

## Sailing in Northern Territory – the journal of Graham Gorrie

Nhulunbuy (Gove) to Sth. Goulburn Island all in May 2005



I flew into Gove from Darwin on Friday 13 May 2005, arriving at 8 am on a sunny day. Mike, Gai and myself spent the day provisioning and finished with a send off party around a fire on the beach outside the yacht club, where I met some interesting people, who had sailed from Thursday Island in a home made catamaran. There were some others we were to run into a couple of days later.

On Saturday morning, we set off in the sail boat SV Whim O Way to sail a short distance to The Granites, a small island where it is reputedly safe to swim as the current apparently sweeps away all

jelly fish, crocodiles and sharks. I had a very short swim in its clear fresh shallows. That night we were plagued by young party goers who drank and yelled and zoomed in speed boats.



Sunday morning, we set out for Wigram Island where we anchored but did not go ashore. The people who live there value their privacy. A pretty place with regular barge arrivals for supplies.

On the way there we ran into a fleet of impounded Indonesian fishing vessels, where the crews are housed waiting for legal decisions, before their boats are burned on the beach.

Monday morning at 4 am, we went north-west from Wigram through the Hole in the Wall channel through the Wessels Islands. I was a bit

green around the gills on the way. The passage was so narrow that you could not see it unless you were in a direct line, and the tide rushing through has dragged boats from their anchorage at speeds of 26 knots. We went through at the end of the appropriate tide at about 6 knots. On the way, we let



out a couple of lines with lures and got a Queen Fish and a mackerel which we consumed (partly) on bread.

Once through we swung south and anchored at Raragala Island, where we met friends from Gove in their fishing boat MV Wakea, and also a couple in SV Steppenwolf who we discovered had connections with me from Brisbane.

We had a brief swim while watching out, then I went back to the boat for a sleep. Afterwards, we were invited to lunch with Cooch etc on the MV Wakea for barramundi and pasta, beer and guitar playing.

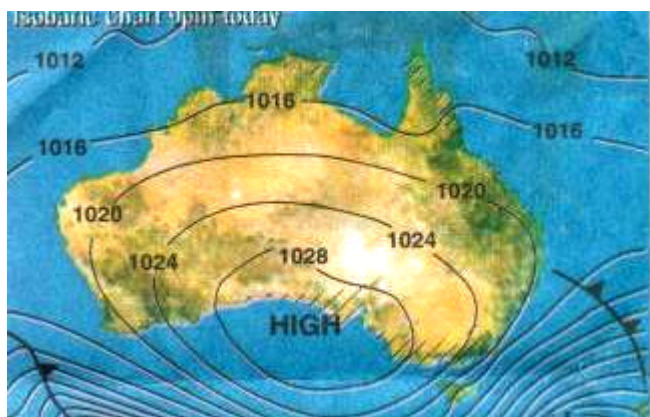
Finally got to bed after a very long day, and then Cooch came over to say the fishing boat was broken down again. So we got up again to be some support. It was the second time in a week

the gearbox had broken. In addition the boat had been stolen and then recovered and then sabotaged so it had limited fuel for its dinghies. So they had to await towing 40 nautical miles back to Gove or else west 160 miles to the Blythe River where the rest of the fleet was working.

Tuesday morning, yet to decide whether to tow them back to Gove, give them our dinghy fuel or continue ourselves. Finally, we headed north to go past the Hole in the Wall up to Guluwuru Island, which was very similar to Raragala with its distinctive rocks and sandy beaches. We found croc and turtle tracks on the beach and found fresh water. We found what I termed a “Robinson Crusoe kit” consisting of a fishing place – a rocky trench below high water with large fish surging in and out, and a fishing device – a net washed up on the beach. I didn’t perform the act, but it seemed as simple as joining the dots to get a feed. There was a lot of washed up netting, which is a big concern for propellers, as it tangles and melts around them, breaking gearboxes and necessitating dives into the water with a knife to cut away the cords. A sane person may not want to dive into the water.



The south-east winds assisted us in going predominately west, but also allowed us to sail north and south. The swell comes from the same direction as the wind, so when we anchored, the boat would face into the wind (design feature) and minimise the sideways rocking of the vessel. Travelling westish also minimised the rocking, because we were running with the swell. However, when we rounded up into the wind to pull the sails down, we had to negotiate the deck in sometimes heaving



seas. The other issue was the tides which rushed through gaps in the islands, so we attempted to travel in sympathy with these, often necessitating careful planning and early starts to the day.

