



Sullivan's Travels

By John & Annie Sullivan

FIFTH LEG... Gove to Darwin

May 17th.

The plan was to cruise along the Arnhem coast from Gove and explore the top end rivers, but in reality the coast is strewn with dangerous reef and hidden coral heads everywhere, and the latest charts are only partially accurate. Local knowledge is a big advantage if you want to hug the coast.

May 19th.

The colour of the water up here is like blue milk and has no underwater visibility. So in the interest of safety and sanity we stayed out in the main stream and island hopped after the Wessells from Inglis Island (first night) 12.02.20s – 136.09.50e up north of the 'Crocodile' island group and on to Grant Island (11.09.46s – 132.52.12e) after an all night cruise. Within minutes of dropping anchor at Grant we were surrounded by 3



huge crocodiles.

They stalked the boat by swimming around in semi circles and just sinking, then to appear as if by magic in another spot just with their little nostrils and eyeballs protruding. We stayed here for two days in a great little weather protected bay enjoying

some great fishing. We were able to catch Trevally and Barracuda on an assortment of lures any time we cared to throw one out. Mind you, the crocs chased quite a few into the boat. Going ashore each day for some exploring and exercise (for Ralf and us) was rather a dramatic



experience, especially as they refer to rubber dinghies up here as “teething rings” for the crocs.

Every morning we would have 2 to 3 stalking around the boat. It is a fact that since the greenies were successful in getting the Government to ban their hunting back in 1975 they are now in plague proportions up here. I am keeping Ralf off the back swim platform from now on as the smell and sight of him seems to bring them closer. We decide to move closer to Darwin to the mainland and stay in a nice little bay called ‘Black Point’ 11.08.58s – 132.08.33e. The next day takes us over to Popham Bay 11.16.25s – 131.50.29e where a creek actually runs right through to Van Diemens Gulf. We explored it but were driven back by thick over growth so we decided to head for Darwin that night on the tide.

May 20th.

We weighed anchor at 2.00am and headed around Point Don and down the 90 odd miles to Darwin. This section was a little harrowing as the currents rip through the channel off Cape Don and caused pressure

Left & Below: Cullen Bay Marina, in Darwin, where John and Annie were introduced to the lock principle. As these pics reveal, it is a fascinating process, and the most practical way of dealing with Darwin’s 10 metre tides.

Editor’s Note: *John is 63 years old and has been boating for 50 years. Apart from the many thousands of private hours he has accumulated, he also holds a professional skipper’s ticket and has driven fishing and charter boats on and off for 30 years. His love affair with the sea and his undying affection for fishing and boating make his life experiences seem to many an enviable accumulation of adventures. I am sure the continuing stories of his trip - from the Gold Coast Qld to the Kimberley Coast, WA - over the next few months will be followed and enjoyed by all our readers who aspire to make a similar voyage.*

waves to build on the corner. We encountered a nasty stretch of water for about 5 miles with the sea too steep to head straight into so we had to tack off about 75% to the waves. A little daunting in the darkness but it all adds to the adventure.

May 21st.

As day broke over the gulf we realized we were only a few hours out from Darwin. The scenery is very ordinary and the water is an awful colour. We have forgotten what crystal clear water looks like. And of course the relentless trade winds, i.e. south easters at 20 knots never stop. We made it to Darwin by midday and dropped anchor in Fanny Bay,

