

Gove to Darwin 2002 – Penelope Curtis

Monday 28th October Shopping trip to Nhulumby

We waited a while in the Gove yacht club for a taxi mini bus to take us into town. An aboriginal lady came up to me and asked me to buy her a drink, but I checked with Glenda first who said she was just humbugging. Despite how incredibly poor they look, very anorexic with stick arms and legs, they are in fact very well off as a result of the royalties from the mine and therefore do not need to work. One guy told me the aboriginals who hang around the yacht club have probably been chucked out of their communities because they drink too much. Jan talked to an older guy who has travelled widely with the famous Yothu Yindi band who live in the next bay.

The air-conditioned, (what bliss!), minibus arrived to take us into Nhulumby along a paved road through the very scrubby bush. Once clear of the harbour we turned south along the coast and could see all the Australian housing overlooking the beach in reasonably good vegetation. This is a holiday area advertised in the glossies. We passed the odd aboriginal walking beside the hot straight road into town. The town was built in the Seventies and has a modern hospital, primary school for 700 and a smaller secondary on the other side of the street, a huge swimming pool and a curious concrete block of small shops built in a square. Jan was very excited at all the things she found in the supermarket – Woolies. We discovered that the supermarkets here are called Woolworth's. (Godson Hamish runs a big one in a holiday resort town south of Sydney) We wandered around the town, I found a super bird book in the book shop and Jan bought me a hairbrush identical to the one I had lost. James is the proud owner of a new leather hat and looks quite the part. We returned to Asterie laden with food and meat, and cold storage supermarket vegetables. On the way back to Gove we made a slight detour onto an industrial estate to try and find Rob of Rob's canvas but it appears he is out of town, so we don't have the chart George wants.

After lunch we went to Perkins Wharf and took on 160 litres and filled all the cans. The local ship had docked. Jan, the quarantine lady, who had arrived with her huge yellow quarantine bags told us that this ship brings in everything they need from Darwin and over the years has provided for the factory and the town. A pod of dolphins were fishing nearby, one was playing with a durado like a cat with a mouse and an osprey (but I am sure it was a sea eagle – identified from my new Australia bird book) was hovering overhead ready to pick up any leftovers. The Engineer from the ship came to chat up Jan (our Jan!) whilst we were waiting for the fresh water hose which the motor boat behind us was going to lend us. Asterie was then washed from head to foot in fresh water for the first time in months, she positively shone! Tanks and spare cans are now all full and we returned to our anchorage.

Emma, George and I went ashore to buy booze at the Yacht Club (the licensing laws had prevented us from buying it in town before 2pm!) Jan had said to buy 24 tinnies so George transposed it and bought 48! Maddeningly, Jan wouldn't let me have any greaseproof paper to try and trace the chart of the hole in the wall. James was keen to go right around the chain of islands 30 – 50 miles out of our way as the charts on board were too small. I couldn't believe he had not talked to anyone or looked at the chart in the yacht club. Even the ship uses this passage! It is said to be spectacular. Later on James told me that he had always planned to go east of Melville and Bathurst Islands

instead of going through the Van Dieman Gulf, a decision he took after speaking to someone who had used that passage, so I found it hard to understand why he wouldn't talk to someone and use the Hole in the Wall passage, but he is the skipper so I had to keep mum. George looked at the chart ashore and decided to go and fetch James to look at it too. I talked to a guy at the bar who told me the only difficulty was arriving at slack water as the tide ran quite hard. I made a poor tracing of the chart but with the cruising guide we found the passage and had a glorious trip.

Tuesday 29th October Day 1 the Hole in the Wall

I joined George and James when we slipped at 0300 to arrive at the Hole in the Wall passage at slack tide. We motored out in a flat calm sea – the radar picked up the scanner on one of the outer buoys and we were clear of Gove. I went back to my bunk and George woke me at 0800 just as we rounded Cape Wilberforce. The cliffs had layers of rust red in them above a slate grey band which looked like a very wide damp proof course – there were places where there had been rock slides in the distant past leaving huge rocks propped up and more piles of rocks on the shoreline. The soil was very thin and some scrub was growing with a few stunted palms. It was baking hot already. Between the cape and the first of the Beeny Islands I saw two small turtles swim past. These islands look like a continuous reef on our small chart. An hour or so later we went between two islands in the English Company Islands. It was called the Cumberland Gap and we could see waves breaking – a tide rip – Jan said that normally meant a reef, but I've seen lots of tide rips too and we hardly felt it as we went through. We passed a yacht going the other way towards Gove. The sea was glassy calm with a greeny slimy scum in patches. An eel, or walking fish ran across the sea hitting the water now and then and pressing on for a hundred yards at a time. Fun to watch. At around 1130 the Gingani Gap opened up and almost immediately closed again. As we approached about a mile south it was easier to see. James got it spot on; we arrived just before 1230 and actually went through with 3 1/2 knots against us which gave us steerage and time to look at the fascinating scenery and birds! We were in about 15–20 metres of water. I saw two pairs of birds, either kites or eagles. On either bank there were great slabs of rock and you could clearly see where movement had taken place in years gone by. The surface of the land positively shimmered with heat. Various ships had defaced the rocks with their graffiti including HMAS ? (Can't remember I'll have to ask Will!).

