



Sunset Station

chapter two

crossing Wide Bay Bar into the Great Sandy Straits

■ by JIM DUNCAN

As described in chapter one, the protected waters of the beautiful Mooloolah River at Mooloolaba offered us sanctuary from the storm. We booked into the Mooloolaba Marina (just inside the river mouth) and it became our temporary home base while we provisioned *Sunset* for the sail north.

WE had already formed an opinion about staying too long in marinas. The real adventure is in sailing itself and discovering pristine, unspoiled and beautiful places with safe, natural anchorages. But when you need to park your boat in a city, Mooloolaba Marina is a very pleasant spot to choose.

Situated on the north side of a wide stretch of the river, it is only a short walk into town and close to the Mooloolaba Yacht Club, several excellent and 'really fresh' seafood restaurants (straight from the trawlers) and a convenient ship's chandlery.

Behind the marina is a green and shady, well tended park with great walking/running paths and picnic spots. This lovely park is a long, narrow spit of

land barely separating the tranquil waters of the Mooloolah River from the roaring surf on Mooloolaba's main beach. From the marina, it's only a two minute walk across the park to the surf beach.

From Mooloolaba we hired a small car and drove back to Brisbane for a second fond farewell to our beautiful daughters Elissa and Katie, their husbands and our nine amazing Brisbane grandchildren. We also drove down to Victoria Point and



Sunset Station enjoys surfing. (main pic left)

The author's mother Ida (88 years) visits us at Mooloolaba. John Prium's beautiful new Lagoon 420 Hybrid Triple Zero in the background. (above)

The author's sister Philippa. (right)



caught the barge across to Coochiemudlo Island to pick up some last minute items from our cottage on Norfolk Beach.

We were rushing to pack the forgotten items, with only 45 minutes to catch the return barge when I heard and recognised a deep miaow. 'Max' a beautiful big ginger cat with golden eyes was abandoned on the island by his owner at Christmas time.

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The author's grandchildren Ida and Jamie with their Dad, Gary.

Max's owner, a young English-woman and single mother with three rebellious teenage daughters, had permanently fled the country to seek help from her family in Britain. Jenny and I had slowly made friends with Max and when we prepared to sail north, we came to an agreement to pay a young local family to feed him.

Hearing his distinctive deep voice, I rushed outside to greet Max, and was shocked by his loss of condition. He held his face up to show me a long cruel fishing hook hanging out of his mouth. A quick check showed me this was the end of a set of gang hooks and the second hook was deeply and solidly imbedded inside his mouth. I tried to see if there were more hooks beyond it but he was in too much pain to allow me a closer inspection.

Gang hooks are often three or four hooks long, each hook joined to the next at the shank, like a daisy chain of hooks. If there were more than two hooks, they

were deep in his gullet and his life was over.

I rushed to improvise a safe pet carrying cage using a clothes basket and wire-mesh storage unit. We just caught the barge with only seconds to spare. While Jenny drove, I held Max in the cage on my lap and phoned ahead to the vet and described the problem.

They were ready when we arrived and Max was rushed into surgery. Under a general anaesthetic the vet opened his mouth and gave us the good news, there were only two hooks!

With the hooks safely removed, Max was also wormed and vaccinated against Feline Enteritis, then allowed to sleep off the anaesthetic. The next day, Russell Jackson, Coochiemudlo's best real estate agent and one of the kindest men I have met, came over and picked up Max and took him back to the island. Russell has now arranged for a single lady living on the island to feed Max. We are again subsidising his meals and hope to see him well and enjoying life when we return to the island at Christmas time.

On our return to Mooloolaba, we readied *Sunset* for departure and waited for a break in the weather. The forecast included a strong wind warning with winds blowing above 30kts, and three metre waves on top of a three metre swell. We had learned the lessons taught to us by our adventures described in chapter one, and waited patiently.

Life in a marina filled with sailing boats and sailors is an interesting experience. On Wednesday nights, the crews meet at the marina office and walk

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together into town to a restaurant (a different one each week). The night is spent eating delicious food and swapping stories about sailing adventures. It is a wonderful opportunity to meet experienced skippers and learn how and where to sail and what not to do.

Jenny and I were surprised by their widespread and genuine, friendly efforts to help us. Several experienced crews came around to our boat bringing charts, routes and general advice. Two veteran sailors, Bob and Sandy Brook from the cruising yacht *Charlie Brown*, spent two hours one morning, talking us through detailed routes up to the Whitsundays with lots of invaluable advice. Ray and Cindy from the motor yacht *Puma* spent a similar amount of time telling us about the 'must see' places and where to find and spear fresh lobsters in the Whitsundays.

