

## Gippsland Lakes Adventure



Six hardy GRYC souls and three boats spent the last two weeks of February exploring the Gippsland Lakes. The following article will provide a tasting of the adventures had, and a smattering of lessons learnt.

The boats and associated souls were Equinox (Team Symonds), Anoqua (Team Perry) and Kungari (Team Andre / Laforgia). As with all sailing adventures, the fun started with the preparation. Given the proximity of pubs, restaurants and shops throughout the Gippsland Lakes region, comparatively little attention was given to provisioning. Maps (Gippsland Lakes Boating Guide), cruising notes (Creeks and Harbours of the Gippsland Lakes and Eastern Gippsland by Mike Smith and Richard Hawkins) and weather reporting apps were sorted in advance. Trailer preparation for each group was a priority given the epic road journey ahead. Our objective was to avoid a repeat of the Equinox experience of blowing a wheel bearing in peak hour Melbourne traffic on their 2016 trip.

While we successfully arrived at Ballarat for the first evening and Nicholson the night after, there was some luck involved with Team Kungari having a quick pit stop to attend to some errant 'lock nuts' that didn't understand their role. Importantly the trip over the West Gate Bridge and through the associate Melbourne tunnels was uneventful. It was a great relief to finally be seated in the Nicholson Hotel on our second night admiring our partly assembled boats either in the boat ramp car park or bobbing quietly alongside the jetty.

Day 3 - all boats were launched and vehicles secured in the yard nearby. Given the long term weather predictions it was decided to head East, firstly down the Nicholson River, across Lake King and into Metung. Until more familiar with the territory, we novices in the group watched and emulated Equinox's every move, to the point I expect Murray and Denise were checking if we were attached with a towline. Dinner ashore in Metung with port and chocolate aboard ship was to become a common occurrence.

Day 4 had us tracking to Barrier Landing via Boxes Creek. Murray had warned us about the current, however undeterred Team Kungari, not confident about using the current to reverse into the jetty, managed a spectacular doughnut in a confined space and pulled off a very classy berthing manoeuvre. Fortunately my thought bubbles remained unspoken as I had completely underestimated the effect of the 3 knot current but was most impressed by Kungari's turning circle in a panic. Lesson learnt, listen to Murray and ensure boat and skipper have good reversing capabilities.

Following lunch, we walked over the dunes and up the beach to Lakes Entrance Channel. The standing tidal waves in the channel provided a great base for the seals to fish and frolic. We then hurried back to check our boats were secure, as the tide had changed and a trip to Tasmania was something we very much hoped to avoid.

The plan for day 5 was to cross the entrance channel on the incoming tide and arrive at Lakes Entrance before the wind and rain. Fortunately the only excitement of the crossing was watching each other veer sideways in the worst of the current. As for the rain, a mere inconvenience compared to the other potential mishaps in a busy working port such as this. Team Equinox demonstrated how to duck out of harm's way when challenged by a Bass Strait trawler wanting manoeuvring room. No point arguing with those guys, they definitely had a size advantage. We spent the evening in the local pub watching our boats be lashed by wind and rain discussing our exploits.

Day 6 and the day was perfect for a down wind sail to Paynesville. Based on previous experience, Murray advised we pause at Metung and reef our mainsails before crossing Lake King. Paynesville is a boaties paradise, central to varied sailing destinations, free berths (some with power), toilets, restaurants, chandlery and yes hot showers. This was the first of what was to be three visits, the next two just missing the busy periods of a music festival and a wooden boat rally. Each stay coincided with twilight racing and we were able to watch the start preparations from our berths. There were a range of boats racing, including an abundance of Noelex 30s, and yes Geoff at least one Sonata 7.



Having had a run of nights in port, we decided it was time for some isolation, so off to the Bunga Arm. The sail across Lake Victoria past Sperm Whale Head was just glorious. Yep this is why we came! We stopped in at Ocean Grange jetty for lunch then onto Steamer Landing then up the Bunga Arm.

The comparisons between the Bunga Arm and the Coorong are well justified. While the Bunga Arm is deeper and narrower, the elongated waterway protected by a sand dune barrier meant we felt at home. We travelled most of its length and after checking several possibilities, settled on the Second Blowhole Campsite, where we spent the next two nights. The beach entry was sandy and sufficiently deep to allow us to anchor stern-in and secure our lines to the beach posts provided. The bush toilets, picnic table and walk tracks added to the attraction of this tranquil campsite. Having frightened off the only other boat, we had the campsite to ourselves for the last night and revelled in this pristine isolation, with sailing jaunts (Anoqua), beach walks and generally relaxing. Lessons learnt, have two lengthy ropes as the securing posts can be some distance from the boat, and take care when traversing them in your morning dash to the loo.

