

Storms at Sea

Malua's passages 2004 – 2023

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Preface

I've been sailing or at sea for more than 60 years, traversing waters all around the world. In the early days, I was on diving or rescue vessels, usually with a crew, while sailing it was with one crew. However, on Malua, I've sailed more miles alone than with a single crew member. Sailing and seamanship are in my blood.

When people ask about my travels, they focus on two aspects: the best place I've visited and the bad weather and storms I've encountered. Without doubt, the atolls of the Marquesas top my list, with Tasmania's west coast coming in second. Regarding bad weather, I've experienced many rough periods, but I've selected a few noteworthy storms to recount here.

These extracts from my journal, posts, and websites detail what I did and how I found myself in these situations. The lessons learned are simple: never sail to a schedule or timetable. Wait for a good weather window, then go. On long passages, you can always adjust course and destination to come through safely. Lastly,

know your boat, its equipment, and how to use it.

If you've prepared well and have faith in your vessel, you can weather whatever Mother Nature throws at you while on passage.

I draw all these strands together on some final thoughts regarding preparing for storms and how it has shaped my outlook. Enjoy the read.

Chapter 1 Tasman Crossing 2004

Introduction

I had recently commissioned Malua after fitting her out in Canberra. We had undertaken a short cruise to Tasmania with a few friends with Nicola, Iain and Denny joining me for a lovely cruise through the D'Entrecasteaux Channel, Bruny island and along the west coast.

On returning to home at Batemans Bay and I was asked, where will you cruise to for the Christmas holidays. The obvious answer was New Zealand. The plan was to leave in December, stay a month or two then sail back to OZ and continue my job.

It turned out that crossing the Tasman Sea, either eastbound or westbound, is no easy task. We made it to New Zealand, but I took the scenic route home, cruising through the Pacific Islands of Tonga, Fiji, and Vanuatu before returning to Australia almost a year later.

Here is the story of our first ocean crossing in Malua and how we fared.

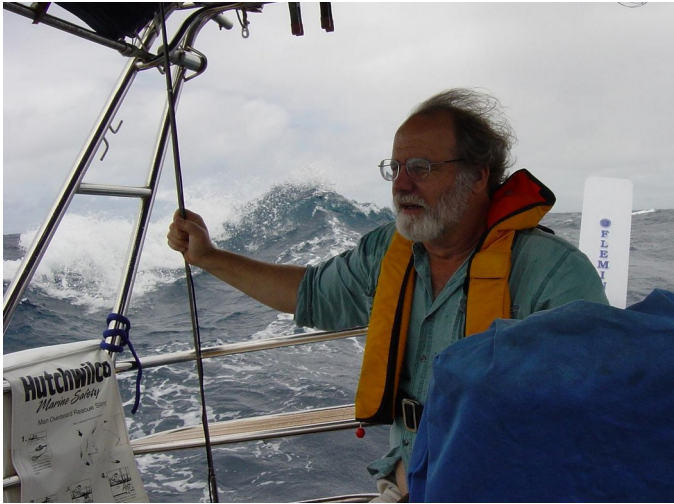
The Storm

The crossing of the Tasman Sea was expected to be well-timed with calm seas. For the previous week or two, a high-pressure system had dominated the area. However, on the night before we left, a deep, intense low formed off Brisbane. This caused south-easterly winds to blow, whipping up the sea. All forecasts indicated that the low would dissipate, so we set off across the Tasman.

The first night, the wind was on the nose, forcing us to sail north-northeast into a rising wind and increasing seas. The next day, contrary to expectations, the wind didn't drop but increased another 5 knots to 25 knots. It was as if the bar had been raised. At this stage, we had three reefs in the main, no genoa, and only the smallest slab staysail.

The boat was travelling at 6 knots with waves coming over the bow quarter. Our Fleming wind-vane, a self-steering device, was working well, keeping the boat on course almost on the rhumb line—the most direct route—to New Zealand. The wind continued to blow between 30 and 40 knots throughout the first and second night, with big seas washing over the boat.

Malua handled it well as we crested each swell and then moved diagonally down into the trough.



Because we were beating into the wind and huge Southern Ocean swells, it wasn't a great idea to be outside. We all stayed below, with only occasional peeps outside to check if the sails were holding up. Our concern for other traffic was low due to our course being well outside the shipping lanes and the state of the weather. The two new crew members, still finding their sea legs, didn't come out of the aft cabin, which left the rest of us to stand watch.

On the third night, the batteries showed low voltage, so I had to start the main engine to charge them. Everyone was confined to their bunks as we changed course to take the swell on our beam. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, and it was very stuffy down below.

The storm continued for four days, with the highest wind recorded at 47 knots. The following day, the wind dropped, and we enjoyed some good sailing off the wind under overcast skies.



