

## Report 35 – Australia, The Whitsunday’s

We landed in Australia at Bundaberg because of the seasons. Spring is the time to follow the warming weather north into the Whitsunday’s, Australia’s most famous island chain in the Great Barrier Reef. After staying in Bundaberg, sleeping, sight-seeing and patching up AKAMA’s aches and pains it was time for our first Australian adventure.

Our Whitsunday’s cruise ran from 9 July to 2 October. During this period for the most part we ran only for brief periods each day and stopped at every reasonable anchorage. When the weather was bad we simply holed up in a safe anchorage, relaxed, met other boaters and enjoyed the scenery. It was a great trip.

The day we left the weather was excellent. So, our first stop was Lady Musgrave Island, a coral lagoon and cay in-between the Australian mainland and the Great Barrier Reef. It is one of the few atolls in Australia that can be entered by boat; but the entry is tricky, not to be undertaken in stormy weather. Without much difficulty, we entered and anchored in the clear blue water of the lagoon. The highlight of this spot happened when we were wading the beaches of the cay; several humpback whales put on a spectacular show, leaping and spouting for hours. Otherwise, we were slightly disappointed by the place. Unfortunately, we have seen the best of the best when it comes to tropical islands, beaches, coral and fishes. Thus, while Lady Musgrave is certainly a gorgeous spot, we’re spoiled.

The next two anchorages were Pancake Creek and Sea Hill point. Pancake Creek is a secure anchorage that is entered by crossing a bar and navigating a serpentine and narrow course between sand bars that dry out. While a safe anchorage, the place is notorious for boats going aground; but we had no trouble whatsoever. The latter is in the mouth of the Fitzroy River, right on the Tropic of Capricorn, kind of a neat place to anchor.

Since the weather forecast was for high winds, and as Sea Hill is in the mouth of the Fitzroy River, we decided to run up the river to Rockhampton. This was a bit of a scary trip, as the sand bars at the mouth of the river have all moved over the years. Our charts and cruising guides repeatedly led us to groundings. At one spot we were even following leads (navigational aids), which led us aground. Fortunately we had the foresight to start out on a rising tide; so we never went hard aground. Eventually, we called the Coast Guard station at Rocky and they told us where the deep water was. Other than a few big boats that are based up the river, few people make the trip anymore. Running up the river to escape the weather turned out to be a good decision, but for another reason; upon arriving in Rockhampton our generator quit working (again). The diesel injector pump was leaking badly, as the low-sulphur diesel that we had taken on in NZ had eaten away the seals. As it turned out, this could not have happened in a better place. On our arrival at Rocky we anchored temporarily among a large number of moored boats. The river is so full of moorings we were having a hard time finding a safe anchorage. Just as we were about to up anchor and go back down the river a ways, a boat left its mooring and came over. The skipper was taking her for a three-week run and gave us the use of his mooring. This was not to be the first such kind act that we experienced at Rockhampton.

At the nearby Fitzroy Motor Boat Club we met some really nice people. They quickly found us a diesel mechanic and 1200 bucks later we had the pump rebuilt and reinstalled. Then the boost pump on our water maker failed; but finding a replacement in Rocky was easy, as the boat club is right downtown. Then when we needed a piece machined for our DC generator and another for our sewage pump we found a great little machine shop, where the proprietor can make nearly anything in metal. What a great little city. Later, when we needed to go to a shopping mall in the suburbs, Bill, one of the club members not only offered to drive us, but took us on a sightseeing trip of the area and to his club for a meal. We got to Rockhampton as strangers and after a couple of weeks there left as friends. We recommend anyone following in our wake to make the trip, but call the coasties first to find out where the deep water channel is!

Next, we made our way to Great Keppel Island, stopping overnight, once in the Fitzroy River and once at the mouth of the river in Cassawarna Creek; both stops were peaceful and the trip down the river was a snap, now that we knew where the deep water is. Great Keppel I. is a resort area and we went ashore on one of the busiest beaches we'd seen so far. It was a nice change. Walking among the resorts and restaurants was interesting and Louise-Ann even had her first ever camel ride. At GKI we met new friends Robert and Wendy, who were cruising aboard their home-made sailing catamaran 2ENTY. While of simple construction, this is one of the nicest home made boats we've seen. We hung around with them on and off for a few weeks.

Since the weather forecast was for high winds and GKI is a bit of an open roadstead, we and 2ENTY made a run for Corio Creek, which our cruising guide said would be a good anchorage. We took one look at it, did not like what we saw, and made a decision to beat it out of there while we could still get over the bar; 2ENTY stayed. We ended up waiting out the weather in Pearl Bay, anchoring in Freshwater Bay overnight along the way. Even Pearl Bay was not that flash and while the first few days there were fine we eventually rolled so hard due to swells that the harnesses on our roll stoppers broke. A local cruiser we met said that in all the years of going there he'd never seen such a bad swell come in...just our luck!

When the winds abated a bit we made a run farther north to Island Head Creek, which is very well protected from nearly any wind. The only thing wrong with this anchorage is the bugs, millions of them. Luckily, we picked an anchorage in the middle of the creek. Others that anchored in the many inlets along the sides were plagued by sand flies; we had them only for an hour or so at sundown.

2ENTY caught up to us in Island Head and confirmed the wisdom of our decision to bug out of Corio Bay. They reported that the creek nearly dried right out and the waves crashed in over the bar at the mouth of the river leading into it, trapping them there. AKAMA might not have survived this place! A catamaran can dry out and re-float, but AKAMA with her round hull would have fallen over, possibly sustaining damage.

