



Coral Sea Voyage 2022



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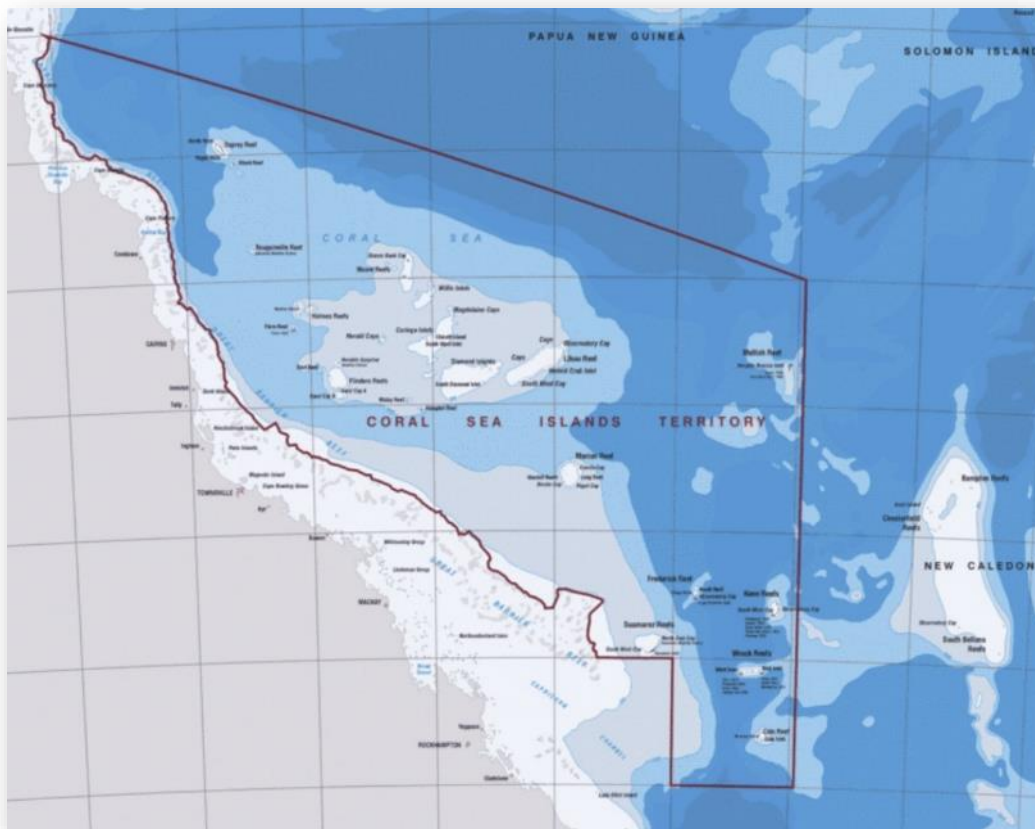
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A Thirst for Adventure

In winter 2022, we were hoping to do something different to previous years. Two regions were piquing our interest: the Swains and the Coral Sea Islands, both far from the well-travelled coast.

We never got the weather for the Swains on the way north. Instead we started to seriously investigate the atolls beyond the Great Barrier Reef, the Coral Sea islands and reefs which are part of an Australian external territory well offshore of Queensland.

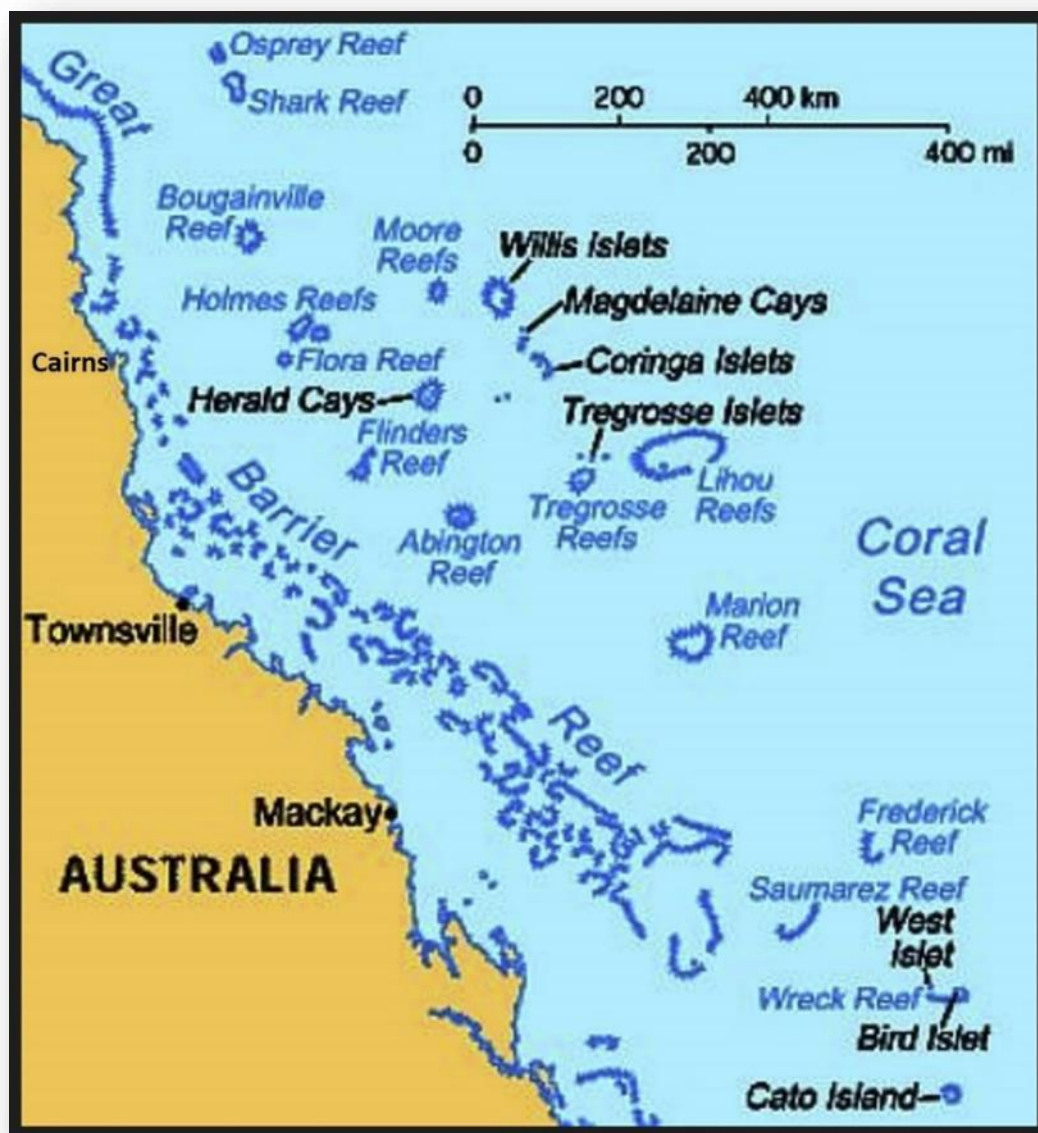
The appeal was to explore what we hoped would be a vast and pristine wilderness out there and experience a thriving wild marine environment protected by isolation from direct human impacts. The oceanic reefs and islets of the Coral Sea are particularly rich in birds and aquatic life. It could be just what we needed to rekindle a sense of wonder and surprise we had not felt for a while.



The Coral Sea Islands Territory is an external territory of Australia which comprises a group of small mostly uninhabited tropical islands and reefs in the Coral Sea. Remote and vast, far offshore of Queensland, the line of Coral Sea reefs stretches from near Papua New Guinea down to just north of Fraser Island and extends some 650 nautical miles east of the Australian mainland. It would take many separate expeditions to explore it all.

The Coral Sea Islands were first charted in 1803. In the 1870s and 1880s the islands were mined for guano but the absence of a reliable supply of fresh water prevented long-term habitation. The Coral Sea Islands became an Australian external territory in 1969 by the *Coral Sea Islands Act* (prior to that, the area was considered a part of Queensland) and extended in 1997 to include Elizabeth Reef and Middleton Reef nearly 800 km further south. It is spread over 750,000 square kilometres but the islands themselves only occupy a few square kilometres of land area. The only inhabited island is Willis Island, with 4 weather station staff generally living there.

Here is another chart showing a bit more details about the reefs and islands.



Our Cruising Companions

Our first foray out in the blue yonder was not a voyage we wanted to do on our own. There are rallies organized to take groups of boats out there, but these are not our scene. Instead, we wanted to find a buddy boat to go with, crewed by people with a similar outlook to ours. And this is not easy. Going with another vessel works best if you are reasonably well matched: crews with similar interests and resourcefulness, boats of comparable performance and size, availability to go at the same time.

By chance we reconnected with Simon and Amanda Anderson on *Windsong II* in the Whitsundays, a couple we had met two years prior at the Percies and had a lot of fun with. We realised we were dreaming of similar adventures and decided to plot our getaway together. The only catch was picking a time when both crews were free of social commitments. With both boats hosting guests on board during July, we hung around the Whitsundays till we were both ready to go and aimed for an August expedition.

The next challenge was deciding where to leave the coast from. We researched information about the atolls that most appealed to us, considered the wind angle if we departed from Airlie Beach Vs Townsville. It became obvious that the further north up the coast we left from, the harder it would be to get to where we wanted with strong southeast trade winds blowing. So Airlie Beach was it!

Simon and Amanda sail on *Windsong II*, a 47ft Leopard catamaran. They freedive, snorkel, kitesurf, fish, dive with a hookah. They are into fishing, photography, drone flying, self-sufficiency. They are active, capable sailors with offshore experience... Same as us. What is not quite the same is our ages! They are nearly 20 years younger than us so they keep us on our toes as far as energy goes.

We cruise and live on *Anui*, a 52ft Crowther. She goes like the wind and we love sailing her. What we no longer have in body fitness and youth, we have in sailing performance!



Our Preparation

There is a scarcity of reference material about the seldom visited islands and reefs of the Coral Sea but one book is available and became our bible: *Australia's Coral Sea Islands and Marine Park* book by Peter Sayre. We were reliant on his extensive knowledge of the area, since he had made it his mission to explore the Coral Sea on his motor cruiser Phoenix for 30 years. We also downloaded useful blog posts from Cruisingtheedge.com written by Robin Jeffries who has explored the Coral Sea for several years with his partner Sylvie Jambu on their 14m power cat. Maybe as we spend time in this area ourselves, we can contribute to the reference material as a sailing catamaran.

Also part of our preparation was reviewing our satellite images of the Coral Sea, pin pointing possible anchorages at different locations and marking them on our navigation software. Satellite imagery is an essential part of the kit for a stress-free approach to anchorages studded with bommies.

We were hoping to take aerial images during our trip. These give a breathtaking and sweeping perspective to already stunning surroundings. Several weeks before setting off, we applied for and were granted a drone permit by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, a requirement to take aerial footage in the Coral Sea Islands Territory.



Watching the weather occupied most of the month of July. We began the process of monitoring conditions through both the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) and our PredictWind/Iridium satellite system, looking at patterns, average wind strength and direction. We were also studying BOM observations at Lihou Reef, Flinders Reef and Holmes Reef in the Coral Sea to compare the actual conditions to the multiple forecast models that PredictWind offers. We found that the European ECMWF model was consistently the most accurate and in fact the only one we paid attention to during our voyage.

Then during the last week of July as we were all getting organized, we went about identifying a suitable weather window for the voyage. We were looking for several days of 15 to 20 knots southeast or less to embark on a 30-hour ocean passage to our first stop in the Coral Sea. The **Coral Sea Islands** provide reasonable shelter from trade winds and ocean swells, so once there, we could hide from stronger conditions if needed and not have to scurry back to the mainland. But we did not want to beat into wind for hours on end to get there. We did not have to wait for long to get a favourable forecast. Both boats were free of social commitments by the end of July, were ready and fully provisioned by 2 August, and the next day we were on our way!

And of course there was all the boat preparation and provisioning. We are sticklers for thorough servicing on *Anui*, and thus we really had nothing out of the ordinary to attend to as far as engines, systems, or sails maintenance. Our fuel tanks were full – 400l of diesel - for the big boat and 80l of petrol for the dinghy. We left with full water tanks too – 400l also – and a water maker in good working order. Other preparation centered around provisioning. We typically put together a menu to have variety in what we eat, and which makes it easier to do the shopping. We freeze a supply of meat and seafood, we get a mix of fresh and bottled fruit, we stow away root vegetables, onions and the like that keep for weeks in crates, we pack away other fresh supplies and staples and refrigerate what we can. We make our own yoghurt, bread, biscuits, pizzas, we sprout beans and seeds. We did not know how long we would go for, but we had enough fresh supplies to last for a month, and enough dry or tinned produce to keep us going for a few more weeks. We were not going to starve on this trip!

Our Voyage



We took off without a specific itinerary but rather a list of possibilities. Our preference was to go to East Diamond Islet first but failing this we could have made an easier run to Flinders Reef. As it happened, the weather permitted a direct line to East Diamond, all be it into wind, between 40 and 60° apparent. What came afterwards was decided along the way based on wind strength and direction, how we felt and what appealed to us! It meant we had a hard upwind run to start with, but from there, we would sail easier and shorter beam or downwind runs.

We were prepared to go for multiple weeks and had no commitment to force us back to the mainland. The weather was what would dictate our return. We were gone for three weeks and for all but the last two days, we enjoyed low to moderate southeast trade winds. We were able to explore, get off the boat daily, have fun walking, birdwatching, snorkeling, fishing and even kite surfing on the stronger days. We could not have asked for better conditions.

It is not until the last two days that the strong winds picked up to 25 knots and with over 10 days of these conditions forecast, we felt it was time to head back inshore.

We were struck by the vastness, colours and wildlife we saw throughout the voyage. We took thousands of photos, we documented our journey daily, capturing our discoveries and impressions. This Cruise Story acts as the trip log of a magnificent voyage for us and a cruising reference for those interested in oceanic adventures.

All aboard and let's go!