Apparently, the wind speed could be predicted by the strength of the high pressure in the Great Australian Bight. If the high was 1028 millibars, we could expect 28 knots of wind from the south-east. If there were other high systems they could delay the effect.

Wednesday 18 May, we sailed up to Hopeful Bay on Marchinbar Island, past the Cumberland strait, choosing slack tide to avoid dirty water and eastwards dragging. Made 5.7 knots with the jib and mizzen sails. We had a permit to be on Marchinbar, and my companions had personal permission for Raragala. Ashore, we walked up a freshwater creek. Saw rock wallabies but no crocs. I went back to the boat for a rest and to read some Kazuo Ishiguro.



Thursday 19 May, we found a cave painting (of a three masted sailing vessel of unknown antiquity)



and interesting rock formations. Saw a giant manta ray, but could not activate the digital camera in time. Later, we sailed north to Lagoon Bay and Hammer Point, went ashore looked around. On Friday, we dinghied north to a mangrove river. The bay beyond it had croc tracks every 20 metres going up the beach and over a lip down into a swampy backwater which looked like it looped around to the river in the next bay. While Mike fixed a bait net in the shade of a overhung cave on the beach, I ventured inland on rocky ledges looking down to the enclosed mangrove where the crocs must live. When I returned to the shore, I sat up on top

of the rocky cliff and spotted a 2 metre croc swimming back and forth in our (his) bay. Later in the day we returned to the river to fish from a highish sand bank which we told ourselves afforded us some protection. We had our waddies with us (about which we also told ourselves stories). I baulked at hooking a small shark, but mike captured a mud crab, which he supplemented with a one



metre mackerel by trolling back to the boat. We also went for an adventurous motor up the mangrove river through colonies of fruit bats, sighting a huge sea eagle up in the trees.



We found a washed-up dug-out canoe which I was able to practice my drumming rudiments on.

Dinner consisted of mackerel with potato bake. Later we went into shore to have a fire on the beach where we told ourselves more stories, this time about the legendary protective capacity of fires.

Saturday 21 May we sailed north to the northern part of Marchinbar, near Jensen Island – didn't do much, walked around, saw a tree full of cockatoos. As an aside, as I write this now back in Brisbane, I can feel the room rocking as though I were still on the boat. It started last night – the dreaded curse of the sea – I can feel that it is in my bones now. On Sunday we sailed back south to Hopeful Bay ready for the next day's trip to Elcho Island where the Aboriginal community of Guliwinku is located.



view from the cave on Crocodile Beach



me playing a dug out rhythm man



cave painting of sailing vessel



an interesting large rock



a view which was to include the boat



the Robinson Crusoe kit

Monday 23 May up at 4 am to Elcho getting 8.5 knots under sail. I saw a sea snake and a turtle on the way. We decided not to put the dinghy down to go ashore, because we would have to hoist it up again for the big day coming up. Sometimes we were able to tow the dinghy - Wee Whim, but if there was a following sea, we had to winch it up on the deck. The Wee Whim is a light fibreglass boat with a five horsepower Yamaha outboard.





inside Whim O Way



my hosts – Mike & Gai



the Hole in the Wall from the western side



typical rocks of the Wessels Islands



a curious question mark shape



the GPS linked depthsounder, fish finder, speed gauge and compass



Tuesday 24 May – a big day to Cape Stewart. Saw a bird riding on a turtle's back – the turtle dived before I could activate the camera, so you will just have to believe me.



I saw two such over the course of the trip. Also saw my first Customs plane which became a daily event as they swooped and radioed for itinerary details in order to identify Vessels Of Interest. As we arrived, and the boat went into the wind to allow us poor sailors to get the rag down, the waves crashed over the deck, and I had to just concentrate on riding up and down with the boat which was heavy and regular, and also gathering up armfuls of sail to avoid it dropping into the water. Got soaked this time – all other occasions were comparatively easy.

