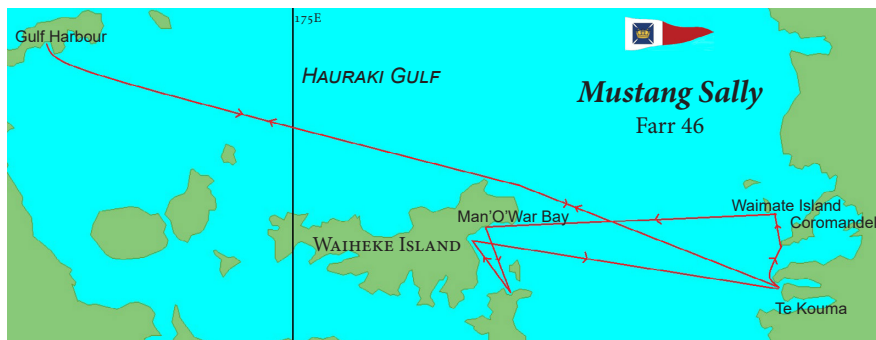


## Lockdown (Level 4), New Zealand

*Mustang Sally* in a time of Covid

Warren Batt



The prop swished gently as we quietly edged away from the dock into open sea in the predawn dark to sail for Te Kouma 35 miles across the Hauraki Gulf on the Coromandel Peninsula. We made our escape blacked out only to discover that the AIS was still in transmit mode. A message came up on Trish's phone app advising us we had just departed Gulf Harbour. A scurry down below to disable the 'transmit' function followed; so much for the cloak of secrecy, our intentions broadcast to all! Three hours later we were enjoying a beautiful reach under genoa alone across the top of Waiheke Island without a boat in sight. We called the marina manager to advise of our unannounced departure, made to avoid any risk of compromise. He'd heard our prop reverberating through his hull and guessed our intention.

It was two days after Level 4 lockdown when all New Zealanders not in essential services were confined to their homes. *Mustang Sally* was our home and we had no wish to be entrapped in the marina. Our marina manager had not posted any notice restricting marina departures and there was enough leeway in the Coastguard advisory to leave room for interpretation.

*Mustang Sally* had become our home again a week before lockdown following the sale of our temporary accommodation. We had packed and leased our apartment in January in anticipation of returning to Malaysia and *Kanaloa* to resume our circum-Pacific cruise. However, an aging father with dementia, a broken hand and other matters conspired to delay us until it was too late. Fortunately, we still had *Mustang Sally* having only just returned her to the water in preparation for sale. I fear that we are not to be parted after 25 years.

Thirteen other yachts and launches were at anchor in Name Bay, Te Kouma, sheltering from the moderate south-easterly. Wine was exchanged for a replacement burgee by landing net as we hung off the bow of *Okahu Bay*(RCC) maintaining two

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Socially distanced dinghy chat with Tim and Ginny

metres separation from Tim and Ginny LeCouteur (RCC).

It was the start of an idyllic two weeks in which we enjoyed a glorious Indian summer roving the offshore islands and bays of the Coromandel coast between Te Kouma and the Happy Jack Islands 10 miles to the north. The scenic peninsula and rocky offshore islands and islets are remnants of volcanic activity 9 to 20 million years ago attested by Castle Rock, an ancient volcanic plug, sentinel over the

coast and its many anchorages. The area is not as popular as the better-known Great Barrier Island and Bay of Islands that attract hordes and has always been a favourite retreat of ours. The islands and bays north of Coromandel Harbour offer uncrowded anchorages, even in the height of summer.

After three days of watching the coming and goings of our fellow refugees we finally upped anchor on a perfect autumn day with nary a breath of wind. The Firth of Thames was as empty as the open ocean with not a sail in sight. We stopped over a patch of ground showing marginally shallower depths than its surround. Too good an opportunity to say no to fishing as we dropped lines in 30 metres to land a large snapper almost immediately, quickly followed by three more before the first mate and crew insisted that I desist with more than enough for supper.

We returned to one of our favourite anchorages at Waimate Island north of Coromandel Harbour only to be driven away to Deep Cove by the stench of a dead cow in the bog behind the beach wafting over the anchorage as the breeze died rendering the beautiful evening unbearable.

