

THE CRUISE WITH A DIFFERENCE by Ian Clapperton



This year I was persuaded to enter the MPONR (Marlay Point Overnight Race) for the first time. It was to be the 50th anniversary of this famous classic event and the organisers were hoping to have a big turnout as in the race's golden years. The race has always started from the Lake Wellington Yacht Club near Marlay Point on the Sale side of the big round and featureless lake. The yachts then sail across the lake, through McLennans Strait and on to Paynesville and beyond depending on the division. Starting at 8 pm means that much of the race is sailed at night.

It was quite an effort to get the boat ready, mainly collecting all the equipment that had to be carried. Even the first aid kit had a comprehensive compliance list.



Ian with Alice

My crew was to consist of Geoffrey (from the Mordialloc Sailing Club) who came with me to Refuge Cove two or three years ago, and my son Bruce who has had quite a bit of experience racing and cruising. But then my eldest granddaughter Alice asked if she could come too! This was a complete surprise as Alice has really not done any sailing whereas the other four granddaughters have sailed every Christmas on Crème Caramel for the last six years. With Alice accepted as crew, that made the ideal total of four on board for the race.

When my entry was accepted I was given a race number which had to be displayed on both sides of the boat. I meticulously made two signs and then at the last minute found that they were the wrong size – the numbers had to be at least 30 cm high. I had to cut up marine ply that I had in the shed, paint it white and then paint the big numbers on in black.

I found the Genoa and the symmetrical spinnaker and pole in the shed – all unused for several years - and put these in the car, together with all the other gear that I might need.

Arriving at Paynesville Thursday afternoon very tired (no one to share the driving), I arranged to have the boat brought out from mast-up storage at Bluewater, hitched up (with help as my new vehicle has appalling visibility out the back) and slept on the boat on the ramp ready for an early start next morning.

I spent all day Friday sailing to Plover Point (a truly magical sail with no tacks needed) and spent the night there. On Saturday morning I awoke to find Sea Dove next to me. Paul and Don had arrived in the middle of the night.

I had to get to the other side of Lake Wellington in a fog which was a complete white-out. Fortunately Don had told me that the course to follow was 270 degrees. As I motored out into the lake another yacht came out and promptly ran aground, then went in all directions as if completely lost. So I radioed them and told them the bearing, after which they had no further difficulty.

The shallows off the yacht club were packed with boats at anchor. I had to take a declaration form ashore but when I started wading through the murky water, I found that the bottom was soft mud and studded with tree roots and stumps. My poor balance made me very nervous, particularly as another guy wading back to his boat had just fallen over while holding his phone.

All that day (Saturday) boats were arriving from across the lake and others were being rigged and launched. With over 230 entries it was very crowded but it was all very friendly. With live music and stalls it took on a carnival atmosphere. Other Bayside boats were in the race: Mystic and Grasshopper so together with Sea Dove made it four Club boats in all. By the way, all the boats had to be trailable.

As the 8 pm start time drew near, Bruce and Geoffrey waded out to Crème Caramel with their gear but Alice and I accepted a lift in one of the inflatables. My crew sorted out the Genoa which none of them had even seen before and readied the spinnaker while deciding how they would try launching and retrieving it.

The race started in the dark and we eventually crossed the start line on our way across the lake. Half way across we realised that all the other boats were over to the left but we just continued heading straight for the



The fleet at night

Plover Point mark. By then the wind had dropped so from then on it was a painfully slow drift. At least it was in the right direction! We were averaging half a knot for the hours it took to get through the strait. Even so, my gallant crew was continuously swapping the spinnaker for the Genoa. Geoffrey had the tiller, Alice navigated with the Navionics chart on the tablet and had the spinnaker sheet and Bruce organised the sail changes. And me? I did very little except shine the torch on the spinnaker so Alice could see when it curled. And I was moveable ballast if we changed tack. Being dead tired from three days on the go, I tried to catch some sleep.

We eventually got out of the strait and into Lake Victoria. Dawn arrived with a glassy sea but gradually a gentle breeze lifted our spirits and took us to Paynesville. We still had to go right around Raymond Island (clockwise) but we had a most exhilarating sail on the last leg before crossing the finishing line outside the Gippsland Lakes Yacht Club.

That evening we were all invited to the club rooms where they put on free (finger) food, a band and of course, speeches. Unfortunately they were not able to tell us who won any of the divisions due to a computer overload. That was the only hiccup that I was aware of over the whole event.

How did we go? Well, we started and finished. We were a long way down on the results list but it would have looked better if we had not had an additional handicap due to the mainsail not complying with the Noelex class rules. We were classed as “modified” due to a loose foot and full length battens.

Would I do it again? Possibly. I would need a new main and a crew member to share driving and then help sail all the way to the start. And sort out the problems *before* the start.

Was it enjoyable? A definite yes to that. A new and unique experience. Another tick on the bucket list.*

Ian.

Crème Caramel, Noelex 25

*Still on the list: Sail around Phillip Island

Sail from Port Phillip Bay to Western Port Bay

Sail from Western Port Bay to Refuge Cove

Sail from Lakes Entrance to Refuge Cove