

INTO THE

Blue Coral Sea



FINDING AN ANCHORAGE amongst the bommies at Chilcott can be tricky.



CHILCOTT ISLET is a rookery for sooty terns and boobies.



CHRISTMAS TREE WORMS in a porite coral – a bright patch of colour.



TWO RED-FOOTED Boobies with their stunning colours.



INCREDIBLE SEASCAPE of East Diamond Islet and reef.

After years of exploring the Great Barrier Reef, it was time for *Anui* to go beyond the barrier, to the islets and reefs of the Coral Sea. CHRISTINE DANGER shares how they planned for their voyage and what they experienced.

The Coral Sea Islands Territory is made up of about 48 separate reefs and atolls with a total of 51 small islands some of which are vegetated. It is spread over an extensive geographic area which extends east from the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef, north to the Torres Straits and south to offshore of Bundaberg. Being such a vast region, it will take a number of voyages to investigate. The appeal is to explore the vast and pristine wilderness, seldom visited and hopefully experience a thriving marine environment protected from direct human impacts by isolation.

We were gone for three weeks in August 2022, covered 626nm, spent time at five different locations, and are still high as kites from the experience. So let's talk about our preparation, what we saw, how it felt.

PREPARATION

A buddy boat, not a rally

Our first foray out in the blue yonder was not a voyage we wanted to do on our own. There are rallies organised to take groups of boats out there, but these are not our scene. We wanted to do our own thing, away from crowds. So instead, we went about finding a buddy boat to go with, crewed by people with a similar outlook to ours, for company and for safety. 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 – not as easy as it seems!

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 lots 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.

RESEARCH

Our bible was the Australia's Coral Sea Islands and Marine Park book by Peter Sayre. We were reliant on his extensive knowledge of the area. There is a scarcity of reference material about the seldom visited islands and reefs of the Coral Sea, but his 30 years of exploring have no equal. 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 powercat.

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.



IT'S WINDY, time to go kite surfing.



BAD DAY for the rock crab, good day for the grey moray eel!



SOME CORAL regrowth visible which gives us hope.



REEFING DOWN – it's windy and bouncy. Let's slow her down!

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

During the month of July, we began the process of watching the weather through both the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) and our PredictWind/Iridium satellite system, looking at patterns, average wind strength and direction, length of systems. 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 organised, we went about identifying a suitable weather window for the voyage. We were looking for several days of 15-20kts southeast or less to embark on a 30 hour ocean

passage. 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 August 2, and the next day we were on our way!

PROVISIONING AND BOAT PREPARATION

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 watermaker 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 canned fruit, we stow away root vegetables, onions and the like that keep



ANCHORAGE PEPPERED with bommies. Going in as close as we dare!

for weeks in crates, we pack away other fresh supplies and refrigerate what we can. We make our own yoghurt, bread, biscuits, pizzas, we sprout beans and seeds. We had enough fresh supplies to last for a month, and enough dry or tinned produce for at least another three weeks. We were not going to starve on this trip!

LET'S GO!

We took off without a specific itinerary but rather a list of possibilities. Our preference was to go to East Diamond Islet 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 40-60° apparent. What came afterwards was decided along the way based on wind strength and direction, how we felt and what appealed to us!

We did not want to be constantly on the go and were hoping to spend a leisurely time at each spot we stopped at, weather allowing. The least time spent at one anchorage was two days, the longest eight days.

Our 626nm journey took us to five locations. For most of this time we were riding 15-20kt southeast trade winds, but we also had to weather 20-25kt blows. The hardest part was the passage from the Whitsundays to East Diamond, a chaotic ride into wind when we had to really slow the boat down to make things less uncomfortable. Lots of slamming and banging, waves and chop coming at you from all directions. But from then on, we had beam or downwind runs which were a little less bruising.

You might think that once you have seen one reef anchorage you have seen them all, but each one was unique with a different feel, different appeal, different activities you could

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engage in. The constant was the breathtaking seascapes, the brilliant colours, the staggering amount of birdlife, the clarity of the water, the incredible feeling of being in the middle of nowhere, but safe and protected. The biggest disappointment and most confronting aspect of our voyage was the state of the coral reefs. They were the worst we have ever seen: a desert underwater.

So let's give you a glimpse of what we saw at each of our hops.

