

You can't cruise Port Phillip! (2005)

By Peter Nyga

I've heard that statement many times, yet each Port Phillip cruise that I've undertaken has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience: the long sails, the navigation, the feeling of mini offshore sailing, and the feeling of doing something different from the norm with a trailer sailer.

For June and me, our four day Melbourne Cup weekend, 2005, sailing adventure was a Port Phillip cruise: Werribee South to Portarlington; then to Sandringham; then to Williamstown and back to Werribee South. That was the plan, which we were ready to change should the wind direction dictate.

Early Saturday morning, I switched on the Internet to study the latest weather forecast and synoptic chart. Mmmm.....gale force warning for the bays; northerly wind backing south later in the day, followed by possible thunderstorms. Maybe we would need to activate the back-up plan: spend the night up Werribee River. Off we went, launching at a windy Werribee South at 0930. Some Coast Guard guys offered to help us because "we have nothing to do" – hardly anyone else was there. The car and trailer were stored safely in the nearby caravan park. Conditions were sunny, albeit with a strong wind, which by now had backed to the west. We thought prudence to be the better part of valour, so we motored up river for lunch, as far as the golf course and cliffs, where we would wait to see what the wind would do. June hadn't seen the river before and was delighted with its scenic beauty and bird life. On the red cliffs opposite, with their edge-lined gum trees precariously hanging on, many swallows had made their mud nests, whilst further downstream pelicans soared above, their enormous wingspans remaining perfectly still as the powerful wind kept these graceful birds aloft. Along the shore, reeds up to three metres tall rustled in the wind, whilst here and there pretty pink wild flowers painted the shore. All this only one hour's drive from home – we could have been anywhere in Australia.

After lunch, we motored back downstream and, at the river entrance, it was obvious that the wind strength had reduced and had also swung around to the south. If we were to go to Portarlington, it would be a beat all the way. We decided it was worth it; we could catch up with my son and daughter-in-law, Andrew and Sil, who live at Portarlington, then for the remaining days, sail with the wind aft of the beam - always a cruising target. We set off under full main and working jib, but even in the 15 – 20 knot wind, the boat at times felt underpowered, so the jib was changed for the genoa. *Playmate* responded immediately; she now had enough power to punch through the waves. However, the wind was not going to let us off lightly; at one stage, it swung through forty degrees and had us pointing towards Rye, so we tacked, only to have the wind swing partly back again. Our speed was good, but actual progress forward was frustratingly slow; Portarlington remained beckoning in the distance. Eventually, one last long tack, at five knots, enabled us to aim straight for Portarlington jetty, where we tied up three hours after leaving Werribee River – a direct distance of only eight nautical miles. It was worth it though; a colourful red sunset beneath grey streaky clouds above the rich green hill of Portarlington dotted with houses was all the relaxer we needed. The forecast thunderstorm never came; indeed we had no rain all weekend. Andrew and Sil came down after tea; Sil bringing with her some mint slices that she had just made – and they were yum! We chatted away until the late hours (made later by losing an hour to daylight saving time). Andrew and Sil have a powerboat and they had caught 35 fish off St Leonards that afternoon. It was easy to see that their early sea change was a great panacea for a well balanced life style.

Sunday dawned a bright sunny day, with a southerly 15 -18 knot wind - yahoo! We would have quartering wind and seas all the way to Sandringham. It was nice to see Andrew and Sil drive down the Portarlington hill to see us off. Andrew was debating whether he would play a round of golf before he and Sil went fishing again. Tough decision!

What an adrenalin rush sail! With full main and genoa, the wind picking up to 20 – 25 knots, and one to one and a half metre seas, *Playmate* was in her element. She just loves more power, not less. Many has been the occasion when we have taken out a reef, simply because *Playmate* has shown us, "Leave me alone; I'll show you what I can do". I'm sure that she thinks she's a small keelboat, not a trailer sailer. That's what's so likeable about the Ultimate 18 design. We surfed on the steeper waves, the hull kicking up a wall of white water on the leeward side. As always, we wore our life jackets. We seemed to have the bay to ourselves; the few keelers we saw were deep reefed and were pitching heavily as they made their way to windward. A point of interest on the way was a floating hotel, which looked like an oil rig. A fellow at Portarlington had told us that it was accommodation for oil rig workers in Bass Strait, where it was normally anchored. Apparently, it was in Port Phillip for

maintenance. After averaging 5.6 knots for the 19.5nm distance, we arrive at Sandringham breakwater and tied up to the small public Hampton jetty. Here we were quite secure, had a late lunch, then wandered around Sandringham Yacht Club. We felt as though we had the benefits of being in the yacht club marina, without actually being in it. We were very contented with the day's sail, and after our little walk, we were eager for a cuppa and cake, which simply lead into Happy Hour – potato chips and sherry, which was promptly followed by dinner – pasta and red wine. Ah, the cruising life! Throughout the night, the strong wind whistled through the rigging, as we lay snug against the jetty.