Beyond the Great Barrier Reef

The adventure begins! We had left Airlie Beach many times in the previous two weeks, but our departure on 2/8/22 was a big one: the onset of our much-awaited Coral Sea Voyage. There was a mix of excitement, anticipation, a little nervousness as we were departing for somewhere new, remote and definitely off the beaten track, although not alone, with *Windsong II* following in our track.

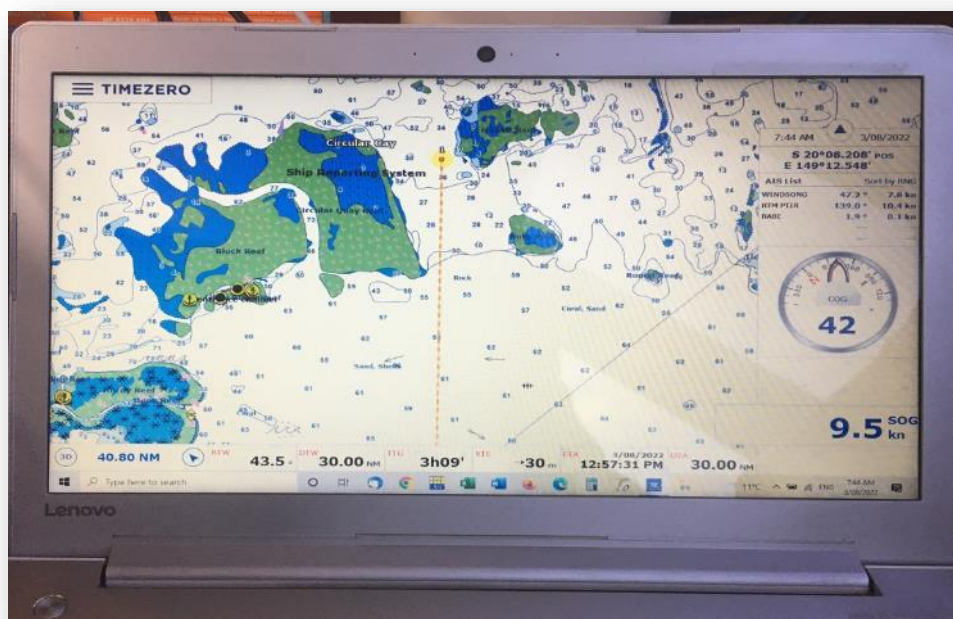


Our first leg was an easy one: to Windy Bay, on Hazelwood Island, which positioned us well for an early departure on 3/8/22 to cross the Great Barrier Reef and get out in the Coral Sea, bound for a 256 nautical miles run to East Diamond Islet.

We left Windy Bay at first light on 3/8/22. As usual it took a while to get the sails up and ready. *Windsong* was quicker off the mark, but it did not take long to pass her. They averaged 8kn under full main and jib; *Anui*, reefed down to hold her back a bit was doing 9-10 knots. We had nice conditions: scattered clouds, sunny, 15 to 20 knot SE, beam sea.



We headed for Circular Quay Reef, passing on the southern side to get through the Barrier Reef. Circular Quay is a very large reef and with 2 or 3 knots of current against us it took a while to get beyond it. Once passed it the reefs are more scattered, then eventually we were out in the ocean, and dropped away from the continental shelf. It was about 2pm, an 8-hour passage to get through the 70nm.



Once away from the protection of the reef, and beyond the Continental Shelf, we found the conditions choppy. We had quickly gone from 50m depth to 1000m. There were no clear swell lines like we were used to in the Southern Ocean. Instead, we had short, steep waves. Time for a second reef!



With the apparent wind at a 45 to 60° angle, we were sailing to windward in 15 to 22 knot ESE. Despite being in depths of 1000m, it felt more like a Bass Strait crossing: lots of movement, lots of bashing and banging, not comfortable, particularly during the night. We had two reefs in the main and a handkerchief for a jib to slow right down to 8 knots and quieten the ride a bit. Doing over 12 knots speed was just too rowdy and unpleasant in these conditions. *Anui* is such a feisty vessel! Our passage planning tool on PredictWind showed we needed to average 8 knots to get to our destination by mid-morning the next day in good light. Going faster would get us at the reef too early.

As usual we did two-hour watches throughout the night. By the third round, we were both feeling green but kept ourselves in check, bucket at the ready. Daylight the next day was welcome.

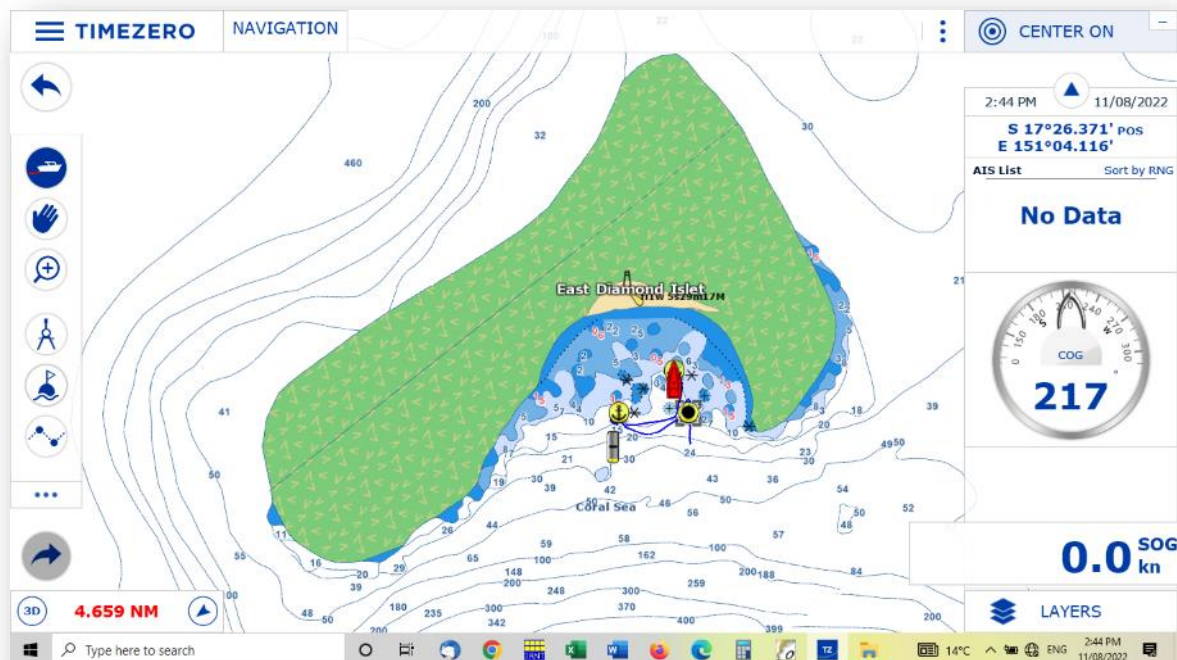
A few flying fish had landed on deck and in the nets during the night. We have never been quick enough with the camera to capture images of them flying through the air like big dragonflies!



We reached the Tregossa Reefs, a large, submerged platform where the Diamond Islets stand by 9.00am and were anchored at East Diamond, the most easterly of the four islets, by 10.00am.

East Diamond Islet

Here is a screen dump from our navigation software, showing the island in yellow and the extensive reef surrounding the bay in green. We had marked in advance a couple of anchoring spots to make our arrival easier. It is that wedge shape reef as well as the island that provide such good protection.



And here is what our first clear views of the coral cay looked like as we were approaching: a wispy grey cloud appears, floating on the horizon, then as you get closer it becomes more defined like a thick green texta line drawn above the water, and closer still, a ring of sand at the base of the greenery. Is that a yacht's mast? Surely, we haven't come all this way to have another yacht there! No, it is the lighthouse!



The East Diamond Islet is described as the jewel in the crown of all anchorages: well protected from wind and swell, the water a stunning sapphire blue, with a huge sandy area in front of the beach to anchor in. The welcoming committee was about: all sorts of birds were flying overhead: boobies, terns and frigatebirds in particular. We dropped the pick in 12 meters of water over clear sand. We could have gone closer in but were happy with nothing to hit behind us, going for simplicity on arrival.

Windsong arrived a little later, having had some drama. Just as they were exiting the Great Barrier Reef the day before, their mainsail came down after the webbing at the top gave way. It was a bit like what happened with our jib the week before, but at the head of a much bigger sail rather than the clew! We saw the main drop and flap about, thinking they were reefing awfully slowly. When they called us on the radio and announced: "We've lost our main, we will call you back when we have sorted ourselves out", we wondered what they would do next: turn back, change heading or keep going with motor and jib. In the end it was fixable but obviously not in the choppy ocean. They have a serious sewing machine on board capable of tackling sail cloth, so after tidying up the mainsail they decided to keep going under the jib alone with one engine ticking along. We all agreed to meet up at East Diamond the next day.

When you do a 28 hour passage, particularly if the conditions have been a bit rough, the boat is in a mess and the bodies smell a bit ordinary. We had stuff everywhere, dirty dishes, a foot bath in the cockpit. So we committed to tidiness, had a swim in the 22.5° ocean, a fresh water shower then breakfast out in the cockpit in the balmy 27° temperature! What a difference 500 kms north make... so much warmer!



Early in the afternoon, we dinghied over to the island which stands about 8m high and is well vegetated with low shrubs and Pisonia trees. This is a haven for seabirds: gannets, brown, masked and red footed boobies, lesser and great frigatebirds, common and black noddies, bridled, black-naped, crested and sooty terns... all nesting and roosting in the vegetation. We have often walked along bird rookeries, and typically they are distinct sections occupied by each species. But here, they all mingle and share the real estate peacefully! It is a busy and noisy place. Birds soar overhead, give their offsprings flying lessons, tend to the little ones in nursery groups, look after the odd fluffy chick wandering the beach all covered with down. The adults build nests, rest in the shrubbery, run around, go foraging... It is astounding. It was a treat to rediscover an old hobby: bird photography. So much variety on this islet, and what is most surprising is the different species of birds sharing the shrubs to nest on... Nature has obviously called a truce, even between boobies and frigatebirds! The Canon camera ran hot as we walked right around the cay. It is so beautiful, all with pristine blue water, clean sand, and lots of fish in the shallows. What a place to be at for Chris's 65th birthday, literally in the middle of the ocean, 400 or 500 kms from the coast, well worth the discomfort of the overnighter sail, and *Windsong* and us have the place to ourselves.







Boobie chick, Red-footed Booby in Argusia Argentea (Octopus Bush)



Immature Lesser Frigatebird, Adult Lesser Frigatebird

The sky was alive with birds soaring. We have never seen so many frigatebirds sharing the air with boobies.



Back down on the ground, everywhere you go along the sand, Red Hermit Crabs creep along in their borrowed shell. You look at a pretty shell in the sand, pick it up and realise it is lived in! Then just a bit further, another shell is moving... and a red critter appears!



On the eastern side of the cay where large rocky slabs edge the shores, Pale Line Rock Crabs scamper about. They gather on the edge of a rock, hopping from one spot to another, at times getting swamped by surging waves. They are quite spirited too, facing the photographer with their pincers brandished.



At either end of the islet are large areas clear of vegetation with many depressions in the sand where turtles have nested. Large numbers of green turtles arrive between October and April to nest on the sandy cays of the Coral Sea Marine Park. Outside these months their presence on the cays remains abundantly clear, and we saw large dug-out nests, leathery remains of eggshells, even turtle skeletons.



We were itching to see an aerial view of our surroundings, but did not want to risk it in more than 15 knots! With the wind forecast to calm down to between 10 and 15 knots, we waited till the next day to send the drone up. It was obvious we would need to launch from the deck of *Anui*, not from the beach, as flying low from the island would be suicidal for the drone and the many birds!

Well before we left, when we did our research about the atolls, we found we needed a permit to fly the drone in the Coral Sea Islands Territory. It was an involved process but we applied, wanting to do the right thing. The day before we set off, Chris got a call from the GBR Marine Park Authority confirming the permit was granted. Although we left before the email had come through with the document, we knew we could at least fly the beast legally. We are now permitted to fly in the Coral Sea till the end of the year.

A couple of flights gave us the breathtaking view of our environment. The first flight was about getting the anchorage with our two boats and the island in the background. The second flight we flew high above the islet, higher than the birds! But when we brought the drone back to *Anui* one cheeky little noddy was circling around it and trying to dive bomb it! Chris had to raise it up and down fast a few times to escape Mr Noddy before she could land it.

With even calmer conditions on the following days, we thought we might try flying to the eastern side of the islet to look back at the anchorage with the sun behind the drone. The colours you see are true to life. One of the most striking aspects about this location is the colour of the ocean when the sun is out. Deep sapphire blue and brilliant aqua dominate.





The lighthouse structure in the centre of the islet stands 29 meters above sea level and has a range of 17 nautical miles. At night it shines brightly and is a comforting sight, being the only light in the darkness other than our two boats' anchor light.

With very calm and sunny conditions on 6/8/22, it was the day to fly the drone to the eastern side of the island and look back at the anchorage. It meant flying about 1.5km east of us, and high enough to be significantly higher than the birdies, by law above 100m.

These shots are oriented towards the west, the western side being where the deep water is. You can really see the shape of the island and extent of the anchorage, as well as the shallow reef flats on the eastern side. The second image was taken as we were flying the drone back towards the boat.

