

## Australia, $\frac{3}{4}$ circumnavigation

Jason Lawrence

### *Awarded the Cruising Club Prize*

We arrived in Bundaberg, north of Brisbane, from the Pacific in October 2009. The seasons demand that the summer months, October to April, be spent well south of Brisbane, so we had a number of options for the coming six months. We could haul *Pegasus* and fly home, or cruise slowly to Sydney and back, or keep sailing south and then west. With family in



South Australia, we decided it would be altogether more exciting to sail to Adelaide and then to take a view on where to go next depending on the conditions.

The Pacific fleet had dispersed and our friends were heading home to Sydney, so we decided to meet in Broken Bay near Sydney for Christmas. Slowly making our way south we had a wonderful time in Mooloolabar, and spent ten nights right in the heart of Brisbane at Dockside Marina. The sailing southwards was pleasant and forgiving, allowing us time to master the 'bar' entrance, a feature of the east coast. Many harbours are river mouths where sand bars have formed at the entrance. The offshore



*Pegasus*

swell often breaks on the shallows and combined with the tidal effect, technique and timing are essential for safe entry and exit. It seems that the optimum time to pass is at the end of the flood in low swell conditions, but often this is not practical for passage planning.

Heading down the New South Wales coast the sailing became a little more boisterous. There is a change in the weather pattern and leaving with northerly winds can mean arriving in southerlies. This was the first time we were to be affected by the passing fronts that

are a feature of the southern half of Australia. The fronts seem to pass every three or four days, becoming stronger and more defined the further south one travels. On the east coast they are preceded by weakening northerly winds before a strong south-south-west shift. Sailing southwards from Brisbane we just managed to enter Camden Haven before a strong frontal pass, and we spent a memorable few days in this quiet country town.

Pushing on south, we spent Christmas with our friends and we all sailed to Sydney itself for New Year. We anchored in Athol Bay with ten

of our Pacific friends to watch the fireworks and welcome in the New Year. Then after a glorious day in Manley we said goodbye to our friends for the last time as they headed north back to Broken Bay and we contemplated our passage south. We headed off in fine weather and arrived in Eden on 10 January



*Pegasus in Sydney*

before another weak frontal pass. This is where it all started to get interesting. With few safe havens and a convergence of current and wind we could expect lively conditions with little warning.

Looking at the Grib files, everything seemed quite still and settled. We had learnt that if the prediction was for 15kts of wind then it was

likely one would get 25-30kts. Indeed, the Australian forecasts state that wind strengths can be 40% greater than predicted and wave height double, which is quite a large disclaimer for a small boat!

We set off on flat seas, committed to either 120nm of Bass Straight (north of Tasmania) to make Lakes Entrance, or if the swell was running and making the entrance impossible, 220 miles to a cove behind Wilson's Promontory. As it turned out, we had fair winds and flat seas, and so we made the shallow entrance to Lakes Entrance, Victoria, although in building conditions. We stayed a few days to let the front pass and prepared for our next leg. We were now in cold water. As the wind came round from the north-east through north the temperature rose and there was something vaguely Scandinavian about being in 36° winds and diving into 17° water!

Once the weather had settled, we left the narrow entrance and approached Wilson's Promontory, heading towards Portland, our next scheduled landfall. Fifteen miles north of King Island it was apparent we would not quite make it. The forecast was for strong headwind, and with the likelihood of big seas we aborted and sailed 30 miles north to the small town of Apollo on the mainland. We tied up along the fishing wharf and enjoyed exploring the small town.

There was one other yacht in the harbour, from Fremantle, so we said hello and talked about their trip across the Great Australian Bight. They had had a pretty bad trip. Having been 'ripped' out of their anchorage they decided to start their passage. With estimated 18m waves they had a really rough time, being pooped, loosing their dinghy and other stern gear. They had spent the last 6 months repairing their 48ft boat in South Australia and recovering from the ordeal. It didn't sound too promising.

