

Ultimate Mallacoota Cruise – Easter 2003

By Peter Nyga



It was the week after Easter. Melissa, my 13 year-old daughter, and I were driving towards Gippsland Lakes with our ever faithful *Playmate* in tow – our Ultimate 18 swing keel – for a few day's sailing holiday. What a glorious morning it was – clear bright blue sky, the sunlight radiating from millions of dewdrops like miniature crystals on the rich green grass of the Gippsland countryside. Within the cabin of our vehicle, the ambiance of the early morn was embellished with the sound of soft relaxing music from a Tony O'Connor CD.

As with so many times before, we turned off at Bairnsdale and continued down the road to Paynesville – albeit for only a kilometre. A sudden thought had entered my head. I pulled the vehicle over to the left, looked at Melissa and said, “We have been to the Lakes many times, and you have been asking for a couple of years if we could sail Mallacoota – how about we go there now?” It took Melissa a millisecond to respond with a “Yippee!” and we were off. To top off the change in plan, we would be able to catch-up with Andrew, my son, and Sil, my daughter-in-law of nine days. They were camping and fishing at Mallacoota after honeymooning at Hamilton Island. This, I thought, is what trailer sailing is all about - freedom. Just pack the boat, head off and change your mind whenever you want – totally self-contained.

Driving the next three hours through East Gippsland was very pleasant; it was obvious that the area with its rich, thick forests interspersed with lush grasslands had received plenty of rain. The only cause of concern was the number of flowers and crosses we saw by the roadside – a reminder of our mortality and how precarious life on the roads can be. (Unfortunately, on the way home, near Bairnsdale, a head-on collision

occurred only a few minutes before we arrived. We later learnt that the driver of one of the vehicles had been killed).

This would be my fifth sailing trip at Mallacoota and Melissa's second, although she was too young to remember the first. I have never tired of the scene on arrival: clear sky, sun shining (as it did nearly the whole time we were there) over glistening dark blue water dotted with islands; the whole scene framed by mist blue hues of background mountains. As always, a dozen or so pelicans greeted us on arrival at the launching ramp – at least we liked to think that they were there for us, and not for all the fish remains from the fish cleaning that takes place at the ramp! It was 3.30pm as *Playmate* easily slid off the trailer into her element. No sooner had we tied up to a new jetty conveniently built next to the ramp, when a woman came up and said, "We used to own this boat", pointing out her husband who was at the fish-cleaning bench. What a small world – here we were at a certain point in time, at a certain place, at the end of Victoria, having changed our travel plan, meeting with previous owners of *Playmate*. From what they told us they were the second owners, having sailed the boat for three years mainly on Waranga Basin (I am the fourth owner). They now owned a Koala 24. Melissa and I then motored the boat around to another jetty where we would spend the night. It was conveniently situated opposite showers / toilets, fresh water taps, with Mallacoota township (and the bakery which saw us sample its delights) only a short walk away. We parked the car and trailer at the end of "our" jetty, where, hopefully, they looked as though they belonged to one of the myriad of campers along the foreshore.

Now, to find Andrew and Sil – and surprise them. All we knew was what their tent looked like – not where they were. We walked around the foreshore "tent city" for about fifteen minutes and located their tent, but they and their car were nowhere to be seen. We left a note and returned to *Playmate* to enjoy Happy Hour – an event we (and every yachting I know) eagerly look forward to. At around 9.00pm, we heard the unmistakable sound of Andrew's car pull up. Shining a torch at the car, I saw Andrew and Sil step out, both beaming with huge smiles. They had been fishing – a pastime of great interest to both of them. The night saw us enjoy port, chocolate, lots of catch-up chatter and laughter, and agreeing to go sailing next day to Cemetery Bight.

Next day again dawned beautiful – sunshine and the promise of a low 20s temperature. Andrew and Sil arrived with some fresh cakes from the bakery and we motored, in no wind, up the channel to Bottom Lake and over to Karbethong Jetty for morning tea. It was Sil's first time on a yacht. There are not a lot of sailing opportunities at Mallacoota; it is just thoroughly enjoyable simply messing around with a boat in an isolated area that offers spectacular scenery with safe overnight spots. Indeed, a jetty in a little cove all to oneself seems to appear right on cue whenever wanted. Next we explored Refuge Cove, went passed Goodwin Sands and over to Cemetery Bight Jetty where we enjoyed lunch sitting in the cockpit, followed by walks to Pioneers Cemetery and Spotted Dog Gold Mine. By now, an ideal wind had sprung up (albeit to windward) and Andrew – who hadn't sailed for 10 years – steered us all the way back to Mallacoota. He obviously hadn't forgotten his sailing skills – Melissa was impressed. Meanwhile, Sil was content to stretch out on the leeward cockpit seat, apparently oblivious to the healing of the boat - although she did mention, "The water looks pretty close". Back at Mallacoota, we eagerly tucked into Happy Hour – which ran well into the night. Sil discovered the delight of smoked oysters on dried biscuits, which she hadn't tasted before. Just as we were reminiscing on the day's events, some visitors arrived. A man with his wife walked down the jetty and stated, "I have been told to come down and have a look at your boat; the previous owner you spoke with yesterday sent me down". We chatted for a while and it turned out that this couple had also previously owned an Ultimate 18. Ultimate 18s do that: over the years, I have noticed that they seem to attract people who just come up and talk – and I have yet to hear anything but praise for the design.

