

Further East

South Africa, Mauritius, Australia, New Caledonia, New Zealand

Pete Hill

I left Durban at the end of July, single-handed again and very much alone. I had rather lost my sense of direction and was not sure where to go. I couldn't face continuing on to Madagascar and it seemed wrong to retreat back to the Atlantic. In the end I decided to sail further east, towards



The author making repairs underway

Australia, but midwinter is not the time to cross the southern Indian Ocean; I would go via Mauritius.

Leaving Durban harbour there was a very light NNE wind which veered and freshened overnight to a force 7, giving me an uncomfortable beat with three reefs in each sail. A couple of days later the wind eased and shifted to the S, but a 30 knot squall broke several of the starboard battens before I could reef down. While removing them to be repaired, the port sail gybed, which broke another batten. The wind quickly increased to force 8, still from the S and it seemed a good time to deploy the Jordan series drogue. I then retired below to start scarfing and gluing up the battens, one at a time. The 'fun', however, was not over for the day as the starboard tiller broke off just before midnight. I had lashed

the tillers and foolishly raised the rudder blades, against which a wave had broken. I removed the blade and tied the rudder cassette to a cleat. The drogue was doing its job and down below was relatively comfortable.

The next morning the wind and seas were down and it seemed a shame to let the S wind go to waste. Getting the drogue in single-handed caused some difficulties.

In the past it was quite easy with two of us. I would heave in the slack after a wave passed and Carly tailed on the cabin top winch and held on tight when the next wave approached, whilst I held the rope down over the aft beam. I took over Carly's job,



Sailing with broken battens

but with no one holding the rope down it rode up the davit and snapped it off. That was bad enough but unfortunately the dinghy was still in the davits - another bit of my foolishness. I eventually managed to get the dinghy into the cockpit, which rather filled it, and to retrieve the drogue with some difficulty - more things to fix.

We sailed on well reefed, just using the port rudder. When the wind disappeared the next day I was able to repair the starboard tiller. When the wind did fill in it was back to the NE, on the nose. As I repaired the



Colonial Port Louis

battens (the bridge deck being long enough to glue up the 16 foot battens) I could set more sail, but it was a week before we had full sail again. Except for a couple of days of light SWly winds the wind remained in the NE, force 3 to 5. Added to this was a 1 knot current against

us; progress was not rapid. 20 days out we tacked off Ile de Reunion in light winds and it took another 3 days to sail the 120 miles to Port Louis,

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Mauritius.

After clearing in, I sailed up to Grande Baie at the north-west corner of the island and spent a pleasant month in this large, well-sheltered bay. Mauritius is very reminiscent of the Caribbean, particularly Trinidad,



Racing Grande Baie, Mauritius

with its sugar cane fields, large Indian population and the quaint seedy colonial buildings of Port Louis (away from the new tourist waterfront complex). Travelling round the island was easy and cheap on ancient Ashok Leyland buses.

On the 18 September I set off towards Albany, on the south coast of Western Australia. The southern Indian Ocean has a reputation for being rough and it did not disappoint. After a very slow start from the island, the wind settled into the SE force 6

which had *Oryx* bashing into the steep waves. We continued on south to try and find some W winds. In fact I got so far S that I considered calling at Ile Amsterdam, only to discover I had no chart of it, and so abandoned that idea.

One nasty moment was when I dashed out in the night to reef in a fierce squall and heard the cabin door slam shut behind me, with no key. Only after managing to squeeze my hand under the opening saloon window to unfasten it and climbing through did I see the funny side of it. By now the brave W winds had arrived and we made some decent runs, but our troubles were not over. Several battens broke which caused tears in the sail and a few days later the port rudder blade broke off at the waterline. In



Surfing in the southern Indian Ocean

calmer conditions a few days later I was able to extract the top half and bolt it upside down into the rudder cassette, giving half a rudder blade.

As I approached Cape Leeuwin the wind went back into the SE and we had to tack the rest of the way to Albany. We arrived after 41 days at sea and 3,700 miles, with a long list of repairs to do.

The customs officers were welcoming and friendly and so was the Environment Protection officer, but he confiscated much of my remaining food and charged me £200 to do it. In the late 1980s I lived in Penryn for a while and there got to know a young Australian couple, Darren and Linda Russell. They lived on a lovely 28 foot, Venus gaff cutter with their baby daughter. I had heard through the cruising grape vine that Darren was now a boat builder in Albany. The Customs Officers knew him well and told me that his boatyard was at nearby Emu Point.



Oryx & China Moon, R. Tamar, Tasmania

The next day I walked around the coast path to Emu Point, some way out of town, to find Darren. Fortunately Darren remembered me and took me under his wing. He gave *Oryx* a berth alongside his travel lift dock, use of the workshop and drove me around to buy wood and materials for the repairs. I made two new rudders, new battens and re-cut the sails back to a split junk rig. Of course all this took longer than I expected.

My visa for Australia was for three months, multiple entry. I had optimistically booked a flight to New Zealand from Tasmania in early January to renew my visa and go to the junk rig rally in the Bay of Islands.



Mount Strzelecki, Flinders Is, Bass Strait

After six weeks the work was finally done and I took Darren and Linda for a trial sail on 17 December. All went well and I set off the next morning for Tasmania.

