

LYDIA ACROSS THE INDIAN OCEAN

Donald Begg

(As readers of Lydia across the Tasman in Flying Fish 2018/1 will recall, Donald and Lydia, his Bowman 48, left the UK in 2014 heading west across the Atlantic and Pacific. After a year in New Zealand they continued to Australia, where we rejoin them for the 7952 mile passage from Bundaberg, Queensland to Richards Bay, South Africa. For the leg from Mackay to Mauritius Donald was joined by Simon Ashworth and Douglas Nethery.

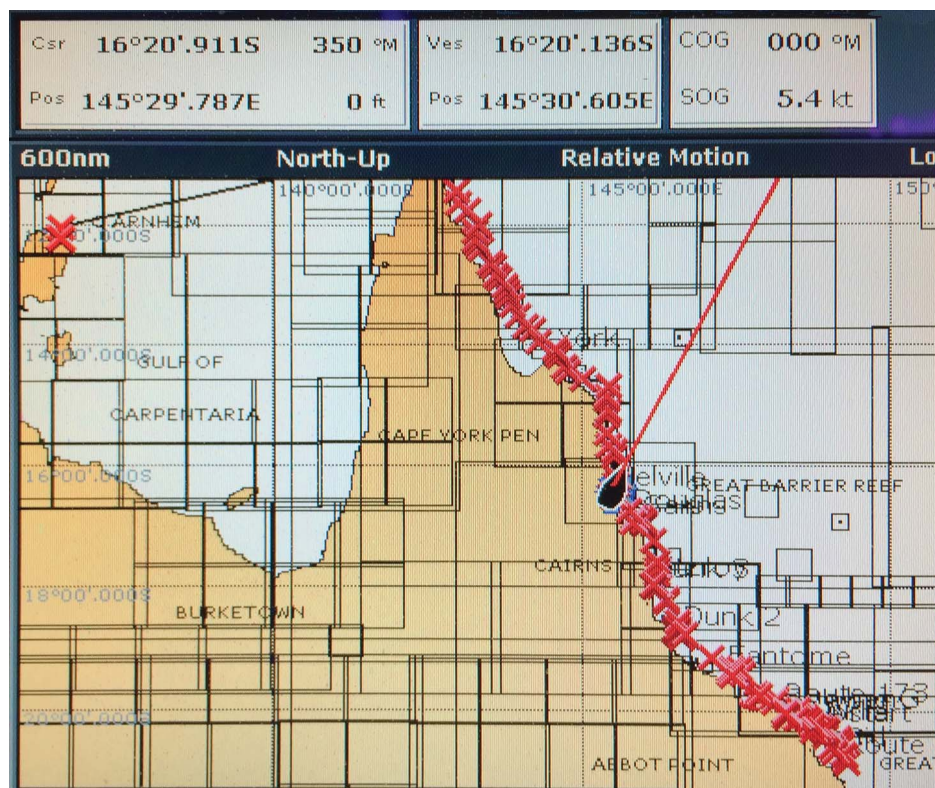
At the time of editing Donald was enjoying Carnival in Brazil. Visit his blog at blog.mailasail.com/yachtlydia (from which this excerpt was taken), to check where he and Lydia have got to now.)

The Great Barrier Reef and beyond

After an agreeable couple of days in Cairns marina, which is buzzily swamped by the visit-the-reef tourism industry, we sailed for Darwin on Sunday 12th August and the unique navigational experience of the series of channels which make up the passage (or passages) inside the Barrier Reef to Cape York. And we are talking channels, some of them quite narrow. There is a series of them, linked together to guide shipping through the holes in the reefs – 400 miles of zigzag marked by beacons and buoys.



