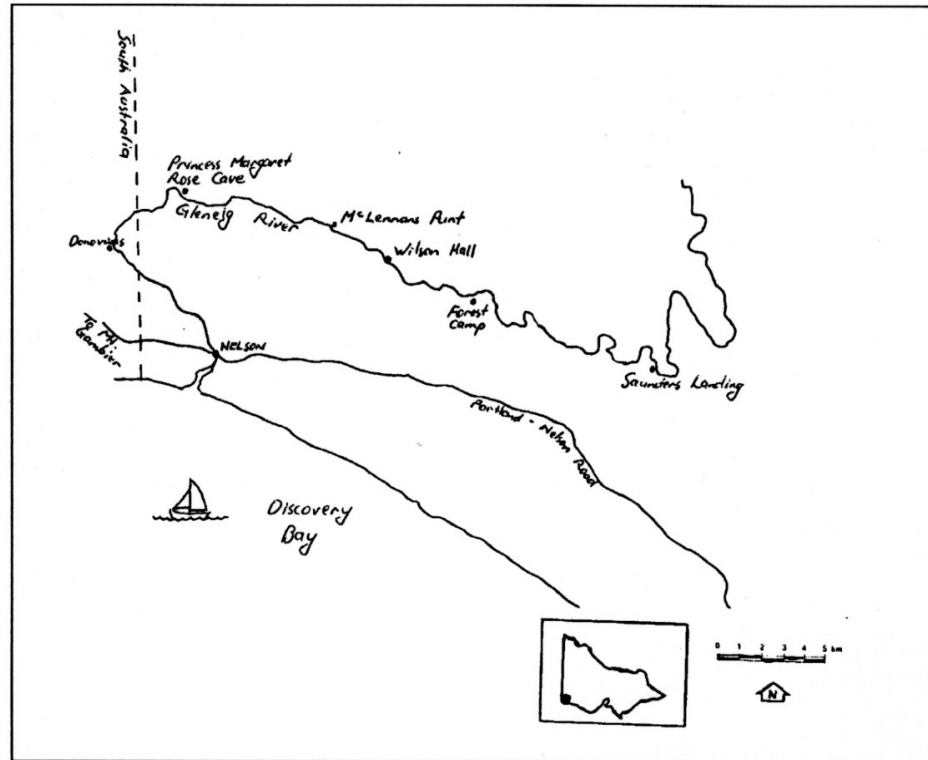


## IN THE WAKE OF MAJOR THOMAS MITCHELL - GLENELG RIVER CRUISE



When explorer Major Thomas Mitchell rowed down the Glenelg River in 1836, he wrote that it was the finest body of fresh water he had seen in Australia. For Easter 1991, Merilyn and I, our children Andrew, Rebecca and 18 month old Melissa decided to cruise the Glenelg to see if this statement was still valid. Behind us were pleasant memories of river boating last January when we had spent many carefree and enjoyable days exploring the lower and upper reaches of the Tambo, Nicholson and Mitchell Rivers.

Some up-to-date background reading seemed to confirm Major Mitchell's observations and increased our appetite for exploration of new waterways. We planned to launch at Nelson near the mouth of the Glenelg and 4 kms from the South Australian border, motor about 30 nautical miles upstream and then motor back. Sufficient fuel and 5 days supplies were loaded on board our Sabre 22 "Gunsmoke", for we learnt that nothing was available along the river apart from minor supplies at Nelson.

The drive to Nelson entails a 900 km return trip from Cheltenham so effectively, 2 days are lost driving (actually, we never consider the driving time lost because we thoroughly enjoy touring and sailing). I arranged one day's annual leave and we left the Thursday morning before Easter arriving at Nelson at 5.00 p.m. after a casual actual driving time of 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hours plus regular breaks and nappy changing times.

There was one adrenalin pumping incident en route which is worth mentioning. We were just leaving Colac, with the speedometer on 55 kph when the police who were at the side of the road stepped out and waved us over. "Oh hell", I said quietly. With no idea what could be wrong and imagining my wallet being further reduced, I stepped out of the cabin of our 4WD with a sheepish smile and asked, "What have I done wrong?". The overweight officer seemed to take delight in staring at me and appeared to deliberately delay his answer for what seemed like minutes. "Nothing", came the eventual reply, "We want to have a look at your rig" and immediately proceeded to the back of the 4WD. His eyes wandered over the load distribution hitches and dual circuit hydraulic 4 wheel disc breaking system. Eventually, his stern looks gave way to what had the makings of a friendly smile and he remarked, "The best breaking system I have ever seen" (I have still to fit a vacuum assisted unit which I intend to do). Feeling much relieved, I decided it was time I took the initiative in this chance meeting and asked him of the current status of the towing laws. Before I could finish my sentence, he cut in and said, "Look, the police aren't interested in that (inferring that the law is not clear at the moment?). What the police will look for is whether trailer brakes are fitted when the towing weight exceeds 750 kg and if a weighbridge were handy, we would check if the tyres were capable of carrying the load." We then discussed the merits of load distribution hitches before he said, "See you later". Relief!