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There was a mixed bag of wind but a few days of fresh SWly winds made up for some light Elies. Christmas day had us running with a SW6. The new, larger, fixed rudders worked faultlessly, keeping us steadily on course under self-steering whilst surfing at over 10 knots. The last 100 miles in the Bass Strait were frustratingly slow with light S and E winds. I arrived on 2 January in the early evening to catch the last of the flood up the Tamar River. My friends Simon and Caroline (*China Moon's* new owners) drove down to wave me in from Low Head, at the entrance. I didn't quite make it up to Devil's Elbow; darkness, the ebb and a strong head wind forced me to anchor a few miles short. Early the next morning I picked up *China Moon's* mooring (she was having a refit ashore) with two days spare before



Sydney Harbour

my flight.

We had planned to do a cruise in company a r o u n d Tasmania, but on reflection it seemed more sensible to go together on

China Moon. We left in the middle of February and had a month to get around. It was good to be back aboard *China Moon* again; some changes, two instead of one engine and radar, but then some of the lockers were as I left them 10 years before. We went clockwise around, calling first at Flinders Island, where we climbed up the 781 metres of Strzelecki peak. Other highlights were surfing over the bar into St. Helens, anchoring off the penal settlement at Port Arthur, driving up Mount Wellington for the panoramic views over Hobart, visiting the MOMA art gallery, and on the west coast cruising and walking in Port Davey. Our final stop was in Macquarie Harbour where we were lucky enough to see a Duck Billed Platypus on a walk outside Strahan and visit the penal settlement on Sarah Island before going some way up the Gordon River. We had been lucky with the weather but had a rough passage north from Macquarie with a near gale from the east. This prevented us calling at King Island, the only disappointment on this very happy cruise.

On returning to the Tamar River, I put *Oryx* on the beach to antifoul and then set off north towards Sydney, calling at Deal Island in the Bass Straight and then Eden at the SE corner of Australia. I sailed into Sydney Harbour on a fine morning which was a memorable experience, to rival entering Rio or Cape Town. I anchored in Balls Head Bay, past the Opera house and the Harbour Bridge. It was a pleasant, if long walk into the city

over the bridge to see the sights.

By now my next three months were almost up. The cheapest flight out of Australia was to Bali (it's a hard life); so I left *Oryx* at anchor and flew off for four days. It's always a relief to come in view of the anchorage to



Isle of Pines, New Caledonia

find your boat still there, more so after four days. I could have spent longer in Sydney but a good forecast tempted me on.

Sailing north from Sydney is not easy for a single-hander; the East Australian Coast current can run up to 4 knots and can only be avoided by sailing quite close to the coast, so there is no risk of even a catnap. There are few harbours with easy access; most have a bar to cross. It took

two days to get to Coffs Harbour and I was very thankful to get the anchor down that night. The bay is very well sheltered, only exposed to the E; on the north side is a substantial, high rock breakwater protecting the marina and fishing boat harbour. Only a few months after my visit a sustained onshore winter storm completely destroyed the marina. I only stayed long enough for a quick look at the small town before continuing to make use of the moderate SW wind.

Faye, a friend of Carly's had invited me to visit her in Lennox Head.

Luckily not far south is the Richmond River. The bar has a notorious reputation, but on the day I arrived it was benign and I found a secure anchorage in Mobbs Bay, a small lagoon accessed through a break in the training wall, opposite the



Light house Ile Amedee, New Caledonia

town of Ballina. I left *Oryx* and had a week of luxurious shore life and being shown the beautiful countryside of NE New South Wales.

It was then only a short hop to Queensland's Gold Coast with its high-rise apartments and reclaimed, canal-fronted suburbs. North of all this lies 40 miles of natural waterways and islands protected from the ocean

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by South and North Stradbroke Islands, a lovely cruising ground. After exploring some of this I entered the Brisbane River and sailed 10 miles up to anchor by the Sydney Street ferry terminus, close to the city centre.

Here I spent a couple of weeks before my visa ran out again, but as it was now midwinter, or what passes for winter there, it was time to sail to the tropics.

In the middle of July I cleared out for New Caledonia. It was flat calm in Moreton Bay and I motored for quite a few hours to clear the north end of Moreton Island and reach the open sea. When the wind filled in it was from the N and so I reached off to the east to put myself in a better position for the expected SE trade winds. Which was just as well, as after two days the wind shifted into the ESE and stayed there for the rest of the passage. It took eight days for the 950 mile passage.

I had some work to do that needed internet access and so spent quite a bit of time in and around Noumea, the capital, but cruised up the coast to Baie de Saint Vincent and down to Baie de Prony. For the last three weeks of my stay my friend Marilyn flew in for a holiday. We were fortunate to have a fresh NWly winds and sailed down to the Isle of Pines, covering the 70 miles to Kuto in 10 hours. The island is considered the prime beauty spot in New Caledonia and on our first day ashore we had the place to ourselves, apart from a few other cruising boats. But the next day a large cruise ship arrived and the place was packed with Australian tourists, much to the delight of the local traders. We then cruised slowly back to Noumea with a following SE wind, stopping at many of the bays and islets on the way.

As soon as Marilyn left my 90 day visa expired and I set off for New Zealand. We had E winds for the first three days and were almost becalmed off Norfolk Island for two days before a fresh NNE wind had me speeding along again. A front came through with rain and a wind shift to the W and took me the rest of the way to Opuia, in the Bay of Islands: nine days for the 1,063 miles sailed. Opuia at 174° E, is almost as far east as you can go.