

## **Port Phillip Solo "Circumnavigation"** **By Peter Nyga**

Some people say that Port Phillip is not suitable for cruising: too open, too few anchorages, weather too changeable..... That's a pity. Providing the cruising sailor plans around weather patterns and tides, rather than to a man-made timetable, Port Phillip is a wonderful cruising ground. Sometimes one's own backyard can be just as interesting as some distant waterway.

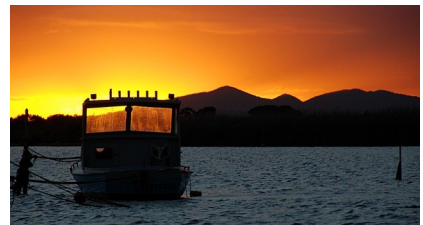


When I retired I set myself a little goal of "circumnavigating" my Ultimate 18 trailer sailer, *Playmate*, solo around Port Phillip. I'd sailed Port Phillip many times before, but never right around. Over the Easter period, 2010, I completed that goal over eight days and 147nm.

I stocked *Playmate* with 12 days' supplies, launched at Portarlington and left the car and trailer at my son's house. That afternoon he sailed with me; we hadn't sailed together for years and we thoroughly enjoyed a few hours together. Back at Portarlington, he went home and I planned to stay at the jetty for the night and head off to Geelong in the morning. However, by 2200hrs an 18 knot NE wind was making conditions uncomfortable, so I sailed for the safe haven of St Helens (Geelong), 14.5nm away, where I arrived at 0130hrs after a pleasant broad reach down the shipping channel. Night navigation in Corio Bay is easy: just follow the shipping channel lights - but keep an eye out for ships! Little did I know that this night sail would be a practice run for the same sail a week later. In the morning I awoke to a warm, humid day with overcast sky, but no wind. Due to the forecast 25 - 30 knot SE winds I thought it prudent to have a lay day - time was my ally. St Helens is a pleasant, well protected little harbour. I spent the day going for walks, talking with the Coast Guard guys, watching pacific gulls, egrets and herons. Later, my partner, June, and my daughter visited. The forecasted winds did not arrive until 1800hrs and I had a sound night's sleep in the safety of St. Helens. Next morning, I pointed the bow in the direction of Werribee River, 20nm away. In Corio Bay, two tug boats were heading out to manoeuvre a ship into Point Henry. Naturally, I gave them a wide berth while watching with interest. My *Playmate* and I enjoyed a pleasant reach, accompanied by a lone dolphin, in 10 - 15 knot SE winds, which increased to 18 knots near Werribee River where we arrived at 1630 hrs. To the west, the You Yang mountain range stood sentinel over the bay - a great navigational aid. I tied up at the end of one of the launching ramp pontoons for the night and in the evening,



Nature put on a spectacular light show. Crepuscular light rays (commonly called God beams) emerged from holes in the clouds, while the river reflected the sky and silhouetted moored boats - a photographer's delight. The many pelicans in the area also seemed to enjoy Nature's display.



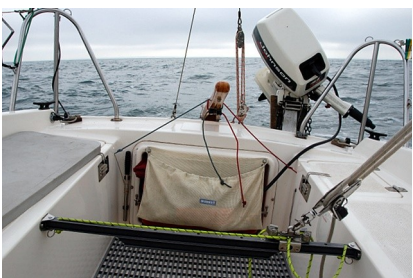
My next Port of call would be Williamstown which I reached in three hours, after watching a stunning, colourful sunrise. The wind was a cool 10 -15 knots southerly. I tied up at Ferguson Street Pier for a brief lunch stop before heading through the many moored boats and up the Yarra River, where I tied up right outside my former employer's new head office and rang a former workmate, "Walk over to your window and look down - that's me waving. Want a coffee?" He laughed, promptly came down with another work colleague in tow and together we went out for a cappuccino. Afterwards they went back to their jobs and I went back to mine - more sailing. I tacked all the way back down the Yarra in a 15 - 20 knot southerly, tying up for the night again at Ferguson Street Pier. That night a fairly rare blue moon rose over the horizon.



I woke to a voice asking, "Welcome to Hobson's Bay Yacht Club. Do you want to come for a shower?" How nice! After having a lovely hot shower and topping up my water tanks I set course for Sandringham - to windward all the way in a light 10 knot, dying breeze. That 7nm took 3 hours to cover. I tied up at Hampton Pier, opposite Sandringham Y.C. as a beautiful sunny day emerged from a cool, cloudy morning. It was entertaining watching yachts and people coming and

going - Wednesday afternoon racing was on. In the afternoon, a photographer friend of mine came for a coffee, as did June after work (someone has to keep the country going).