EAST DIAMOND ISLET

Oh what a feeling arriving there after a 28 hour passage from the Whitsundays! The vastness of the sparkling bay, the excellent protection behind the vegetated island, our anchorage in clear sand in 8-12m of water, the abundant bird life, all this contributed to a feeling of awe. We stayed at East Diamond for eight days, both in calm 10-15kts conditions and windier 15-25kts and felt totally safe. We saw more sea birds than we have ever seen, there were numerous chicks at all

stages of development, we enjoyed crystal clear water with 30-50m visibility. On calm days we bird watched, swam, fished, enjoyed the warm sparkling ocean, took thousands of photos. On windier days, we kite surfed, an amazing activity in the middle of the Coral Sea. What was less uplifting was the state of the coral. As snorkellers and free divers, we were shocked: grey barren rocks, devoid of corals and with depleted fish life. Maybe some of the remote bommies at depth were better, but without scuba gear we did not see much to rejoice about.

CHILCOTT ISLET

Part of the Coringa Group, this islet is in a nature reserve that also encompasses the Herald Cays. It is 70nm west of East Diamond. This is definitely a location for calm conditions. The anchorage is not well protected, nor comfortable in 15kts SE at high tide, with a persistent side roll whether you drop the pick as close to the beach as the bommies allow or stay out. We were anchored over sand in 6m of water in a gutter lined with bommies. It would have been easy to just up anchor and go the very next morning, but we were glad we did not because

Chilcott was well worth exploring. Again, the bird life was outstanding, with huge colonies of sooty terns, noddies, boobies of various kinds, tropic birds and frigatebirds. Snorkelling was surprisingly better than at the Diamond Islets, with evidence of recovering corals, possibly helped by the green conservation zone.

NORTH EAST HERALD CAY

Welcome to our island paradise! What made it so? For a start we were spoilt for choice when it came to finding a perfect anchorage. You could easily make your way to a shallow spot free of bommies. We anchored in 4m of water over sand. The sun was shining, revealing amazing graduations of colour in the crystal-clear water. There was a huge number of birds again. At North East Cay we saw courtship flights of red-tailed Tropicbirds, feisty aerial pursuits of Boobies by Frigatebirds, the cutest fluffy chicks waddling around on the beach, bright red hermit crabs borrowing beautiful shells as their home, mean looking grey eels feeding on crabs in the rock pools. We found the perfect lagoon behind a long sand bank for kite surfing away from the busy bird rookeries. We were there for three days and thoroughly enjoyed our stay.

SOUTH WEST HERALD CAY

You might think, another cay, another bird rookery, and only 6nm from the last, but let us tell you this one had a very different feel. The islet was smaller, the sand coarser, the vegetation lower, the nearby reefs encircling the anchorage. It felt wilder and more remote. It was not as easy to make your way to an anchoring spot, but once in you felt closer to the action. We were surrounded by birds again, keen to investigate the boat but not interested in spending the night, having comfortable nests to return to – no bird poo cleaning duty! We snorkelled there in a few spots, finding some small treasures to focus on and plenty of fish, but still dismayed at the



Overview of North East Herald Cay and our anchored boats



NORTH EAST Herald Cay beautiful anchorage in sand.



KITE SURFING on the windy days.



SUNSET DRINKS and dinner on the beach were a treat



BIRDS SOARING at South West Herald Cay



AQUA DOMINATES at East Diamond islet. Further out, it's 1000m deep!



WINDSONG II AND ANUI side by side at North East Herald Cay.

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THE RIDE is never smooth in the Coral Sea



TWO SPECKS in the stunning seascape of South West Herald Cay.



ANCHORED ALONG Holmes Reef West – no island this time, just shy disappearing cays.

devastation. We could have stayed longer than two days, but the weather forecast showed it was wise to move on. We would easily return though!

WEST HOLMES REEF

Our last stop in the voyage, and the only one where we were anchored alongside a reef platform rather than sheltered behind an islet, we found West Holmes Reef reasonably protected considering the wind which was blowing. We anchored in clear sand in 8m of water with plenty of space to choose from. We were there for two days. We fished and snorkelled on the first day, then the wind really picked up to

well over 25kts. We hunkered down the next day till a small break in the weather on the following day allowed us to head back to the coast before the conditions really deteriorated. We did not explore the Holmes Reefs as much as we would have liked to because of the weather. Snorkelling was hard work among the labyrinth of gutters close to where we were anchored, with the strong current pouring out of the reef flats. The coral was very damaged. It may well have been different in the Division Passage separating South and West Reefs, which is renowned for spectacular sights at depth of 30m if you scuba dive.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Our first escapade into the Coral Sea will be one of many. This voyage has opened up a new area of exploration for us, so there will be more of these far-fetched adventures. We can't wait to go further north, further south, further east! See you out there, somewhere in the deep blue sea!

Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for many years, cruising Bass Strait, Tasmanian waters and Australia's east coast. In July 2017, they finally retired and are now sea wanderers, living on board their beloved catamaran Anui, a 52ft Crowther. Follow their adventures on www.sv-anui.com