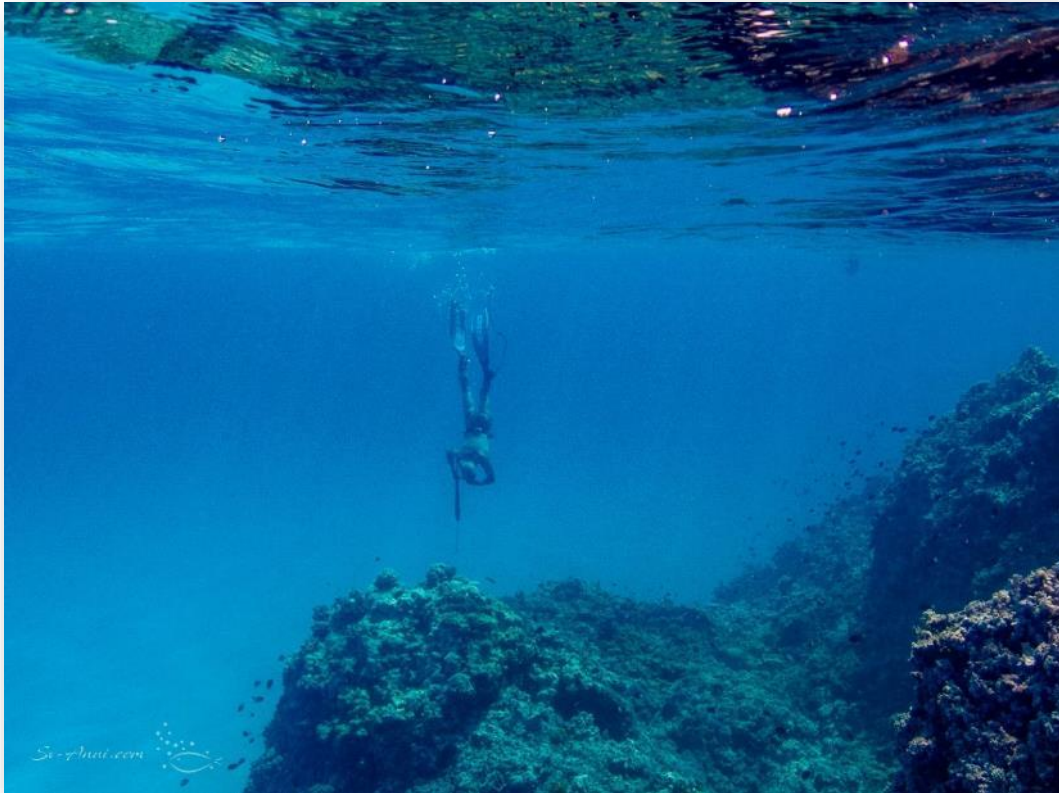


Low tide coincided with late morning. Time for a dive and snorkel. We went to a few of the large bommies at the back of the bay. The water clarity was incredible: easily 50m visibility, a real delight and something we had never experienced before. What was less delightful was the state of the reef: a mass of grey, barren limestone rock with very few live corals. Fish life was reasonable only with not many good homes for the fish to hide in. But we explored, went deep down, seeing a few little treasures and just enjoying the warm water and clarity. Unfortunately, this reef was in worse condition than Little Black Reef we had been to several weeks before offshore of the Whitsundays. It was very disappointing, shocking in fact. To us it looked like a succession of bleaching events which have destroyed practically all the coral.

The underwater shots say it all: bare, grey bommies in the sparkling blue ocean. You get a sense of the depth, size of the pinnacles and gutters, but all devoid of colour. Here we were thinking that we were far enough away from civilization to find flourishing underwater life. Our human impact is far reaching!



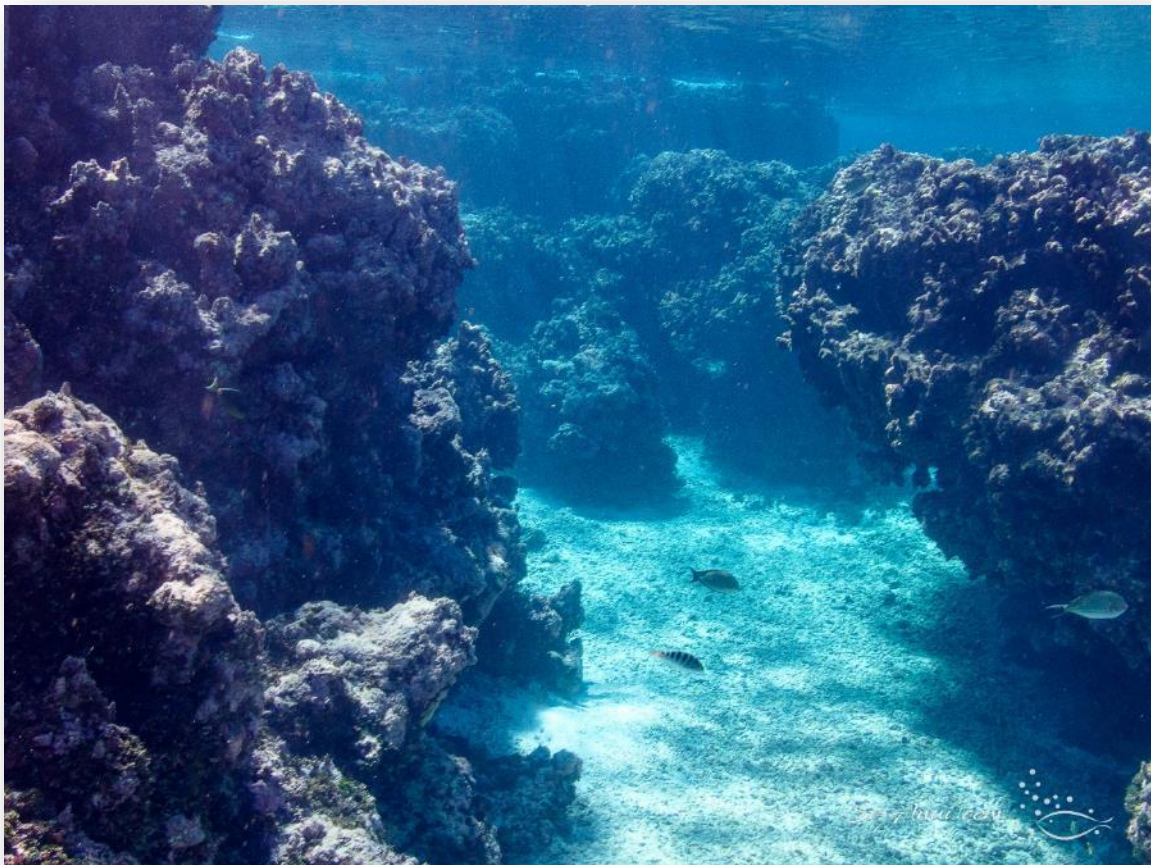




Wade managed to spear a Big Eye Bream. So that evening we shared it as a sashimi feast with Simon and Amanda on *Anui*.

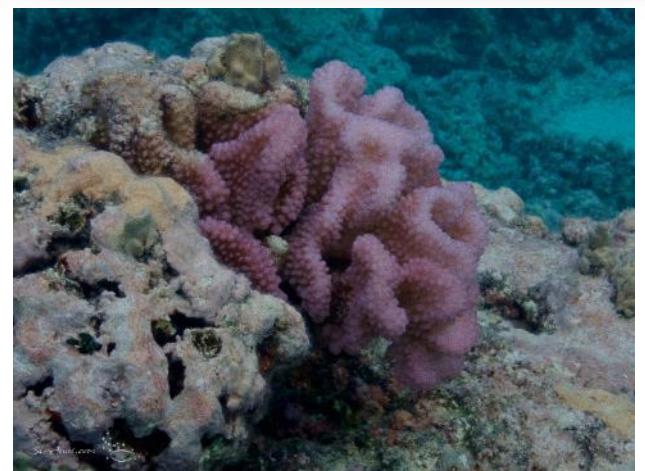
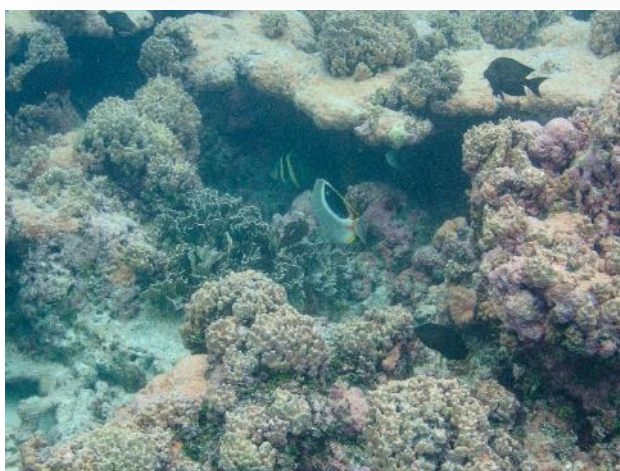
We also decided to explore the reef on the outside southern edge, in the hope that the underwater life would be better. There were many more fish, including pelagic species, but the coral was wrecked... the same grey and brown shades of eroded, bare, shapeless coral rock. There is hardly any recognizable coral shapes, just rock so the damage has happened some time ago and back to back bleaching events have sealed the fate of the coral.

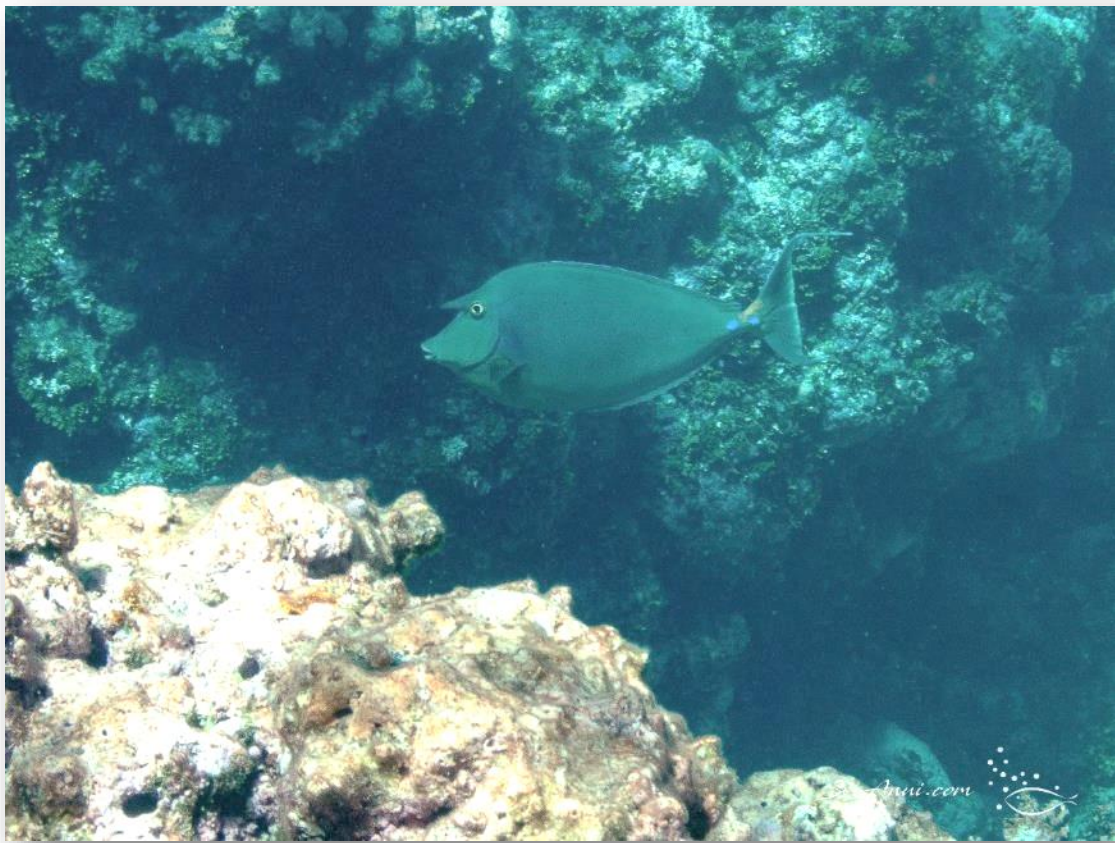
You can image what the seascape might have looked like a few years back: interesting gutters, swim throughs, lush walls, but not anymore!



Yet the surgeonfish are plentiful, as are the Parrotfish and Unicornfish. In the rare tiny little patches where there is some surviving coral putting on a brave fight, butterflyfish gather including species we had not seen before such as the Reticular Butterflyfish.

A few corals struggling to survive in between patches of benthic algae covering the substrate:

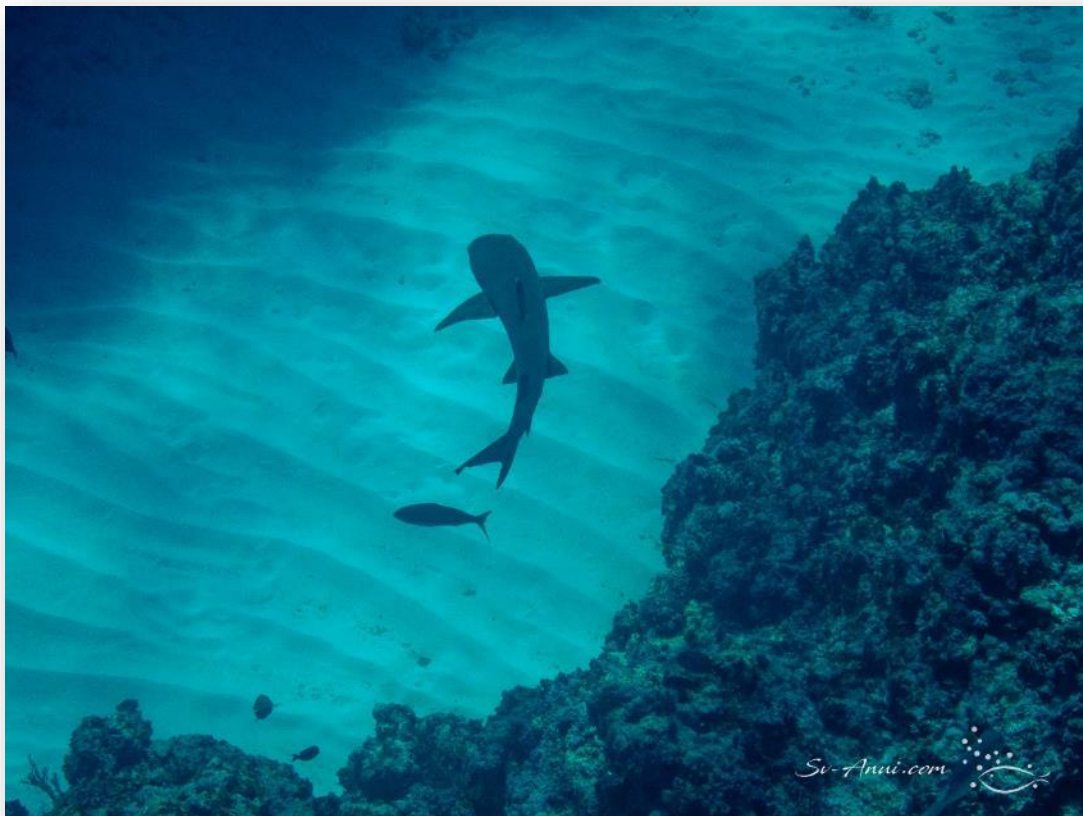




Blue-lined Surgeonfish, Blue-spined Unicornfish

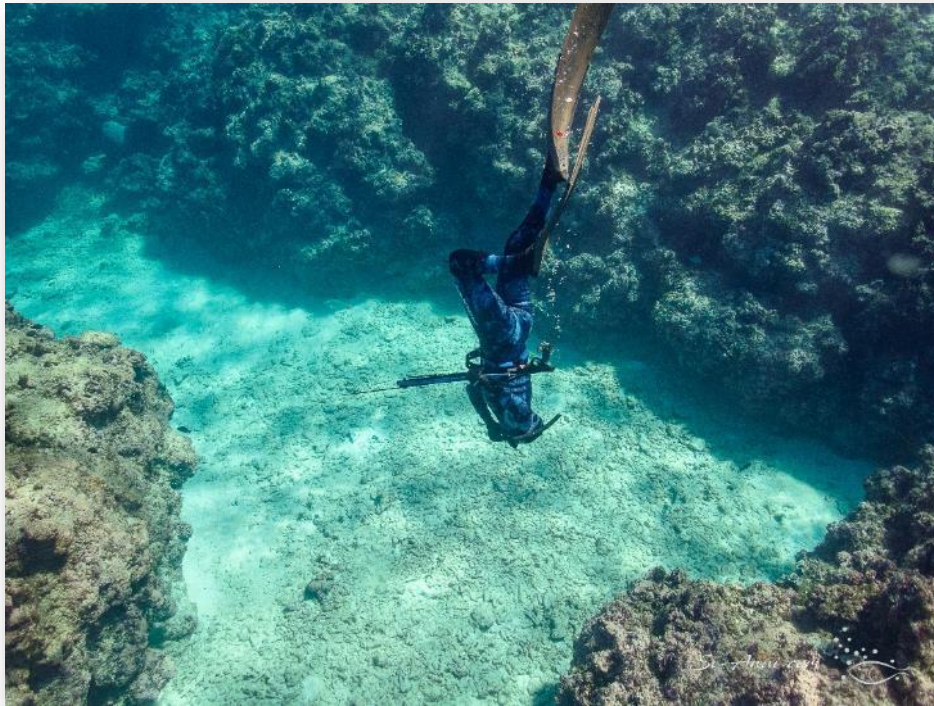


Reticulated Butterflyfish, Humpnose Unicornfish



Saddled Butterflyfish, Whitetip Reef Shark cruising

With calm, warm and crystal-clear water, we did enjoy exploring, fishing and practicing freediving. Chris now feels relaxed and comfortable going down deep and staying down observing... Even Wade noticed the change and improvements as he cruised past looking for good fish to spear. We spotted a big Barcheek Coral Trout and a few Emperors, but they were onto us very quickly and escaped with one powerful flick of the tail. In the end Wade caught us a Drummer.



Chris freediving down to 10m, Wade trying to find the elusive coral trout under a ledge in about 12m

Home from our dive, we were told by Amanda that there was a Red-tailed Tropicbird under a shrub at one end of the island, which we had not noticed. We had not seen Tropicbirds since our voyage to Lord Home Island, so it was quite exciting. Late in the afternoon we went for a wander, camera in hand. We did not see any tropicbird flying but found five resting under different bushes: three chicks with their mottled black and white plumage and two adults with their characteristic red tails and bright red beak, hiding in the shade.



Red-tailed Tropicbird Adult, Red-tailed Tropicbird chick looking quite plump

We also were lucky enough to spot a Great Frigatebird in the Argusia Argentea shrub (Octopus Bush), displaying its brilliant red gular sac, a sign of courtship. It is interesting that only one male had his sac inflated, among hundreds around. We are so fortunate to witness all this stunning birdlife!



Male Great Frigatebird displaying its gular sac, Lesser Frigatebirds flying in formation, the top three are male, the bottom one female

By the way, we had to do a bit of research about the Frigatebirds to understand the differences in appearance between Lesser and Great Frigatebirds. We consulted our Australian Bird Guide. Here is what we discovered.

The Lesser Frigatebird adult male is all black with white axillary spurs (narrow white extensions into base of underwing). The adult female has a black hood and white back collar and throat. Juveniles have a buff hood, bleaching to white.

The Great Frigatebird is a larger bird, with a longer sharper beak. The male is unmistakably all black. The female has a white breast but no white axillary spurs. Juveniles have a buff hood.

So in the first image you can see a male lesser frigatebird, and a female great frigatebird. The second image shows a male great frigatebird displaying.



Sunday 7/8/22 was a busy day: Wade did a check of both engines, we stitched a small repair patch to the boom bag with the hand awl where a tear was developing, vacuumed, and mopped inside the boat, wiped the walls down to minimize salt and mould build up. Chris baked some bread and some cookies. We could have explored the other islets but anchoring there was never going to be as stunning and comfortable as the Eastern islet, so we opted to stay.

During the afternoon we went back ashore, lured by the wildlife. It is so special to observe the many creatures on the islet. We sat and watched several masked booby couples preening each other and tapping their beak in a display of courtship. One of these was right on the edge of the water, which made for an interesting shot with *Anui* in the background.





The Masked Booby is a heavyset seabird with long, pointed wings, stout neck and head, and fairly long, pointed tail. It has short legs with large, webbed feet. The bill is long, heavy, and daggerlike.

The couple above are breeding birds. These display enthusiastically, the male marching around the female with an exaggerated gait and “sky-pointing” with its beak. The paired birds were touching bills, preening, and watching each other intently.

Again, we consulted our Bird Guide to differentiate the various species of boobies. Here is a quick summary in picture. The first image shows a courting couple of Masked Boobies, the second shows a Red-footed Booby, and the third a Brown Booby.



Many female boobies were sitting on one or two eggs in just a scrape in the sand, sometimes in the middle of the beach, not exactly well protected! We were amazed how totally unafraid they were of our presence. We kept our distance and the 400mm zoom lens came in handy to get a close view without disturbing them, but still!



Beautiful Noddies were busy fishing on the eastern shoreline. Both the Common and Black Noddies were out and about. They are such good flyers and delicate looking birds.



Late in the afternoon the Frigatebirds were very active, all soaring high in the sky. Our favourite Great Frigatebird with his brilliant red sac on display was up and about, strutting his stuff.



We watched him doing spectacular circuits in the sky. He stood out in the crowd of birds aloft. How could a female not fall in love with him? He was sure to be as attractive to his potential mate as he was to us!



Back on the shore, the rock crabs were also fun to watch, and Chris captured a few shots of them getting swamped by little waves.



It is so precious to be able to unhurriedly wander and observe all this wildlife. This is a naturalist paradise.

The evening was a convivial one: homemade pasta with sumptuous coral trout pieces in a tasty fish broth on *Windsong*. Simon had caught a 70cm beast and the feast was on! We watched Amanda set up the pasta maker on the cockpit table and prepare enough for the four of us. We have been debating whether to buy one of these gadgets and watching this made our mind up. We will get one when we get back to shore!

It is lovely to have the company of another boat, yet not live in each other's pocket. We come and go as we please, meet up for a meal or a cuppa, chat on the radio most mornings to share our plan for activities. We exchange impressions, special finds, cruising plans, we talk about the weather forecast of course and map out the next possible hops. But all of this happens in an unstructured, uncrowded fashion. We really appreciate this relaxed, safe and friendly way to share this magnificent adventure.

With the wind picking up and forecast to increase over the next few days, we decided to stay at the Islet, and in fact re-anchored closer in to get slightly better protection from the chop. *Windsong* did the same, meandering between the bommies to throw the pick in just two meters of water, right next to the beach. Ah, the joy of mini-keels! With our thin rudders and daggerboards, we were not that brave, anchoring in 9m of water instead of 12m! In stronger conditions it was more comfortable close in to the beach, but the side chop was inescapable at high tide in over 20 knots of wind, regardless of where you were!

We thought we'd have another small snorkel and fish around the bommies close inshore. The visibility was terrible, and the state of the coral appalling. This part of the reef has been decimated by storms and bleaching. It is like a lunar landscape underwater. However there were some big fish: Maori Wrasses, Blue Trevallies, Blue Spine Unicornfish, and a few large Coral Trout.

It did not take long for Wade to hit the jackpot, spearing a 75cm Coral Trout, just under the maximum legal limit! You are not supposed to take any coral trout larger than 80cm to protect breeding. What a beauty! This will feed us for days! As usual sharpshooter Wadie got it in the head, killing it instantly.





Wade filleted the trout on the sugarscoops. Sashimi was on that night and we froze the rest. Bengie appreciated some choice little bits too. She is very partial to coral trout... much more tasty than her usual packets of Felix! She watched intently, fur blown by the breeze, while Wade was filleting the trout!



However things did not quite go as planned. Contrary to our expectations, the trout did not taste very nice: rather chewy and stringy. We wondered whether being so big, the flesh had become tough. Then the next day, as we were studying fish and medical books, we found that a larger trout can carry the risk of ciguatera poisoning. We were aware that generally larger predatory tropical reef fishes are more likely to be ciguatoxic and that some species should never be eaten: Chinaman fish, paddletail fish, red bass, barracuda, moray eel. But we had not realised that we needed to be cautious with our favourite coral trout.

To reinforce our concerns, both Amanda and Chris had been complaining of odd pains in their legs and arms for the past two days, a bit like a massive buildup of lactic acid after you have run for miles! Having eaten sections of two large trout, we were concerned. In the end we made the decision to dispose of the coral trout filets overboard. Such a waste, but it was too risky. Ciguatera poisoning can be nasty and the buildup in your system is cumulative. You can end up developing allergies, unable to eat any fish. How sad would that be?

We might skip eating fish for a few days and in future focus on spearing smaller beasts.

There is one good thing when the wind is up and the sun is out: these are perfect conditions for kite surfing. Not many people can claim to dive and kite surf off a Coral Sea Island! How lucky are we to be engaging in these activities!



Our idyllic anchorage: the depth of colour in the water with the sun and clouds was breathtaking. Even in strong wind, this place is magical. *Windsong* in the foreground is anchored in 2.5m of water. *Anui* in the background is in 9m.



Being low tide meant there was only a narrow strip free of bommies to fly the kites back and forth. Next time we will try high tide for more space to play in! Wade is on the red kite, Simon and Amanda took it in turn to fly the yellow one. This way there is always one person able to run a rescue in the dinghy if need be.





Meanwhile back on the beach in the shade of the Octopus Bush, there were Red-tailed Tropicbirds to be found - a mum and her downy chick.



And a crested tern chick was struggling to follow mum along the shore:



And there was a half-buried fishing dory to be stumbled upon! There must be a story there.



For the next two days it was just a waiting game until the weather allowed us to leave. It was very windy, with gusts reaching 28 knots and choppy in the anchorage for both boats regardless of depth, so we stayed on board and busied ourselves with studying our Coral Sea book and satellite charts to plot our next route, developing photos, documenting our adventure, tidying up our gear, cooking treats.

Thursday 11th August, our last day at the Diamond Islets, the conditions started easing and we got together with *Windsong* to plan our departure and next hops. We were very lucky with the forecast as we could see another 10 days to two weeks of settled conditions.

Our choice of next destination was influenced not just by the weather forecast but also the sailing direction. With *Windsong* unable to sail to windward without a main, and us not keen on having to do an overnighter in an agitated ocean, sailing to the Flinders Reefs Group from the Diamond Islets was off the agenda. Simon and Amanda had done a makeshift repair to their mainsail but were not comfortable using the full main and had put two reefs in to take the pressure off the head of the sail in preparation for the next leg. They could run downwind on the jib or spinnaker and could at a stretch sail a beam run with jib and double reefed main but could not go upwind without using the engines. This state of affairs suited us fine: we did not want to beat into wind or make long uncomfortable beam runs, so downwind sailing as much as possible was what we chose to do, under jib or screecher alone, allowing us to explore the Coringa Islets, the Herald Cays, possibly Flora and Holmes Reefs, most offering good protection even if the wind picks up again.

We went for a last walk around the island. We watched with delight fledging sooty terns taking their tentative first flights from the back of the dune. It was quite funny seeing them unsteady, flying straight towards us, intently eyeing us and looking like they might land on us. But landing was also a new skill requiring a lot of space, so an extended arm was just too challenging although obviously tempting. Red Tropicbirds were also in the air, looking splendid. Chris did not have her camera with her and regretted it. "I should never leave the boat without a camera"!

We have really enjoyed our stay at East Diamond Islet. Even with the devastating reef degradation, we had a lot of fun and the island still had a lot to offer. We would easily return in the future and maybe visit the other islets.



Chilcott Islet

Chilcott Islet and South West Islet make up the Coringa Islets Group, situated 70 nautical miles northwest of the Diamond Islets. The group was named after the vessel the Coringa Packet. It was wrecked on the reef of Chilcott Islet and the Islet itself gained its name from the ship's captain, Captain Chilcott. Chilcott Islet is the larger of the two islets and according to our bible (Australia's Coral Sea Islands & Marine Parks by Peter Sayre) and our satellite images, it offers the better anchorage – read 'the least worst' - for shelter of the two from south-east trade winds. We intended to anchor for two nights at Chilcott.