We got the fishing rod out and did some very successful fishing. For the next three days, we didn't see the sun, let alone the horizon, because we were shrouded in thick fog. It was a matter of motoring and watching the radar.



The fog didn't lift until we were motoring into Opuia, New Zealand, to clear customs.

The next Chapter is about a Tropical Storm Malua went through in the Atlantic coast of the USA.

Chapter 2 Tropical Storm Andrea 2013

Introduction

I had crossed the Atlantic on a dream run from the Canaries southward and sailed through the Caribbean towards Cuba. Denny joined me for Christmas to cruise some of the islands. After she flew home, I continued sailing west.

Following a great time in Cuba, I left Hemingway Marina with another cruiser, Balvenie, to sail to Florida. It was quite a crossing with very strong winds, but the Gulf Stream pushed us north. The nights were dark and rainy at times. I had connection problems with the autopilot and had to hand steer for hours. In the end I hove-to and slept for 90 minutes. I finally made it to West Palm Beach, where I and four others cleared into the USA.

From there, I headed north via the Intracoastal Waterway to Norfolk and then out into the expansive waters of Chesapeake Bay, including Annapolis and Baltimore. I traversed the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal going east and sailed south towards the open Atlantic. This required navigating the many sandbanks in this

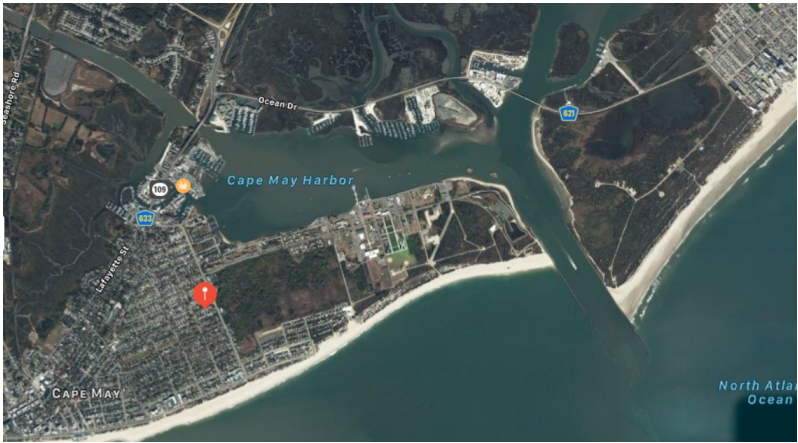
gulf, then rounding Cape May before I could turn north towards New York City.

The Storm

It was June, five days into the hurricane season, so I had to watch out for hurricanes forming in the Gulf and moving north. This wasn't what I'd planned for, and I found myself caught right in the path of one coming north along the coast I was sailing. While not the worst storm the USA had experienced, such as Andrew, it still packed quite a punch.

Here is how I rode out that storm.

I needed rest after two days of steaming through the canal and south down the Delaware Bay with all its sand shoals. I navigated through the narrow entrance into what's called a harbour, though it's more like an enclosed river mouth with a bay stretching southeast to the town.



I dropped anchor inside the bay and fell asleep. Upon checking the weather forecast, I discovered I was right in the path of an Atlantic hurricane forming south and travelling north up the coast.

I pulled up the anchor to seek out a marina for shelter but only found one with no space but at least water and diesel. I filled all tanks to capacity and left to re-anchor, having learned that the shoreline, both sea and land, had quite shallow water.

This location was ideal for riding out any storm. The bay wasn't wide or long, so big waves wouldn't form, and the narrow, protected

entrance would prevent Atlantic storm swells from rolling in.

I dropped anchor with ample room aft and let out 75 m of my 10 mm chain. I checked that the rest would flow easily and ensured the join to the nylon rode was secure and free-flowing.

There was a hive of activity at the Coast Guard Training Centre abeam of where I'd anchored. Recruits stowed everything movable and doubled the lines on the few vessels in their dock. With all canvas well secured along with everything on my deck, I prepared a good meal and settled into bed, setting the alarm for midnight when the Tropical Storm was due to arrive.



Here's an extract from Wikipedia regarding this storm:

"The first tropical cyclone and named storm of the annual hurricane season, Andrea originated from an area of low pressure in the eastern Gulf of Mexico on June 5. Despite strong wind shear and an abundance of dry air, the storm strengthened while initially heading north-northeastward. Later on June 5, it re-curved northeastward and approached the Big Bend region of Florida. Andrea intensified and peaked as a strong tropical storm with winds at 65 mph (56 knots) on June 6. A few hours later, the storm weakened slightly and made landfall near Steinhatchee, Florida later that day. It began losing tropical characteristics while tracking across Florida and Georgia. Andrea transitioned into an extra-tropical cyclone and moved along the East Coast of the United States."



