

2 The next instalment

After ascertaining from the Coast Guard that the bar was safe and comfortable, we left Port Macquarie early on the morning of 19 September for Coffs Harbour – a journey of about 64 nautical miles. Since there was no wind – and none expected – we anticipated a journey of about ten to eleven hours. We were very pleasantly surprised to pick up a current close in-shore which gave us at times up to 2 knots of assistance. Ultimately this reduced our journey by just on two hours.

We soon realised that this current, welcomed by us, was unwelcome to the pods of whales we had encountered every other day so far. There was not a single sighting all day long as they were probably a long way off-shore to pick up the corresponding current to the south. Even the omnipresent dolphins were in short supply and there was little or no activity on the ocean.

However, on the plus side, no seasickness! What utter bliss! Apart from enjoying the feeling of well-being, I was able to give Martin a couple of rest periods – he didn't believe he went to sleep but I took a couple of photos of him sound asleep (but not for general publication!). I was able to spend short periods just reading and listening to the radio. The best (and often most obscure) programmes are always on at night or very early mornings and I was able to listen to several hours of 50s and 60s music – wonderful!

We arrived in beautiful Coffs Harbour mid-afternoon and, after the obligatory shower, shave and shampoo we wandered off to the Yacht Club for a well-deserved beer and yet another seafood dinner. Can one eat too much seafood?

The marina is perfectly situated and was created by joining the mainland to an island called “Muttonbird Island”. This island is a natural rookery for muttonbirds or sooty terns which make their nests in holes in the ground (they look like rabbit warrens) and the whole island is dotted with these. One can walk over the island but only on the single path especially made for this purpose. The island is about 150 feet high and the ascent is straight up from sea level! After crossing the island, the descent to the other side is just about as steep but very much worth it with the most stunning views out to sea as well as north and south as far as the eye can see. I am including a photo of the marina as seen from the top of the island.

In consulting the weather forecasts on our second evening, we learnt that some very severe weather was forecast in two days' time. Since we've spent quite a bit of time in Coffs Harbour previously, we decided to leave as soon as possible. What with tides in the next port (Yamba) we decided we had to leave at 1am the next morning! So, after a light dinner, we were off to bed with the alarm set for 12.45am. Not a lot of sleep for me as this was going to be the first (almost) overnigher.

It was very quiet and calm as I tossed the mooring lines off the cleats and once out of the harbour we found a lovely breeze which gave us a run to South Solitary Island at up to 8 knots. Once we headed north beyond the island, however, normal cruising rules kicked in and the wind came right on the nose so sails in and motor on again. There was only the tiniest sliver of a moon but the whole firmament of stars gave a soft glow, enough to enable a distinction where the ocean and the sky meet on the horizon. No traffic on the water at all – are we the only ones in the world? But as always, there was a wonderful

distraction. Appearing out of the relative darkness and illuminated by the steaming lights of Dame Margot appeared a wonderful sight: two gulls fluttering and gliding in our slipstream looking like ghostly white bits of silken material. They continued to glide in and out of our vision and, after about an hour, were joined by three others and then by about a dozen others. By now it looked frantic rather than ethereal and peaceful and they were making a bit of noise. I realised that they thought they were following a fishing trawler and were waiting for whatever scraps come off these boats. Oh dear, poor things – all that energy expended for nothing. As I drifted off for a little sleep I resolved to give them some bread when dawn came, if they were still silly enough to hang around. However, they had vanished and I wondered whether they would fly back to Coffs Harbour or just take up residency at the closest bit of terra firma?

We arrived at the Yamba bar in good time for a favourable tide at about 9am and reached the marina not long thereafter. Yamba is one of our favourite little seaside towns along the NSW coast. It is attractively located at the mouth of the Clarence River and boasts beautiful long white beaches and mangrove-ringed shallow islands. Fishing boats are ubiquitous, both the professional as well as every kind of recreational fisherman with or without a boat. The little main street has everything you need but has not yet succumbed to being uber-trendy as most other seaside resorts. There is the smallest cinema you can imagine – we wanted to see a movie but the theatre shows just one movie per day – four separate sessions and all they have is children's stuff. We soon realised that the town is absolutely swamped by Queenslanders who are currently enjoying their school holidays - nearly every number plate on the cars at the tourist park was a Qld plate.

Last item of news for this log is the amazing dust-storm we experienced yesterday – 23 September – along with everyone else in NSW and southern Queensland. It was briefly preceded by very strong gusts of wind – up to 30 knots and then the dust arrived and it was not even possible to see the end of the marina! The street lights came on and it was eerily dark – not red as we saw from photos of other places. We totally closed up the boat, turned on the air-con and just occupied ourselves with reading and doing chores.

It lasted the whole day and everything was coated with a heavy, red layer of dust. When we got up the next morning to tackle this mess, we were confronted not only with the red dust but lots of black and sticky stuff all inside (we had opened all the hatches overnight to get some fresh air) and outside the boat. We soon realised that the local farmers had burnt the sugar cane early this morning and the wind brought it directly to the marina. Thanks guys! It's been a long day of cleaning and we are about to sit and relax with a glass or two of lovely cool wine and some locally made pate.

Although we had vaguely planned to go up the Clarence River, we've changed our plans and think we will leave for the Gold Coast in the next day or so. There are major works being carried out on the Harwood Bridge and they cannot open it through the day to allow us to pass.

I'll be in touch again soon!