A 5.30am departure for us and an even earlier one for *Windsong II* – a technique they used from hereon for us both boats to arrive at roughly the same time - saw us leave the East Diamond Islet and set off downwind with the screecher up. After eight days in the one spot, it was good to get going again.



It was a slow passage with a bit of swell about after several days of strong conditions, but the wind was gradually dropping.

We averaged 7 knots speed only. With the wind right up our backside, the ride was a lot more comfortable than our first upwind passage to Diamond Islet, but the apparent wind was low. At times we goose-winged the screecher and jib. We had a few patches of drizzle.



Having left two hours after Windsong, we arrived at the same time at Chilcott Islet. Although we were very close to each other towards the end of the passage, we could not see each other's boat, probably the result of overcast conditions, sea haze and patches of drizzle.

And the islet was not visible until we were within a few miles of it. Then all of a sudden, there was the islet and our two boats side by side! We were just looking in the wrong direction!



The unfortunate thing was that the wind picked up while we were rounding the reef, looking for a safe spot to anchor and it also started drizzling. We are so grateful for the satellite charts to guide our approach through the bommies to a shallow area. We anchored in 7m of water at low tide under threatening skies.



The evening and night were incredibly bouncy. There was a persistent beam roll with the swell wrapping around the anchorage no matter how close you were to the beach. It was a challenge to cook our meal and we had a noisy, chaotic night. We were closer in than Windsong and were rolling around. Their motion looked even worse. We felt ill looking at them lurching about!

It would have been easy to just lift the anchor up and go, in fact that is what Amanda & Simon felt like doing until we put the dinghy in the water and picked them up for a walk around the island. It was just what we all needed: a leg stretch, a walk on stable ground, fun observing the colonies of birds breeding and nesting, a gorgeous view of the anchorage from the beach in the sunshine, plenty of beautiful shells to collect. And of course, we flew the drone.



Chilcott Islet is a rookery for sooty terns which are the most numerous, noddies, frigatebirds and different species of boobies. The various colonies' territories were a little more delineated than at East Diamond. The sooties were at one end of the island, frigatebirds and boobies at the centre, noddies at the other end amongst the rocks and the turtle dugouts. We had so much fun watching all the chicks at different stages of development, from fluff balls covered in down, to molting, right through to fledging youngsters learning to fly. You can spend hours watching, sitting quietly or just walking past. They are not scared of you. That is the magic of these seldom visited wild places.

Yet again we took hundreds of photos. A fun one was Amanda lying on the sand, observing and filming tiny sooty tern chicks.



It is always hard to select a handful of images for the story, but this time we are focusing on chicks.



A Masked Booby chick who will grow into its feet, a Sooty Tern chick



Bridled Tern family at feeding time, Masked Booby mum and downy chick



Downy Masked Booby with mum extending her wings, Tiny Common Noddy chick

Photographing birds in flight is always a bit tricky, particularly when they are going past you at speed, but we managed a few.



Sooty Tern, Brown Booby



Common Noddy, Great Frigatebird displaying sharing the air with sooty terns



Immature Lesser Frigatebird, two Great Frigatebirds displaying their gular sac, competing for female attention

The highlight was seeing red-tailed tropicbirds flying, with their beautiful red streamers trailing behind their gleaming white body. They look so striking and elegant in flight.





One of the less pleasing spectacles we observed on Chilcott Islet was the quantity of marine debris on the beach and amongst the rock slabs on the exposed side of the island. More than at any other cay, we saw plastic bottles, plastic caps, the ubiquitous single thong, bits of rubber, buoys, pieces of timber, bamboo, small nets, lengths of rope... etc. It may well be that the Diamond Islets had recently been cleaned of rubbish by visiting research teams and Chilcott may not have been.



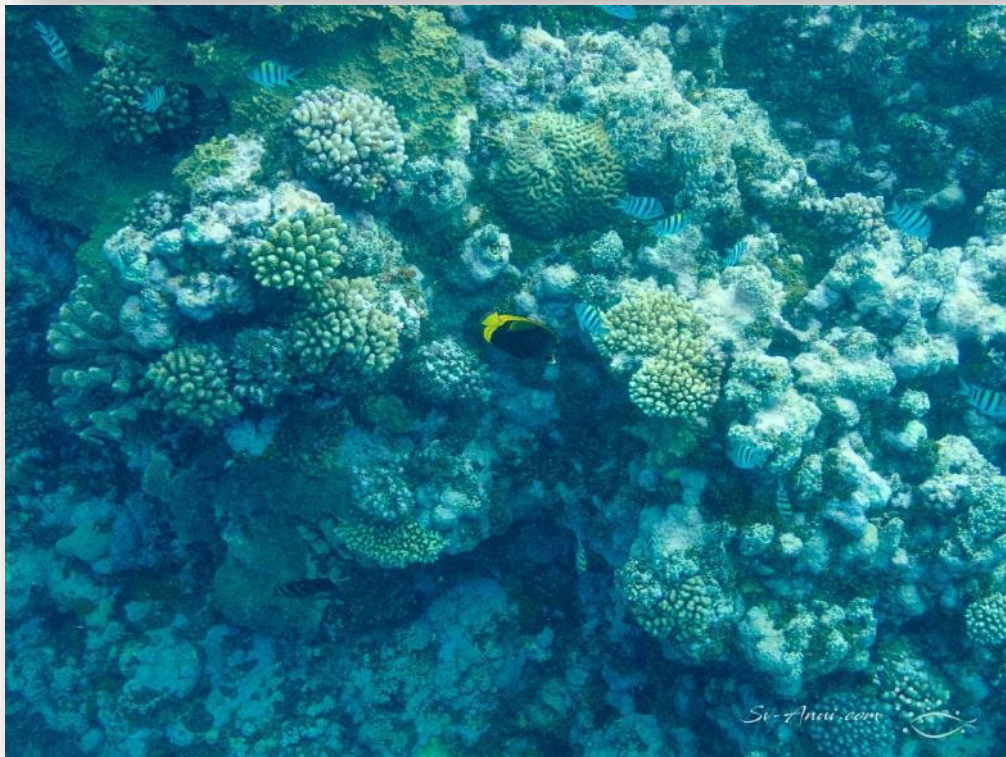
A lot of plastic bottles and containers had Asian labels. A combination of the shape of floating objects and the patterns of currents and winds all has an effect on the movement of marine debris in the ocean. Currents determine where the debris moves from and arrives at across the ocean. The westward flowing streams of the South Equatorial Current, and particularly the more southerly SEC streams from between Vanuatu and New Caledonia as well as the Australian East Coast Current are the ones most likely to carry the debris load to the cays in this area of the Coral Sea.

With limited space on board to store rubbish and not knowing how long we would be away for, we did not pick up any of the litter.

And then it was time for a snorkel. Wade had a sticky beak from the dinghy but did not feel it was worth the effort and the islet being in a green zone, he could not spearfish. Chris on the other hand was keen to have a look around. And the water was so warm and clear! You can see the area we surveyed in this aerial, the large reefs to the right of *Anui*. Wade ferried Chris over and back in the dinghy, waiting patiently for her to decide she had enough!



It was worth the effort. Although not in great shape, the reef here appears to be in recovery. There are some soft and hard corals starting to recolonize the reef: the mustard colour encrusting coral is the dominant specie. These corals creep along the rocks like a crust holding everything together, almost like a layer of cement fusing together the substrate. They tolerate high flow environments.







When we exchanged impressions after our respective dives, Amanda was encouraged by the little patches the coral she saw too. We both felt Chilcott Reef was in better condition than East Diamond. But as she quite rightly said: "In the middle of a desert when you get a glass of water it is nice, but it is still a desert."

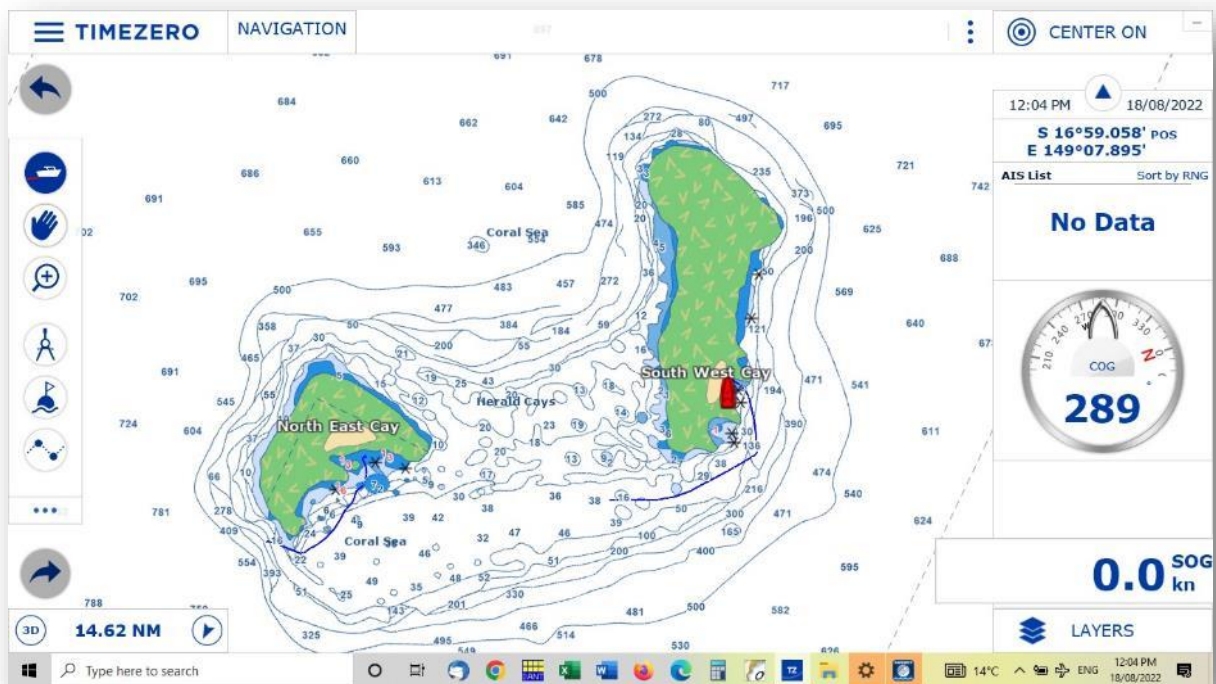
The water and the air temperature are markedly warmer as we head further north. We are now at latitude 16°S. We feel very warm in our wetsuits! After the snorkel Chris gave the water line a bit of scrub to get rid of the tea stained line and some hairy green algae growing along it in places. For some reason it is particularly bad on the inside of the starboard hull. More scrubbing required, but it will be easier in shallower and calmer water at the next stop!

Although the anchorage at Chilcott was not comfortable, we were glad we stopped and took the time to explore both above and under the surface. But it is most definitely a spot best visited in light conditions, not in winds of over 15 knots! You also can't anchor very close to the beach where it is shallower because of the quantity of rocks. There are long sand gutters, but they are lined with large bommies some of which surface at low tide. We generally look for a 50m radius clear of obstructions. So if you want to sleep at night you drop the pick further out.

Herald Cays

On the 14th August, we headed off again, this time to the Herald Cays. This was a 50nm passage West of the Coringa islets. There are two cays in the group separated by a coral shoal 15 meters deep and 4 miles wide. Just beyond this, the sea floor drops quickly down to 500m and deeper. The current is strong between and around the two islands. The cays are in the central part of the Coral Sea Plateau.

The Herald Cays were named after the ship HMS Herald which conducted hydrographic surveys in the Coral Sea between 1849 and 1861. The cays are permanently vegetated and have abundant bird life. The Herald Cays are recognized as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance. They are also a very significant hatchery for a range of migratory bird species and sea turtles.



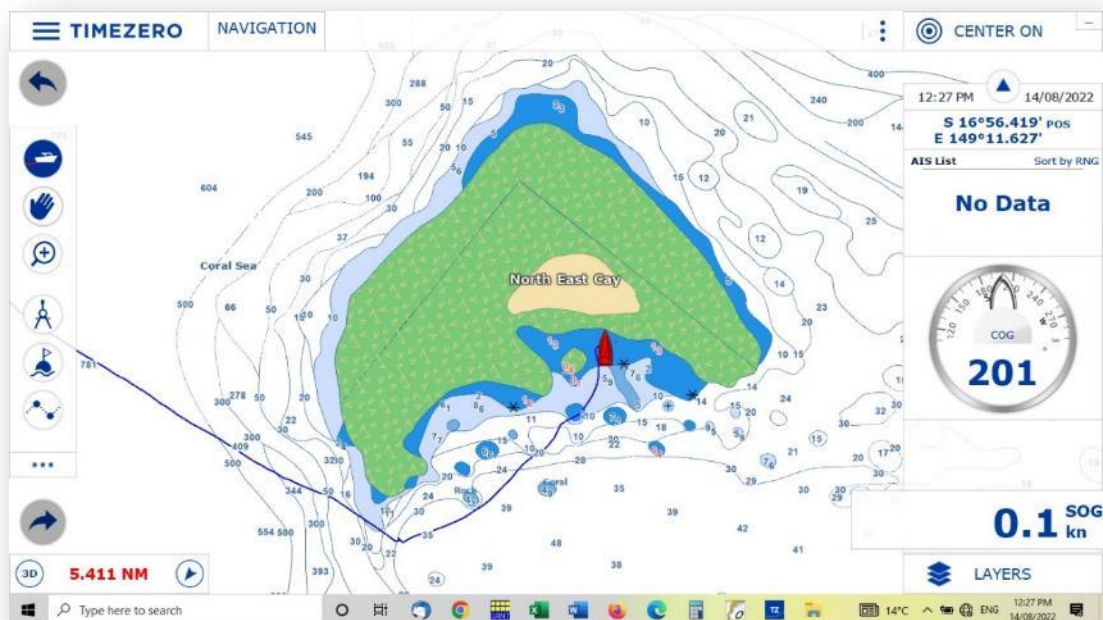
These two cays fall within the Coral Sea Marine Park Green Zone, as did the Coringa Islets, established to protect and conserve ecosystems, habitats and native species in as natural a state as possible. So no fishing, no spearing, no drone flying from the cay nor within 100 meters from it – you would not want to anyway!

