



# Sullivan's Travels

By John & Annie Sullivan

## The SECOND Leg ...

(From The Gold Coast to the Kimberley WA)

### March 12th.

**W**e leave Great Keppel Island and steam north to Port Clinton 22.29.30 S - 150.45.29 E in a 25 knot Northerly headwind. It was not very comfortable. The seas were just big enough to make us want to tack. Once the waves reach one and a half metres or better, it is more comfortable to come about to 35 degrees to the sea and keep on the plane (16 knots).

The Voyager allows you to get away with this up to about 2.5 metres, whereby you will have no choice, unless you want to break something, to come around almost 75 degrees to it, which means you don't make a lot of forward ground.

Port Clinton is a big area but we only stayed overnight, as it doesn't offer great shelter in northerly winds. The next day we head up to Island Head (22.21.33S -150.38.55E), which is only 10 miles further. Island Head is almost at the top of the peninsula that is the start of Shoalwater Bay. It offers great anchorages and normally good crabbing and fishing.

### March 16th.

No crabs, and very few fish, but we did manage to bag lots of baitfish that we caught under lights with the cast net. The underwater lights were paying their way already. We decided to head up to the Percy group (21.39.12S - 150.20.03E).

These are a set of three beautiful islands some 40 miles further north. They are a 'must see' on a cruise north, especially Middle Percy. The wind changed to the south on the way up and seemed to be strengthening by the hour. By the time we arrived it was



blowing 30 knots from the south.

### March 17th.

After consulting "Cruising the Coral Coast" (which is a must-have if you are heading north) the suggestion for a comfortable anchorage was 'Blunt Bay'. This is a shallow and somewhat dubious spot on the north corner of North East Percy. After rocking and rolling all night and being on constant anchor watch to avoid hitting the coral bombies should the pick slip, we decided to move over to West Bay which is on the West side of Middle Percy. My advice is to forget Blunt Bay in a developed southerly.

The day brought stronger wind, so we left the boat safely anchored in West Bay and decided to explore the island. Tradition demands that one enters the island hut on the beach, and hang a ship's memento to acknowledge having been there. The hut has been host to thousands of visiting boaties over the last 30 years and the hundreds of messages and mementos hanging or nailed up make a chronological

plethora of wit and wisdom that will entertain you for hours. The island is privately leased and has a homestead a couple of kilometres away from the beach. You are able to visit the owners if you wish.

It is a nice walk through the semi tropical terrain and undulating hills. Don't be surprised if you come across some wild goats, as the island has thousands of them. Thanks to an earlier lessee many years ago the Beach has many beautiful coconut palms that are brimming with nuts for the taking. Annie decided to take a few and spent the next 2 hours trying (and finally succeeding, I might add) to open a big one to sample the sweet nut centre. We also used my cordless drill to milk about 10 more just to get the rich fresh juice out. We actually made a drink using Tequila, Vodka and coconut milk, which we had for 'Sundowners' that evening. (F&B can supply the recipe if you'd like it).

### March 18th.

After the worst night's sleep on

record, due in the main to the massive heaving and rolling we encountered all night as the winds picked up and the swell came around the points, we decided to get the hell out of the Percy Islands. I called for 'any station' on the VHF radio for a weather report, but got no response. Without radio contact, we decided to head for Airlie Beach, some 120 miles north.

It wasn't until we had steamed some 5 miles from the island and I realized we were in some really ugly weather. I was now able to contact Mackay Coast Guard and they confirmed my worst fears...we had a gale warning, 45 knot winds, with 5.0 metre seas predicted. What were we doing out there?

Well, it was too late to turn around, the seas were so bad the tops of the waves had foam whipping off them in frenzied sheets, the swells were 5.0, possibly 6.0 metres high, and only about 5 seconds apart. The only thing going for us was we were running with it.

Then, as if things couldn't get any worse, we were hit by blinding rain with wind squalls that I can only guess how hard they blew. This, and every now and again a rogue wave of some ridiculous proportion would come

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**Different views of the Percy Islands off the central Queensland coast. Left: This is the famous beach visited by just about all mariners who pass this way. Below: Sunset over the islands.**

**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.*

along and scoop us up at a frightening speed, and propel us upwards to 25 knots, spearing us into the trough and leave us for the next one to finish us off. This was going to be the trip from hell.