We were invited to a very pleasant dinner on the beautiful motor yacht *Chloe Jane* by Paul and Cindy Charlesworth. Paul, a commercial captain, master shipwright and inventor (he has designed an amazing, low energy desalination system), freely gave us copies of his navigation software and charts and advice on how to use them.

We were also invited for morning tea onboard a great racing yacht called *Blitz*. *Blitz* is being sailed around the world by three middle-aged English gentlemen, Dave, Dave and Walt. They made us a nice cup of tea and we sat in *Blitz's* main saloon discussing almost everything from families to philosophy and looking at pictures of their grandchildren.

Dave read us some poetry he had composed during his first night-watch on *Blitz*. It was good stuff, 'shooting stars leaving fiery trails across a dark velvet sky, black silhouettes of dolphins riding on the yacht's bow-wave'... and suddenly in the middle of the poem, a love story with an achingly sad, but romantic memory of his wife who had died a few years ago.

Dave told us that during her life he wrote many poems including frequent love poems to her. After her death he completely stopped writing until that first night-watch on *Blitz* when the surreal beauty of sailing under the canopy of stars suddenly released a 'blockage' and he couldn't stop writing.

Sunset's first mate, Jenny, cools down in the Great Sandy Straits.






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These three Englishmen on their great sailing adventure around the world resonated well with me and aroused some kindred emotions. England has always been a sea-faring nation and grew to become the first great global sea-power. Once Britannia truly ruled the waves! In spirit, these three men are worthy descendents of Francis Drake, Horatio Nelson, James Cook and Mathew Flinders. I hope I have some English sea-faring blood mixed into my Scottish ancestry to help me become a more competent captain on *Sunset Station*.

We parted company, exchanging email addresses with Walt, a quiet but determined engineer (already sending us email reports on their journey) and Dave (the poet) has promised to write to us when they are sailing up the coast of India. Jenny and I are looking forward to getting that letter.

Most of the sailors we met at Mooloolaba are married couples typically in their early to mid 50s and sailing together as a team. It seems natural to sail with a partner; this way there is the pleasure of sharing amazing new

experiences with a person with whom you already have a background of shared memories. Jen and I sometimes say to each other, "can you really believe we are doing this". This feeling is only relevant in the context of a shared life.

I already love sailing, but I don't think I would sail without Jen. It would be a bit like the sound of one hand clapping.

There are also many younger couples with children living onboard; some young families have sailed from Britain, the USA, Canada, Europe and Hong Kong on voyages right around the world. A

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Jenny and I have observed that despite vastly different backgrounds, financial circumstances and philosophies, sailors willingly embrace a special egalitarian equality and camaraderie which is based on their common interest, a love of sailing and the sea.

Sailors also tend to have a refreshing humility (perhaps taught by close encounters with the mighty forces of nature) and are eager to share information (perhaps, because they know that at sea, having the right information can be the difference between life and death).

For most of the people we met at Mooloolaba, sailing is not a hobby or sport. It is a life-time passion that they take very seriously. I was surprised by the number of people who told me they do not drink while sailing. This caused me to do a double-take, am I still in the same country? Perhaps this declaration may not preclude them enjoying a glass of red or tot of rum as the sun sets and the day's sailing is over.

Back to the story: Suddenly the coastal weather improved slightly and the mighty *Blitz* was gone. "Too early" said some of the experienced sailors, "best let the swell and wave height settle down a bit." Then we received this email from Walt on *Blitz*.

"Hello Jim,

It took us 48 hours to reach Great Keppel Island. Fantastic conditions all the way. *Blitz* is exhilarating at night in a good wind."

Walt, I bet she is.

(Footnote one: I am writing this journal at Great Keppel Island. We are pleased with our actual sail-time from Mooloolaba to great Keppel in 52.2 hours. But unlike *Blitz's* fine crew who



sail non-stop night and day, we have taken days to explore new places and spent our nights safely at anchor, tucked away in protected bays or inlets and sound asleep. Okay the Brits are tougher).

Waiting for the weather at Mooloolaba, the objective: a safe crossing of the Wide Bay Bar into the Great Sandy Straits. A few days later the wave/swell height dropped to 1.2 on 1.7 metres. We asked for advice again and one experienced skipper said it was still too early, and he would not sail in these conditions. But I felt the weather was improving and decided to sail out the next morning and have a look. If it was still too bad, we could return to Mooloolaba.