This part of the voyage was our absolute favourite: spectacular seascapes, brilliant anchorages, raucous birdlife. And we could only speculate on how few people have visited these idyllic settings before us.

North East Cay

We started with North East Cay, a large heavily wooded islet which looked the best of the two islets from the satellite maps. With well-established *Pisonia* trees, it stands reasonably high, to the dizzy height of 8 meters! The crescent moon shape of the cay offers excellent protection with hardly any roll in trade winds.

We had a very pleasant sail with a reefed main and screecher, doing 9 and 10 knots speed, a really smooth ride. We left just before 7am, while *Windsong* had a 4.30am departure. We reached North East Cay just after them. The islet did not disappoint! What a stunning place: a large, vegetated coral cay, turquoise water, large expanse of sand, a few obvious bommies to avoid, but an easy access to the best anchorage you could hope for. Arriving at a coral cay such as this one is the moment you realise there is nothing but great experiences ahead. We dropped the pick in 5m of water. This spot looked even better than East Diamond!



We had to hand steer all the way this time. Wade discovered a leak in the hydraulic ram of the autopilot and hand steering saved a bit on the hydraulic fluid. It was actually quite fun to do on a short trip and we took turns at the wheel every half hour. It gave us a rhythm, something to focus on in short bursts. We figured we would attend to the problem once at the anchorage, knowing that if need be, we could swap unit with our old reconditioned one.

Amanda & Simon came across for a visit once we were settled and Simon helped Wade check out the auto pilot. They discovered what was wrong: one part of the ram had loosened off and just needed tightening up. What a relief and an easy fix!



We had a period of lower breeze in the afternoon, below 15 knots, so we took the opportunity to fly the drone. You never know what the wind will do later, so it is a matter of getting the aerial shots while you can. Just as well we took the chance as the next days were just a bit too strong to launch from the boat, and take-offs from the cay were prohibited. The first image shows the whole island and anchorage, the second the sandspit behind which is a lagoonal area.



Here are some peaceful views of this idyllic anchorage, and those intense vibrant colours are to die for.



And in the midst of all this breathtaking beauty, there was the rich bird population! The density of birdlife is hard to fathom. Over the next days we all went ashore multiple times, to walk along the shoreline and observe. The usual different species of boobies, terns, noddies and frigatebirds were nesting, although not quite in the quantity we had seen in the previous two islets. However what we enjoyed over the next days was watching the behaviour of three species in particular: the frigatebirds who were in spectacular aerial pursuits with the boobies trying to still their fish catch, the juvenile red-footed boobies who were so tame and inquisitive, and the red-tailed tropicbirds in their courtship flight displays, showing remarkable flying skills. The bird books were out to learn about our feathered friends. Here is what we found.

North East Cay hosts at least 1400 pairs of Frigatebirds. These are large tropical seabirds with long and sharply pointed wings, long deeply forked tail and long bill with a pronounced hook. They are very distinctive in the sky. Among the most aerial of seabirds, they can spend days aloft and are powerful flyers. One of their limitations though is that they don't have oily feathers, to make them lighter flyers, but this means they can't get their plumage wet. In fact doing so can be fatal as they become waterlogged and drown. Thus they avoid landing on the ocean, although they can capture flying fish in flight, and scoop water for drinking with their beak. You might think flying fish is a rather narrow diet, but they do get a variety of other seafood as they steal the catch of other seabirds – if you can't fish it yourself, find someone who can! They especially target boobies who are skilled at plunge diving for their feed. They circle high in the sky watching the boobies dive and as they surface and fly away with the loot, the frigatebirds chase them in the air, harassing them to force them to regurgitate or drop their catch. We witnessed a few spirited and noisy pursuits and found dropped or regurgitated squid on the deck of *Anui* – big purple splats!



The bird at the bottom in the first image is a Masked Booby victim to an attack. The other three are Frigatebirds pursuing it. The second image is a mob of these bullies of the sky. We do think they are beautiful birds and spectacular when the males inflate their gular sac, but they are a menace when they spiral over feeding grounds and other birds. Brown, masked and red-footed boobies are all fair game for the frigatebirds.



But the species of boobies that stole our hearts were the red-footed boobies. The juveniles in particular would come so close to us, readily approaching us, flying between us, even landing on our extended arm! What a delight. It is so special when birds are totally unafraid of us humans. The red-footed boobies are relatively small and slightly built, with a long tail and striking red feet. Their bill is blue-grey bordered by pinkish facial skin. The juveniles are all dark brown, but once grown up show their striking colours.



Now the seabirds that are dearest to us are the Tropicbirds. North East Cay hosts over 500 pairs of Red-tail Tropicbirds. We saw both the white-tail and red-tail species and have to admit our favourites are the red-tailed. This glistening white seabird with a large red bill, wire-like red tail streamers and black paddle like feet are distinctive. They use their streamers and feet for maneuvering in flight.



For comparison, here are the white-tailed tropicbirds. Notice their yellow beak and white streamers.



But what is most striking about the Tropicbirds is the courtship dance. And we saw these right above us multiple times, especially during mid-morning. Display flights of two or more birds would start with lots of circling, not just around one another but up and down. Imagine a wheel. Two adults would start their synchronized flying. The display would include periods of stationary or even backwards flight with one bird rearing up in a standing position and lowering his tail.

Trying to capture this in still images is always a challenge, but here is a series, both birds flying in sync in the first photo, then starting the wheel with one flaring, the other flying up in the second. But it does not stop there, as shown in the next photos.



Then starts the most spectacular part: the top bird is flying backwards, while the bottom bird is flying forward, and on and on they circle like this, with lots of calling to one another.



Sometimes an interloper tries to get in on the action but misses out and looks quite dejected. How is that for body language! And this can happen right above you when you are getting ready to kite surf!



Which brings us to the next part of our activities at North East Herald Cay. Some of the time the wind was blowing at 18-20 knots. But never fear, we have the technology! Two kites came out again, one shared by Amanda and Simon, the yellow one, and Wade got his smaller one out, black and red this time. Chris was behind the camera. There was a sand spit and protected lagoon-like area the guys played in. Amanda could not resist getting out on the exposed downwind side where the boats were for the photo though!





We had yet to turn our attention towards the underwater life. We checked out the rockpools at low tide in search of eels. We saw a few of what we think are Grey Moray Eels. The rock crabs were on this eel 's menu!



One eel attacked a crab twice. It lost three legs on the first strike and the corner of its head on the second. Its chances of surviving the attacks were slim.



We were very careful watching from the edge of the rockpools as the eels were quite aggressive. They were hissing and launching at us right out of the water. A bite of these meanies would not be fun!

Continuing on with the underwater investigations, we were not very hopeful that the reef on the southeast of the island would be in good condition but dinghied to a few bommies out there anyway. The verdict was not good. Although we saw several good size fish, including large Coral Trout, Steephead Parrotfish, Angelfish and the usual Reef Sharks, the reef was mainly rock with little coral cover. Apparently fierce storms come through this area in cyclone season. So we only have two beautifully clear images to share, those of an exquisite looking Emperor Angelfish. Developing the underwater photos that day was quick!

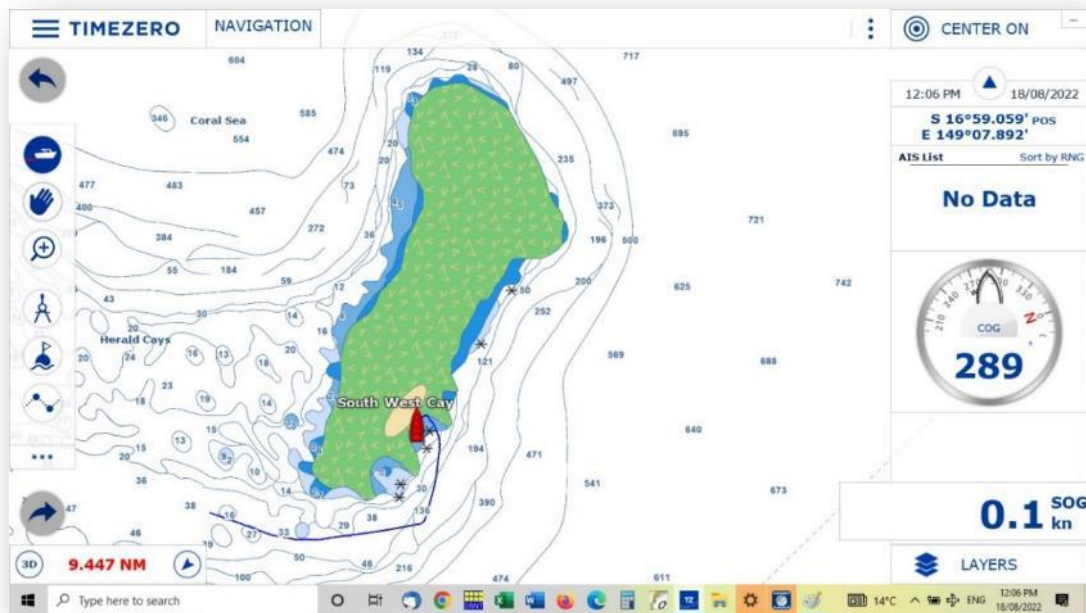


We very much enjoyed North East Cay and would easily come back again. It offers great anchoring, with easy access to a protected sandy bay. It is a shame the trifecta - birdlife, snorkeling, kite surfing - can't be achieved here these days. However the setting is still rather heavenly and we had to pinch ourselves to remember we were after all in the middle of the Coral Sea anchored in 5m of water surrounded by an 800m abyss, in glorious isolation!



South West Cay

Every cay you go to is different; you might see different birds, collect different shells on the beach, the vegetation could be sparse in some, wooded and dense in others. We found South West Cay had a different feel to North East, smaller, a little wilder, maybe more exposed. Mind you we got there in over 22 knots of wind, seeing 26 at times, so gone was the flat ocean! We were wondering how protected it would be as we were approaching, but it was fine.



We were ashore very soon. The number of sooty terns in the air and on the ground was astounding and the noise! Brown Boobies, Masked Boobies, Red-footed Boobies... all were out and about, looking a bit perplexed by all that racket from the boisterous terns. We realised after the first night that the loud bird calls did not stop at night!





Brown and Masked Boobies soaring, Great Frigatebird male with gular sac inflated

We walked right around the island, along the beach made of very coarse crushed coral at the front, and along the back of the cay on large slabs of rock. The vegetation consisted of low bushes and grasses but no *Pisonia* trees. We saw very few shells on the beach. In fact we noticed a few naked hermit crabs with no shell at all for a home and many with very lacklustre ones, to the point where we thought we might have to donate some from our collection!



Chris chatting to the Masked Boobies, Wade surrounded by Boobies and terns



This island has such a wild feel. Look at our beautiful *Anui* surrounded by birds in all that aqua water! She belongs in that seascape.

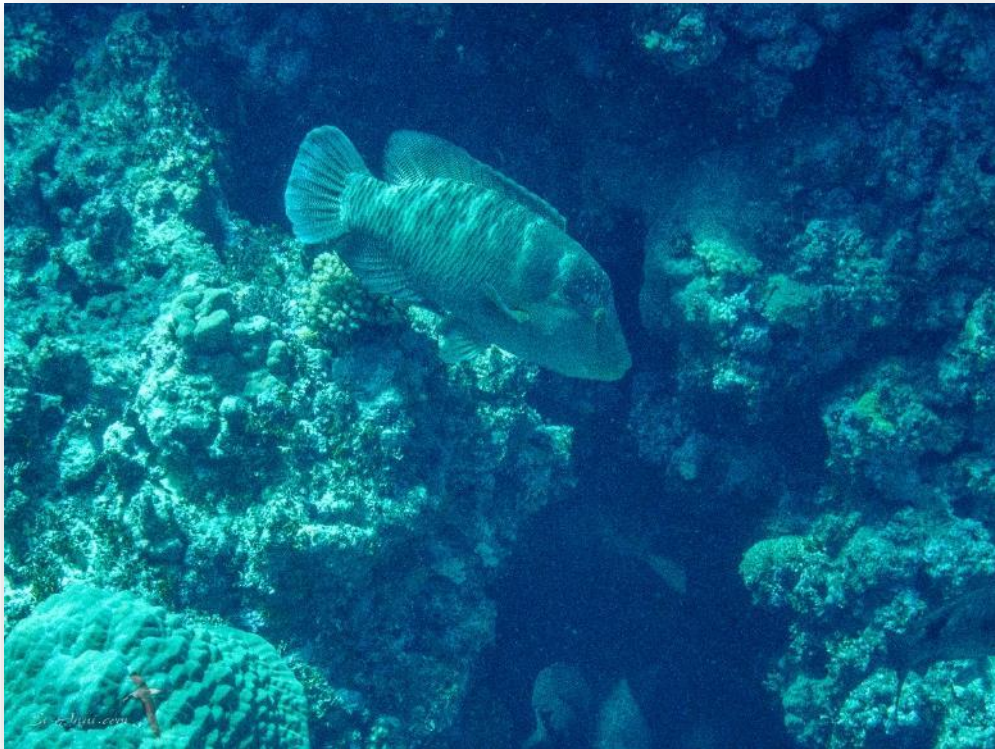
With all the bommies around the boat and the reef walls at either end of the cay, we had a nice time snorkeling. Although the coral was in a poor state, the fish life was good and we had a lot of fun meandering along the maze of gutters. What was disappointing apart from the poor reef health was the amount of marine debris, particularly small plastic bags drifting in the water. Pollution of the world's oceans is a global issue, but it was surprising to see so much around this cay.



