

Ian Holsworthy's West Of Fraser Island



There are some spectacular meeting places between the land and sea in Australia. While natural theme parks can be found pretty well any where you look around our coast, some are special.

Tasmania's south and east coasts have scenery to die for, spoilt only by the place being too damned windy to enjoy for most of the year, much too cold to swim in, and only to be fished in mid summer by brave souls wearing thermal jocks. The bays and islands of South Australia's west coast have to be up there for the fishing, for colour and contrast between clear blue water and the stark red granites, and for a wildlife selection better than the average zoo. But for me, the pick of Australia's coastal playgrounds is the area between Fraser Island and the coast from Tin Can Bay to Hervey Bay, in Queensland's south east.

Given the sort of population boom that Queensland has been going through in the past 10 years, it's amazing (and bloody encouraging) that the coast that makes up the western coast of the Great Sandy Straits hasn't been torn up and transmogrified into the 30 story glass dunnies that Queensland developers regard as high culture and the rest of civilisation see

as visual pollution gone mad.

There are a string of tiny villages – places like Poona and Maroom, with populations of plus or minus a couple of hundred, including equal numbers of dogs, kids and beat-up tinnies – that support holiday cottages, a few grey nomads who found whatever it was they were searching for, and not much else. Tincan Bay, on the southern end of the Straits, has suffered a fairly substantial population blowout, but the natural beauty of the place has saved it from too much damage. But the coast to the north, between Kauri Creek and Hervey Bay, is pretty much intact. Perhaps the area's reputation as the holiday home of every sandfly and mosquito that ever was, may have helped, or perhaps the fairly basic infrastructure may keep developers at bay. Whatever the reason, it's one of an increasingly rare bits of south east Queensland to look more or less as it did 50 years ago.

In terms of scenery, it's an area that grows on you, rather than smacks you over the head for instant impact. The mainland coast is low and largely fringed with mangroves that give way to sandy beaches at low tide. Not the rock-hard sand of surf beaches, but a muddy, active sand, full of yabbies,

crabs and prawns, and never, never, never, a place to take the new four by four for a test run. A few lumps of rusting iron demonstrate the consequences to some who've tried. Looking to the east is the bulk of Fraser, always dark blue, sometimes with a misty halo, and inevitably imposing and a little bit magic. It's only when you get out on the water that the area's true beauty and interest kick in. Fraser Island is generally in the order of 5 km from the mainland shore. Between the two land masses is a maze of deep channels (up to 30 m in some places), sand banks, blind gutters and mangrove islands.

Navigation can be exciting for the newcomer. The main shipping channels are well marked and not too difficult to follow. They do, however, run north and south, whereas the majority of small boat traffic wants to go east-west, from the mainland to the Island and back. This means jumping over, around or through a series of banks, some of which dry at low tide, but many of which don't. There are some interesting plough marks to be seen, and local marine mechanics indulge in a little hand rub when they see boat trailers with interstate number plates.

One of the more sadistic pleasures enjoyed by locals and visitors is watching lost yachties trying to get underpowered boats out of the holes and banks they get stuck on, and laying bets about the clouds of black smoke being unburnt diesel or the proper engine explosion that everyone secretly wants to see, preferably from a safe distance. The area has a pretty fair tide range – upwards of 3.0 m on full and dark moons – and is most readily navigated by larger boats on tides rising towards full, when most of the nasties are taken out of play. Any sort of echo sounder is a huge help in this area, as is a large serving of patience.

The villages mentioned above have adequate boat ramps, provided you remember that the tide goes out a long, long way and you aren't going anywhere below about half tide. Most of the local caravan parks will allow casual visitors to park a car and trailer in their park for a nominal fee provided you aren't visiting during the holiday peak seasons. This isn't a necessary precaution for day-boating, but if you are doing overnight trips, it's a good idea to ensure peace of mind. I don't know too many Queensland boaties who haven't experienced or know of trailers being stolen or cars being trashed when left overnight at boat ramps, especially near Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

The area is much better suited for small boats than cruisers. A big area of the Straits dries out at dead low tide, and the western side of Fraser, which is the most interesting part of the area, is fringed by a drying inter-tidal flat, typically 50-300 m across.

You don't want to put a big boat on those flats unless you are prepared to stay there for a full tide cycle. Once you get over to the Island, however, you can feel the years and stress disappear. This is truly back to nature. Most of the roads to the Island's western side have been closed, thanks to deliberate neglect by Queensland's National Parks service. This at least means the enviro-Nazis won't be on your back. There are a string of beaches and backwaters between the mangroves where you can easily set up a camp, provided you are careful about the tide – setting up tents and the like loses its appeal if you have to lug camping gear a couple of hundred metres through sand flats. Once there, there is good shelter from anything but

