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News Afloat

The following article has been generously prepared by Jim Woods as an account of his adventure to North Queensland.

Couta Boats In Queensland

The dream became reality at an ungodly hour. 6am Friday 31st July, Avis staff presented me with a 4 tonne Nissan tray truck, and the adventure had begun.

Five weeks away from Woods Auto Shops cruising the Whitsundays in the couta boat "Weeroona". My companion for the first two weeks James Mlghell, joined me at midday and after some last minute packing we set off to collect the vessel from Tim Phillips Boating Services, Sorrento office. Our arrival there at 3pm saw the freshly painted motor started for the first time by the meticulous Ric Lansell (We hoped that it would start the second time as well). All the Phillips' staff gathered around and said there was no way a 26 foot boat would go on an 18 foot tray truck. But the confident Phillips merely lowered the hull onto old tyres and hessian bags filled with sawdust; strapped her down with nylon webbing winches and although 8 foot of boat was protruding over the rear of the truck pronounced us fit for travel. After a test drive (to the Portsea Pub) and some lubrication (only one each) for the drivers, we were off.

The plan was for James and me to drive to Mackay in 2-1/2 days. I wanted to get a good start on Friday night but the day's activity had made us quite tired, and so just before midnight we set up a roadside camp on the Melbourne side of Nagambie. Being Victoria In July it rained. Saturday's driving took us through Shepparton and into N.S.W. (Tocumwal, Finley, Forbes, Parkes) and for dinner at the salubrious Dubbo Hotel. Following a delightful Steak au Poivre accompanied by a bottle of nicely aged Claret, we made a few more miles before camping 100 km south of Moree. I woke from sleeping under the truck to find it had poured overnight, and I was marooned on a little island of dirt with six inches of water running on either side of me. James the more sensible of the pair had slept inside the truck, and so I called for him to get me some wet weather gear. But he wasn't going to get out of bed when all he had to do was roll up his sleeping bag and start the truck. As I said, he is the more sensible of the pair.

At Moree, we stopped for an overdue wash and relaxed in the magnificent natural spa pools, before continuing our journey. Sunday's travelling took us from the relatively good N.S.W. roads onto the notoriously bad Queensland tracks. and we camped on Sunday night outside Rockhampton, an easy morning's ride from our destination.

Monday lunchtime - Mackay - and the crane from Brambles arrives on the wharf and with practised ease lowers the boat into the water some 30 feet below, deposits the pallet of lead on the floor of the boat and places the mast in as well. To my surprise the boat floats with only minor leaks. It has survived 3,000 kms of travel - the last half over some very bad roads. The only sign of wear is movement in the planks which combined with the road dust and wind has cracked the paint on the side of the boat which has borne the weight of the journey. The rest of Monday and Tuesday morning was spent fitting out the boat and getting ready for sailing. We thought it important to have all the gear stowed properly and spent a large amount of time getting it right. In the end, nearly all the gear was able to be stowed under the floor, giving us as much cockpit space as we would normally have. On Tuesday afternoon, Mackay Harbour witnessed a unique spectacle as the "Weeroona" hoisted sail and set out for a test run. Everything worked and we knew the preliminaries were complete.

Wednesday 5th August, with an ebb tide assisting, a light south-easterly off the starboard quarter, 25 deg C and sunny, and a vague idea of the right direction, we set sail for Brampton Island. My estimations had us sailing due north for four hours to reach our destination; and as the wind rose to a pleasant 15 knots, I realised, after coating my outside with suntan oil and my Inside with cold beer, that the holiday was really underway.

After 4-1/2 hours sailing, we anchored safe from the south-east trades at Brampton Island. "Let's catch some fish for dinner" James suggested. But after an hour or so, we had no luck and began to prepare for the night. Set up boom tent, blow up llos, hook up gas stove, then pre-dinner drinks. It was to become standard routine but whilst it was going on I was concerned that we might be dragging anchor. I looked at the fishing line which was over the starboard side tied to the shroud. It was now under the boat. "Up line and reset the anchor" I ordered. But as I pulled up the line, I realised that it wasn't the boat drifting at all - a 51b Trevally came to the surface and 2 hours later was filleted and on the BBQ clamped on the traveller horse. How easy is this fishing caper, I reflected on a full tummy of Trevally. That evening the little rubber dinghy took us ashore for our first taste of island life.

The Brampton Island resort was mainly occupied by pensioners, but a couple of the staff members were ready for a little drinking action. By 2am we were all done, and James and I headed for bed. When we awoke, the gentle night breeze was a 25 knot trade wind which had flipped the rubber dinghy on its back. Consequently, the motor had spent all night sleeping with its head in the sea.

My head felt like it had spent all night sleeping under a jack hammer, as I carried the ailing motor to the Brampton Island work shop and stripped it down. Fortunately, it worked much better than before, once cleaned and we were to have no further problems with it. So Thursday was spent doing repairs and maintenance; but I received an interesting message. Dennis Horne was arriving Friday afternoon at Hamilton Island. After checking the charts, it should be a fair day's sailing. Leave about 8.30am and with prevailing south-east trades behind us and an assisting ebb tide until 3pm, the 60 mile journey should take about 8 hours.