Amanda and I discussed our plans over two huge crayfish and decided we still had some options. If we didn't get a clear weather window to cross the Bight, we could always head back east after cruising South Australia.

Our next leg would take us up into the Gulf of Saint Vincent, and we wanted as much time as possible before the next frontal pass. We decided to leave when the westerly wind had abated. It should then start backing to



The boys with crayfish from the Southern Ocean

## Jason Lawrence

the south and east. We had been warned by the local Cray boats to stay well off Cape Otway. They were right. The seas were large, short and confused, but as we bore out close-to, the wind started behaving and backed south-west as we tacked and headed west. Some light winds and then a strong south-south-easterly saw us through the Backstairs Passage and into the lea of Kangaroo Island south of Adelaide. That was only the second time we had used the 4th reef, and I really felt that we were entering hostile territory.

I wrote in the log, 'Unexpectedly the wind built up all morning, so by lunchtime it was blowing over 35kts, just aft abeam with 4m seas. For only the second time since leaving the UK I had to put four reefs in the main. For the very first time since leaving the UK I was struck by the strong feeling that this was really the wrong place for small children.'

In the darkness we edged our way through the Backstairs Passage and into a small, well-protected bay where we dropped the hook. After three attempts we managed to get a good hold in the tap weed and sand. I would have to address that issue. We were just inside the protected waters of the Gulf of Saint Vincent, and within striking distance both of Adelaide and of achieving the first objective of our trip round Australia.

On 24 Jan we arrived at the Royal South Australian Yacht Squadron (RSAYS) and settled in for a memorable stay. Along with the usual maintenance, we spent time with family and enjoyed the hospitality of the club and its members. I had been watching the weather and although fronts were passing with regularity, the general conditions looked favourable to cross the Bight.

A still Monday morning, just glowing in the pre-dawn, saw us slip lines and glide out of Adelaide on dark glassy seas. We wanted to get south early as the sea breeze sucks the air up the gulf, giving strong southerly winds from midday onwards. Further south there is less effect. Keen to sample some of the great cruising in South Australia we headed back to Kangaroo Island and found a beautiful anchorage in Emu Bay on the North side of the island. Having spoken with many members and walked the dock of the RSAYS it was apparent that all cruisers use an Admiralty or stockless anchor. I was lucky enough to find a second hand Admiralty anchor in Adelaide, and as we set it for the first time it bit into the seabed hard. We were relieved to have appropriate ground tackle for the south coast.

White sand under crystal clear, turquoise water - fantastic! The only drawback was that these waters are the breeding grounds of the great white shark, so absolutely no swimming off the boat or in deep water. The Beach looked safe enough, (watch out for the snakes) so we all went ashore and swam before taking a long walk down the beach. It felt great to be back here.

The cruising in the two gulfs is wonderful. En route to Port Lincoln,

our departure point for the bight, we spent eight nights at anchor in six anchorages and three islands. We re-provisioned in Port Lincoln and, while waiting on weather, headed out to the Sir Joseph Banks group to see the islands and spend a few days on the beach.

All through South Australia the sea life was plentiful and visible, with daily sightings of dolphin, shark, fish, sea lion and plenty of birds, although no Albatross. We had last seen them approaching Kangaroo Island in late January. I was hoping that we would see them again when we returned to the fringe of the southern ocean on our immanent passage to West Australia.

We wanted to head south to be ready for an early morning departure, so on the 20th February we pulled up the anchor, left Port Lincoln and headed south to Memory Cove in the Thorny passage, just 5 miles from open ocean and our westerly course. As we sailed south the wind picked up, so by the time we reached the Cove the wind was blowing 35kts from the west. We planned to leave early the next morning when the wind eased and backed to the south-west, then south and then east, giving us a head start before the winds strengthened from the east.

Mathew Flinders, who was responsible for charting much of South Australia, anchored in Memory Cove on 22 February 1802 after crossing the bight from the West. He named the Cove in memory of the eight seamen who died in the straight when their boat sank in tidal eddies. That afternoon the wind howled and we dragged anchor, so we deployed the big guns deep into the sand and had a good night's sleep. The morning of 21 February saw clear skies and little wind, so we had pulled up the anchors by 0700 and headed off round Cape Catastrophe and West Point into the Southern Ocean once again.