Yes, I was right in its path as it moved north, but I was well prepared. I got a few hours' sleep, but just before midnight, the wind started from the southeast. With ample room astern, I undid the snubber and let out all 100 m of chain from the locker. The nylon took the strain around the capstan.

The wind rose steadily. Thankfully, there was a short fetch, so the waves were quite small. Then came the rain and more wind. I let out another 20 m of nylon and started the engine, putting it in gear at idle to take strain off the anchor as I attempted to stay in one spot.

At the height of the wind, I had the engine in full ahead with the anchor straining to keep Malua in position. From the cockpit, I watched the

anchor alarm as we weaved back and forth with winds in the high 40 knots. The rain and noise were disconcerting, not that I had anyone to talk to. All vessels except one appeared to be holding their positions. A large yacht started to drag towards the seashore beach but thankfully stopped just short, its anchor presumably catching on something.

Around 4:00 am, the winds veered to the opposite direction (northeast), signalling time to up anchor and re-anchor with more room off my stern. This was challenging, as I had to gauge how the anchor chain was coming in from the cockpit while pressing the up-anchor button and steaming forward against the waves and wind. I'm sure I put strain on the windlass, but eventually, the anchor appeared over the bow. I steamed into the wind to drop it in a good position with sea room off my stern, letting out 75 m of chain again. The anchor set on the first attempt, and I was once more stationary with the Vesper Marine anchor watch set.

From about 5:00 am until dawn, with rain continuing all this time, I alternated between sitting in the cockpit with the engine running and watching the anchor alarm below deck. As light

broke, the rain and wind eased, allowing me to relax and have breakfast.



I wasn't going anywhere for a few days until the open ocean calmed down, so I went ashore and walked around. It's amazing how quickly one forgets the challenges of cruising.

The next stage was to enter the Hudson River and the Big Apple.

Was that a magical moment on Malua?

I then cruised north to New York, up to Rhode Island then south again to The Chesapeake where Malua was on the hard for the winter. I returned to sail south through the Panama canal and cross the Pacific to home in Australia. The pacific storm is in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Pacific Storm 2014

Introduction

Crossing the Pacific on the way home after five years in the Mediterranean and two years in the Caribbean and USA, I was expecting an easy run.

I had a flat sea almost all the way from Cape Hatteras to Cuba and then an easy passage through the Panama Canal and on to the Galápagos. The time there was enjoyable, with some land travel. The 19-day sail from the Galápagos to the Marquesas Islands, with winds between 12 to 18 knots, was every single-handed sailor's dream cruise. Warm, moderate winds always behind the beam.

French Polynesia is the world's best cruising ground, with protected atolls, clear water, and wonderful drift dives through the channels. Eventually, I had to leave this paradise from Bora Bora and head on to Tonga to reach home.

Not only did I leave in a rush due to bureaucratic pressures, but I also left knowing I was heading into unsettled weather as I moved from the calm areas around the equator towards

the tropical latitudes and the Southern Ocean further south.

What happened on this leg wasn't in the plan, and the impact and consequences have had lasting maintenance repercussions that I didn't uncover at the time. Here's the story of this storm.

The Storm

Malua left French Polynesia after some difficulty with my crew member who did not want to leave Bora Bora. I left her in the hands of the local Gendarme and set sail out into a very unsettled weather system. I had no option but to leave, so off I went. After two days, the main engine started to give problems. It was either water in the fuel or the fuel was contaminated. The end result was I could run the engine to charge the batteries but not move the boat forward. Not a big deal in a sailing boat; however, there was no wind, so I just sat and waited.



Be careful what you wish for.

On the third day out, at dusk, the wind started to rise. By midnight, I watched as the wind rose from right astern, first 20 knots - OK, put in one reef; then 25 - OK, put in the second reef and furl the genoa; then 35 - well, it can't go much higher. The boat was now doing 8 to 10 knots downwind.



This is where single-hander lethargy sets in. You do nothing either because you're tired or you think it will get better. When the wind was at 40 knots, I decided to take the third reef in but did not move from my captain's chair. It was then the wind rose to 45 and then 47 knots and BANG - the sail tore between the second and third reef points. Now there was no option but to take the torn sail down.

I stepped up into the cockpit and started to move forward when a large wave washed all over the port side of the boat. Time to clip onto the lifelines, turn all the outside lights on, and

secure the sail. Not a difficult job because Malua was still running before the wind and waves. The autopilot was handling the situation well.

When the sail was secure, I only had a small furled staysail out, and Malua was still doing 5 to 6 knots along the rhumb line to Tonga - 6 days away.

I slept well the rest of the night, but by morning, the seas from east of New Zealand had built to a massive 5 to 6 meters. Thankfully, they were quite ordered and pushing me in the right direction.