Once clear of the reefs on the north side of the eastern end of the passage we set a course towards Darwin, but there was still no wind. It was incredibly hot 35.5 – we have to get used to this as Darwin beckons. James needs to get weaving with his fans below before they go into a marina. Sea still glassy and later it was quite difficult to define the horizon as the sun got lower. Suddenly I saw a pod of very black dolphins half a mile off our stern jumping clear of the water. The wind got up as it got dark and the engine went off and we had between 15-20 knots of wind during the night.

Wednesday 30th October Day 2

George woke me at 0500 with just half a moon now and the sky already getting paler. The sun came up at 0615 with a gentle breeze just aft of the beam, but not for long, the wind died away as the morning progressed. Engine on at 0830 until the breeze got up just before dusk. School today. 35.5 degrees again. A cloudy afternoon made it a little cooler.

Thursday 31st October Day 3

Jan had 12 knots breeze and 7kts over the ground during her watch. Engine went on around 0630. George hand steered from 5-6am as the wind died away. I took over for a while but it was a losing battle. George and James back to bed once the engine was on. It got steadily hotter in the cockpit with the early morning sun shining right in, no protection from the bimini at this time of the morning; the only place with any shade was just in front of the dog house by the little granny bars, so I clipped myself on there. I eventually heard noises below at 0930. Don't know how long they had been up. School again about 1130. One fan working in the saloon area. We motored most of the day and saw very little bird or marine life – I think it is too hot. Jan made bread dough and turned it into huge baps and fed us those with bacon and a little lettuce and tomatoes. It was very good, but difficult to eat so much on a very hot day. George and I spent most of the day on deck trying to find a nice cool spot – wrote postcards, read and slept. Had the last of the spaghetti bol just after the wind got up and we had another lovely spinnaker run. Wind got up to 15-17 knots so down it had to come before dark and then the wind died again! The jenny was up for most of the first watch and then the engine on again.

Friday 1st November

Day 4 Approaching Van Dieman Sea

George woke me at 0500. The first rays of light were showing in the sky. We were motoring hard against the tide and Cape Don lighthouse was on the port beam.

We altered course about 1000 once inside the Van Dieman Sea. I could just see Melville Island to starboard. Not quite so hot this morning, the sun was rising on the port beam and not astern. It was cloudy but with lovely colours. Everyone was awake earlier today and after breakfast got stuck into school. Wrote a long email to send home. George found a fan and rigged it with an old cigarette lighter holder to the shaver socket over one of our bunks. It also fitted in a socket above the sink in the galley.

We motored all day, late morning we saw a fast patrol boat – the radar card started to beep and I had only just done a scan! He was coming fast and appeared not to notice us but altered sharply when he was on our starboard beam and called us on channel 16 and asked all the usual questions – he was Customs, satisfied, he sped off over the horizon.

Cape Howarth appeared on our port side about 5pm and we intended to anchor to wait for the tide in the morning. – no watches tonight, just a stiff evening breeze with only moaning myrtle to disturb it. I have just pulled in the fishing line and something with very sharp teeth has bitten the lure right off! We found a wonderful anchorage about a mile offshore out of the swell in about six metres. James said it was the best holding in mud he has ever had. Just after supper I was standing enjoying the new night on the aft deck, sad that our journey was coming to an end, when I was aware of hundreds of little lights in the sea, just astern of us in a small patch, some were quite close and mostly in pairs rather like the lights that danced in the bow wave of the dinghy off the beach in Gove. I called the others on deck, it was magical and had to be some sort of plankton I think. James shone a bright light and there appeared to be a jelly like substance around it; James decided it was lots of crocodiles eyeing us up; it did look like pairs of eyes! Ten minutes later it had all disappeared.