There are few yachts after the playground of the Whitsundays but there is a steady stream of merchant shipping. This was unexpected, at least by me. My memory of visits to Sydney in the Royal Navy is of passing well outside the Barrier Reef. On reflection, of course we did – it was before the days of GPS, and the Reef would be a nightmare without GPS and Navionics. More credit to Captain Cook! A particular characteristic of the run is that everyone talks to each other on VHF Channel 16. We had the challenge of transiting a mile-wide channel on a dark night with two large bulk-carriers passing in opposite directions, us sandwiched in the middle,



Waypoints along Australia's northeast coast

but all movements and intentions were choreographed by a friendly and seamanlike dialogue on VHF. The language is English of course, but in a variety of accents.

This is SE trade wind country and August is trade wind season, so much of the passage is dead downwind, with a preventer on the boom and a lot of gybing. Our new autopilot packed up (a minor hitch in the wiring, as we were to discover in Darwin), so the Hydrovane took over, willing enough but not the easiest solution for frequent downwind manoeuvring. We stopped for two nights at Port Douglas to shelter from a blow. It's a charming little resort, again dedicated to Barrier tourism. We hired a car and drove to Cape Tribulation, of Cook fame – surprisingly busy and touristy, but a satisfying day's change from routine on the boat.

We rounded Cape York on 18th August and sailed through the Endeavour Strait, a channel in the wider Torres Strait between Australia and Papua New Guinea, with big tides and water as shallow as 5m, but secure in the knowledge that any number of yachts have been there before us and have kept their keels above the mud. This was a major landmark for *Lydia*. Two and a half years after passing under the Bridge of the Americas she was leaving the Pacific to enter the Sea of Arafura and the wider Indian Ocean.

We fancied a go at the Gagari Rip, also known as the Hole in the Wall, so sailed slightly south of west across the Gulf of Carpentaria towards the port of Gove. We paid for this. There had been strong winds in the southern part of the Gulf, so we crossed with 15–25 knots on our port quarter but with an unpleasantly steep and unfriendly sea from the



Approaching Cape York

south which strained senses of humour and depleted our stock of 'essential' crockery. As a consequence we were not overly disappointed on anchoring in Gove to find that the outboard refused to start and that we were confined

to dinner on board and a

good night's sleep. Did we miss anything in Gove? It's a small township alongside a major bauxite terminal, the silhouette of the town suggests Wigan Gasworks, and the bay was covered in a pall of smoke because the Aborigines were 'renewing' the land with bushfire.

The Gagari Rip is an adventure. It is described in the pilot as 'the foundation of many a yacht club best yarn' and 'with a little planning this passage can be the highlight of a voyage'. It looks a bit like the Corinth Canal, albeit smaller and not man-made, and is a shortcut between Raragala and Guluwuru islands which takes 35 miles off the trip around Cape Wessel at the Gulf's northwest corner. The snag, of course, is the tidal stream, which reaches 6 knots. We needed to go through at 1700, the start of the ebb, a time that suited us well because there is a sheltered bay on the far side in which to anchor for the night. We went through without incident, admiring its wild beauty and enjoying the sense of being miles from anywhere in remote Aboriginal country.



The Gagari Rip

We had a restful night at anchor and again paid the price. In the morning the wind just faded away and a glassy calm had us reciting from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. We motored most of the remaining 400 miles to Darwin, with just two or three hours of land breeze every evening to give the engine and the helmsman a rest (no autopilot, and the windvane only works under sail). By way of compensation, Simon caught a 7lb tuna whilst we motored and fresh fish is good for the ship's company's morale. My concern was fuel. We had filled only two of the three tanks at Cairns, partly because I was expecting steady SE trades all the way (and indeed we hardly used the engine between Port Douglas and Gove), and partly because I wanted the diesel in our big reserve tank to be at its freshest before starting our ocean crossing. The approach to Darwin around Melville Island and up the Clarence Strait would be no place to run out of fuel, with strong tides and numerous reefs, but we kept the revs modest and got in with a little fuel to spare, anchoring in Fanny Bay at 0100 on 26th August. We had covered 1695 miles from Mackay and 2003 from Bundaberg.