We went from 8 knots to 24 knots with fixed revs of 3200 rpm, which normally cruises us at 15 knots. On some big waves we slowed to 8 knots and the following wave (some 6 metres) started to break on to the dinghy which is fixed to the swim platform at 90% to the deck on davits. This would propel the boat forward like being in a tunnel, then the boat would accelerate up onto these huge

swells and gain speeds up to 24 knots and scream down the face like an 9 ton surfboard. It was like being on a roller coaster ride for 7 hours.

Looking back now, I must admit, it had been a long time since I'd been that concerned. The last time things were this bad was when I was ferrying an old 42 Precision to Merimbula in 35 knots and 4 metre seas and she started to take water through a busted intake in the bow. I was 10 miles off Sydney heads and she was sinking by the bow...but that's another story.

Annie was white knuckled for the first hour, but eventually decided we might just be okay. A handy tip for any one crazy enough, or unlucky to be caught out in a situation like this, is to calibrate your auto pilot for lots of rudder and heaps of response and let him ("George", "Nigel", or whatever you want to call him) do the steering.

You do not want to try to handle the steering manually in this type of sea; you will not be quick enough. Anyway, I guess I can thank 45 years of boating experience and a good blue water boat for getting us to Airlie Beach in one piece.

It was the longest 7 hours I can remember. I would like to thank the Mackay Coastguard, too, for standing by for the duration of the trip in case we had trouble.

## March 19th

Just when you think the worst is





**Here:** Annie Sullivan gets stuck into the coconut shelling routine, and **Below:** The entrance to the legendary ‘Yachtsman’s Grotto’ (for want of a better description) on Middle Percy Island.



seventy four of them) and hide behind it to get out of the infernal 2 metre chop and 20 to 25 knot winds that blow 24 hours a day.

Now that I have tainted your idea of a tropical holiday up north, let me say that the area really IS beautiful and you can have a great time - providing you are prepared to suffer a little rough weather to find your favorite hideaway or reef and do your thing.

### March 28th

We did just that this weekend, with friends from Brisbane flying up to Hamilton and spending the three days fishing, oystering, swimming and just watching the sunsets. It was just like it says in the travel brochures or the ‘Get Away’ type TV shows.

The girls went ashore on one of the many islands and gathered oysters, while us boys fished a couple of little bombies for some great sweetlip and some red emperor. On their last two evenings in the Whitsunday’s we pigged out on fresh rock oyster entrée, followed up with emperor fillets in beer batter, washed down with a really dry riesling.

The ideal place for us to spend our nights was in a place called Cid Harbour. (20.15.700S – 148.56.400E). It is not so much of a harbour, more like a safe bay out of the prevailing southeast wind, and note, the sunsets off Cid Harbour are to die for.

### March 30th

After dropping our friends off at Hamilton airport, we headed off to Townsville. From Airlie I decided to run the boat at 9 knots on our daily runs. The boat is just off the plane at this speed (it starts to lift and go on the plane at 10 knots) At this speed we are using only 12 litres an hour all up. The great economy at this speed more than compensates for the extra time it takes to get to our destination. It lifts the boat’s range to over 1000 miles on a tank. It allows us to move around the boat doing things and dining at the galley table at meal time. We even watch movies now while we travel, so it passes the time very easily.

***(Next issue, we survive a Pacific Tsunami, and take the boat into an impossible creek on Hinchinbrook to catch some fantastic barramundi) .***

over it happens. We were anchored up in Airlie Bay and the wind was still howling in from the south at over 30 knots. ‘Bullets’ of 50 knots plus were whipping down through the hills in front of us when one gust caught the starboard front hatch and flipped it open at 200 miles an hour, smashing our windscreen. This was bad enough - but the rain came down and it was relentless. The saloon, steps and cabin gangways were flooded. We tried a temporary fix without success.

The next day I bought a sheet of plywood and made a ‘window’ to fit. Getting a replacement window from Alfab was almost impossible, even after almost 20 phone calls. Finally it took Bentley, the office manager from Voyager, to go over to the glass factory, pick one up, and dispatch it personally to

get the new hatch to Airlie.

### March 26th

I have a new name for the Whitsundays, I have renamed them the WindySundays. For those who think that it is all swaying palm trees, beautiful sunsets and gorgeous girls in hula skirts I am about to burst your bubble.

It is a fact of life that the trade winds blow from March to October up here at an average of 20 knots every day from the South East, and it rains constantly almost every day through March to May. The locals seem to be oblivious to the foul weather but from a South Queenslander’s perspective it is absolutely *b. . . y horrible!*

The name of the boating game up here is to find an island (and there are