We opened all the port holes and went to bed imagining sea snakes coming up the anchor cable to join us. I woke with a start in the middle of the night; a waning moon casting a light over the water to hear a curious rustling now and then amongst the polybags of cereal packets and crisps at the

bottom of our bunks. Imagination in overdrive I leapt out of my bunk and switched the light on only to hear the rustling again...it was George's little toe twitching in his sleep and gently stroking a poly bag. James told us he had dreamt that he couldn't hang his hand over the edge of his bunk lest a crocodile got him!

Saturday 2nd November

We arrive in Darwin

Up at 0630 and slipped from a glassy anchorage at 0645 and motored towards the Vincent Islands, saw two or three very fast sports fishing boats and later as we turned south for Darwin a small landing craft during an otherwise quiet hot (36) morning. Slept on and off today, seem to be very tired, is it the heat? We had hoped to go into Fanny Bay of Darwin Yacht Club but James said it was very shallow and he does not have the proper charts so we continued to Frances Bay off the City. It all seemed rather run down, but in fact there is masses of building going on. There was an Australian Warship alongside, HMAS Trocar, a large landing craft. We anchored just off her bows near a hundred foot Jonquier called Impression owned by David and Pamela.

There we just sat, awful anticlimax, James didn't seem inclined to find out anything about anything. George was climbing up the wall, wanting to go ashore – I think he has had enough, I just couldn't keep awake.

David came over to ask us all for a drink but Jan said no. We had volunteered to go and get fish and chips and it would make supper too late, but George just told James we were going. Impression was a fabulous boat with four delightful crew, they had loved Tonga and had good weather. The owners commute every three weeks of so from Jersey!

Stoke Hill Wharf was heaving when Emma, George and I got ashore. HMAS Trocar was just about to do the sunset ceremony, which I tried to explain to an unimpressed Emma! We queued for different versions of fish and chips and a bottle of bubbly which had to be opened before we could take it bouncing back in the dinghy to Asterie where we found the two J's and Will excitedly watching Aussie TV!

Anchored just outside us in the quarantine area were ten or so beautifully shaped Indonesian fishing boats. We were told that they had been arrested for fishing in Australian water. It is a scam; these are old unsafe boats belonging to an Indonesian village who appoint a different skipper for each illegal fishing trip. If the same skipper is caught twice fishing illegally, he will go to jail. For the first offence he and his crew are confined on board, on a small living allowance from the Government, until their case comes up, when they are usually sent home with more money in their pockets than they would earn from fishing and meantime the boat is likely to sink under them. This is one way to make some money and get rid of the boat. Most are built of teak and have very cramped living accommodation.

Sunday 3rd November 2002

We leave Asterie

We were up early to pack and thoroughly clean our cabin and heads before breakfast. James rowed us ashore and we took a taxi to the Tourist Board to try and book some trips and find

accommodation. We went to Cullen Bay Marina Service Apartments, overlooking the marina where Asterie hopes to be after she has been hauled out and inspected for blue lipped mussel, a small mussel which multiplies very fast, growing vertically one on top of the next blocking any orifice it finds. It survives in still water and has caused havoc in the new marina.

We went to our lovely apartment on the top floor of the ten storey building where it was relatively cool, although there was air conditioning. We had a sitting room, bathroom, washing and drying machine (the norm here) and a bedroom, and of course a swimming pool outside the lobby.

We had agreed to meet the Marlows at the yacht club for lunch, where we had a reasonable meal but found it just like the Officers Club in Fort Lewis, hide bound with red tape and bureaucracy.

At four pm we returned to Asterie to go to the Yard where she was due to be lifted. Jan took Emma in the car they had rented and met us there. She was very efficiently lifted and we were amazed at how clean she was. The delightful girls were there to inspect her and found no sign of the dreaded mussel, which cannot get a grip if there is fast moving water. Asterie was moved to a spot not too near the trees for rats and possums to invade, and close to the shower block and washing machines. James was intending to antifoul in this incredible heat and live on board.

We were off on a trip tomorrow and agreed to join them in 48 hours to re-launch and accompany them around to Cullen Bay Marina.

We returned to our lovely apartment and made a quick phone call to Sue Mann's parents and found them, their last night in Darwin, so we arranged to meet at the best fish restaurant in town just near by. You pay \$27 a head (£7) for an all-you-can-eat seafood buffet. It was excellent, and we had a super evening chatting about our daughters and our various trips. What an amazing co-incidence.

It was strange to be sleeping in a bed with covers.