

Sunraysia Bushwalkers take to the high seas

The Whitsunday Islands are a long way North of here. The flight from Brisbane to the nearest airport of Proserpine took as long as the initial Adelaide -Brisbane leg. As a result the party enjoyed mild subtropical winter weather over the two weeks of sailing that Roger had arranged.



Coffin like cabins

Our home for two weeks was "Meer Blume" a 10 m long yacht. By some mismanagement on Roger's part the Cornells and Dales had **coffin like cabins** in steerage while Verna enjoyed a more commodious stateroom in the bows. The yacht was fully provisioned. A nautical type with long floating hair partly held in place by a straw hat, explained rapidly and in detail the workings of the yacht. He took the vessel for a short spin in the harbour and then left his bewildered audience to their own devices. Actually Roger is an experienced sailor and it was the landlubberly Dales who, with Verna only gradually realized that although the vessel would tilt alarmingly in a stiff breeze there was no danger of capsizing. For the next fortnight we island hopped, swam, snorkelled over coral reefs, anchored by isolated beaches and lounged in resorts. We also did some bushwalking.



Bushwalking in the Whitsundays

The Whitsundays are a drowned Ice Age landscape. The peaks and ridges remain above water and form the steep sided islands with small, secluded coves. In pre-colonial times the aboriginals kept the islands as grassland for the most part. Some settlers who followed on some islands maintained the grassland for grazing and a few islands still have open landscapes but most have reverted to forest. We found to our cost that walking through the steep trackless forest is slow hard going. The rocky ground and the plants and **insects** that prickle and stung unwary visitors from the Mallee add to the difficulties. Thereafter we stuck to the paths established by National Parks. These are mostly on a couple of the grassy islands and wind at an easy gradient through patches of forest and grass trees. The walk can be enlivened by encounters with unclad campers lounging by the track. They are deposited on isolated beaches and later collected by arrangement with a small high-speed landing craft. The campers can enjoy a desert island existence, disturbed only by infrequent trackwalkers.

Note the spider shadow on the T-shirt

The track to the summit of the main island is different. It appears to be a short sharp ascent but after being caught-in fading light at the first attempt we made sure that we left in the morning for our second attempt the following day. It was a steep 2 -hour climb through forest with tree ferns and epiphytic orchids clinging to the trees. As we neared the frequently cloud shrouded summit the vegetation changed. Climbing palms clung to us with barbed tendrils. Huge spiders spun webs across the track. At the top there were patches of bare rock affording panoramic views of the whole island group stretching far to the South.



Be a buoyant bushwalker

Here is a glossary of terms for the bushwalker so that he/she is not all at sea when a captive sailor aboard a yacht

The first thing the experienced bushwalker turned novice sailor has to understand is that nautical types have a limited vocabulary and have to make one word have several meanings as exemplified by the word port which means variously: a harbour, a side of the boat or a sweet spirituous liquor. I cannot help you much here. You will just have to muddle through for a while until you realize (for example) that "Turn to Port". Probably means "turn to the left (or is it to the right?)" and is not a command to go back to the harbour or to seek solace in grog.

Anchor. This bears no resemblance to the T shaped anchor with barbs found in logos and heraldry. The real thing resembles some agricultural tine for subsoiling or re-ridging. It comes attached to many metres of chain that need to be treated cautiously as they are liable to strip skin and occasionally fingers during the headlong plunge of the anchor to the sea floor.

Beam. This is not a welcoming smile or the illuminating ray from your head torch but a word to use when describing how fat your yacht is.

Port. The left (or is it the right?) hand side of your yacht. It is easy to remember that it is represented by red, the same colour as the spirituous liquor. Easy to remember but not much use as we never lit up our port light. Instead we had a riding light on top of our mast at night. Actually ours never worked. We did see one bewhiskered sea dog clamber to the top of his mast to fix his own but none of us felt like doing the same. Neither did the yacht hire company who just suggested we hang a fluorescent light from low down on the mast.

Reach. Generally an advantage in bushwalking as in cases such as "Who would like this last bit chocolate?" In yachting parlance it is simply the relatively stable period when the yacht is travelling in one direction. I say relatively stable because the boat is tilted at 45°. Salt spray breaks over the crew at intervals. **The crew in their yellow souwesters** resemble a disconsolate and cowed row of bananas that have passed their use-by date. This is how the skipper likes them, there is no backchat and they are nervously poised for his next command. (See also skipper and tacking)



Rope. There is none. There are bits of cord that look suspiciously like rope but they are halyards, sheets (no, sheets are not sails), painters and many more varieties that I never learned. They are not as dangerous as the anchor chain but can be sneaky. One coiled itself around my ankle as I leapt ashore. It plucked me out of the air and dashed me onto the rocky shoreline.

Skipper. That mild mannered, affable man ashore who, once afloat, is transformed into a martinet barking out orders with never so much as a "Please" or "Thank you, ducky".

Starboard. The other side from port. Colour it green.

Tacking. Until now your experience of tacking has been the rough stitching used to hold the filling in your sleeping bag after incautiously putting the bag too close to the fuel. Tacking is big in yachting. It defies common sense but yachts can sail faster if they go in a different direction to the wind and can actually sail towards the wind. They cannot sail directly into the wind, which is unfortunate for Murphy's Law determines that that is usually the direction you want to go. As a result you have to proceed there in a zig zag at exhilarating speed but covering five times the straight line distance. This is tacking. Sometimes when both wind and tide are running against your yacht you tack manfully for many reaches before it is apparent you have got no further forr'ard (note use of forr'ard. Nautical types as well as having a shortened vocabulary also dispense with bits of words as in foe'sle and bos'n.)

There, that should be enough to secure you a berth on a Whitsunday yacht without anyone suspecting you are a landlubber.

Mark Dale 2002



Meer Blume at anchor Long Island