We moved next day to the southern cove that had been occupied the night before, away from the stench to enjoy a quiet couple of nights with the island all to ourselves before our solitude was shattered by the arrival of a small launch that dropped anchor



Morgan admires the day's catch from our favourite anchorage

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immediately ahead of us and drifted back to within 10 metres of our bow. The couple immediately disappeared below only to re-emerge on the blast from the foghorn and a few carefully chosen words, after which they moved from over our anchor but still far too close for comfort; this despite half a mile of empty anchorage!

With anchor weighed we motored slowly northwards outside the islands in gentle westerlies before rounding the top of Moturua (Rabbit) Island and anchoring in 15 metres a stone's throw off a cobbly tombolo connecting the two bush-clad rocky hills with little sign of rabbits. Trish and Morgan collected a huge bag of plastic trash off the eastern shore, mainly fish bait wrappers. It is difficult to understand the mentality of those littering the seas of which they so obviously enjoy the fruits.



Mustang Sally from Moturua Island

Unfortunately, mussel farms attract charter boats and day boats of fishers which hang off behind the harvesters to catch the snapper irresistibly attracted to the debris of broken mussels and organic detritus stripped from the mussel lines by the harvesters. Although mussel farms are ubiquitous along the

Coromandel coast they give another dimension to the area with the early morning throb of the mussel boats arriving to harvest and maintain the farms which provide fish refuges and act as wave breaks offering more sheltered waters in their lee. Two other boats joined us overnight and stopped by for a dinghy chat during the next morning. It's warming to see fellow boaties looking out for each other in these trying times when we are largely left to our own resources.

Ngohituana Bay, with its three delightful sandy coves on the mainland three miles to the SE of Moturoa, was our next stop. Dark was gathering rapidly when we arrived to share the bay with one other boat. We met Peter, Lisa and Zenon off *Pelizeon* on the beach next morning, swapping experiences of respective passages to New Zealand from the Mediterranean while maintaining two metres separation. However, keeping nine and 10-year-old boys apart was more challenging. The concept of social distancing is difficult for children who are naturally social and crave for peer company. Given we were now 11 and eight days in self-isolation respectively with no Covid symptoms we decided we could cut them a little slack provided they didn't board each other's boats. They spent the afternoon zooming around in their respective dinghies and sailing their model boats before going ashore to explore until dusk. But for the adults it is a strange experience to meet

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like-minded sailors and not invite them aboard for a sundowner. Morgan prepared his lunch and was away by 0800 the following day with notebook and compass intent on mapping the shoreline, picking up Zenon on the way.

*Mustang Sally* and *Pelizenon* parted company when we headed south to the 'pipi' channel, the narrow small boat passage into Coromandel harbour between the mainland and Whanganui Island; named the 'pipi' channel for the very productive pipi (a small clam) beds on its sandy eastern shore; the pipis mysteriously disappeared a couple of years ago but we now gather cockles from the muddier western side of the channel. Having collected a half bucket we continued out to sea on a holding tank run and to fish. Morgan caught a 53 cm snapper, the largest in his life, his legs still trembling with excitement after landing it.

We spent that night in Squadron Bay, Te Kouma, where Trish was accosted by the farmer while taking a walk on the farmland immediately behind the bay and ordered off the land and back to the boat in no uncertain terms, something never encountered on previous visits. Fresh fruit and vegetables were beginning to run low and the laundry was mounting calling for a provisioning trip to Coromandel on the rising tide that afternoon. In the past we have often anchored in three metres of water (*Mustang Sally* draws 2.8 metres) at half-tide half a mile off the



entrance to the boat channel leading up to Coromandel township, giving at least three hours until the turn of the tide to dinghy into town for a pleasant lunch or replenishment of supplies. This time there would be no lunch as Trish, having rung ahead, headed ashore to the supermarket and laundry still open as essential services in the otherwise deserted town.

Coromandel was built on gold and timber before dying in the early fifties when the gold mines closed, and the axes no longer rang in the decimated kauri forests. My grandfather was headmaster of the local school at the time and I have indelible memories of Friday night passages on the *Coronel* from Auckland to



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Coromandel via the 'bottom' (eastern) end of Waiheke Island, the main mode of transport for people and goods to those places when roads were absent or tortuous. Ironically, Coromandel became the centre of the anti-mining movement in the 1980's leading to a ban on exploration and mining on the Coromandel peninsula despite its historical gold endowment. Its deserted streets during lockdown belied its popularity today as a tourist destination celebrating its historic past, a mecca for arts and crafts, and a thriving mussel industry.