While we had hoped to spend more time in these isolated localities, the weather forecast was ominous so it was off to the safe harbour of Loch Sport Marina on the edge of Lake Victoria. The winds were so light we began to question our decision to head for cover, particularly as Team Anoqua managed to have lunch at Ocean Grange jetty with their main sail up. But fortunately we decided to remain cautious and head for shelter.

We arrived at the marina well before the storm and were allocated berths near the entrance. Alas the winds picked up, dropped away and then she really blew, exceeding 30 knots. Our berths were exposed and we clearly had to move further into the marina. Having sorted new berths, no-one was keen to risk a motoring manoeuvre in the near gale conditions. So with guidance from Murray, and using those long ropes yet again, each boat was successfully turned and positioned to enable a quick motor into their new berth. My own plan to somehow spin on one foot and disconnect the stern line while steering into the gale was far too ambitious. Lesson learnt - while using a floating rope as an anchor line isn't sensible, it works a treat as a stern line trailing behind when things get too busy to disconnect it.

We were very proud of ourselves for having successfully moved our boats without mishap, much to the relief and admiration of the locals who were observing the entertainment from the pub, since it was their boats that may have suffered if we came unstuck.

We also had reason to be impressed with the local residents as they were most helpful in providing transport to soggy yachties, including to and from the service station for those who needed to purchase fuel. Further to this, our adulation was enhanced by the quality of the wine list at the Loch Sport pub, mostly from South Australia and all well priced.



After two days the weather abated and so we headed back to Paynesville for the tail-end of the music festival and then on to Rotamah Island the following night. The weather was glorious, light winds and sunshine. We often headed off separately in our various boats, adding waypoints to our electronic records with the view we would use these on our next trip. On Day 8 after some independent frolicking we met up for lunch in Duck Arm outside of Paynesville. This beautiful spot was further enhanced by a parade of passing boats assembling in readiness for the Paynesville Wooden Boat Rally.

Our near final adventure was to sail from Paynesville, across Lake King and up the Tambo River to Johnsonville for the night, with the objective of sheltering from yet another blow.

We set off in 15 knot winds, which were perfect for Kungari (meaning swan), and she aptly took flight, leaving all in her wake. This was particularly noteworthy as up to this point we had been Tail-end Charlie. To this day Team Anoqua is suspicious that we had our motor on, and just maybe we did, or maybe we didn't.... As for Team Equinox, sorry Murray I know it hurts but this memory too will fade.

There are only two public wharfs along the Tambo and fortunately the one at Johnsonville had space for us all. We arrived ahead of the weather and had time to wander about, stretch out on the lawns and even prepare dinner the barbecue shelter in the park, and then in came the wind. While not as ferocious as our night in Loch Sport, we renewed our gratitude for the quality of the weather service as we checked and rechecked our lines and fenders. Though the river gave us some shelter, the

wharf position meant we took the worst of the winds on our beam. Lesson learnt - in these conditions you can never have too many fenders out and the 'double horizontal fender' technique worked a treat.

Our last day of on-water adventures had arrived. Teams Equinox and Kungari made a quick trip further up the Tambo River to Swan Reach, before following Team Anouqua out into Lake King, across the mouth of the Mitchell River and back to our set off point on the Nicholson River.

Oh how tempting it was to just slip up the Mitchell River for a look see, but alas that will be next time when we have our mast lowering system in situ to navigate the bridges further up. The river is a classic form of a digitate delta with 'silt jetties' extending well into Lake King. These silt jetties are second in size to the Mississippi River delta and extend for 8 kilometres above and below the water. As a consequence the channel markers for the Mitchell extend well out into Lake King meaning we had to use part of this channel on route to the Nicholson River. As our depth recordings attest, this is a hazard not to be ignored suddenly rising from 5 meters to less than 1 meter.

After two weeks on the water we were left wanting more and all have plans to return. So what made this such a memorable trip? In short, it was the good company, wonderful sailing, spectacular scenery and comfortable facilities. As the prior descriptions attest, the weather of the Gippsland region is variable and it was important to have sufficient flexibility to work within its confines. A storm is no more than a minor inconvenience when watching it from the local pub knowing your boat is secure. We did however have more fine weather than not, even managing a swim on the odd occasion. While many criticise the forecast app Willy Weather, it is easy to read and proved to be a great resource in our trip planning. The cruising notes provided useful information about navigation and the range of facilities, with a combination of paper maps and a Navionics download working well. This area is popular during school holidays and various festivals, so knowing when these are will also help with your planning and in smaller groups will also increase the likelihood of finding sufficient berths.

Oh yeah we shall return!

Kate Andre

In the company of:

Joe Laforgia

Murray and Denise Symonds

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