

● Feature: Townsville/Palm Islands

A quiet bay in Magnetic Island . . . a great spot to get away from it all.

Palms, magnets and a table on the beach

Caroline Strainig revisits one of her favourite cruising grounds, the Palm Island Group north of Townsville in Far North Queensland.

Steve's face was a mirror of emotions as he listened to the ringing tone on his mobile phone, waiting for someone to pick up on the other end.

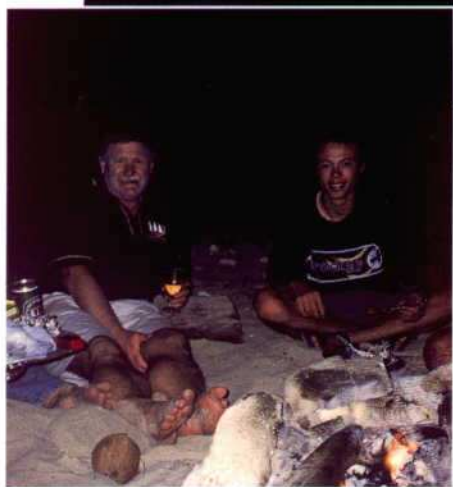
"Hello," he said, pausing while the other person responded. "Yes. My friends and I are on a yacht nearby. We were wondering whether we could come to the resort for dinner . . ."

His expression changed from hopefulness to disappointment as he listened to the response, while the rest of us could barely suppress our we-told-you-so mirth. The Orpheus Island Resort receptionist was polite but firm: passing sailors were not welcome at the exclusive resort, which caters for a maximum of 74 guests at any one time. This was one prize not even Steve was going to win.

The attempt to sweet talk the receptionist led to the phrase "Do you do dinner?" becoming a catch-cry in our little band of



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TOP: The sun sets behind Magnetism on Herald Island.

ABOVE: Steve (left) with a Dutch backpacker from the yacht Jasmine on Havannah.

two cruising couples and was only one highlight of a memorable trip to Townsville and the Palm Island Group.

For my husband Alex and me it was somewhat of a trip down memory lane because we used to live in Cairns and sailed through the area several times many years ago. However, it was a new experience for friends Gail and Steve Cook of the Gold Coast.

Our escape machine on this five-day visit was Magnetism, a Beneteau Oceanis 430 from Magnetic Palm Island Rent-A-

Yacht (MIRAY), a bareboat company based at the Townsville Breakwater Marina. The company is operated by Stewart and Ann Coates, who have chartered boats out for some years to visit Magnetic Island and recently managed to secure a permit for boats to visit the Palms as well.

The Palm Island Group is 30nm north of Townsville and comprises more than 12 islands, which include Orpheus, Pelorus, Fantome, Curacoa and Great Palm. Only two islands in the Palm Group are permanently inhabited. Hinchinbrook Island is a little farther NW again.

Some passing yachts miss out because they are in delivery mode and can stop only overnight. This suits

those who do take the time to relax and explore just fine. It's wonderful to be able to get away from it all in such picture-perfect surroundings. Some beaches in the Palms can go for days without a single fresh human footprint – a welcome change after busy places like the Whitsundays.

Magnetic Island, 4.5nm N-NE of Townsville, is often first port of call for yachts and bareboats heading north from there. We had particular reason to visit because we wanted to take some Townsville relatives for a sail and then drop them off somewhere convenient.

After a briefing from Stewart of MIRAY, we motored out of the marina and set sail out the leads. Magnetism was well set up for easy handling and after a brief getting-to-know-you session we settled back and relaxed as we sailed across on a broad reach in a light southerly.

"Maggie", as the island is familiarly known, has a permanent population of 2500 people. Only four bays are populated and more than half the island is national park. Attractions include plentiful native wildlife, bush walks, supermarkets, excellent beaches, restaurants and a range of accommodation from backpacker to four-and-a-half-star.

Anchorage-wise, Horseshoe Bay on the north coast is reasonable in southerly winds. MIRAY has several moorings there and we picked up one of these.