Our passage was about 750 miles, so we planned on four days, which was great as in five days the wind was forecast to increase from the east and could cause big seas as it pushed the water up against the ever present south-west swell and east flowing Leeuwin current. I was quite anxious; this is not a place where one should normally cruise and it's best to limit the exposure as much as possible.

We made good progress in light but strengthening south-westerlies, and were delighted to catch five blue fin tuna on the first day. With the freezer full and fresh winds we put the lines away and concentrated on the sailing.

On the second day after a squally night the wind backed to south-east, which made for a more comfortable passage, and we pushed on to the Recherche group, our first land fall.

Day 4 and it looked like we would make Middle Island in the Recherche Group late in the afternoon. We altered course and came onto the plate at lunchtime seeing the depth change from 3,800m to 70m in just 10 miles. I



Blue fin tuna

was very glad the swell was only 3m and not 6 or 12 as is not uncommon in the region.

The Recherche group is very isolated and only really accessible if you are crossing the Bight, which only a handful of yachts do each year. We knew we would see no other boats, so we had to be careful in that dangerous archipelago.

On our approach to Middle Island, I suddenly noticed that we were in an area of the chart with no soundings. On closer inspection it cautioned that it was unsurveyed.

Great! Only 10 miles to go and we were in an area that Flinders described as 'a mass of uncharted dangers'. After a nervous hour or so with the sun in our eyes we got back into the soundings and made our approach around NE point and into Goose Island Bay. We found a protected spot behind the headland and dropped our Admiralty anchor. It bit hard into the sand and weed - well hooked and secured before last light. Fantastic.

We had crossed the Great Australian Bight and could look forward to some remote day cruising in the Recherche group whilst heading slowly towards Esperance some 80nm away. It felt great that we were finally in Western Australia and a massive relief that the Bight was behind us.

The wind strengthened from the east and over the next four days we slowly made our way through the group and along the coast to Esperance, arriving on 2 March. After dropping the hook we were called by customs, who asked us to pop in for a cup of tea. We were only the second boat that had visited in two years, and they gave us a few mementoes and colouring books for the boys. We liked Esperance, and with a friendly Yacht Club and accessible town we enjoyed our time there. Keen to push on and round Cape Leeuwin, we made our way to Albany and spent a few windy days waiting for the weather to clear.

Leaving in fresh winds we made our way from the Southern Ocean into the Indian Ocean by rounding Cape Leeuwin, and arrived at the Fremantle Sailing Club (FSC) on 16th March. Of course it was not a straightforward entry. Arriving at midnight on the 15th we had engine failure (tap weed round the props) in 30kt southerlies and so had to anchor just off the shipping channel until daylight, when a quick dive cleared the issue. We were delighted to be in Western Australia (WA) and enjoyed the great FSC and the facilities of Fremantle. We hauled *Pegasus* over Easter and completed the underwater works (5 coats of antifouling etc) and spent



another couple of weeks preparing for our trip up the coast to NW Cape, into the Pilbarra and on to the Kimberley, the highlight of the journey to Darwin.

We said our goodbyes and left the FSC on 18th May for a shakedown to Rottnest Island. It felt great to be back on the beach again and to be able to swim off *Pegasus*. We didn't delay and set off after a couple of days to Shark Bay, some 500 miles north of Perth. The region became more remote as we headed north, and with worsening weather, we decided to stop in Geraldton to replace a faulty diode bridge. I had completely forgotten that it was failing and was keen to have all systems operational, if only at the beginning, for this next leg!

We spent a memorable Friday night in the Yacht Club, and before leaving on the Saturday, the stewardess bought four Crayfish down to *Pegasus* as a gift. Crayfish are plentiful in the region and the Abrolhos Islands, just 30nm offshore, are renowned for the quality and volume trapped for export. (Incidentally, the *Batavia* was shipwrecked on the Abrolhos Islands in 1629. It's a pretty gruesome story. See 'Batavia (ship)' on Wikipedia.)