The Indian Ocean

Following visits to Lombok in Indonesia, Christmas Island, Cocos Keeling and Mauritius, two months and 4564 miles later we had reached La Réunion and were ready to depart for Richards Bay, South Africa. Although only 1400 miles, which is modest by Pacific and Indian standards, these miles are fraught with uncertainty. You're south of the trade winds and into the variables. First it's 600 miles down to Madagascar, the southern tip of which has a continental shelf protruding for 50 miles which has a reputation for big seas and strong currents in its shallow water. Then you need a weather window for the 'bomb alley' of the Mozambique Channel. This is because low pressure systems form further south off the coast of South Africa and whistle up against the Agulhas and Mozambique Currents with yacht-munching seas. So you can work out a weather window, but not a realistic one until you're south of Madagascar, and that doesn't help you with the timing of your departure from Réunion. Solutions?

1. Consult a weather router for specialist advice. We used Des Cason, sygambit@gmail.com, an amateur based in Durban, who was recommended by Roving Rear Commodore Jonathan Lloyd in *The Challenge of Passage Planning in the Southwest Indian Ocean* in *Flying Fish* 2018/1, and who proved to be both accurate and supportive (see also page 15 of this issue). Other boats on the ARC used Chris Tibbs on a paying basis, and there were one or two others.
2. Have a Madagascan courtesy flag and a port of refuge lined up. Two options are Fort Dauphin (25°01'S 47°E) and St Augustin Bay (23°38'S 43°37'E). Des Cason recommends the latter, his experience suggesting that that officials at the former are less friendly to Europeans. That said, several boats on the Oyster rally went to Fort Dauphin and appear to have had no trouble. A stock of lubricating euros or US dollars might be useful. *Atem*, a few days ahead of us, was approached near Fort Dauphin by an unmarked launch with crew brandishing AK47s, but being a Swan 62, and with 40 knots of wind, they had no trouble pulling away. The skipper sent out an SSB DSC and had a rapid response from MRCC Cape Town but no explanation. The consensus is that it was probably a sparingly-painted government launch.

3. Stick north of 26°S until approaching the African coast. This should keep you north of the worst of the weather and of the build up of the Agulhas Current.
4. Carry as much fuel as you can, and keep two days' reserve in hand in case you need to make a final dash for safety. It may be psychological, but I found that the sea in these parts has a less friendly feel to it than that of the Pacific. Just a look at the sea and sky tells you this is Injun territory. Don't tarry.

So, on our way. We sailed from Réunion early on 3rd November in calm conditions and motor-sailed all day. From then on to Madagascar we had periods of wind, periods of calm, motor-sailing for a while then pure sailing for a while. We didn't enjoy burning diesel so early in the voyage, but there was no alternative if we were to maintain momentum. On the night of 4th November, fireworks weekend at home, we had an Old Testament thunderstorm, lightning that would have shaken Guy Fawkes, 25 knots of wind on the nose. For the next couple of days we were plagued by squalls, but had a sailing wind of varying strength for at least half the time, reef in, reef out.

South of Madagascar we probably cut it a little fine, running along the 1000m line 30 miles off the coast, and spent 12 hours motoring at a frustrating 4 knots over the ground with wind and a lumpy sea on the nose. Then the wind backed into the south and we had a good beam reach across the Mozambique Channel – luck and a weather window were with us. We even had a day of relatively calm seas, and caught up with some sleep. This lasted until 100 miles off the African coast, and then it roughed up and we exchanged comfort for faster sailing, with daily runs of 148, 162 and 165 miles. We offset 30 miles north to allow for the current, and then came scooting down the coast wing-on-wing at 10–11 knots over the ground, with 20 knots from astern and the current under us. The wind increased steadily, so we reduced to yankee alone and came surfing through the breakwater entrance into Richards Bay on the evening of 12th November with 35 knots of wind on the quarter. A friendly berth at the Zululand Yacht Club and a cold beer were most welcome.

The benchmark for the ±1400 mile passage from Réunion to Richards Bay is 10–12 days and we did it in 9½, so no complaints. We did have the engine running for 100+ hours but make no apology for that.