Trish received a friendly reception at supermarket and laundromat but had a hostile encounter on the boat landing when she returned to the dinghy. She was not wanted in their town and they generally harassed her until a local Maori chap came over and berated them, sending them on their way. Just not Trish's day! It is difficult to understand the hostility towards people coming ashore from isolation on boats. The stress and uncertainty of Covid appeared to be unsettling normally rational beings. Totally isolated boaties were at far more risk from on shore encounters than vice versa.

On Good Friday a couple of days later we anchored in uninhabited Ranger Bay in Te Kouma for the night. I rowed ashore to explore the rocky beach and treat myself to oysters off the rocks, to be confronted by a gun-toting man who emerged at dusk to take me to task for being ashore. The man had no property rights and I had never been above the highwater line, so he had little ground for complaint. Attempts to defuse the situation with humour were not particularly successful before he stormed off back around the foreshore in the gathering gloom threatening to report us to authorities while I returned to the boat. Being out of cell phone range, we reported the incident to Auckland Maritime Radio who advised they would notify the appropriate authorities. So much for Easter spirit and Prime Minister Jacinda Adern's exhortations to 'be kind'. Coromandel harbour and Te Kouma were rapidly losing their attraction.

Rangipukea Island guarding the entrance to Te Kouma is a delightful day anchorage with a long sandy beach, the best in the area. Ashore we met the crew of *Intrinsic*, a yacht we had previously shared an anchorage with, who suggested a game of boules until second thoughts determined otherwise and we settled for pleasant exchange at a distance. The only other boat was a 60-foot power boat with an alpha male in budgie smugglers and a trophy wife who had anchored near us on several occasions without a wave or acknowledgement. Give me a yachtie any day!

The Indian summer was finally drawing to a close with northerly and westerly gales forecast. After Morgan had completed his traditional onboard egg search we upped anchor on Easter Monday and sailed the 13 miles across the Firth of the Thames to Waiti Bay on the NE corner of Waiheke Island, a leisurely reach under genoa alone at 7 knots in a N4 breeze. We counted 20 boats scattered around the greater Man'o'War Bay apparently all preparing for the blow. By evening the wind was F5 gusting F6 and the next morning had backed W5 gusting 7 leaving Waiti exposed. We motored down to North Harbour at Ponui Harbour with expectation of more south in the wind but found the anchorage uncomfortable with F7 gusts

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bending through a low saddle in the western headland protecting the bay. We returned to Waiheke Island and anchored in Wairere Bay close by *Coeur de Lion* (RCC) out of the strong winds blowing from the main anchorage at Manō'War Bay.

The next five days were spent at anchor except for a holding tank run out to sea on the third day when the wind eased SW3-5. The windlass strained to retrieve the anchor as we hauled in a great length of heavy mussel farm rope with spat pots attached, broken away or discarded from the nearby mussel farm. There was little we could do but haul it aboard and re-dump it in deep water beyond Tarawhiti Island. We caught a nice kahawai returning to the anchorage which we presented to Peter, Elizabeth and Peter aboard *Coeur de Lion*, having introduced ourselves by dinghy during a lull. The wind veered west again and blew with a vengeance for another two days before it finally dropped and the rain ceased. We were able to take a walk along the strand at Manō.War Bay along with many others glad to escape their boats after being cooped up for a week. Small clusters congregated along the beach to chat with observance of social distancing remaining strong. My daughter Tanya and her husband Pete brought us down a much-appreciated box of fresh produce from their organic garden, placing the box on the sand for us to retrieve. We exchanged greetings from a distance resisting the temptation to give Tanya a hug. It has become a rather sad world when you can't embrace your daughter, but we take no chances and play by the rules, as we have observed most of our fellow sailors doing, contrary to the tirade directed against people in isolation on boats by some Waiheke residents in the local newspaper— why, we might even be enjoying ourselves (which we are). As we spoke a very large shark was chasing its prey in lunging leaps across the shallows of the bay, in water no deeper than a couple of feet, causing reflection on an earlier swim off the back of the boat.

The Coromandel coast called as we sailed back across the Firth of Thames to Waimate on the 19 April. *Coeur de Lion* joined us a day later and for the next eight nights we shared the anchorages which so delighted us. We spent four nights



Dingy and raft antics at Waimate

at Waimate keeping our distance while we walked the island and Morgan preoccupied himself building a raft from mussel farm buoys flotsam on the shore, happy to be towed around by dinghy before converting it into a not very efficient sailing craft.