A 15 knot westerly wind and overcast sky greeted me next morning - ideal reaching conditions for the longest leg - 34nm to Cameron Bight (Blairgowrie). For the first few hours, a low cloud cover blanketed much of the coast line as *Playmate* enjoyed the freedom of off wind sailing; she seemed to dance in her natural element. There was little sign of life apart from a few penguins which looked at *Playmate* inquisitively before diving for safety. Occasionally, I set the self steering - two bits of string holding the tiller -



which gave me a little respite to navigate and go below for food and drink. By midday, when I was 4nm off Mornington, the wind strength eased to a slight zephyr as the sun broke the cloud cover leaving *Playmate* wallowing with sails slatting in a sloppy sea. It was time to stop for lunch, so I hove to by backing the genoa and lashing the helm ale. *Playmate* simply sat there at about 60° off the wind while I relaxed over lunch - biscuits, cheese, tomato, cake and an apple. The light zephyr continued,

making progress rather slow. Reluctantly, I motored the last mile or so into the new Martha Cove residential / marina complex. I briefly thought of staying there, but as it was only 1500hrs I decided to push on to Blairgowrie after topping up the fuel tank. I was amused to see the screen on the self operated fuel pump asking the operator to select one of: "Up to \$200, Up to \$500, Up to \$1000". With the tank topped up with \$15 of fuel, I set off for Blairgowrie in the now strengthening wind, which gradually became offshore as I sailed along this beautiful, curving coastline, its main feature being the peak of Arthurs Seat. At 1830hrs I dropped anchor amongst the moored boats in



Cameron Bight, cooked a pasta dinner, read a little then crawled into my sleeping bag as

the boat gently rocked me soundly to sleep. I probably went to sleep with a smile on my face thinking that this cruising life is rather blissful. I didn't have a care in the world.

What a wonderful night's sleep! I've always preferred anchoring, which allows the boat to do its own thing, rather than bash against a jetty. I crawled out of my bunk at 0545hrs, had a hearty breakfast and left in the dark to catch wind and tide across to Queenscliff. What a stunning sunrise over Arthurs Seat and Mt Martha! Nature again put on an ever changing display of crepuscular rays, one of which beamed direct on to the Fort, a man-made island built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Other rays hit the water causing the wave tops to sparkle like a million diamonds. As if this wasn't beautiful enough, another lone dolphin escorted me away from the coast. With a favourable tide and a 15 knot wind on the beam, *Playmate* was slicing through the water at a quick pace – a bit too quick. I jibed to double back on my course to allow a container ship to pass within safe distance, and later



gave the Queenscliff–Sorrento Ferry a wide berth. Halfway across my dolphin companion left me as *Playmate* sped towards Queenscliff, which I entered just two hours after leaving Cameron Bight. It was now Easter Friday, so there would be plenty of keelers down from clubs around the bay. After trying to obtain a berth at the new Queenscliff marina, I left because they had no room and went over to Queenscliff Y.C. Same story there: keelers were rafted three deep, so I found a pontoon

near the narrow bridge which runs over to navy property. Here I spent an enjoyable day talking with people and walking around the delights of historic Queenscliff. At one stage, drama unfolded behind my boat when police and ambulance arrived followed by a dive boat, which had on board two divers who were suffering from the bends. They were soon whisked away in an air ambulance. In the evening I moved over to the moored boats area opposite the yacht club, dropped anchor and enjoyed another peaceful night's sleep.

What a glorious morning to wake up to for the last day's sail back to Portarlington: light SE breeze, the rising sun painting red hues on ever changing cloud formations and imparting its warm glow on *Playmate's* deck and me. I spent the morning relaxing, studying the many moored boats, watching a cormorant sleeping on the bowsprit of a cousta boat and the comings and goings of the keel boat people. It pays to go with the strong tide in this area so I had an early lunch and cleared Queenscliff at 1130hrs to catch the flood tide. Reaching up the interesting coastline was most enjoyable: past Swan Bay, up Coles Channel, St Leonards and then.....the wind eased. In order to make it to Portarlington at a reasonable time, I motor sailed the rest of the way and tied up at the jetty. Having completed the "circumnavigation" the plan was to relax overnight, chat with a few other yachties and retrieve the boat next morning. It was not to be.