At Nelson, we easily launched at a good ramp south of the road bridge (after having been warned by a local, "You'll never launch that thing there mate"). One hundred metres away there is a caravan park where we had previously arranged by telephone to store the 4WD and trailer. There is another ramp north of the bridge which is less exposed to the wind, but it is further from a caravan park. We learnt from another local that one unfortunate boat owner was recently killed at this ramp when his car and trailer slid down and crushed him against the jetty.

Once under the bridge, we stepped the mast and fitted the boom (it would come in handy for a boom tent later on). We had toyed with the idea of leaving the mast at home but for reasons of laziness and safety, decided to leave it on the boat. (Safety because we would be on our own in a relatively isolated part of the State and if the motor should fail, we could always sail back, even if it did mean a thousand tacks!)

Dusk was approaching so we were eager to locate a safe anchorage. We motored past the many fishermens' huts on the water's edge which were apparently built before anyone considered the environment. We understand that there is some debate about whether or not the huts should be demolished. It is similar to the beach hut issue around Port Phillip Bay - love them or hate them, they do form a unique part of our history.

Already we began to appreciate the beauty of the river and marvel at nature's wonders. For about 50 nm upstream, the river snakes through totally unspoilt national park. For the first 20 nm, the river cuts through spectacular limestone gorges, some 50 metres high; in other parts dense forest grows to the water's edge where it meets a border of tall reeds.

By evening, however, we were 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> nm upstream when we located what was to become one of the very few suitable anchorages on the bank to spend the night - a horizontal area projected out from a steep hill. Opposite, the fading light played on the limestone cliffs as the sky and perfectly still water turned into pastels of pink and blue with the yellow near full moon forming a natural lamp. The scene exuded peace and we retired with total calmness descending upon us.

On Good Friday morning, we woke to absolute stillness and a clear sky. As I put my head out of the companionway, I noticed graceful swans slowly paddling along the opposite bank, whilst water hens darted in and out of the reeds. On the pulpit, perched an azure kingfisher and the motionless mast-head wind indicator was perch for a small finch - like bird - what a blissful morning!

And so our journey continued. The cliffs became deeper as the river did a "U" turn into South Australia where one passes the small holiday village of Donovan's Landing with its holiday shacks standing out over the water complete with boats underneath. Back into Victoria, we arrived at the small jetty which marks Princes Margaret Rose Caves about 150 metres inland. Opposite, the cliffs were at their most spectacular - vertical and 50 metres high, their craggy faces painted by nature in various hues of fawn, grey and cream. Crimson rosellas flew from tree to tree - trees that seemed to defy gravity as they poked out at acute angles from the sheer cliffs. We walked to the cave entrance only to be met by a sign which said, "Closed on Good Friday". Oh well, we would visit the cave on the return trip. Further upstream, we stopped for lunch at Wilson Hall where there is a good jetty and small launching ramp. (Incidentally, the place names on the map refer to a small jetty and occasionally, a camping area.) The day was warm and humid, however, the water temperature was only 18°C. The river was forever twisting and at each bend, we wondered what the next scene would bring. The cliff's were giving way to steeply sloped, densely forested and reed covered banks. The few people we saw consisted of fishermen, canoeists and occasional campers. It was becoming obvious that there was simply nowhere suitable to pull the boat into the bank (although some fishing boats tuck into the reeds, this practice is not permitted). By 3.30 p.m., we were 19 nm upstream when we came to a little jetty which was not marked on the map and which looked as though it was completed yesterday - in fact it probably was judging by the fresh wood shavings lying around. A perfect overnight spot. A few metres inland there was a grassy clearing with a barbecue and wood supplied by the rangers. Overhead, noisy gang-gang cockatoos raised a cacophony of sound through the trees. These grey, red-headed birds have a peculiar, wheezy screech - somewhat like a rusty hinge on a swinging door. When feeding, they utter a curious growling sound. Delighted with our setting, we drank to the new jetty during happy hour. We dozed off to the haunting cry of an owl hooting from the opposite bank.

