

Closely watched by the navy

Sailing north of Gladstone, 10 miles off Shoalwater Bay at three in the morning, it was raining, wind blowing and a cold 13 degrees. On the radar a warship appeared going fast across our bow a mile in front of us. I changed course to show that I saw them. The boat then turned and passed our port side, close. It then turned around and followed us about a mile behind for the next few hours. Australia and America are having a war exercise and there has been a massing of ships. You could hear the ships calling one another over the VHF radio through the night. I felt a little sorry for the sailors who had to plod along behind us. We were doing eight knots, a good speed for Bow Tie Lady, but for them that must have been almost wallowing compared to the speed they normally do. Eventually they realized that we were not protestors wanting to upset their games so they left us and we continued to head north.

The day before a strong wind warning was issued so we headed for Gladstone, an industrial city. Scores of bulk carriers waited at the entrance to a very long harbour with wharfs loading coal for China and unloading bauxite for the two aluminum refineries. Chemical plants give off an unpleasant odor as we headed for a pleasant boat marina. It must be one of the best for facilities and the cheapest we have stayed at so far.

Gladstone Yacht Club was very welcoming and, as you would expect, with laid back atmosphere and serving excellent seafood. The next day we awoke to freezing temperatures and rain, a 13 degrees maximum and locals were commenting on having to don trousers in lieu of shorts and long socks. This was the start of the cold and rain. We sailed out the next day freezing and for the 2 days and 2 nights' passage to Mackay we had the upturned clay pot on the stove as our heater.

Arriving in Mackay, we were greeted with the local newspaper's headlines announcing the coldest day in the last 50 years, 12 degrees was the max.

We stayed there for 5 days. The weather has been lousy and we did not see a patch of blue sky until we left. I had planned to sail over to Brampton Island about 20 miles away to spend the weekend with my son Daniel who is on the management team at the resort. Instead, we flew over in a light plane that took around 15 minutes. I could not face hours of being wet and cold and all the time hearing on the radio that we were in the tropical north.

Daniel is doing well and enjoying himself living and working in a small island community. The resort caters for couples, not so much for children. On Saturday night Daniel presented me with my early birthday present, a collection of DVDs, books and a shortwave radio guide. He is well aware of my forthcoming long passages and my love of shortwave radio.

While in Mackay I had the new engine serviced. A young marine mechanic apprentice came on board and dropped to his knees upon seeing the new Volvo Penta engine "What a beautiful machine!" Lovely to see what gets some people excited. The enforced stay gave me time to have one of the sails modified and the opportunity to spend time modifying the boat set up. This shake down cruise is providing a great learning opportunity in adapting the boat for sailing life.

It does not take long to get into cruise mode, savouring the joy of just looking out to sea and, if you are patient, seeing a little beauty in the waves, the birds or the dolphins that come and perform. You learn to value your sleep doing 2 hour watches in the night and appreciate a warm bunk with an

innerspring mattress. Food also takes on some importance. Nuala has mastered the pressure cooker, producing corned beef to die for and the efficient use of oven bags to do a roast. I have also learnt the dangers of making plunger coffee in the middle of the night. You know that moment of longing for fresh coffee as you savour the aroma as the coffee settles? I did, but just as I was about to go to pour a cup, a rogue wave hit and I experienced the joy of seeing the coffee pot launch itself all over the galley, into the lockers and fridge. Coffee grains are so hard to clean up and the task will give me an ongoing task to while away the idle moments for a long time to come. The blue sailing bible did recommend avoiding making fresh coffee!

We did return by boat to Brampton Island yesterday to say farewell to Daniel and to enjoy one of those memorable sunsets, swarms of butterflies and for Nuala to see her first dugong appear by the side of the boat. We headed north in the night, aided by the falling tide that can run at a good few knots through the Whitsundays. Today was champagne sailing, with 15 to 20 knots of wind, blue skies, sparkling waters and the lady performing so beautifully in these conditions.

The journey continues and I am having the time of my life.

Peter Barker