

CAPE *Crusader*

After a hiatus due to ill health, Dr Richard Ham is back doing what he loves best – sailing the open ocean. Our roving photographer JOHN FORD joined the intrepid 74-year old sailor for his final fling from Eden around South East Cape, the southernmost tip of mainland Australia, and home to Geelong



When Barbara and Richard Ham pulled into Eden, nearing the end of a four-year, round-the-world voyage, Richard was a very sick man. He was flown to Canberra Hospital, but eventually his wife Barbara got him home to Melbourne, where he spent almost two years convalescing.

So when the excuse came around for a voyage on his beloved Bluewater 400 to Coff's Harbour and back, the 74 year-old doctor jumped at the chance. And so did I, joining the three crew aboard for the Eden to Geelong leg, which for Richard would mean he had completed a worldwide circumnavigation.

By the time we got Seabird moving from Eden it was past 11am. At first we thought Twofold Yacht club were escorting us out of the bay, but it turned out we were simply on the same course as their regatta. Still, it lent a sense of occasion to our departure.

The cliffs south of Eden are spectacular, with intricate red shapes formed from ancient lava flows. The imposing rock construction of Boyd's Tower sits on the southern entrance to Twofold Bay as a reminder of the region's rich whaling history.

But without much wind, we motor-

sailed close to shore, passing Bitangabee Bay about an hour out of Eden.

Bitangabee is a safe refuge in most seas, although it looks treacherous from a distance. The entrance is quite narrow, but opens into a well-protected channel that's safe from the elements.

As we motored south a flotilla appeared off Green Cape. Fishing boats were everywhere: pros and charter craft mixing it up with trailerboats amid what looked like a run of kingfish. Out came our lines and lures in the hope of bagging some fresh fish for dinner, but we manoeuvred our way through the fleet with no luck, despite fish being landed all around us. The lures stayed out until we were within a mile of the heads of Port Phillip. Suffice to say, we managed to catch nothing along the way.

But the voyage was memorable for other reasons. Green Cape is one of those iconic lighthouses on the Australian coast and, as the gateway to Bass Strait, something of a milestone for ocean racers and cruising sailors. Our arrival was rewarded by a lift in the breeze and we were able to kill the motor, goose wing the sails, and maintain a sprightly pace.

The course changes direction here, turning east across Disaster Bay and along the Nadgee Wilderness towards



Cape Howe. Ordinarily, the Nadgee area is only accessible on foot: a couple of days' walk from either Wonboyn in NSW or Mallacoota in Victoria. By boat, it offers stunning scenery. Even from 20 miles away, the sand hills of the Cape were clearly visible and eventually the tip of the Gabo Island Light revealed itself.

The Light is truly magnificent. Built in 1859 from granite hewn on the island, it rises 55 metres and its natural colour glows an earthy red in the afternoon light. Like Green Cape, the lighthouse keeper's residence is now available for holiday accommodation. Gabo is a light plane flight from Merimbula or Mallacoota, which has a healthy abalone and recreational fishing industry, but access to the sea only from a beach-launching site.

Meantime, the sun was getting low as we sailed east into open ocean. The area from Cape Howe forms the Wilderness Coast in Victoria, but the lay line to Wilsons Promontory takes you away from the coast. It is possible to hug the land, however, anchorages are limited.

Gourmet food was scoffed with a setting sun over the water. It was the most picturesque of backdrops for devouring the Eden Deli roast chicken and homegrown tomatoes. With darkness descending we began our round of watches: two crew for two hours on watch and two off. The wind

was playing its part, coming slightly around to the south, allowing us to jibe the headsail so the sails were set for the night run.

But two hours is not enough sleep! The night was black by the time it was my turn on watch. Off in the distance, there was the glimmer of light from one of the Bass Strait oil rigs. Eventually a number of flames were visible, and at six knots they became something of a feature of the night. I imagined them as roaring monsters or huge dragons of the deep. Remember: you need to keep a minimum 500m clearance of the oil rigs, but the roar they make doesn't encourage you to go much closer anyway.

The wind continued from the east as we headed into an idyllic day's sail. Blue sky, calm seas and about 15 knots from the absolute right direction for gentleman sailors. It was still two hours on and two off, with most of us sleeping lightly throughout the day. And this leg gave us plenty of reason to appreciate how well the Bluewater 400 performs as a cruising boat.

All controls lead to the cockpit, where big winches make sail adjustments safe and easy, and there's an electric winch to take the effort out of heavy tasks. The boat has certainly done the miles, while the owners have demonstrated that world cruising is achievable for the young at heart.