Departing in fresh reaching conditions, we had a good run, and with a following 4m sea made the south entrance to Shark Bay the following afternoon. Inside the sheltered, shallow waters of the bay, we explored some outer islands, enjoyed shelling again, and spent a few nights at the Monkey Mia resort where the Boys hand fed the Dolphins.

Shark Bay was the site of the second European landfall in Australia by Dirk Van Hartog in 1616, on route to Batavia (Jakarta). He only spent three days there, nailed a pewter plate to a tree and set off again. The outer Island of Shark Bay is known by his name. We very much enjoyed cruising in the protected waters with its abundant sea life and quiet anchorages. We made our way north to Carnarvon for victuals and to regroup before heading up the Ningaloo reef to NW Cape. We took the opportunity to have our final Rabies inoculations, organised in Perth, as we prepared for the open ocean once again.

We were entering a different weather pattern and so changed our cruising discipline. We could expect the wind to be less violent and anchorages to be protected by reefs, a more Pacific experience! But it was not to be. After a day at sea we took shelter from the large swell behind Cape Cuvier. Tied to a tug mooring we waited as the wind topped 40kts. We had learnt of this tug mooring at the bar of the FSC. With no other hiding place on this exposed coast it is a real godsend - position 24° 13' 25"S 113° 24' 10"E. The morning saw more benign conditions and we pushed on the 70nm to our first stop in the Ningaloo National Park at Gnarraloo. In a protected anchorage we enjoyed snorkelling and walking the extensive beach.

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It was 11 May and we were aware that we still had some 1500 miles to sail before Darwin. We had to be there by 10 July and so would really need to push on. Before we left, two other boats arrived and we introduced ourselves and had drinks on the beach. We would see more of *Kialana* and *Lizard* on our passage up the coast.

Heading north we had a few night stops along the way before heading into Tantabiddi to sit out three days of ferocious winds. When things had settled down we managed to spend the afternoon off the boat before heading round NW Cape and on to Serrurier Island.

The Passage Islands between NW Cape and Dampier are just beautiful. Being south of the Montibello group, they are less explored and we spent



Sunset with the crew in the Passage Islands

a memorable week making our way slowly up to Dampier. The weather was peaceful with still evenings and the sea and bird life magnificent. While the Ningaloo reef had been disappointing, this un-noted area was just fantastic.

Arriving in Dampier on 23 May, we decided we would victual there, avoiding the necessity of stopping in Broome. We filled with diesel, water, gas and supplies. It would be another seven weeks before any resupply would be possible owing to the inaccessibility of our next cruising ground. This leg from Dampier to Cape Leveque was the one we could get stuck on. With the prevailing winds being easterly, we would be unlikely to have any easy sailing. We had decided that heading up to the Rowley Shoals, three reef systems and some 250nm north-east of Dampier, would give us the best route to Cape Leveque a further 200nm east-north-east, hoping that the wind would clock south-easterly.

It was a pretty windy trip and we arrived on the west side of Imperieuse Reef as the wind was blowing E7-8. We were well sheltered from the sea and spent two days on a Department of the Environment and Conservation (DEC) buoy waiting for the wind and sea to ease. We swam off *Pegasus* and saw manta rays and a myriad of tropical fish as we waited. Customs and





Aboriginal cave art

Coast Watch were ever present and at 1500 everyday they over flew us and asked us the same questions.

Once the wind eased, we spent nights at Clerke and Mermaid Reef before heading up to Cape Leveque in mild south-easterly winds. Arriving on 4 June, we were through the most difficult part and could enjoy five weeks slowly cruising the Kimberley, the highlight of the trip for me though a worry for Amanda. We took our last saltwater swim off the beach at Cape Leveque. From here on in we were in crocodile country, absolutely no swimming off *Pegasus*.

