenic spots and exploring ashore. We enjoy walking, learning about history and seeing remnants of

old times. Here are a few of the anchorages we stayed at.

Betsy Bay, on the western side of the Harbour, offers good shelter from west southwest in a shallow bay (2-4m) with a muddy bottom. It is often frequented by fishermen who establish a camp there. The attraction of this bay is a 12km return walk to the ocean. It is a marked trail through button grass moorland and tea trees.

Double Cove, also on the western side of the Harbour, offers a choice of two anchorages as the name suggests and is a delightful spot. You are surrounded by tall timbers. We anchored in the south Cove, in 3-4m over mud. The cove offers great shelter from all winds except strong northerlies.

Sarah Island, although not an overnight anchorage, it is worth a visit because of its convict history. There are interpretive signs and plenty of ruins to see. You should anchor out, well away from the jetties, as the island is on the itinerary of several tour operators which ferry large number of tourists a couple of times a day. So it is wise to time your visit accordingly.

Birchs Inlet is a particularly lovely and surprisingly wide inlet at the southern end of Macquarie Harbour. There



are several spots to anchor in, one very well protected from all winds at the north east end, but we chose to go to the southern end and dinghy ashore to search from some relics of railway. This anchorage is fine in all but a northerly wind.

Kelly Basin is another inlet we particularly enjoyed. There are several anchorages there and a few ruined jetties on the northwest side and northeast side of the basin with significant ruins of the old town of Piling. A railway wagon, riveted steam boilers, brick kilns all make this a fascinating area to explore. There is also a great walk along the old railway track, a long but easy wander amongst temperate rainforest and along Bird River. You can anchor at West and East Piling in shallow water, or at St Leger Point

One of the relics at Piling in Kelly Basin.

on the east side of the entrance to the Basin. This is sheltered from strong southerly winds whereas the Piling anchorages are best in a west through to north quadrant.

UP THE GORDON RIVER

A trip up the Gordon is one of the must do excursions when you come to Macquarie Harbour. The main tour boats will only go four miles up-river, however yachts can go about 20 miles. The river is broad at the entrance, but slowly narrows and meanders as you travel up. It is magnificent with the twists and turns

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and the reflections. There are a few spots to stop at: Boom Camp where the piners used to live, Heritage Landing where tourists' boats land their passengers for a brief but interesting rainforest boardwalk, Marble Cliffs, a limestone formation in a bend of the river, Butler Island, Warners Landing and Sir John Falls, both with a jetty to tie up to. And of course there are a few spots along the river where the depth is suitable for anchoring, although some parts are very deep indeed, over 20m. We went as far as Sir John Falls. You can go up a little further in the big boat to Big Eddy, but can't anchor there because of depth. Beyond this, the Gordon is navigable by dinghy past Pyramid Island at the mouth of the Franklin River, but you need a strong enough outboard to negotiate two rapids. In our case four people in a 10ft Walker Bay tender with a 2.5hp motor was never going to be enough, so we did not attempt it.

The highlights of any trip up the Gordon are the amazing reflections you get, the mist that rises off the river late in the afternoon and early morning, the surprise sightings of a platypus foraging next to your

anchored boat. Every twist and turn of the river offers a new view. It is quite enthralling. But it can also be a scary place if heavy rain falls.

The Gordon provides good shelter in strong winds, however add serious rain and you have a recipe for disaster. When we were there we got caught in heavy weather. The river rose by 2m in less than 48 hours, which was not our worst nightmare. The major problem was the hundreds of tree trunks careering down the river. A few people sustained some damage with logs in the anchor chain, a tree trunk in between catamaran hulls. So a word of warning, by all means go and hide from strong winds up-river, but if rain is forecast, stay well away from it! We escaped unscathed, but have learnt our lesson!

TOP: Perfect reflections are one of the amazing sights on the Gordon River, especially at sunset.

ABOVE L-R: Moody anchorage for *Take It Easy* off Sarah Island.

ABOVE LEFT: Very sedate looking Hells Gates.

ABOVE RIGHT: Weather change up the Gordon River.

Our return to Strahan enabled us to reconnect with the outside world and replenish our supplies, ready for the next part of our adventure: the passage down to Port Davey-Bathurst Harbour and our two weeks exploration of this stunning wilderness. This will be the subject of our next article. Stay tuned!

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