Our destination was such a poor anchorage and located in uncharted waters that we renamed it Cape Stupid. We met Bruce from the catamaran Topaz – a friendly and knowledgeable person who had sailed extensively around Australia, and we later learned, has compiled detailed logs of his journeys which he shares with others intending to travel. The anchorage was what is called beamy. The tide caused the boat to face parallel to the swell. My stomach felt like a plastic bag with food in it that was being shaken up and down. I was nearly rolled out of bed on each wave. Once the tide dropped below the surrounding reef, it steadied up and we could sleep – until 1 am when the tide dropped so far that we hit bottom. I joked (perhaps inappropriately) that we should check in the UBD where we were, because the navigation program was nearly one kilometre out on the GPS positioning, and it showed us actually inland. There was nothing we could do then, so we attempted to sleep again until the tide came back in enough.

The Whim O Way is a 30 ton ferro-cement ketch with a huge wide keel and it took the punishment well. If you have a chart, I suggest you amend it to rename this cape as indicated above.



Wednesday 25 May we left at 3 am with 3 feet of water under us as we snuck out slowly with our eyes glued to the depth sounder. The seas were confused with swell coming from several directions which made it difficult to maintain a comfortable orientation to the waves. It was to be a very long day after a terrible night. We saw three dolphins swimming beside us, and later I spotted the fin of a large shark. On the way to North Goulburn, we discussed an escape plan for me which would involve landing at an Aboriginal community and flying out. We didn't get to North Goulburn until 9.30 pm which made it a very long day. Nice anchorage. Luckily we could make radio contact on channel 16 with a passing barge, captained by Geoff (a mate of my companions). He informed us of the details of South Goulburn and its community. Dinner of coca cola and tinned spaghetti to ease my quease.

Thursday 26 May we travelled the short distance to South Goulburn and met up with SV Steppenwolf again. The Steppenwolf is a beautiful boat fitted out like a gypsy caravan. I had to pester them for photos (below). We discovered in conversation that I had further points of history



with Jim. Not only had he worked for a relative of mine at Boondall Entertainment Centre, but he started in the Public Service at the same time as me, on the same floor of the same building (different department). Jim and Judy were kind enough to drop Mike and I over to the landing so we could walk to town and do a proper reconnaissance.



An apparently friendly local picked us up, took us to town to investigate flights and took us back to the landing, where he requested we bring alcohol into the dry community for him. He would pick me and my luggage up on the morrow and run me back into town. Friendly, but I said as politely as possible, that I couldn't bring alcohol. No worries he said, but in the morning when I got there with all my stuff – guess what – I walked two or so miles into town and he avoided me all day.

Interestingly perhaps, the community is licensed for Kava, but not alcohol, and I understand that Kava is not even a traditional intoxicant used by those people.

Chris and Margaret who manage the community shop were incredibly helpful in creating options for my travel. They rang around, gave me the run of the shop to store bags and make cups of tea. They introduced me to the elder, Billy who made me welcome for the day and chatted with me for



an hour. I would have liked to have got a photo of me in the community, but decided to keep my presence low key and not run the risk of offending anyone. Chris ran me out to the mail plane. We began loading all the luggage and the town party departed. It eventuated that there was a problem and my guitar wouldn't fit. The pilot suggested that I would have to leave it behind, but luckily the CEO of the community was a passenger and he suggested we try again, and with a lot of squeezing we got me on board. Coincidentally, the CEO is a Gorey which he said are distant relatives of the Gorries. Sometimes the small things count. There was no accommodation on the island, and my former companions had left early, so I didn't have very many options (in fact, none that I was aware of).

So, I was soon landing in Darwin, and after an overnight stay went on to Brisbane and home. As an aside, while in Darwin, I visited WW II sites and museums and I went to the open day of Government House in Darwin, where Ted Egan shook my hand and even invited me to sing with him in the folk band. It was incredibly friendly and left me with a very positive feeling for the friendliness of the Northern Territory.



It was hard to believe that Friday morning I was on a boat in Arnhem Land and Saturday night I was back in Brisbane. I really am grateful to Mike and Gai as well as Chris and Margaret for their

assistance. It did cost me extra to change my flight arrangements, but it got me home where I wanted to be, and it allowed my friends to relax their schedule and take as long as they wanted to get to Darwin.

I was told I was a woosser when I got home (for bailing out), so, even though I knew it was just a joke, I thought I would just respond by expanding on the incredible stories of my exploits and the danger and excitement of the high seas – what a crock. (no photos).