Anchoring space is restricted but there is generally swinging room for a few cruising yachts. The locals told us enthusiastically about the Magnetic Harbour major marina development that was well under construction at Nelly Bay to the south.

We opted for dinner at an informal beachfront café in Horseshoe Bay. The pizzas and seafood were good and the adults were able to relax with a glass of wine while the children played quietly nearby. The distant murmur of waves added to the ambience.

The next day the four "long-termers" – Gail, Steve, Alex and I – set sail early in a light southerly, targeting a snorkel at Acheron Island, 12nm NW of Magnetic.

The sea and birdlife are prolific and as we sailed we kept a lookout for the humpbacks, minke and pilot whales that pass through the region from July to November.

"There she blows," I yelled excitedly, as I pointed to a black glistening shape in the water only a couple of hundred metres off our bow. We watched until the whale vanished. There is something about these magnificent creatures that invariably fills me with a sense of awe.

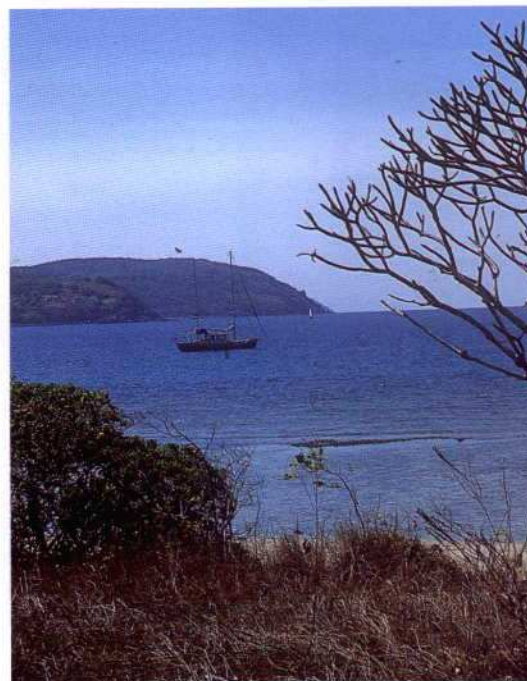
At Acheron we anchored off the sand spit on the northern side in about eight metres of water and enjoyed our fist snorkel over coral bommies in the crystal-clear water. "See, I can still do it!" said Alex, holding aloft a small rock to prove he'd made it to the bottom.

Our next destination was Havannah Island, the

Palm Group's southernmost island. Here we weighed anchor at the anchorage recommended in the cruising guide – off the sand spit on the NW tip. It was still daylight so we motored across in the dinghy to explore Fly Islet to the NW. The four of us wandered slowly along the beach taking in our surroundings. The setting sun turned the outcrops of rock golden and gave the distant smoke haze from burning off in the north a reddish hue.

Dinner was a barbecue on Havannah's sand spit. The crew of Jasmine, the only other yacht there, joined us. The skipper was a North Queensland cruising yachtie – his crew two male Dutch backpackers seeing the world before settling down to their careers. Talk flowed freely late into the evening.

Havannah is a calm-weather anchorage only and even in the prevailing light conditions the southerly



Yacht at anchor off Fantome Island.

TOWNSVILLE MARINAS, ANCHORING AND ATTRACTIONS

Townsville Breakwater Marina

This is the marina where Magnetic Palm Island Rent-A-Yacht is based and is only a short walk from the heart of Townsville. Visiting yachts are welcome and the marina caters for vessels up to 30m. Facilities include an amenities block, travel-lift and hardstand. The entrance channel was due for dredging at the time of writing and had only 1.3m water in the middle at low tide. A berth for a 10m yacht will cost \$24.20 a day or \$142.44 a week. Call them before entering. They can be contacted on VHF channel 16 (working 10), ph (07) 4721 2233, 24 hours a day.