Next morning we were up at 4.30am, a quick look at the weather forecast showed it to be the same as yesterday; we would go and have a closer look. Jenny battened

NZ Young 57, *Earthling* visits Mooloolaba. (top)

Chance early morning encounter, another Manta 42, *Jade*, from Hong Kong rounds the port marker. (above)

the hatches and cast off and we motored out from the Mooloolaba Marina and turned towards the river mouth in the soft dim morning light.

In the river we were hailed by another catamaran making its way out. It was Arni and Cam on their Manta 42 sailing catamaran, *Jade*. We had only met Arni (another Englishman) and Cam (a beautiful Chinese lady) a few days earlier.

Arni gave me wonderful advice on how to properly sail a Manta 42. This lovely

couple with two young children on board have sailed *Jade* halfway around the world from Hong Kong.

(Footnote two: There are only two Manta 42s currently known to be in Australia, our *Sunset Station* (the only Australian registered Manta) and Arni and Cam's *Jade*. Ralph Campbell (a retired American businessman) sailed his immaculate earlier Manta 40, *Amada* from the USA. By a rare coincidence, all three Mantas were briefly together in Mooloolaba. Ralph said these were the only three Manta catamarans in the southern hemisphere! But Manta builds great sailing catamarans and they get around, so you never know when another one will arrive in Oz).

Reassured that an experienced sailor like Arni had decided the weather was okay, we left the river mouth, raising our sails before sunrise and turning north. I noted that Arni turned south and then remembered he had told me that the international Doyle sail-makers loft in Brisbane was modifying *Jade's* asymmetric spinnaker to his specifications.

As forecast, the seas were rough on our journey up the coast, but not nearly as rough as our sail from Moreton Bay to Mooloolaba. This time we were surprised to find ourselves relaxing despite the relatively high seas, we both knew that *Sunset* can sail well in much worse conditions.

Abeam Noosa, we phoned my parents, Jim and Ida Duncan. Mum asked if she would be able to see us from the beach, but our track five nautical miles off the coast made this unlikely.

Two hours later we reached Double Island Point and prepared to make the decision on whether or not to attempt crossing the Wide Bay Bar.

Nearly everyone we met at Mooloolaba has their own horror story about a Wide Bay Bar crossings. People have drowned on this bar, and boats have been wrecked.

Another very experienced sailing friend at Mooloolaba, John Prium (a Dutchman, another great seafaring country) sailing on a Lagoon 420 Hybrid named *Triple Zero*, told us his preferred method was to arrive in the afternoon, spend the night tucked safely in behind Double Island Point and cross the bar early in the next morning when the seas were quieter.

Everyone advised us to call the Tin Can Bay Coastguard at Double Island Point and get a report on conditions on the Wide Bay Bar before attempting to cross it.

We called Tin Can Bay Coastguard and a friendly lady told us the bar was reasonable and that another boat had successfully crossed at 1252. She warned us that the bar was breaking at the edges and asked if we had the way-points. We did, they were already programmed into our chart-plotter and auto-pilot to ensure we stayed right on the best path across the bar.

We approached the bar at 1420 in the afternoon, with both Jenny and I wearing our life-jackets, even our two faithful hounds, Cola and Piggy, had their bright orange life-jackets on. We started both engines and turned briefly into wind and dropped our sails. Then back on track with the both engines running at 2500rpm.

Big waves were crashing and breaking just to the south of our track, I saw two waves break ahead of us and prepared to steer *Sunset* straight down the waves, no broaching allowed.

I watched a three metre giant wave higher than our bridgedeck bear down on us just as the chart plotter showed us in the middle of the shallow crossing. It didn't break, but picked up *Sunset* 7.5 tonnes displacement like a child's toy and we surfed down its face. I briefly glanced at our SOG (speed over ground), it read 13.8kts. Actually it felt pretty good, *Sunset* likes surfing!

Then we were through, the next nautical mile is called the 'Mad Mile' because reflected waves make it maelstrom like. It looks rough, but is not really dangerous, that part was behind us. We had crossed the Wide Bay Bar at 1430.

As we entered the calm waters of the Great Sandy Straits, I called the Coastguard lady back to cancel our log and thank her for her advice. She giggled a little, we first timers must all sound relieved.

Jenny and I relaxed with a pleasant glow of satisfaction (or relief); we had crossed our first bar successfully. We also felt a strong feeling of gratitude to all of those experienced sailors back at Mooloolaba who had patiently explained how to do it and what to expect.

Thanks guys, when we have gained some experience we'll try to live up to your great example and pass on the best advice we can give to the next generation of newbies. ❖



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