Humpose Unicornfish in the gutter, Bluefin Trevallies



An area of reasonable coral cover, Threadfin Butterflyfish couple



Maori Wrasse, Yellowmask Surgeonfish

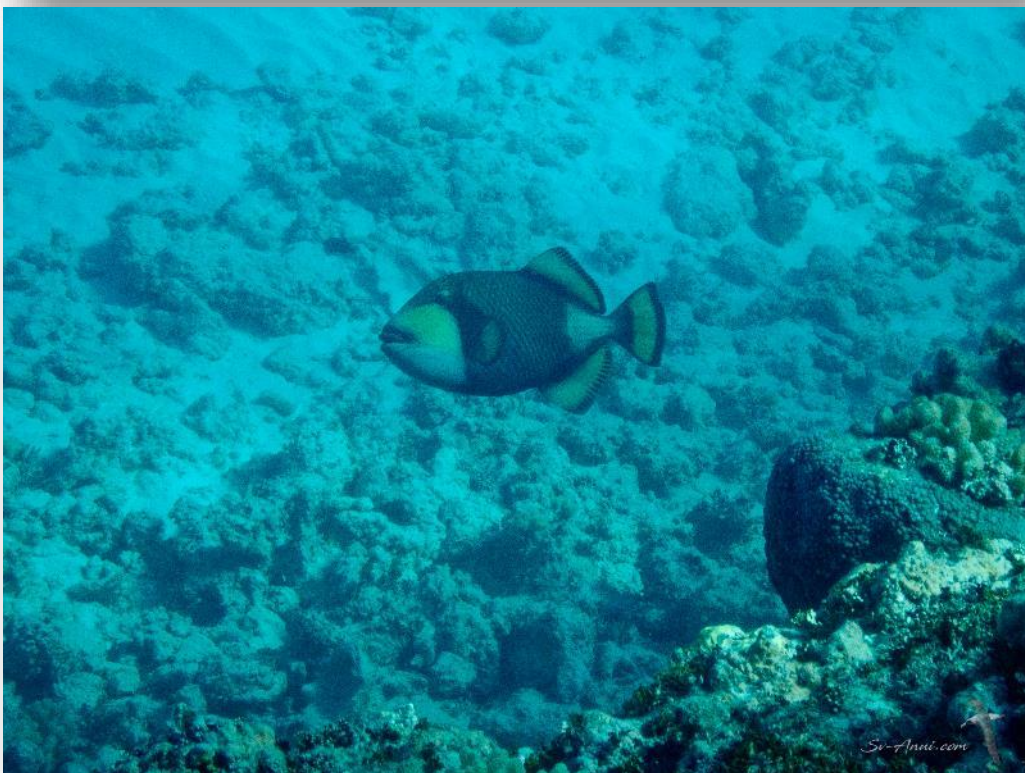


Bluespine Unicornfish, Maori Wrasse and buddy Bluefin Trevally shadowing it – those two moved together everywhere

Christmas Tree Worms are one of our favourite macro subjects. It meant diving deep for this one, twice, once to get the yellow spiral out, the next to show what happens when it retracts!

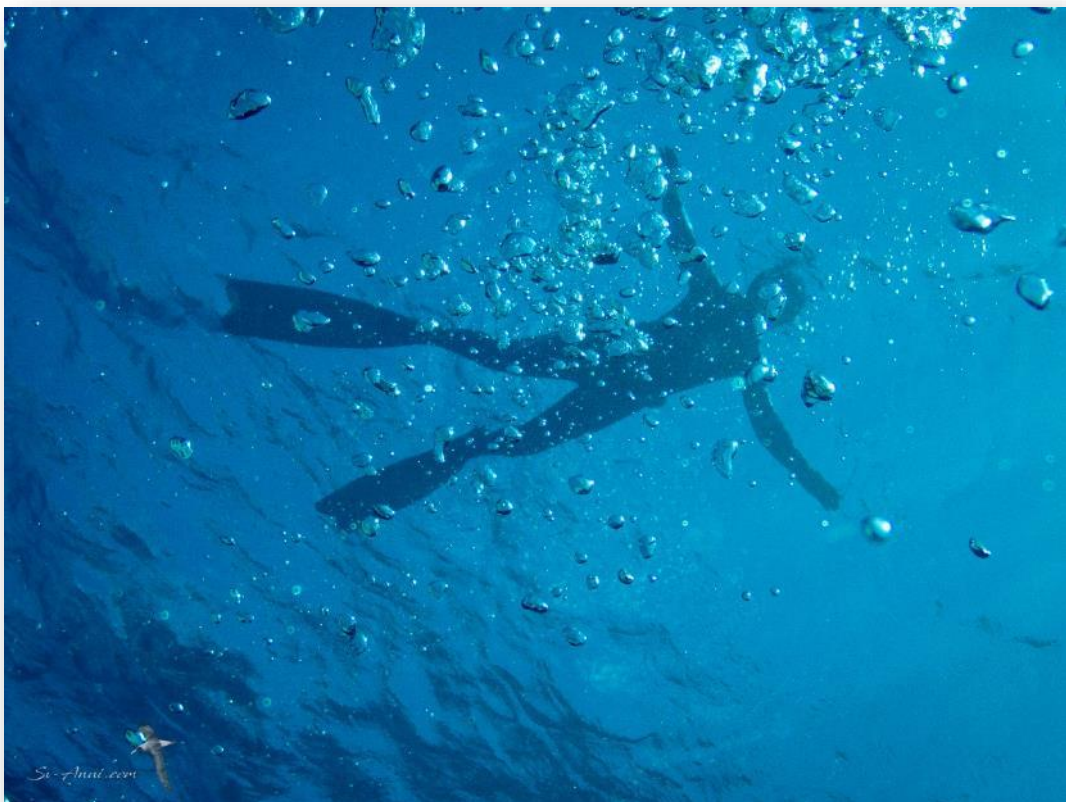


Triggerfish are quite spectacular large fish. The first one is a Clown Triggerfish, so distinctive with its prominent rounded white patches on the lower half of the body. The second is the elusive Titan Triggerfish who does not like close contact, which is just as well as they can be aggressive when nesting in coral rubble and confront divers ferociously.





Wade had the camera for this shot of Chris... She obviously takes his breath away!



We flew the drone a few times. On the day with slightly less wind, we sent it 1.5 kms away to get a view of the northeast end of the cay looking west. There is a large area of clear sand which looks like a nice anchorage, although it might be much deeper than where we were, and the gap between the bommies to get in looks quite tight.



We have been really impressed with the quality of the camera on the Mavic 2S drone, the sharpness of focus and rendering of colours.

This is our favourite aerial from the entire trip. It has now been printed on metal in large format and adorns the wall of our saloon. The colours, the islet, the reef and if you look closely, our two boats.

What we love most about the ocean is its sheer immensity. It has always reminded us of just how minute we all are in the scheme of things while also instilling in us a profound sense of tranquillity and joy whenever we are near it or in it. This is very much what we felt at South West Herald Cay.

This image is taken from the opposite end, looking east over that same sandy area. You can just see North East Cay in the distance too at the top right from this shot.



From a more practical point of view, the aerial below made it evident it would be ‘interesting’ getting out of the anchorage during the night for our next hop! Lots of bommies to dodge! We did not really want to re-anchor further out nor did we want to follow the track we made coming in as it was just too convoluted, so we marked the shallow bommies on our navigation software for ease of exit. In hindsight it would have been less stressful to anchor out!



While we were flying the drone, Simon and Amanda were taking over/under shots with their GoPro and dome lens on a focus stacking setting. Here are a few of the fun photographs highlighting the clarity of the water:



And here is another drone shot of our boat!



Meanwhile on the deck of *Anui*, we had a little visitor, a Red-footed Booby, Chris's favourite type. They are the smallest of the booby species, graceful, slim-winged and named for their vivid coral red feet which males show off during courtship.



He was inquisitive and looked intently at the rigging. Better not hit that like the Sooty Tern did! And then he called his mate over! Maybe that sky pointing with the beak was not for the rigging at all, but part of a courtship behaviour which is something the boobies do.



Like we did at North East Harold Cay, the four of us had lovely sundowners and ate dinner ashore, each contributing some treats and watching the sunset. This image taken by Amanda illustrates the mood well! Moments to capture, and moments to remember.



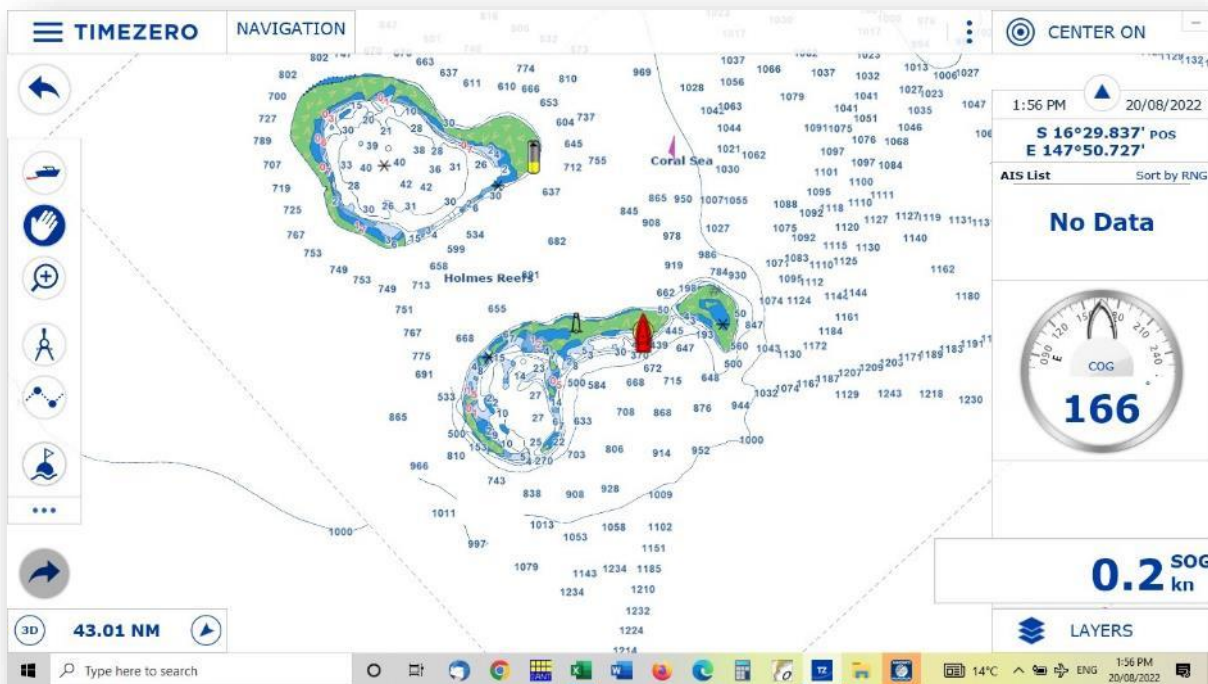
We could have easily stayed another day at South West Herald Cay. We enjoyed its wild, more compact feel, but with the forecast showing some strong winds returning within a few days, we made the decision to head off to the Holmes Reefs.

The only downside of this location was the boat's proximity to the beach which meant several birds hit the rigging during the night, at least one with fatal consequences. It was a sad moment finding a beautiful sooty tern, dead at the bottom of the starboard stays one morning. It was an opportunity to closely observe its exquisite plumage and fine body before giving it an ocean burial.



Holmes Reefs

Holmes Reefs consist of three reefs: West, South and East. There are small unvegetated cays that move with the seasons on West Reef and disappear all together at high tide, more akin to sandbanks than islets.



There is a narrow navigable passage between West and South Reefs about 50m deep. But the depth around the reefs is in excess of 600m so the current rips through there and it pays to have the tide with you.

We left the Herald Cays at about 2.00am, for our 85nm passage as we expected it to be a slow trip with the southeast between 10 and 15 knots and we wanted to arrive at our destination by early afternoon for good visibility. We motor-sailed with the screecher during the night while the breeze was less than 10 knots, then by 7.00am as the breeze picked up a little, we swapped the screecher for the spinnaker and turned the engine off. What a cruisy sail this was, and incredible feel in the middle of the Coral Sea. We were not speedy, averaging 7s and 8s, but it was smooth and relaxing.

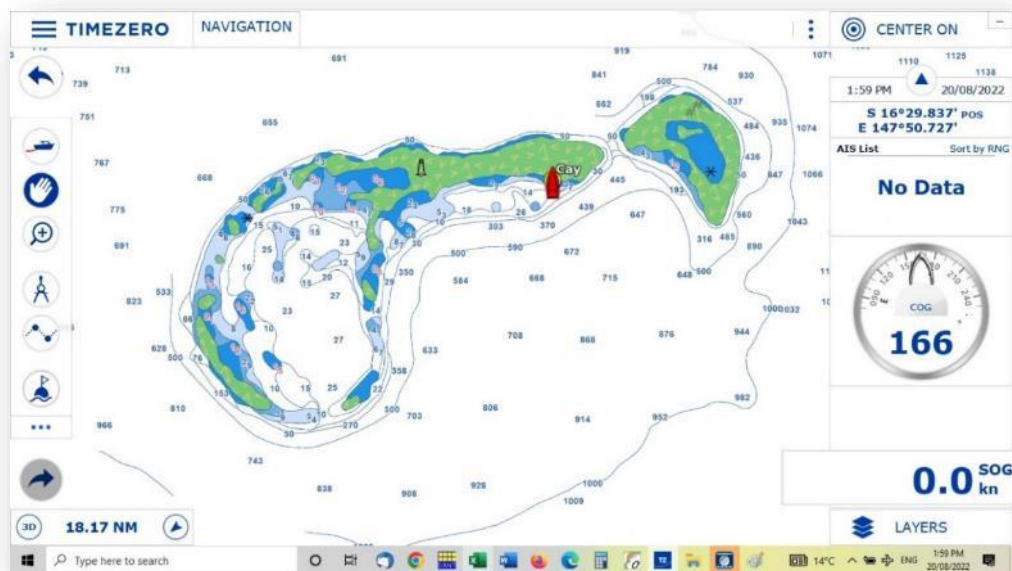
Holmes Reef West

With three days of moderate weather before a long blow, we elected to go to the most protected of the three reefs: Holmes Reef West. We kept the spinnaker going right through the narrow Division Channel between West and South reefs, lucky to have the tide with us, then it was time to pack up bluey!