Townsville Motor Boat and Yacht Club, Ross Creek

This has a strong cruising membership, which operates under the title of the Townsville Cruising Yacht Club. The club is only 500m from downtown Townsville and marina berths for yachts up to 15m are generally available. Facilities include amenities, bar etc. A hardstand is adjacent but is not operated by the club. Again, the entrance channel was due for dredging at the time of writing. However, management said most boats were not having problems entering. Call them first on VHF channel 16 (working 77), ph (07) 4772 1192.

6am to 6pm. From 6pm to 9-10pm the bar staff take calls. After-hours arrivals can go to the fuel berth. A berth for a 10m yacht will cost \$27.50 a day, \$170.50 a week.

Anchoring

There are no authorised anchoring areas in Townsville, but yachts frequently anchor in front of the casino and entrance to the Breakwater Marina in an area known as The Duckpond. Anchoring in Ross River and Ross Creek is not permitted. However, there is a public jetty in Ross Creek (one-hour limit) within walking distance of shops. Moorings are not available.

Things to do

There is plenty to do in Townsville and it's worth combining your visit to the region with a few days on land exploring.

Attractions include the Strand foreshore and its unique water playground, the promenade, a new museum based on the Pandora shipwreck and a renowned aquarium and casino.

Qantas and Virgin Blue run regular daily flights (\$594 return from Sydney on Qantas in December) and there are several Qantas international flights coming into Townsville now also.



The author on the helm.

swell sweeping around the point ensured Magnetism rocked on gently through the night as we slept.

Early the next day Steve made his nothing-ventured phone call to Orpheus Island Resort. The cruising guide described the resort as "strictly out of bounds for non-guests", but we had evening gear with us and since we hadn't used it at Magnetic Island he was determined to see if he could get a table for dinner at Orpheus. Once our mirth subsided we headed north.

After several hours of good sailing in about eight-10kts, the wind died and we dropped the headsail and motor-sailed along the western side of Orpheus Island and past Hazard Bay where the resort is. You can anchor here and there are some spectacular clams and good coral, but we opted for Little Pioneer Bay. This is one of the best trade-wind anchorages in the Palm Group and several yachts were already there. Ashore there are national park facilities and ruins.

We joked that we would settle "only for the best table on Orpheus Island" and Steve and Alex set out to organise it while Gail and I prepared food. A pleasant surprise awaited us when we arrived on the beach: the men had excelled themselves and a piece of ply-

● PREVAILING WINDS/CRUISING GUIDES

The prevailing winds are S-SE. The wind swings north in October and November, although this has been irregular in past years. Cyclone season is December to March.

The winds during our visit (August) were S-SE, all light, stronger in the morning and dropping off in the afternoon.

Cruising the Coral Coast by Alan Lucas is the main cruising guide and is available through Boat Books and other marine outlets. An updated edition is due out later this year.

The chart is Cape Bowling Green to Palm Isles.

● DIVING AND FISHING

The Palm Island Group is home to 340 of the 350 known coral species on the Great Barrier Reef, and an amazing 1100 species of fish.

MIRAY's Stewart and Ann Coates say each dive location offers something different.

The full reef diversity can be experienced by doing a drift dive down either of the channels to the north and south of Orpheus Island. Soft corals are primarily found on the western side of the channels and the hard corals on the eastern side with the corresponding fish species.

Acheron Island is frequented by giant manta rays, while a grouper under Yanks Jetty on Orpheus Island is also worth donning the tank or snorkel for.

The fishing in the Palms as a whole is good, with reef species like red emperor and coral trout and bigger pelagic species such as mackerel, bonito, tuna and marlin.

On Magnetic Island the reef edge off Geoffrey Bay has a garden of hard corals and is home to a school of harmless black-tip reef sharks. The wreck of the Moltke is an excellent shallow wreck dive.

The Yongala wreck south of the island has been named one of the top five wreck dives in the world and is visited daily by several local dive companies.

wood they'd found had been fashioned into an impressive table, complete with chilled champagne. Watching a spectacular sunset as we revelled in solitary possession of our own stretch of sand was unforgettable. Again, a smoke haze from distant burning off gave everything an almost surreal reddish glow. The night was still and as we settled down to sleep we could only just hear the water rippling against Magnetism's hull.