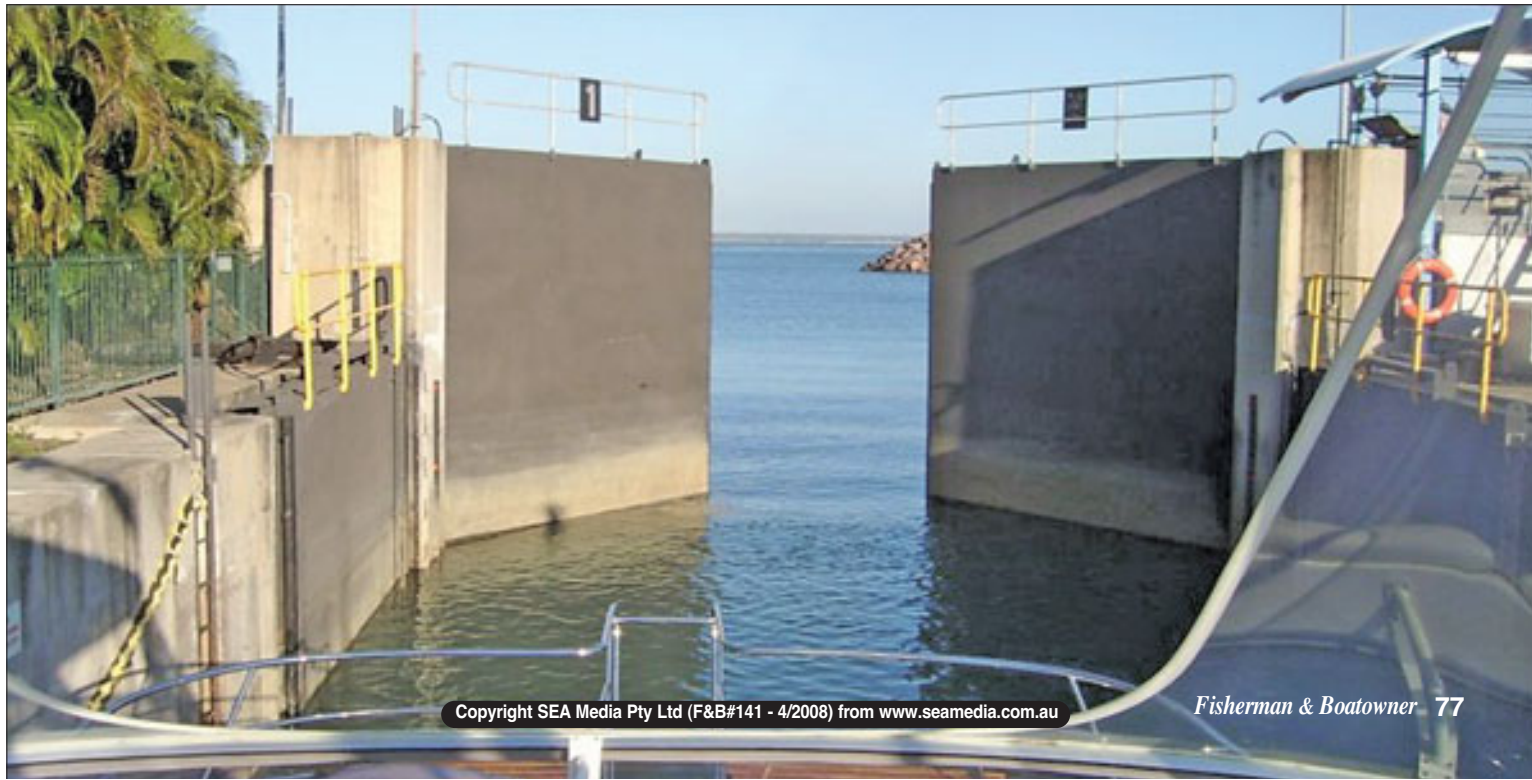
Darwin’s outer bay while we arrange a berth in Cullen Bay Marina. (12.27.06s – 130.49.11e).

It is a beautiful marina and has all the facilities one would need. We will be here for a few weeks to look around and unwind and do some small repairs. All the marinas in Darwin are accessed via locks as the average tide rises and falls around 24 feet each day. If you have not experienced a lock then let me explain the method.

The Lock Master opens the outer doors and you drive the boat in. He then shuts the outer doors and depending on the state of the tide he will then either empty some water out (so you fall to the marina level) or he will flood the lock to suit the marina level. Either way, when he opens the inner doors you are able to float into the marina. The rise and fall can vary up to 30 feet (10 metres) depending on the time of the month. A little tip here will save you a whole heap of damage to the fibreglass. The sides of the locks are covered in big barnacles and as the boat moves up/down you must keep it off the walls with fenders. They can cut your fenders to ribbons too, but better them than your boat.

Cullen Bay Marina is handy in that it has restaurants of all cuisines surrounding it and the centre of the city is walking distance (about 2 kilometres).

My first impressions of Darwin were not very kind but I must say the





place, or at least the people grow on you after a while. Because of the weather all year 'round being hot and somewhat humid one tends to drink a lot of fluids. One also has no trouble finding other Darwinians that will keep you company whilst replacing those vital bodily fluids, so I can now say that I have completed my 'PhD' in alcoholism with honors. We struck up some great friendships with other cruisers and sailors in the marina. It seemed we had people from all over the world making a

Ralf, the third member of the Sullivan team on the Voyager, proved to be an irresistible attraction for the crocs 'stalking' the boat in the north.

stopover at Darwin.