All went according to plan. Two reefs and the number 3 headsail was correct sail selection for the gusty 25-30 knot breeze. From Brampton we steered north to the Cumberland Passage taking Tinsmith Is. and Linne Island to port. The Cumberland Passage was fairly swelly but with the wind and tide behind us, the swell was long and we could surf down the front and still keep the boat dry. All that practice sailing in and out of the Port Phillip Heads stood us in good stead as we enjoyed the thrilling conditions. Off Silversmith Is. I checked our progress and calculated that we were making 11 knots over the land (spring tide would account for 4 knots). I also took a sight on Shaw Island and set our course for Whitsunday Passage. About 2pm things weren't adding up. We should have been at Lindeman Island, but could not see it. In addition, what we believed to be the Repulse Islands were far too close on the port side. We had no certain points on which to take a sight but as the water turned brown, I knew we were not in safe water. We turned about hurriedly and headed out to sea. Dropping the plate confirmed what I had suspected. We were in 5 feet of water! Engine was on, and we were quickly to safety. A quick check of the chart told me that we were in Repulse Bay, and as we hardened up in the wind now rising to 35 knots, I knew it would be a long bash back to Cape Conway. After the first couple of swells had landed in the boat and been easily cleared by the automatic bilge pump, I was confident that the boat would make it. I was not so confident about her two occupants. We continued up the north shore clearing the green water by hand and automatic pump, when disaster struck. James, knocked over by a large wave, caught his arm on the coaming and dislocated his shoulder. Now, I thought, we really are in trouble. With darkness approaching, high wind and seas, unfamiliar territory, beating off a lee shore with one man injured. I called for the life jackets for the first time ever. We reached Cape Conway in darkness and crossed the

Whitsunday Passage guided by the Lindeman Island light.

As the anchor went down in the shelter of Lindeman and Seaforth Islands, I was laughing about how good it was to be alive when I realised how much pain James had endured. He had not complained during the ordeal, and had filled the diesel tank, pulled up the centre-board and generally helped wherever possible. But now with it all over he was clearly in agony. He asked if I wanted to help put the shoulder back, but my body repairing ability extended only to cars, and not to people! So James simply did it himself by jiggling the arm around whilst I looked away.

I cooked dinner and within minutes we were asleep. But the Day of Disasters wasn't over. I had anchored at mid-tide in 20 feet of water wondering whether the low tide at 3.30am would leave us still floating. Sure enough, right on 3.30 I was awakened by the sound of the rudder tapping on a coral bommie. On with the shoes and wetsuit, over the side I went to retrieve the anchor and reset it 20 feet further out. And thus ended the Day of Disasters.

The next day the breeze was still steady at 35-40 knots so we sailed (very carefully!) bareheaded and with 3 reefs into the harbour at Hamilton Island. The trip took about 2 hours with wind and tide assisting and ended with several refreshing ales in the Hamilton Island Hotel. After our ordeal, a couple of days on solid ground with our friend Dennis Horne, were definitely in order.

James and Dennis left me alone on Hamilton after some pleasurable days sailing, although in cloudy conditions. Sailing solo I headed for Whitehaven Beach on the north side of Whitsunday Island. This is one of the world's best beaches - 5 miles of pure white silica sand accessible only by boat. I had met up with the crew of the square rigged barquentine "Golden Plover" in Hamilton Harbour, and they were kind enough to invite me to join their camp at Whitehaven for a few days. The "Golden Plover" does charter work out of Airlie Beach, and runs a crew of 11 catering for approx. 30 guests. The guests camp on the beach and are extremely well fed and entertained. I was fortunate enough to share their meals and facilities and in return I took staff and guests on day sailing and diving expeditions around the islands.

The next few weeks settled into a pleasant routine. The weather was brilliant one day and perfect the next, and the wind varied from 10 - 20 knots with the occasional 25 knot day. The major decisions were where to go (if anywhere) and what to eat and drink. I covered a lot of ground by myself and always enjoyed good company at the end of a day's sailing. The cuta boat was quite a novelty and I soon became a local talking point amongst the plastic boat owners. No sooner had I dropped anchor or berthed against a jetty than a couple of people would poke their heads around the boat and start asking questions.

The interest in the craft was very strong and everybody agreed that they are the perfect vessel for sailing around the islands. More often than not one of my questioners would end up being my host for dinner or a few drinks and because of this, travelling by myself turned out to be most enjoyable.

For the last two weeks, I was joined by Marion Roberts. Apart from the romantic interest, it was going to be interesting to see how Marion, who had no boating experience whatsoever, was going to handle living on a 26 foot open boat. It was a tribute both to the boat and to Marion that the experience turned out to be an enjoyable one; but the lesson is that with a boom tent and proper cooking facilities, a cuta boat is quite suitable for up to four people for "live aboard" cruising. Again Marion and I covered a fair amount of ground around the Whitsundays before setting sail for Mackay and the return journey to Melbourne. The last day's sailing from

Brampton to Mackay remains clearly in my memory. With clear skies, lots of sun, 25 knots plus, one reef and the No.2 headsail, we made 20 odd miles journey in just over 3 hours.

Once in Mackay, the boat was packed onto the truck in a morning, and by 2pm we were headed back to Melbourne. 3,000 kms later, with the 'Weeroona" safely resting in Tim Phillips' yard, and the truck returned to Avis, the reality had returned to a dream.

Jim Woods