That afternoon, while I was in the captain's chair at the nav station, the boat was slammed over to the starboard side by a huge wave. The dorade vent over the stove started to flood water, and I found myself on my side underneath a waterfall of seawater coming through the closed companionway hatch. Before I realised what had happened, Malua had righted herself, and I was drenched through.

There was water everywhere with about 2 inches over the floor.

I set about getting rid of the water by sweeping it into the bilge. Days later, I was to find the batteries swimming in a sea of water in their

purpose-built battery compartment. I would find water everywhere in the aft section of Malua. My quarter berth was wet, as were things on the chart table. The final water damage would be revealed days later.



I then realised that there was something flapping in the cockpit. I opened the companionway and looked out to find all the canvas from the bimini and weather cloths ripped to pieces. The two fenders secured at the stern had gone. The stern anchor tied to the lifeline was over the side, attached to the boat at the end of the anchor chain. The life recovery ring was trailing astern on its line. All the sheets

and lines kept in the cockpit and under the hard dodger were somewhere else. It was a mess.

Luckily it was light, so I set about retrieving the things trailing overboard and securing the other lines in their correct place.

I was to find out later that the engine fan vent located in the cockpit had been flooded along with the large cockpit locker containing one outboard engine. The other on the rail had had a good seawater submersion.

What could I do? Just run before the wind with only the small furled staysail to give me direction and drive. Five days later, I was off the northern tip of Tonga, hoping for a tow into the harbour by one of my friends. I contacted them on the HF radio, but they could not or would not give me a tow into the narrow entrance to the port of Neiafu on the northernmost island of Tonga. You soon find out who your friends really are.



I organised a commercial tow into the harbour, cleared in, and took a mooring buoy in Neiafu harbour. I had been here before in 2004. Relieved that I had made it to a place where I



could get the engine fixed and repair the sail. The next chapter occurred a few years later. *No magical moment on Malua here.*

Chapter 4 Bass Strait 2017

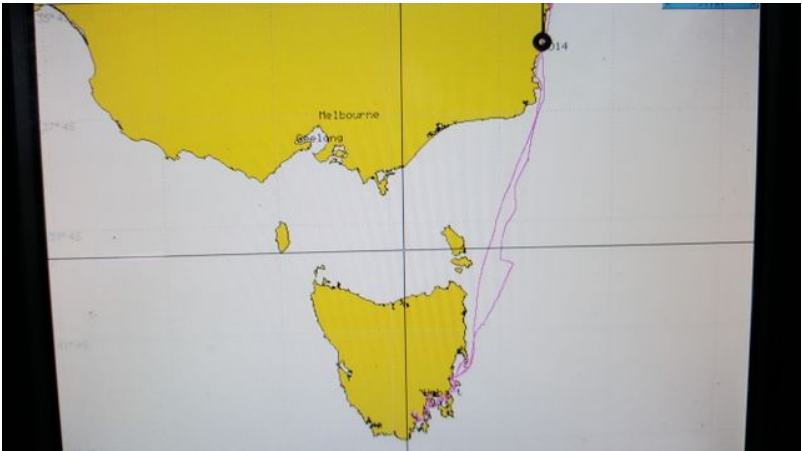
Introduction

This event came out of the blue on what should have been a routine sail south to Tasmania. As many crews on the annual Sydney to Hobart yacht race know, crossing Bass Strait is no walk in the park if the sea turns nasty. I had the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) forecast and also took advice from another prediction system – my mistake.

Here's my story of being hit by an unexpected cold front coming north from the Southern Ocean and meeting the easterly flowing waters of Bass Strait.

The Storm

I know not to leave port on a bad forecast, and being in Bermagui meant I was safe and sound until the forecast looked good. Now the lesson to learn is which forecast to rely on. I usually check two or three. The BOM model and the USA model are the ones I consult. On this occasion, I followed the BOM model but relied on the Predictwind app on my phone. It showed three days of northerly wind then a swing to the west. All good. The westerly would come off the land and make the sail down the Tassie coast nice and flat.



I left Bermagui at noon and set sail for Bass Strait down the coast southwards. The vessel C-Star left soon after me. The wind was from behind and the current was with me, so I made good time down the coast. I passed Eden late that afternoon and set off across the strait. I had my first meal on passage and settled down for the night, knowing there might be ships. It was a quiet night with no real traffic. The following morning, I tried to call C-Star on VHF as arranged but only got a short, disjointed message. I heard Painsville calling C-Star on VHF, so I spoke with them on HF and said they were behind me and not lost, as a result of Marine Rescue initiated search. They had not checked in with Lakes Entrance, miles out of their VHF range.