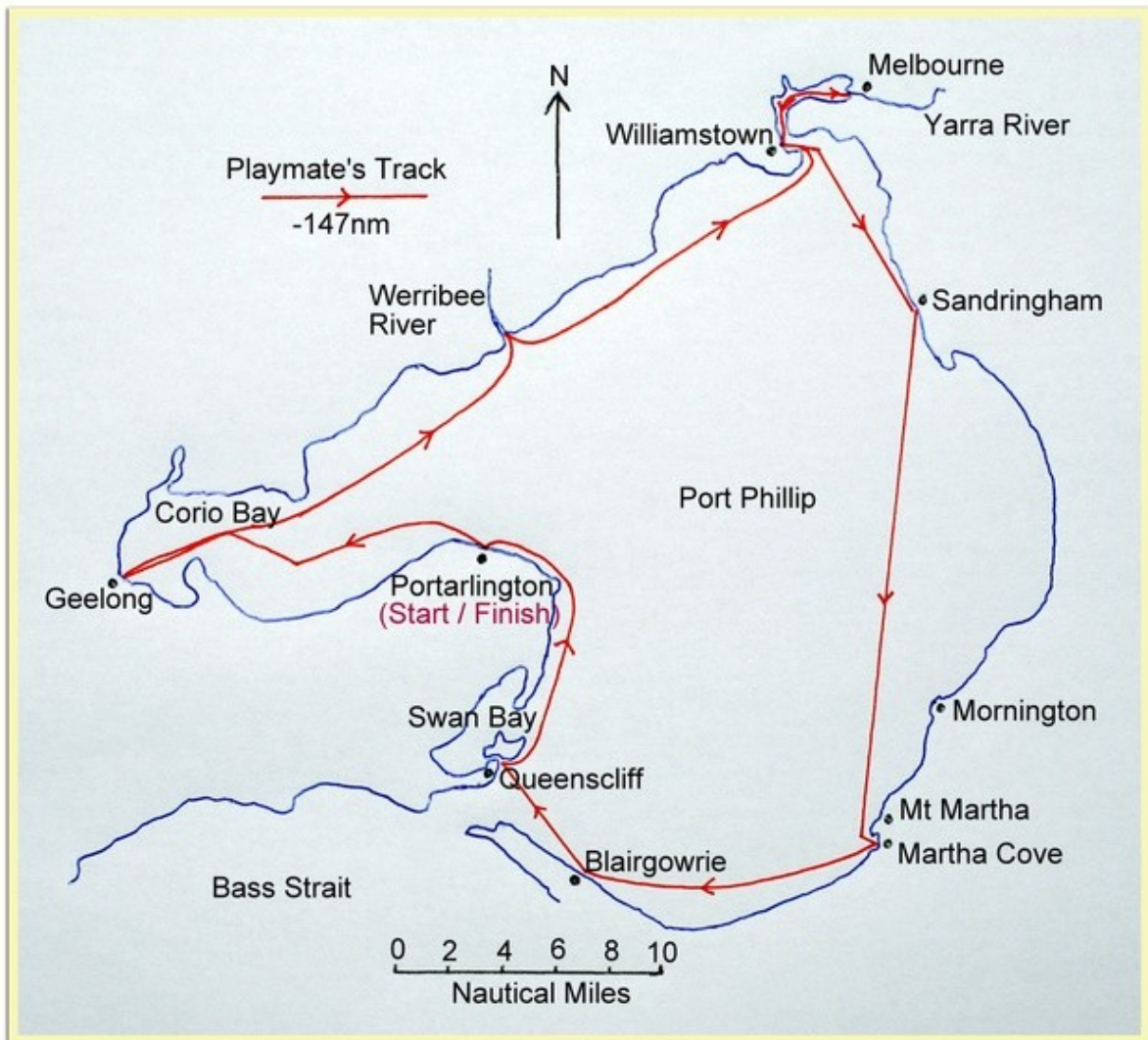
The overnight weather forecast was for 15 – 20 knot SE winds – ok for Portarlington. However, by 2100hrs the wind was a 25 – 30 knots easterly, leaving Portarlington exposed (I learnt later that this was the official wind speed at Point Wilson at that time). It was time for Plan B. I left at 2100hrs for Geelong running under jib, surfing up to 7 knots in 1 to 1.5m seas. Suddenly, 3 closely spaced waves rose to twice the median height and had breaking crests. They were very steep - just like coastal bar waves. I don't know why this occurred because the depth gauge showed 7m. In just a few seconds there was no time to think about life and the universe, all I could do was ensure the boat rode square to the steep face and hope I was not pooped. *Playmate* rode the wave successfully, its crest breaking each side, and slid down the back as it passed only to be hit on the port quarter by the next, very close, steep wave. *Playmate* broached and heeled 40/45°; it felt like more 80° as I stood against the leeward cockpit seat and hung



on to the windward lifelines while hoping that the buoyant hull and heavy bulb keel would do their job - here was a real life self righting test. Up she popped, the jib and rig shook so much I wondered how they could stay erect. I quickly pulled the helm hard up and *Playmate* took off, riding the next wave quite well. After that the sea went back to "normal" size and I tore off down the shipping channel to St Helens.

On arrival, I discovered that 2 other solo sailors had sailed their trailer sailers in the same conditions, arriving just before me. At 0100hrs we discussed, even laughed (stress release?) about the "freak" waves and could not work out why they had occurred.

I patted *Playmate* and went to bed.



**Peter Nyga**