Windsong had been anchored for three quarters of an hour, having left three hours before us. They too had a great spinnaker sail. You can just spot the tiny cay in front of them, which definitely qualifies as a “shy cay”. It only appears at low tide. Our navigation software shows our anchored position.



With the wind forecast to pick up, we were quick to send the drone up soon after arrival. We have learnt to take the opportunity to fly when we can or miss our chance. A wind speed of 15 knots is the maximum we are prepared to launch and land in. Beyond this, the drone gets buffeted by the gusts, can drift and is harder to control, especially from the deck of the boat. It is a joint effort these days when flying it from *Anui*, which has been the case for every flight in the Coral Sea. Chris launches it, flies it, takes photos and brings it back for Wade to catch. He has only cut his fingers once!



You can see there is not an awful lot to hide behind, just a long platform reef. Where the water is a dark shade of blue on the far side of the reef, the depth quickly drops to over 800m, whereas the lightest aqua part on the inside of the reef is between 5 and 15 meters.

With the wind picking up to 18-20 knots the following day, we did not feel like going very far in the dinghy or attempting a drift dive in the renowned Division Channel, but did want a snorkel and were hoping to catch a fish for dinner. We set off at low tide, lazily going to the long reef in front of the boat, anchoring the dinghy in a patch of sand between the bommies.

As soon as we were in the water we were taken aback by the choppy conditions and the amount of current pouring off the reef flats. It was a real workout for an hour! We had to keep an eye on where we were in relation to the dinghy and our boat, as you would just drift off and have trouble swimming against the flow. We both headed against the current to start with, figuring we would just let ourselves drift back when we had enough. But the current was working its way along the labyrinth of gutters, and it was quite a struggle to go where you wanted or stay where you wanted to aim with your spear or your camera!

We found the reef in a poor state, looking very grey and barren, but with bright little patches of pink and purple here and there where small *Acropora* corals were putting up a fight for survival. There were gutters harbouring different species of parrotfish, coral trout and bluefin trevally, none of which were keen to be speared so Wade came back empty handed.



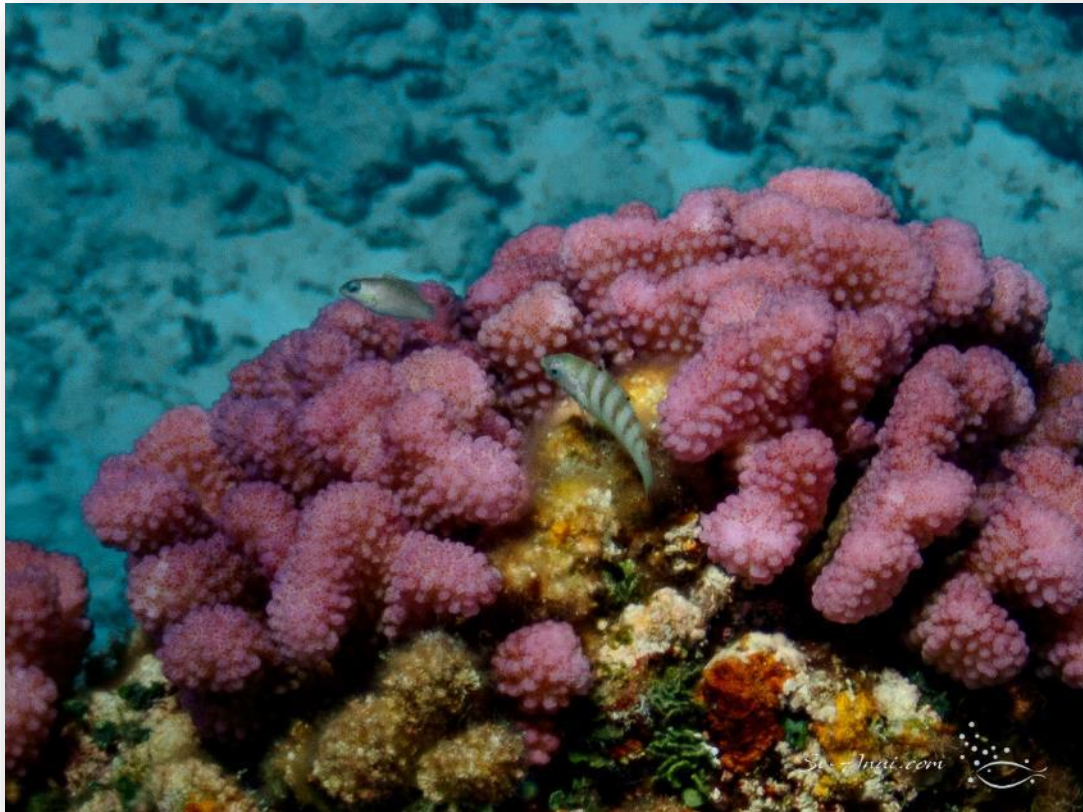
But Chris directed her attention towards bright and different critters to what she normally would. She was pleased to discover several small fish she had never noticed before. Some were tiny. Staying in one spot and focusing the camera with the water movement was easier said than done! It was a matter of grabbing hold of a rock with one hand, operating the camera with the other, while trying to resist the force of the current!



Redspot Wrasse next to pink coral, Sabre Squirrelfish



A shy Dick's Damsel, Ringeye Hawfish resting on the coral



Tiny wrasses in the pink coral, and a healthy white coral

And then there were the sea sponges, bright orange and difficult to miss in all the greyness of the reef! These act as filters of waste products and toxins from other animals and plants on the reef, pulling a lot of water through their bodies as they feed.



For our last day at Holmes Reef, we were boat bound. We busied ourselves with a few tasks like defrosting the fridge, cleaning up the bird poo on the bows from the nocturnal visits of the boobies, backing up the thousands of photos we had taken, making water to top up our tanks, making bread, pizza dough, rum balls without the rum – Wadie, can't believe you forgot the rum again!



The Bureau of Meteorology has an automatic weather station on West Reef which we meant to visit, but the strong wind got in the way of that plan!

Soon it was time to tidy up the boat and prepare for our passage back to civilisation. Dinghy up and secured, toys stowed away.

In calmer conditions we would probably have explored this reef a lot more. It is certainly one location where we would benefit from proper dive gear, which is still an issue to be thought through for us.

But for this time, Holmes Reef was the last whistle stop before returning to the mainland.



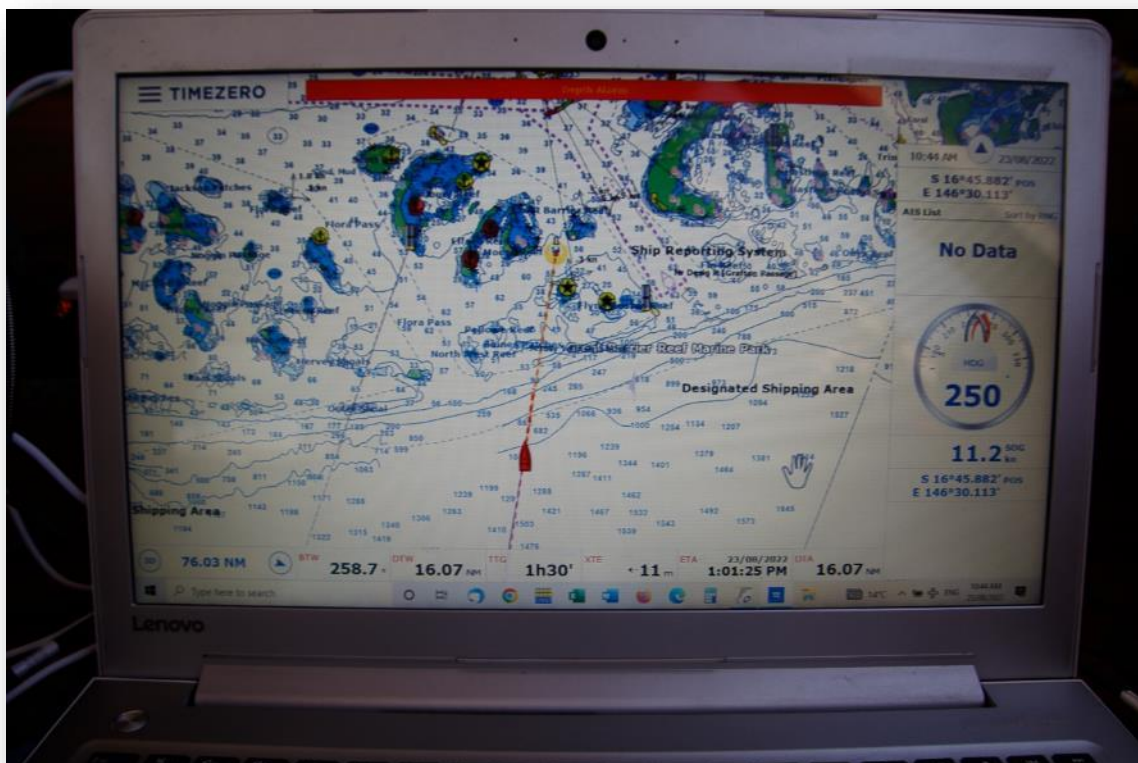
Return to civilisation

With a forecast of persistent 20-30 knot southeast for as long as we could see on our PredictWind satellite weather, life on the Coral Sea was no longer going to be fun. Hiding, boat bound behind a sliver of a reef for days on end is a bit lack lustre, so it was time to head back inshore.

On 23 August, we left Holmes Reef West at 2.00am and headed west towards the mainland for a 115nm passage. The conditions were perfect for a smooth and fast sail: Southeast wind 15-20. Our software calculated we would average 9.5 knots, so we were due back on the coast 12 hours later. No holding *Anui* back this time!

These early morning departures sound awful but are actually easier to deal with than the full overnights. It means we are both up to get the boat settled and sailing, then take a two-hour watch each in the dark, and can have a more relaxed daylight rhythm. You don't feel quite as wrecked afterwards!

We had set up two reefs in the main in advance before we left, intending to use the screecher and reefed main for the conditions. It is always easier to take a reef off than put it in, especially in the dark. We kept that set up for the night, then as the wind came slightly forward of beam, we swapped the screecher for the jib. It was on and off with the reefs as the wind changed and we crossed the Continental Shelf.



We crossed the Great Barrier Reef just between Moore and Milln Reefs. We certainly knew we were going over the speed bump of the Continental Shelf, going from 1500m depth to 50m! In an otherwise smooth and fast passage, it was a very rough stretch of water probably made worse by an out-going tide.



We knew we were getting back to civilisation as the phones started beeping, the emails downloading even before we were inside the Great Barrier Reef! After three weeks of internet and phone detox, we were ready to face the world again!

Once inside the Great Barrier Reef, we had flat, protected water and zoomed along even more!

Rather than sail straight to Cairns, we agreed with Windsong to head to Fitzroy Island and stay there for a day or two. We promised ourselves an end of voyage celebration at a restaurant where no one had to cook or do dishes, just enjoy a pub meal, a glass of wine and maybe a walk up the big hill!



We eventually made our way back to Cairns and anchored at the start of the inlet. We were there for an extended period, hiding from a bout of terrible weather, but used the time to tackle a range of projects.

It's a Wrap!

A Few Observations

- When embarking on a remote trip, you work with the weather and start in light conditions, knowing that you need stopping points that will provide some shelter as the wind inevitably picks up. Sitting behind an islet, even a low one, offers better protection than a horseshow reef.
- You get a definite “middle of nowhere” feel so far away from the mainland. Once beyond the Reef, there is no sight of land. We had been well offshore before during our Lord Howe voyage and many Tasmanian trips, so we knew what to expect, but it particularly gets you once you are anchored in front of a tiny cay, no more than a few meters in height or just behind a sliver of reef! We saw no one at any of the anchorages. You feel and are a long way from it all which suited us fine.
- The Coral Sea is quite choppy. Whether during upwind or downwind runs, calm or fresher weather, the ride is not smooth, with waves or chop coming at you from all directions. The sea state is likely a result of southeast trade winds against the East Australian Current.
- The water clarity out in the Coral Sea is exceptional, often between 30 and 50m, but unfortunately the coral reefs range from totally destroyed to poor in shallower areas for snorkelers. It may be different if you Scuba dive on the deeper coral pinnacles.
- You must get very close to the islands to get away from the ocean swell. It is not always possible to get a big enough patch of sand to anchor in and you often need to weave your way through bommies and reefs. Satellite maps make the task a lot easier.

Learnings

- We are a lot more conscious of safety practices, like taking a radio in the dinghy (so you can call the main boat or your friends if anything happens out there), attaching a second safety line to the dinghy in case the main one fails (we had heard of boats losing their dinghy never to be found again close to shore, let alone 260 nm from shore).
- We found we had to slow *Anui* down significantly for a comfortable ride, especially when going upwind. She might be able to easily sail at 12 – 14 knots, but the ride is a hell of a lot quieter at 8-10 reefed down, particularly when the apparent wind is forward of beam.
- We realise now that when going with another vessel, there will always be differences in sailing speed. When on a passage, you are on your own, you might leave at different times to compensate for performance differences, but you go at your own pace and meet up at anchorages. A slower boat will take longer to get there, but that's it. If any mishap happens, you make your way to the agreed anchorage and attempt to fix things there, not in the ocean.
- Next time we will get even better organized with PredictWind... forwarding our phone messages and emails to our satellite address so we are not totally out of contact.
- When anchored in amongst bommies and planning to leave at night, it is quite possible to weave your way through on GPS marks and past track in the dark, but it is a lot less stressful if you go and anchor out in deeper water at the end of the day so you have nothing to hit behind you for a night departure.
- Without a doubt the atolls are worth the long journey. Being enthused with doing more in the Coral Sea, we will investigate options for dive gear and compressor, whether for a hookah or tanks as it was clear that we would see a lot more underwater and enjoy healthier coral and marine life on a dive than on a snorkel. But as usual, storage space and gear weight are what holds us back!
- The ocean over the years has taught us to be adaptable, to be willing, open and ready for change at any moment because there are things bigger than us which we can't control. The lesson was reinforced on this voyage.



*If hope is a flame,
wonder is fuel for the fire.*