We left Island Head Creek on 13 August and headed for MacKay Marina, stopping along the way at Hexham, Hunter and Curlew Islands. None of these Islands and their

anchorages was remarkable, although the scenery was nice. What made the trip interesting were the whales. We began to see them daily, sometimes just sleeping on the surface and sometimes spouting, leaping and splashing. It was great!

We intended only to go into MacKay Marina to fuel AKAMA, provision, and sight-see for a couple of days while the weather improved. But, while there we discovered that the high pressure pump on the water maker was failing; so we had it rebuilt. A week later, we had spent \$1200 on the pump, nearly \$4000 on fuel and hundreds in marina fees. We did a lot of good for the local economy and a lot of damage to our cruising kitty!

North of MacKay the Whitsunday's Islands are a series of beautiful islands, many with good anchorages, one after another. We won't go into the details of each; suffice it to say that we had a great time checking them all out, while along the way watching whales, turtles and diving birds. The only down-side is that the farther north one gets the more boats one encounters. Moreover, many are rental boats, the crews of which often have no clue as to how to operate the boat or anchor it. It was entertaining though. On several occasions we saw boats anchor right on the drying reef. On the radio we heard some really funny conversations, such as, "We are out of wine; please send a service boat out to us". On several occasions the crowds led to the boats being too close together for our liking, or we were forced to move on as anchorages were too full when we arrived. Now, this was not all bad, as it caused us to explore some nice bays off the beaten track. One, Keyser Island, is hardly visited, yet a fantastic anchorage; we liked it a lot and stayed two nights, all the while in the distance dozens of yachts passed by not knowing what they were missing.

From Keyser we went through Solway Passage, where a huge current rushed us along at breakneck speeds to the famous Whitehaven Beach on Whitsunday Island, where we anchored. Whitehaven is a beautiful white sand beach that stretches for miles along in a graceful arc from the passage to a shallow creek. The sand is so fine that it squeaks underfoot. Unfortunately, it is so well-known that hordes of boats go there, including huge tourist boats that off-load day-trippers by the hundreds. Also, it is infested with midges, whose bites take weeks to heal. Nonetheless, it was worth the bother.

After exploring a few other small islands we then went further north to Hook Island, in our opinion the jewel of the Whitsunday's. We stayed for a week in Macona Inlet, a deep fjord-like bay. Outside the bay it blew like stink, while in the bay we were snug. Many other boats were there, some of which we recognized from our travels. That was great and in no time an impromptu game of Boulles led to visits back and forth between the boats, sundowners and meals together. Just east of Macona is Nara, a similar inlet. At the head there is a short walk to a cave where there are aboriginal paintings on the walls. Well, call us sceptical, but while we don't doubt their original authenticity, we think that most of them have probably been "enhanced" and added to by persons unknown. Again, we are spoiled; for example we've visited the world heritage Niah caves in Borneo; this one pales into insignificance in comparison. But, we remind ourselves that even a crummy day exploring new places beats a great day living ashore hands down.

After circumnavigating Hook Island we crossed over to Airlie Beach on the mainland. This is the centre of Whitsunday's activity, a real touristy town. We anchored near the yacht club, where we had a nice meal with Robert and Wendy of 2ENTY, our last with them as they were going farther north and we turned south on our return trip to Bundy.

Since we had visited nearly every place we wanted to see on our trip north, we headed south fairly rapidly, stopping only to anchor each night. When we got to Brampton and Carlisle, two islands joined by a shallow reef, we decided to have a nice meal at the Brampton Resort restaurant. We no sooner landed on the beach when a man came up to us and asked what he could do for us...very nice we thought. In actual fact, he put the run on us, refusing to serve "day-trippers" at the "exclusive" resort. This was one of the few times that we ran into less than great Aussie hospitality. Later that night, we were expelled from Carslile Island itself as it were! The wind blew up so badly that AKAMA was rolled savagely from side to side. We beat out of there in the middle of the night and took refuge at Scawfell Island, which had been recommended to us by some park rangers the day before. Scawfell was a good anchorage, and lucky for us that it was, as we and a few other yachts were trapped there for nearly a week while the SE trades winds reminded us that they, not we, controlled when and where we moved.

We left Scawfell Island bound for the Percy islands, which we had missed on the way up, stopping at MacKay Marina on the way to wait out yet more bad weather. Along the way, we were again treated to fantastic displays by the humpback whales. One of the bays in the Percy islands has a shack the walls of which are adorned by mementos from many of the boaters that have stopped there over the years. Looking them over was fascinating. Unfortunately, the beach is adorned by savage sand flies, so we beat a hasty retreat and continued south on our way back to Bundaberg.

Once south of MacKay there are not very many places to stop for the night, so we went again into Pancake Creek. The first time we were there we merely stopped overnight. This time, we met up with friends who wanted to hike up to the lighthouse. There we met a retired lighthouse keeper and author who spearheaded the restoration of the lighthouse and the grounds around it (Australian lighthouses are now all automated and have no keepers in residence). He was a fascinating man and we spent hours chewing the fat with him. As we mentioned earlier about Pancake Creek it is notorious for groundings. While we were there a yacht became grounded on a sandbar. In true maritime spirit, help from others soon had the situation under control. AKAMA was on stand by as a tug, being the most powerful boat in the anchorage, but Mother Nature took care of things by floating the yacht free at the next high tide.

The next day, Monday 2 October, we were back at Bundaberg Port Marina, where we collected our mail and some repair parts, and then fuelled up for our next Australian adventure.