The Kimberley is a wild and remote region stretching 300 miles from Cape Leveque to Cape Londonderry. It has been home to aboriginal tribes for



Do you see him?

thousands of years. The wildlife is abundant and spectacular, and the country dramatic and truly Australian. Everything about it is big. Tides range up to 10m, crocs can be 8m long, the plains, with rivers cascading down that can be 200m above an anchorage. It is just magnificent.

The sailing is not so great, however. With strong tides and little wind it is best to motor-sail to arrive in good time. We had planned to motor most of the way, and with our diesel stocks intact we had plenty of mileage in the tanks.

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There's just too much to say about the Kimberley. Suffice to say we saw pilot whales, dugong, dolphins, sharks, eagles, snakes, spiders and plenty of crocs. We swam in fresh water creeks, climbed cliffs to sacred



Burning rubbish, Steep island, Kimberly

aboriginal sites, found cave paintings, and Bradshaw art, copper in Coppermine Creek, iron ore and uranium. We travelled to a Douglas DC3 crash site and the boys played in the cockpit of the well-preserved wreck. Teaming up with *Lizard* for two weeks, we cruised in company

enjoying many good evenings aboard *Pegasus* or *Lizard*. All in all, it was a truly rewarding cruising experience and well worth the effort. (You can read a full account of the Kimberley adventures in a future log.)

We rounded Cape Londonderry, our last Kimberly cape, on 30 June, and made our way south into Koolama bay and up the King George River.

Making our way 15 miles up the gorge, we anchored at the head of the impressive river in a truly dramatic location close to the two 150m waterfalls. Scaling the cliffs, we swam in the fresh water pools and marvelled at the scale of this impressive country.



*Pegasus* at the head of St George's gorge

With just 250nm to Darwin we were nearly there. Our next passage would be open water across the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, round Charles Point and into Darwin.

Looking at the Grib files the conditions were not ideal. We had strong winds from the east or south-east, and with a course of 060°, we would be close-to for most of the way. There was no window showing over the next week, so we decided to make passage and get to Darwin.

Four reefs in the main and a slip of staysail, and we were still making 6kts over the ground, too fast for the conditions. I can only describe the

sea as filthy. The seas were 3-4m depending on direction of the current, and with a wavelength of 14m. With *Pegasus* at 14m LOA this was most uncomfortable. When the bow was up, the stern was down. And we see-sawed across the gulf for 24 hours before conditions moderated. The boys were terribly sick, as was Amanda, and as the seas subsided in the lea of Arnhem Land we all felt relieved. The wind eased as night fell and rounding Charles Point we found a suitable anchorage for the night.



Author and crew in Kimberley

Motoring against stiff headwinds and current we made slow progress, but at 1100 on 3 July we dropped anchor in Fannie bay, opposite the Darwin Sailing Club. This would be our base for the next three weeks as we prepared *Pegasus* for the next leg of our journey, north across the Arafura and Banda seas through Indonesia and up to Singapore.

Dinghy down and ashore to the Club for beer and cigarettes, the only two items we ran out of in the Kimberley and our 6 weeks in the bush! It felt great to be back in civilisation.

Both Amanda and I felt a terrific sense of achievement, having finally completed a three-quarter circumnavigation of Australia (against the prevailing winds). During our nine months in Australia we had sailed through the Coral Sea, Tasman Sea, Bass Strait, Southern Ocean and Great Australian Bight, into the Indian Ocean, and on to the Timor Sea and finally the Arafura Sea. We had logged some 7,600 miles and added 550hrs to each engine! Of the major Australian cities, we had taken *Pegasus* to Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide, Perth (Fremantle) and Darwin. We had seen tropical Queensland, through the wild, cold south, to the deserts of WA and back to the tropics. We had caught mahi-mahi on the east coast, blue fin tuna on the south coast and yellow fin on the west coast. We had seen the fantastic museums in Brisbane, sailed under the Sydney harbour bridge and seen ancient aboriginal art in the Kimberley. Australia? Done!