

1 The Adventure Begins

Dawn was breaking when the alarm woke us on Wednesday 9/9/09 – quite an auspicious date for a departure!

From early days of planning, we always intended that the trip north would be the main event rather than aiming at any particular destination. With this in mind, our first destination was Newcastle and we enjoyed a most perfect eight hours of sailing. 15 to 20 knots of wind on a fairly flat sea due to a westerly wind (off-shore) is a joy indeed! Seasickness occupied me for the first few hours and I struggled to enjoy my surroundings. It is very difficult to remain patient when you can't read, listen to music, converse or just look around with enthusiasm – my only activity is to look at my watch interminably and ask about the estimated time of arrival. Thankfully, my equilibrium kicked in after a few hours and the rest of the trip was enjoyable.

We arrived in Newcastle in eight hours from our house and settled into the marina. After a brisk walk we called in to the Newcastle Yacht Club for a hard-earned beer and a dozen divine local oysters. The marina is relatively new and is a great place to be. There are lots of beautiful walks along the water – it's all recently restored and has wall-to-wall cafes, restaurants and drinking places. Not very busy yet but will be when summer beckons the tourists.

Across from the marina we watched in amazement as the mast for Richard Branson's brand new humungous catamaran was being stepped with the help of three mobile cranes. The catamaran is probably about 100 feet long and the largest of the cranes was lifting the mast of about 120 feet from the wharf onto the boat. It took many hours and I got the best photos as I was hanging around on my kayak to capture all the "moments critiques". I'd love to send the photos to Richard – if anyone has any ideas as to how I could get them to him, let me know.

Two delightful nights in Newcastle and we left for our next destination – Port Stephen. (To our surprise a couple of whales came very close to us – already on their way south). For those who don't know it, Port Stephen is one of the most beautiful harbours in Australia. Green hills – some volcanic in shape – form a fringe around the many bays which constitute this large body of water. White sand and a large percentage of shallow water give a bright blue and aqua-coloured brilliance – like millions of sparkling diamonds when the sun is out.

A combination of a lack of swell and a spare public mooring persuaded us to overnight in Nelson Bay – the largest of the towns which are scattered around this Bay. Since our dinghy is packed in a bag on the deck, I kayaked to the shore the next morning to buy the very necessary weekend newspapers (and a cappuccino!!)

That afternoon we sailed to nearby Soldiers' Point Marina, a so-called boutique marina. And it really was – everything just the way they should be including the most luxurious bathrooms, great restaurant and cafes and a courtesy car with which to get supplies. On our first evening we went to the Port Stephen Yacht Club just next door to the marina where prize giving was in full swing following the afternoon races. A very friendly crowd and we stayed much longer than we intended.

Seasickness still forms part of every day at sea although the periods are shorter and the nausea much less. So I sit for eight hours and stare at the horizon. There is the odd distraction of whales but they have always been about 500 metres away from us – I suppose one would not want them much closer? Dolphins come to play and they are very welcome – I call out to them and laugh out loud at their antics. I swear they can hear me and they stay longer. Martin thinks I've gone potty but the koi fish at home come to talk to me so why not the dolphins! There is a favourable current close to the land and so we will be staying fairly close to the shore (about 5 km) on our way north. Because of the close proximity to land we have birds as our constant companions. Petrels and shearwaters are the most graceful and lovely to watch as they glide like ice-skaters, one or the other wingtip perilously close to the water. Their movement exactly mirrors the movement of the swell and waves on the ocean. Large albatrosses look far more serious about the matter of finding food as they fly across the water looking for fish. They are a handsome bird – black/brown and white with yellowish beaks – and have a wingspan of between two and three metres. There are also gannets and other as-yet unidentified birds. Our Field Guide for Birds of Australia will help us identify them as we see more of them.

After two long days on the water (stayed overnight in Foster-Tuncurry) we are now in Port Macquarie and I'm not budging for a while! Mother Nature is assisting as there is a strong wind warning for the next few days. A power boat was damaged this morning as it tried to cross the bar (no, this is not where you have a drink – it's a build-up of sand at the exit/entry to a harbour and this has nasty big waves breaking over it in strong wind conditions). Being a sail boat we have much less power and would be foolish to attempt to cross it.

The only marina in this lovely seaside tourist haven is pretty shabby and worn-out as they are about to build a new one. We quite like it here, however, as it is quiet and peaceful and very close to lovely walks all along the seafront.

It has been very windy and we have not been able to leave due to the dangerous state of the bar – a vessel trying to get out yesterday was badly damaged. The forecast looks good for tomorrow and we've walked up to have a look at the bar and hope to depart tomorrow morning for Coffs Harbour. It will probably be a 10-hour day – unless we get more southerly wind than has been forecast..