Cognisant of the need to give Andrew and Sil their own space, Melissa and I agreed to spend the next couple of days exploring this fascinating waterway on our own. Off we went across Bottom Lake to The Narrows Jetty for morning tea, then over to Gravelley Point jetty for lunch, again basking in the warmth of the sun in the cockpit. In the afternoon, we motored up Genoa River, slowly, not wanting to disturb the solitude of pristine wilderness. On the way, we made a mental note to later spend a night in Sou West Arm (yes, that is the correct spelling, despite what exists on some maps). Onwards around Cape Horn with its enticing narrow beach and L-shaped jetty, to Gipsy Point. Unfortunately, the old wooden pub with its king parrot visitors on the veranda no longer exist. Instead there are modern holiday units. Andrew and Sil had booked one of these units for mid June. We kept going, briefly along the Wallagarough and Genoa Rivers

before returning to Gipsy Point Jetty for the night. Here we enjoyed just talking with anybody who happened to stroll along the jetty – that is one of the pleasures of trailer sailing. I guess that the lifestyle is sufficiently different for both sailors and non-sailors alike to want to engage discussion. We met one interesting elderly couple that had just come in after a day's kayaking. They had paddled 20 kilometres that day and were having a ball – cheap boating.

The night was cool and there was heavy dew on the foredeck and boom cover in the morning – and what a beautiful morning it was. We awoke to a cacophony of birdcalls, mist rising off a mirror-still river, and on the grassy bank right next to us seven kangaroos chomped away for their breakfast, oblivious to our presence.

Distances are not great on Mallacoota waterway, so we took our time getting ready to leave, allowing the rising sun to dry the boom cover. Again, we slowly motored down the river, exploring various inlets on the way, stopping at Goanna Bay Jetty on Top Lake for lunch. By now a light breeze had sprung up, so we untied the umbilical cord holding *Playmate* to the jetty, and sailed off towards The Narrows – which was upwind (Isn't the destination always upwind?). Melissa loves tacking (I'm glad someone does) and I lost track of the number of tacks we did to finally get through The Narrows under sail – a first for us. At times, we seemed to be tacking through 150 degrees, the wind having shifted that much during the tack. However, once into Bottom Lake, a 12 to 15 knot steady wind caressed the sails and we were off, sailing up and down the lake just for the sheer enjoyment of moving under wind power and hearing the gurgling of *Playmate's* wake. We spotted Andrew and Sil who had hired a boat and were fishing. Ensuring that we kept the sun behind them, we sailed passed a few times while they took photographs. Getting good photographs of one's boat under sail is rare and Andrew and Sil's photos did not disappoint. We hailed them goodbye and caught up with an Austral 20 and Ultimate 16, which were also frolicking about just enjoying the breeze. By this time, the sky in the southeast was becoming very dark – rain threatened. I remember thinking how smart the Austral looked with its white hull and cabin glistening in the sun's rays against the dark background. The Austral reminded me of a scaled down S & S 34 keeler. We parted company and pointed the bow back towards The Narrows where we again passed Andrew and Sil, who had moved their boat in a vain attempt to catch fish. (Next day, they caught a large flathead and luderick, just fishing off the bank. They came to the conclusion that it was a waste of money hiring a boat.)

Our overnight stop was Sou West Arm Jetty – a rather pretty spot. The jetty lies on one side of a narrow isthmus; to the east is a magnificent view across Top Lake, flanked each side by the hills of Sou West Arm, with the ever present blue mountains in the distance. During Happy Hour a displacement cruiser joined us, also to stay overnight. We talked for some time before retiring to our bunks.

In the morning, we awoke to the sound of light rain falling on the boom cover and deck – and a screech from next door. All their tea bags had become ruined by water after inadvertently leaving them in the sink – and they simply couldn't live any longer without a cup of tea. We gave them a supply of tea bags to see them through. There is something very soothing about listening to the rain while being snug in a small boat, and we were in no hurry to leave. By mid-morning, the rain cleared to a sunny day, so we set off to explore the beach near the ocean entrance. It never ceases to amaze me just how much the entrance and surrounding area has changed each time between our visits. The area was very silted-up and it took a little while to negotiate *Playmate* through the shallows. We walked over to the ocean beach and to the entrance, which was shallow enough to walk across. However, notwithstanding the low depth of water, we noted just how swiftly the tide was rushing out – it is, after all, a very dangerous bar. Not wishing to leave the boat too long where it was on a falling tide, we returned to Mallacoota where we had lunch, then casually, and reluctantly, retrieved. Andrew and Sil joined us for Happy Hour (I don't know why it is called Happy Hour – it always ends up a very enjoyable few hours), after which Melissa and I slept the night on the hard, ready for an early morning drive home.

As we cast our last glance at this magnificent waterway, Melissa stated: "I could spend two weeks here". I couldn't have said it better.

Peter Nyga