In the morning, we awoke to a 20 knot south-east wind, tending easterly. We would like to have sailed over to Williamstown, then back to Werribee South, but given the east in the wind, we thought that Williamstown might be a little exposed. In true cruising mode, we again elected to put the wind on our quarter and sail straight for Werribee South. Before we left, a couple came along the jetty to say hello and have a chat. It turned out that they used to own a Sunmaid, which they had taken to the Whitsunday Islands (with more than a couple of adventures from the sound of it), and now they owned a Columbia 27 keelboat, which was on a swing mooring in Hampton Harbour. The fellow described the Columbia as "A nice day sailer", and seemed amazed at our little Port Phillip adventure. (The Columbia 27 is actually a comfortable, heavy, offshore yacht). They were pleasant people to talk with and soon they came onboard *Playmate*. That's half the fun of cruising: you never know who you are going to meet and share information with. I recall a Gippsland Lakes cruise, when we were tied up alongside the jetty in the middle of Paynesville. A couple came walking along and said; "You must get sick of all the people stopping to say hello". "Not at all", I replied, "we meet more people this way than we ever would at home. Who stops at your front fence for a chat?"

Upon leaving Sandringham, we acted cautiously by hoisting only the working jib, figuring that with an offshore wind, it was sure to increase in strength further out to sea. It wasn't to be - unusual. We were underpowered, so took down the worker and hoisted the genoa. That extra horsepower picked up the speed. We were merrily sailing along in the middle of the bay in about one and a half metre seas when a wave, steeper than the rest, slammed into the port side of the hull, its crest breaking over the entire boat – and us – in a sea of foam. For a second, we could see nothing to boom height except white water. Our clothes were drenched right through to our skins. "Reminds me of my ocean racing days", I remarked to June with a grin. We laughed and let the sun dry us out – there was no point in getting changed. And where were our newly purchased wet weather (offshore) clothes? In a locker below without a grain of salt on them! We hadn't worn wet weather gear yesterday and so had become complacent. That wave was a reminder that the sea is in charge; from then on I made sure that I steered *Playmate* down the face of each steep wave, coming back on course again when the wave had passed. The rest of the sail continued without incident. Nearing Werribee South, the wind strength reduced, so we hoisted the main, in addition to the genoa, keeping our speed at acceptable levels. We entered Werribee River three hours after leaving Sandringham and tied alongside a floating pontoon away from the launching ramp, where we would spend the night. After a late lunch again, we went for a walk along the foreshore, then returned to the boat to be entertained by the usual antics of people launching and retrieving boats. One fellow in a powerboat who was going out, swore so much, and so loud (the main expletive used comes under "f" in modern dictionaries) at his companion, that the companion simply walked off and exclaimed, "You can go fishing on your own". I would have done the same.

Happy Hour was bliss. Sitting in the cockpit, facing west, eating smoked oysters and drinking sherry, we took in the calm vista of pelicans gliding across shimmering water as the sun sent golden rays across streaky clouds, against a silhouette of the You Yang mountain range. Again, it was hard to believe that we were only one hour, by car, from home; we could have been a thousand kilometres from anywhere. Sometimes it pays to enjoy your own backyard – it may be just as romantic as that beach or island a great distance away. Meanwhile, our clothes, and the boat itself, were not drying out very well, due to being salt encrusted, and the high humidity. A funny event occurred in the evening. June was below and I was standing in the companionway. A woman on her own came walking along the pontoon to which we were tied, started talking with me, and asked a hundred questions, the last two being: "Are you retired?" and "Are you alone?" To my responses: "I wish" and "My partner is below", she immediately said "Well, have a good night", and walked off. As I went below, June was trying to contain her laughter. "You have just been chatted-up, you know". The night was warm, humid and noisy – from all the powerboats starting up at crazy hours in the morning. When we emerged from the cabin, we were greeted with the sight of a full car park – about one hundred and fifty cars and trailers. Cup Day had arrived.

Given that there was no wind, and we had had a ball, it was time to retrieve before the crowds came back. We were home by lunchtime, looking back on another rewarding Port Phillip cruise.

Peter Nyga