At that stage, I had done just over 160 nm in 24 hours, a good run. The wind was over 25 knots and increasing, so I put in the second reef. Then it hit - a front from the South. Totally unexpected and with winds more than 40 knots. I dropped the main and furled the genoa. I raised the main with the 3rd reef in and started to beat into the wind as the sun set, but the wind continued to increase. My log notes indicated it reached 45 knots at 4:00 am. Not a great start and so unexpected, but Malua was going well into a rather calm sea. Then as I watched, looking forward with my spreader lights and my forward-facing spotlight illuminating the deck and sea, the wind rose in a series of gusts well over 45 knots.

The waves were now building and Malua was moving forward nicely. Malua started to rise over a wave and then it hit. A big one over the starboard bow. White water filled the staysail and bang - the stay parted at the head, and I watched, as they say, in slow motion, as the sail and furler went over the port side into the water.

Spring into action. Let go the main halyard and drop the sail, but it jammed before totally furling. It stuck flapping in the now 45-knot wind. I finally pulled it down and moved forward to try and get the staysail on board. It was at this time attached at its head to the halyard up the mast and the base was secure. The sheet was holding it onboard, but a lot of the sail and rigging was in the water. Then the base with the furler drum came loose and went over the side.

I was able to secure a line to it and, via a block and the winch, pull it over the lifelines and up to the bow anchor area. It was secured, but the head was over the port side supported by the halyard. If I let that go, it was dangerous, so I



passed a line around the sail and pulled it alongside the boat but up in the air just above the furiously spinning wind generator. Stop, think. OK, stop the wind generator by using the electric brake and tie off the blades. I completed that in a few precarious minutes and set about recovering the head of the foresail. I slowly loosened the halyard and lowered the bent and twisted Profurl furler alongside the boat. All this time I was wallowing in the ever-increasing waves and wind. Finally, the sail and furler were secure along the port side of Malua, and I could now focus on sailing the boat with the sails I had left.

I looked at the wind gauge and found the wind was still in the 45 or more range. I was not going anywhere this evening. I unfurled a bit of the genoa, pulled hard on the sheets, and turned the wheel into the wind and tied it off. Malua was now heaved to or lying a-hull. It doesn't matter what you call it, but Malua was sitting nicely in the water. There were very few large waves and none like the Tonga storm from the Southern Ocean. I took a shower, changed into some dry clothes, and settled down to wait for dawn.

I was 50 nm from Flinders Island and moving in a south-eastern direction at about 2 knots with very few waves disturbing me. I climbed into bed and set the alarm for 27 minutes and slept. When I woke, I looked out the portlight adjacent to my bunk to check the waves, wind, and weather – nothing had changed. The wind was still at 35 knots or more. Back to sleep. So it went until the sun rose. Wind still at more than 35 knots, but the warmth of the sun was a good sign. At about noon, almost 18 hours after the staysail came down, I started the engine and turned south for Hobart. The sea had become more confused, and we made only slow progress.

Then the radio went off: "All ships, all ships, etc. Has anyone seen C-Star?" I again communicated with Painsville, this time on HF, and told them about the storm last night and that I was OK heading to Triabunna and would try calling C-Star on VHF. No luck.

I subsequently heard they had telephoned Marine Rescue with their sat phone to say they were returning to Eden. This message had not been passed to Canberra. I never check into Marine Rescue for this reason. They will start a search just because someone travelling along

the coast has not been able to update their plans. Thankfully, Canberra knows better and uses all available resources to contact vessels in the area to assist.



The wind dropped as suddenly as it rose, and I continued to motor down the coast for the rest of that day and through the night. At 5:00 am the following morning, I switched from the forward diesel fuel tank to the aft tank. As I switched, I watched the vacuum gauge go from yellow (good) to red, and the engine started to splutter as it could not get any fuel through the line. I could see a dirty black mass in the fuel filter. A quick switch of filters to the alternate and a switch of tanks back to the forward tank, and I was off again.

Now I had a problem. No wind and little fuel in the forward tank, and about 80 nm to any destination. I always keep 40 litres in two containers in the aft cockpit locker. I lifted the first, full, so it went into the forward tank. I located the second, but it was empty. What had gone wrong?

The only feasible solution was to get fuel from the aft tank, but it would not come through the block lines. So I used the outlet at the base of the tank to draw off fuel. I drained some fuel into a container, but it was full of black fungus from the diesel algae. Black sludge like jelly. I tried again and again till finally, it started to run reasonably clear. OK, I had clean fuel in a small container but blocked lines. What to do next? How could I filter it? The only thing I could think of was through a small funnel with a coffee filter placed in it. It was a slow process, drop by drop. It required many refills to get the clean fuel in the lower container. Finally, I had enough extra fuel – about 5 litres to make it to Triabunna if the wind did not come up.