At 11.30 p.m., we could not believe our ears when we were violently startled out of our slumber. The peaceful night had turned into day as the most blinding lightning we have ever witnessed flashed around the boat. The accompanying thunder was something akin to being inside a big drum while some clown attempted to bash one's eardrums to pieces. I have been in a number of electrical storms - both during ocean racing and various trailer sailer cruises, but never anything like this one. What concerned us, was that the thunder was occurring virtually the same time as the lightning - a sure sign the tempest was directly overhead. At this point, we were sorry we had put the mast up. I darted into the cockpit locker and pulled out a wire which I keep for just such an occasion and earthed a shroud to the water. Next step was to remove the fuel from the boat and carry it inland well away from us (I suspect

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we all said a little prayer as well - except for Melissa who slept through the whole episode). In fact, the violent fury of Nature's power lasted only 10 minutes - a very long 10 minutes. As fast as it came, it went, clearing to a starry sky. Back to bed.

At 1.10 a.m., Marilyn cried, "Peter!". She needn't have; I was already awake in disbelief. "Yes dear, I'll see what I can do about this bloody thunder and lightning." A second front had hit - this time with strong rain and wind! All we could say was, "Thank goodness we are on a river". It also lasted about 10 minutes but was not as close as the first one. Back to bed - again.

Next morning, the scene was bliss - a picture of serenity. Mist caressed the still river, raindrops sparkled on dense lush green foliage as the sun's rays penetrated through the trees overhead. The water downstream turned from dull grey to aquamarine as a rainbow formed a perfect semi-circle over the river. The only sound was that of rushing water from a mini waterfall on the opposite bank. Three metres away, a kangaroo totally unafraid of our presence, was having his breakfast of grass.

Our journey upstream continued as far as Saunder's Landing where we stopped at a small grassy clearing, 28 nm from Nelson. By now, the river was becoming narrower with more overhanging trees and some snags - but still quite navigable with depths of 5-6 metres (lower downstream, the depths were up to 13 metres). From what we had read, the river was navigable for a further 20 nm. We would have liked to go further but did not wish to arrive back at Nelson with 3 drops of fuel remaining. We did not stay long at the clearing - no sooner had Andrew and I stepped ashore, when ugly leach-like creatures seemed to pop up everywhere from the grass and attached themselves to our trouser legs. They were cone-shaped, about 7 centimetres long and had the suction power of epoxy glue. A couple even made their way into the cabin when we did not notice them on our black clothing. Feeling unwelcome, we decided to commence motoring back downstream and have lunch en-route.

We planned to spend the night at Princess Margaret Rose Caves jetty and visit the cave in the morning. Contrary to expectations, we found the trip downstream just as interesting as going upstream. We saw more bird life on the way back - particularly herons and ducks. Touring canoeists were also in force and we passed about twenty of them in total. Many seemed to be mother and daughter teams and we did not envy them their task as we noticed their rain soaked gear and thought of the damp shore where they would be spending the night.

At Princess Margaret Rose Caves jetty, we came to within a metre of losing our boat. We deliberately stayed right at the end of the jetty against a pole because we knew that the tourist ferry from Nelson would arrive soon. The "ferry" is more like a 20 metre 2 storey Eildon house boat. When it arrived, it came slowly into the jetty where there was ample room, but the now strong wind which was gusting off the immense cliffs sent the craft towards us. The deck hand jumped ashore and when it became obvious that she did not know how to tie a line around a post, she said, "You had better fend off". "You're kidding", I replied, "We are against a post and our skeg is stuck in the muddy bottom." The ferry had a huge bumper bar at the bow and it kept on coming. In literally another second, "Gunsmoke's" 2.4 metre beam would be considerably reduced. But the wind god was on our side - a gust from the opposite direction put the ferry back where it belonged. Much relieved, we were later invited on board the ferry by the captain - owner for coffee and a chat. He was an amiable fellow and he and his attractive deck hand made us most welcome, although I was quietly alarmed to learn of his "unreliable, single diesel engine".



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Easter Sunday brought overcast weather with intermittent rain. We did not worry - we had planned to spend the day where we were, but with "Gunsmoke" now safely tucked in between the jetty and the shore. Easter Bunny had no trouble finding us and even young Melissa joined in the spirit of an Easter egg hunt. I am still finding bits of Easter egg paper behind bunk cushions.

The cave itself was worth the visit - a credit to Nature but, I thought, not quite as spectacular or as big as some other caves I have seen. In the afternoon, Andrew, Rebecca and I went for a bush walk which afforded some spectacular river views from the cliff tops. To us it looked like the Amazon River snaking through the jungle far below.

Having decided to break the journey home by spending Monday night at Port Fairy, we motored back to Nelson in the morning. On the final leg, we still marvelled at the magnificent cliffs, the reeds and birdlife. Yes, the river is magnificent - it brings you back to the wonders of nature and a pace of life from times gone by.

Peter Nyga