First stop the next morning was James Cook University Marine Biology Department's research station just to the south in Pioneer Bay. This research station specialises in breeding giant clams for recolonising depleted areas of the Great Barrier Reef. The staff member was polite and chatted to us for a few minutes, but a tour was not an option at that time. You can phone the university on (07) 4777 7336 if you'd like to try and arrange a visit.

Farther south in Hazard Bay we came across a pretty place with tables and a grassed area and good snorkelling that the cruising guide told us was Yanks Jetty. We didn't stop but read up on the history as we passed. Apparently it was the location for a ship "degaussing station" in World War II, whatever that is.

Next stop was ex-Leper colony on Fantome Island, where we anchored in 10m at Juno Bay. The colony was transferred to Great Palm Island Hospital in the 1970s. Bits of old stoves, masonry and others debris proliferate. A school group was camped nearby – their silver modern tents in stark contrast to the

ORPHEUS ISLAND

As Steve discovered, Orpheus Island Resort is indeed strictly out of bounds for visiting yachties, nor can you catch a plane or on-water transfer to Townsville from there. Rooms start at \$610 per person twin share, including all meals. Specials are available at various times during the year – check with your travel agent if interested.

ruins dotted about. We wandered for an hour, intrigued by these remnants of yesteryear and pondering what life must have been like for the lepers who once lived there.

Fantome Pass off Fantome Island's NW tip is reputedly one of the best snorkelling spots and we got our gear ready and set out in the dinghy with high expectations. Unfortunately, our timing was off – the tide was racing out – and we decided not to battle it. Next time.

Short of supplies, we headed for the aboriginal community in Casement Bay on Great Palm Island, which is another excellent trade-wind anchorage. Food at the supermarket is reasonably priced and there is also a small bottleshop and a petrol station that sells fishing gear. Numerous notices on the public noticeboard indicated an active community life.

We called in for a quick dip at Onion Bay on the southern side of the island and then headed south out of the Palm Group to overnight at Rattlesnake and Herald islands. These two islands are a convenient stopover only 17nm NW of Townsville.

The men were still in table-on-beach mode and we capped off our last full day with another fun beach barbecue on the spit off the western tip of Herald, a light-weather anchorage. Magnetism was easy to keep an eye on as we ate: her mast was silhouetted against the setting sun.

On the way home the next morning we stopped off at Florence Bay on the eastern side of Magnetic Island. This is a picturesque spot with a nice beach. Alex couldn't resist a last snorkel here while the rest of us relaxed. He exclaimed that the reef here was among



the best he'd seen, with nice bommies and many fish. "Come on in – it's wonderful," he cajoled.

It was 3pm when Magnetism and her crew of four weary adventurers arrived back at the Breakwater Marina. Spirits were high that we'd had such a great time but low that it was over. Steve was still as irrepressible as ever: "Hey, guys," he said with a grin, motioning to the still-pristine evening slacks he carried on a hanger. "I wonder how much Orpheus Island Resort would charge us for a few days? The receptionist there knows me now!"

** CH would like to acknowledge and thank Stewart and Ann Coates of MIRAY for their help with this story.*



Little Pioneer Bay is one of the best trade-wind anchorages in the Palms and you can spot cruising yachts from all over the world there. This yacht was from Hawaii.

BAREBOATING WITH MIRAY

Magnetic Palm Island Rent-A-Yacht has an office in the Townsville Breakwater Marina. Boats can be picked up there, or from Horseshoe Bay on Magnetic Island. A ferry runs regularly from Townsville to Magnetic Island.

As of November, the fleet comprised two Beneteau Oceanis 430s and a Beneteau Oceanis 320, with more yachts expected early this year. The existing yachts are not new but well maintained and comfortable. The 430s are set up for eight and have four private double cabins and two heads.

Chartering rates are very reasonable – \$490 a day for a 430 high season and \$430 low season. Sail-training and skippered boats are available.

For more information phone MIRAY on (07) 4778 5644, email info@miray.com.au, website www.miray.com.au