After a couple of days I noticed there were some huge Barramundi trapped in the Marina. They tell me they come in through the lock and sometimes stay for months. At night when I put my underwater 'Aqualuma' lights on at least 2 big 10 kilo beasts swim around at the back

daring me to throw a lure. There is a big sign up at the marina that says "no fishing" so for the moment they are safe.

June 2nd.

Annie flies home for 3 weeks to settle her daughter in who has moved back from the USA to live here permanently. I decide to email a mate in the States and ask him if he wants to do a bit of fishing up north for a week or so. He jumped at the chance and flew out 3 days later.

After talking to some local fishos, we decided to head off to Bathurst Island, which is 60 miles off the coast North of Darwin (11.38.000S – 130.20.000E) and was supposed to be crawling with barramundi. As it turned out the only thing it was crawling with was bloody crocodiles. They were everywhere we went, and in plague proportions to boot. We circumnavigated the island and came back down the Apsley Straits separating Bathurst Island from Melville Island. We found out that you cannot catch fish in these regions during the spring tides as the currents are so strong that the water becomes like mud. Everywhere we went the water was the colour of chocolate and the currents sometimes reached 6 knots. I guess one lives and learns. We did however catch some nice Salmon up the creeks and the crab pots were working overtime as well.

June 7th.

It was decided to explore a section of Bathurst Island this morning so Mark, I and Ralf took the dinghy up stream to what looked like a small sandy beach. On the way up we startled at least 3 big crocs from their 'slides' with them slithering almost silently down the mud banks into the water. Mark nursed the 357 Magnum lever action just in case one of them decided to try and board the dinghy.

The next hour will turn out to be the most terrifying event of the trip.

I navigated the dinghy into a little cove and headed for the beach. As the boat touched the shore Mark jumped out to bury the anchor and suddenly found himself up to his thighs in soft mud. At first he didn't realize his predicament, and that was to find out he could not extricate himself no matter how hard he tried.



Annie Sullivan with a barracuda hooked off Grant Island in NT

Before either of us realized how bad this mud was I had stepped out as well and Ralf jumped ashore to do his thing. Because Ralf was so light he didn't sink at all, he just ran up to the edge of the mangroves and started exploring.

“It was just then that we spotted this huge croc swimming towards us. I picked up the Magnum with my muddy hands and fired a warning shot across its nose . . .”

It was probably a couple of minutes later when Mark said he was unable to move. I managed to pull one leg up only to have it sink down in another spot. We looked at each other and didn't know whether to laugh or panic. We were stuck up to our waists in mud, the tide was coming in and the creek was full of crocodiles.

To add to my fears, Ralf was wandering around the mangroves

and wouldn't come when called. I said to Mark that we had better start working on Plan B. We couldn't believe that we were all in such a dangerous situation so quickly. I continued to call Ralf and finally he came running down to the boat. I

threw him into the dinghy and then said to Mark that I believe the only chance we had was for me to get out of the mud and then try and pull him out.

I began to pull myself across the dinghy, at the same time trying to loosen my legs from this

terrible mud. Little by little I felt my legs coming free and after 25 minutes I was able to pull myself into the dinghy. The tide had come in about half a metre by now and the water was up to Mark's chest.

I said “We will have to get you out soon, big fella, or you are really in trouble”.

Mark weighs about 130 kilo and it wasn't going to be easy. The plan was to start the engine and try and

pull him out as he tried to haul himself up at the same time.

It was just then that we spotted this huge croc swimming towards us. I picked up the Magnum with my muddy hands and fired a warning shot across its nose some 5 metres away. Thank God it got the message and turned around in a flurry of white water and disappeared. By this stage Mark was starting to panic, not to mention how terrified I felt. Mark kept saying “Don't let the bastards eat me alive, will you?”

I started the outboard and revved it as hard as I could. It worked; Mark slowly started to slip out of the mud and was able to scramble aboard with my pulling him as well. We sat there in that dinghy, covered in filthy smelling brown mud, and I remember laughing till we cried.

June 8th.

The next morning we steamed back to Darwin feeling very lucky.

(Next issue we explore Darwin and all its surrounds. We sort out the local fishing spots and mix it with the locals)

F&B