Still no wind as I rounded the southern arm of the Freycinet Park. The sun was starting to set, and I had not reached Prosser Bay near Orford. But no worries, there is a full moon tonight, and I will be able to see the land which I know from previous cruises. I motored at the optimum speed to save fuel as it got dark. The moon was in the east just above the mountains as I passed northeast of Maria Island and toward the bay. Then the moon disappeared behind the mountains, and I was left in total darkness.

The light of Orford was my only guide along with the chartplotter and radar. I eased into the bay and dropped the anchor. I pulled back to see that it was set well and turned off the engine. Silence. Food, shower and sleep.

I woke after a great night's sleep to find I was right in the middle of the bay, a long way from the shore.

I cleaned up the mess down below and followed another yacht up the channel of Spring Bay and into Triabunna. I was right out of fuel as I tied up alongside and tried to arrange a tanker to fill Malua's tanks.



No magic moment on Malua

The next Chapter just highlights the importance of a weather forecast.

Chapter 5 Coffs Storm to New Caledonia 2018

Introduction

While cruising, particularly around the world, one studies weather systems and becomes quite knowledgeable about their movement and intensity.

On Australia's east coast, the systems are highs that develop over the centre of the continent and move east, or lows that spin off the Southern Ocean and move north up the coast before heading eastwards towards New Zealand. These lows can dissipate as they move or, in some cases, deepen and become East Coast Lows with intense weather systems around them. They're dangerous because of the gradient of the isobars (i.e., the closer they are together, the stronger the wind), and the lower the pressure at the centre, the stronger the wind towards that centre.

Another factor is wind direction. On the west side of the low (for those in the Northern Hemisphere, our lows turn clockwise), the wind blows westward and then towards the north. We all know (from the 2003 film, "Finding Nemo")

about the large and strong East Australian Current that originates in the Coral Sea as warm water, hits the coast at 15 degrees S, then flows south with its fastest speed up to 5 knots and strongest point off Cape Byron, NSW, before widening out near Tasmania.

When the southward-flowing current meets an East Coast Low moving north, with wind compressed between the centre low and the coast at speeds from 10 to 50 knots, the open sea can get ugly. The wind-driven swell and resultant waves collide with the warm water flowing south and the two forces of nature collide. The waves become steep, their tops tumbling down into the troughs. The backs of the waves are also steep, and many a Hobart-destined yacht has bashed through them to find their boat and gear weren't up to this rollercoaster ride.

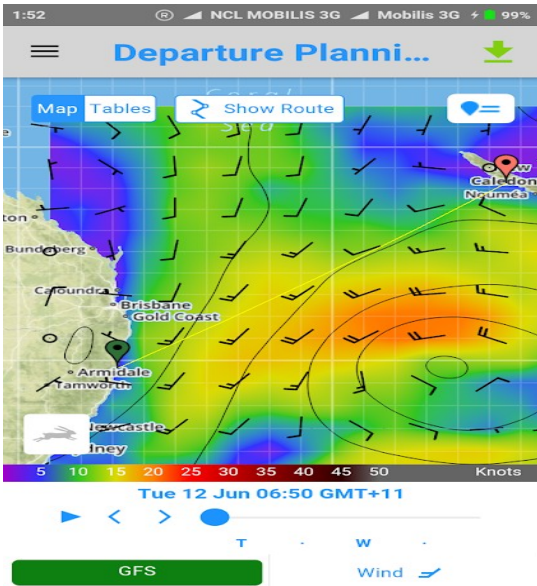
A yacht of Malua's size must be very careful when running before these winds in steep seas. Go too fast, and you may speed down the face into the swell ahead and bury your boat in water. Loose your direction, and you may turn side-on to the swell and waves. Alternatively, if you travel slower than the swell, you may be

overcome by breaking waves and swamped by a big one.

My strategy is to run before the wind at an angle that keeps me moving diagonally to the waves at a speed that I and the autopilot can control.

When I set off from Coffs Harbour to cross the Tasman to New Caledonia – a 7-day passage – I had assumed the low would continue its track towards New Zealand, and I would get favourable winds all the way to my destination. The low stalled and didn't move for days, and I sailed right into the edge of the East Coast Low. Here's what happened.

The Storm



Should I go today or check in after clearing customs at Coffs Harbour? That was the question I now faced. I had been watching the low off the coast for a few days, and it looked as if the low was moving as expected towards NZ, so I decided to go. As I nosed out of the protection of the harbour, I realised that what looked like smooth water was not.

Now the wind was blowing from the south and the current was running southwards – in the opposite direction, so the ocean swell started to get steeper and steeper while the wave tops were being blown off. I had put in one reef

early, so when the wind reached 25 knots, the second reef went in, only for a very short time before I had to put the third reef in. I furled the genoa to almost nothing, but it was out on the spinnaker pole because I was now running diagonally down the face of the waves – the most prudent course in steep swells.