By late afternoon it had clouded over and the Clifty Island Light came into view. Clifty Island is a windswept and desolate place. The old keeper's quarters seemed

abandoned. Access to the island must have been difficult and it would have been a special person who could endure the wild and lonely winters there.

Once past the island, the mainland came into view under a cloudy sunset. It was one of those skies that photographer Ken Duncan calls his "Jesus Rays" of radiating golden light. It looked like a scene from the Ten Commandments, as the sun set at the far end of a bay shrouded in cloud and bushfire smoke.

The coast at this stage is still a few hours away, and we knew our arrival at Refuge Bay would be in the dark. By the time we made our approach it was around 2200 hrs. A night-time entry to Refuge Cove is not to be recommended for the uninitiated, especially with bushfire smoke making it hard to pick out the entrance by floodlight, and with 25 knots up your bum. But David and Richard are familiar with the entrance, so we were able to navigate safely through.

It was great to get in Refuge Bay and we enjoyed a couple of congratulatory drinks. With the wind howling and the glow of fires over the ridge, it was an uncomfortable night. But dawn was sunny and revealed a truly memorable anchorage. Under most circumstances it would be a great spot to relax for a few days while exploring the hills and coastline, but with the wind blowing hard from the east we upped anchor and headed around the other side of The Prom'.

It was brisk sailing along the rocky coastline to South East Point, which sailors often refer to as The Prom, and which is the southern-most point of mainland Australia. Past the wide expanse of Waratah Bay, I look up at the imposing cliffs leading to the lighthouse some 90 metres above. It is made from natural granite.

The isolation of The Prom adds to its appeal. It's a fair trip by land, and with the track now closed to traffic, there's an 18 kilometre walk to the aforesaid lighthouse. But the rock formations and wildlife make



it a photographer's paradise.

The trip around the point, although windy, was in a relatively calm sea and we were able to hug the coast and take the passage through what the locals call Little Bourke Street. The alternative route wide of Citadel Island Light or Cleft Island, also known also as Skull Rock.

Once through the passage we headed out to look at Skull Rock, a huge wind blown monolith rising from deep water. With the wind blowing off the rock, we were able to get in close and marvel at the stalactites and wind-blown sculptures of the natural amphitheatre. While it looked a great place for a concert, we settled for the music of the waves on the rocks, and the symphony of gulls and eagles.

The nearby islands of Redondo and Citadel are equally imposing - steep and





Above: Skull Rock off Wilsons Promontory. Left, down: Approaching Wilsons Promontory lighthouse at the most southerly tip of the Australian mainland; Passing Cape Howe. Below: Seabird at Queenscliff.



rocky and well worth the trip.

Satisfied with our sightseeing, we headed in to the relatively sheltered waters of Oberon Bay where we dropped anchor and settled down for a long lunch. Even in the bay the wind howled around us for a day and a half, as The Prom was engulfed in fire. During our visit it also registered as the windiest place in Australia.

Oberon Bay and Tidal River, which has a small settlement, are suitable havens on the western side of The Prom when the big easterlies are blowing. There is also anchorage in Sealers Cove, but only for a few boats. If these spots are taken or unsuitable, it might be necessary to head

into Port Welshpool.

The stay in Oberon Bay gave time for reflection of life aboard a cruising yacht and many good yarns were told. Compared with a 40-foot motor-cruiser, things are quite confined. The galley has room for only one cook and the gas stove isn't huge but we were able to turn out plenty of hearty meals from the bottomless pantry. And with four blokes on board there was still plenty of space on Seabird to, well, cruise the world.

Our passage to Melbourne needed to be planned to get us to the heads on a suitable tide to enter Port Phillip Bay. With the wind still expected to blow 20-30 knots from the east we planned a midnight departure to get us to the Rip on a slack tide. Someone should have told the weather gods. The first three watches it blew on cue and we put Cape Liptrap behind us in good time, but by dawn the wind had died and we were motoring with sails furled.

Lazing along with motor running and the autopilot steering, we saw the scenery change slowly. But down below, dozens of dolphins and, above, Pacific gulls and hundreds of shearwaters entertained us. By the time we got to The Rip, slack tide had well and truly passed, but the sea was still safe and, amid plenty of swirling water, we entered the bay at last and pulled in at Queenscliff for the night.

Seabird was back in home waters and the next afternoon she was tied up at her berth at Geelong Yacht Club. Richard had completed his circumnavigation at last. And I had a feast of images from a cruise to remember.