With a 10-year old voracious fruit and raw vegetable eater aboard we made another provisioning run to Coromandel. Trish and I dinghied the one mile up to the township leaving Morgan on anchor watch. The dinghy was loaded to the gunwales with laundry

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and garbage, the greater amount being plastic gathered off the shore. We bought official rubbish bags at the service station (an essential service) across the road from the landing and dumped our garbage in the designated place before walking into town, Trish to the laundry and I to the pharmacy to collect a pre-arranged prescription. Walking back, I passed Trish still in the queue waiting her turn to enter the supermarket while I returned to the landing only to find all the garbage dumped back in the dinghy, fortunately still in the bags. At least it had not been emptied into the dinghy, for which I suppose we should be grateful. The lady in the service station who sold me the bags had seen nothing but directed me to the transfer station 'around the corner and a couple of hundred yards up the road'. With one large bag over each shoulder the 'couple of hundred' proved to be 750 metres. Trish was at the dinghy by the time I returned, shopping and laundry on board and ready to go. Apart from the mysterious garbage police, no rude encounters were experienced this trip, with friendly shopkeepers and no angst from townsfolk we met in the street or queues. Light was fading rapidly as we returned to *Mustang Sally*. Morgan had thoughtfully switched on the anchor light to guide us. We



Looking north from Waimate Island to the top of the Coromandel Peninsula (far distance).

Photo courtesy of Peter Bratz, *Coeur de Lion*

motored back to Waimate on a mirror calm sea in the lee of Whanganui Island, our wake streams of bioluminescence, Jupiter rising very bright and Orion overhead in the crisp clear sky – one of those nights you could have carried on forever, even when under power, with a tot of rum in the steaming hot mug of coffee to warm the cockles of your heart.

After 28 days of maintaining social isolation we expanded our bubble at Ngohituna Bay to include *Coeur de Lion* and once again were able to share happy hours, champagne and steamed cockles. On Anzac Day, our final day north of Coromandel, Trish and Morgan went fishing in the afternoon and caught two snapper and collected another pot of cockles from the pipi channel at low water. Morgan collected firewood and built a fireplace for the evening sundowner on the shore

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Sunset at Deep Cove with *Coeur de Lion* and *Mustang Sally* at anchor.  
Photo courtesy of Peter Bratz, *Coeur de Lion*

with *Coeur de Lion*. He found footprints in the sand of the kiwis he and Trish heard the night before while fishing late for yellow tail bait. The flames flickered in the fading light, the sky a pastel mauve and yellow behind the islands to the north while we enjoyed snapper sashimi with a sauvignon blanc seated on logs around the fire

for a perfect sunset. Bjorn, Elizabeth and Peter returned to *Coeur de Lion* as we sat contemplating the flames and all those that sacrificed their lives for what we enjoy today, until the tide lapped our feet and extinguished the fire. We made our way back to *Mustang Sally* after inspecting Morgan's kiwi footprints by torchlight, for *linguine vongole*, fare of the day's labour.

A last foray to our favourite fishing spot in the Firth was very rewarding, including a 56 centimetre snapper delivered to *Coeur de Lion* in Name Bay, as a token of appreciation of their company over a wonderful fortnight. Trish and Morgan upped anchor and took us down to Rangipukea Island on the last day of level 4 lockdown, before heading ashore with the anchorage and beach to ourselves. So ended 33 days of enforced isolation. We were privileged to have spent 31 of them at sea in a small cruising ground that offers everything. We had a cracking sail back to Gulf Harbour the next day, averaging over 8 knots in the SW5, a fitting finish to a great cruise as we returned to our berth and Level 3 lockdown.

But it was not so great for my father who crossed the bar four days later just short of 98 years old and just three months after placing him in hospital care; denied visitors, he must have felt well and truly abandoned despite his advanced dementia and the best efforts to maintain contact by phone and Zoom. Perhaps the real tragedy of Covid-19 is not so much the dying but the isolation and inability to be with those you love in their final hours. I write this as a tribute to an old seadog who joined the NZ Division of the Royal Navy as a seaman boy at the age of 15 and was the last surviving New Zealand crew member of the HMS *Achilles* at the battle of the River Plate, the opening naval engagement of WWII.

We will remember him.



Robert (Bob) Batt