The wind instruments stopped working at 54 knots, but all was well on board.

Suddenly, the bilge alarm went off as I was at the wheel guiding Malua down the waves, not trusting the new autopilot. Once, then a second time the shriek of the alarm sounded, and then continuously with a scream that would wake the

dead. What was going on? Was there a hole in Malua, maybe a thru-hull had come adrift?

Down below, I lifted the bilge hatch to taste the water, but there was no need – the flow of water from the stern area was more than a breached tank would supply.

This was serious.

Maybe the shaft gland had come loose? I opened the door into the engine compartment. The shaft was OK, but the water flowing from the rudder area was a stream. Oh no! Not the rudder.

With the torch in my mouth, I climbed into the engine room to look for the source, and there it was running like Victoria Falls from the port lazarette base – cascades of salt water – right over the old autopilot. What? Why that much water? Back outside, I looked at the water flowing over the deck and lazarette, but that couldn't cause that amount of water to enter the vessel, so what was it? As soon as I opened the lazarette hatch, I understood the situation. The compartment was almost full of water with containers floating on the surface. I removed a few, and there, right in front of me, as one of the larger waves broke and tumbled down

towards the stern of Malua, the white water came over the swim platform and washed halfway up the stern before draining away. Why into the locker? The locker contained the two gas bottles. A safety hole permits excess gas to drain out onto the swim platform on the stern.

The gas drain hole is more than 20cm round, so a wave that floods the swim platform can flow inwards to the locker. Now under normal circumstances, the odd wave over the stern causes no harm or flooding of the gas locker, but with the steep swell and the rolling waves from their tops down the face and into Malua, well, that was a different matter.

After repeated waves over the stern, the rate of in-flow was greater than the out-flow from the exit hole, and the locker started to fill. Its only exit was down a gap in the floor created when I removed the autopilot to fix it. I hadn't had the opportunity to fibreglass the interior, and the seawater drained into the interior of Malua, setting off the bilge alarm.

I went down below to the emergency stores for a wooden plug and hammer and back to face the oncoming waves. I hung over the stern to put in the wooden plug. A good tap/strike with the

hammer, and it would stay in place till I reached land. After a few minutes, the bilge alarm stopped, and all stations returned to normal storm tactics.

At that point, I took a deep breath and went below, put the kettle on for some hot tea, and settled into my captain's chair as I watched the wind go up and down to a high of 40 knots and an average of just a little over 30 knots. Malua, as always, handled the conditions well; the new autopilot had a few bad calls, but what can you expect, being so inexperienced?



It was now dark, but I could still see the white waves behind me as we raced forward down some of the steepest seas I have ever seen. Not

for a moment did I consider further reducing sail or changing course... we were in a groove.

The day dawned with no sleep but an uneventful night and many miles under the keel. I had noticed that the wind was dropping, but then again, it may have been that it was daylight, and that made the conditions look a bit better. After a few more hours of steadily declining seas and wind, we were back on track for a smooth passage to New Caledonia.

I have been in a few storms in my time, from a very bad one off Cape Point in Cape Town to the knockdown a few days out from Tonga and one on passage to New Zealand, but this was the most severe with the steepest waves, though not the strongest winds. Thankfully, it lasted just over 12 hours, which is quite bearable considering.



The balance of the trip was very easy, with the sun coming out and the wind dropping on some occasions, which required I start the engine. I was able to time my arrival for dawn to go through the pass and motor towards Noumea city and marina. I made the mistake of telling the marina I was not going to stay with them, so I was relegated to the back of the line for clearance and, in fact, had to be boarded by Bio-security at the public wharf in the SW - not convenient. I did stop for fuel at the end of the jetty and some bread, then off to the Orphelinat Bay anchorage to get the tender ready to do the

rounds to clear in. A simple process requiring a few km on my folding bike.

Restock and ready for Denny to fly in for a few weeks cruising these delightful islands.

COVID interrupted my cruising plans and Malua did not get the attention all yachts deserve during that period. However when all was shipshape and it got cold in the winter I sailed north to warmer weather. The trip home had some surprises in store.

Chapter 6 South East Coast of Australia – 2023

Introduction

I started sailing along Australia's south-east coast last century (not that long ago) and have built up great local knowledge of both the weather systems and the best routes north and south along this coast.

When I headed south from the Whitsundays returning home, I had the bit between my teeth and, in true Malua style – after the Tasmanian racehorse of the 1880s – I sprinted for the finish. The passage south to Sydney from the Gold Coast was fast, with a top speed over ground (SOG) of 9.5 knots, so I was aiming to top that speed with a little help from the East Australian Current.

Going north, the best course is to hug the coast and catch the counter currents, but sailing south, the idea is to get into the current and ride the flow south. The wind plays a part, of course, so setting off with the wind in the north is a prerequisite, but the strength depends on the weather systems.

If there's a high-pressure system, you're safe, but if there are any low-pressure cold fronts down south and the wind may turn, you could be holed up in a bay for a few days. The lower the pressure of the front, the stronger the wind.

I had studied the winds for a few weeks while sailing south and while in Sydney, so when I looked at the 7-day forecast, I knew I had to leave the next day because the wind direction could change. The lesson here is don't only look at the big picture, but drill down to the details all along the passage because there may be a smoother patch than you had noticed.

The Final Sprint Home

19 November, 2023

This sprint to the finish down the Australian coast to Bermagui I have sailed more than 25 times, so I knew my way home, but did I know the weather and what was waiting on the route?

The weather forecast showed that a good NE wind would be blowing on the Saturday and reach 25 to 30 knots during the nights, but it was with me and the current was also in my favour. The top speed on this cruise was 9.5 knots over the ground set off Port Stephens in

the last leg, and I knew I would easily do this on this leg.

Now this leg is 160 nm at about 6 knots, which would take a day and a half at most. I moved from the Sydney Fish Market and sailed over to Middle Harbour and picked up a mooring right along the shoreline. The local yacht club was having a sponsors race, so it was filled with yachts and very smart crew not sitting on the rail but holding a glass of the local bubble stuff or some real champagne.

I had prepared a few nights' meals and tucked into one as the sun set. Again, I set the alarm for before dawn, and when it went off, I was off and running with one reef in the main and a poled-out genoa.



I soon cleared the heads and set a course past Port Botany and directly to the Sir John Banks shallows to the north of Jervis Bay. Now my normal course going north is inside the banks, and under normal conditions, I would go 5 nm out to sea from the banks to get round the very rough conditions associated with the great East Australian current hitting the shallow banks which come up from 120 m to less than 12 meters. You can imagine the turbulence as this stream of water flowing from 2 to 4 knots hits the shallow water of rocks.

I have passed this point many times before and in many wind conditions, but this time was a different experience. The wind had increased and the waves built, while not ocean swell size,

were quite big but nothing Malua's autopilot couldn't handle. The confused seas were something else to behold. They seemed to come from every direction, breaking over the bow, stern, and even jumping on board from the port side. A tug steaming north called on the radio a similar company tug steaming south to have a chat, then asked why he was so close to the banks. They recommended he should turn more out to sea. I was tracking him on the AIS all the way down the coast, and immediately after the communication, he turned off my stern and headed out to sea for calmer waters. I stayed my course.

I was committed, so I continued knowing Malua was on a roll, and I had improved the top speed record when I reached 10.8 knots SOG.



Decisions again. Should I continue and reach Bermagui during the night? It was now 5:30 pm, so I would arrive at dawn or even pre-dawn, and I would have to wait till the sun was up to enter the Bermagui river mouth with a raging NE wind and swell.

I, as always, took the prudent decision and jibed at the entrance to Jervis Bay in the lee of Point Perpendicular. While in flat water, I pulled the main down and furled the poled-out genoa. Then steamed into 25 knots of wind to the northern shore of the bay at Long Beach to take a break. I arrived after dark to find a catamaran with all lights on and a much smaller sailing vessel anchored near the shore. I have thrown the pick in this area before, so I knew that one

had to drag the anchor in because it often got fouled on sea grass. With the strong wind and a depth of 10 meters, I let out the normal 40 meters and started to pull back on the anchor, but it kept coming. So I hauled in the anchor and immediately noticed the SQR had speared a cockle shell right at the tip which was still attached. That was the reason it wouldn't hold. I moved up to the bow with the hammer to release the shell and start again. Down went the chain and I pulled back. The SQR and 50 m of chain held, and I set the anchor alarm and proceeded to get Malua ready for the next leg of the journey.

Sleep and a good night's rest in calmer waters. Alarm went off at dawn – no point in an early start as I only had about 80 nm to run to Bermagui. I checked the latest weather forecast at BOM which indicated that the wind would reach 35 knots along the Batemans and Eden coast. The temptation was to wait and see what the next day would bring. On this occasion, prudence did not make a planning decision, but when I set sail, I did put two reefs in the main and furled the genoa on a pole well before I exited the calm but windy Jervis Bay.

I flew out of the Bay and headed for a straight line for Montague, knowing I would be about 10 nm offshore and well in the southern flowing current and the ocean swells that accompanied two days of strong wind. Little did I know what the ocean had in store for me off Batemans Bay and further south.

I had kept the boom on the starboard side as the wind was from the NE, but as I sailed further south, the distance from the coast got more and more as I tried not to have to jibe in the current conditions. Malua was handling the swell and wind well, although it was obvious that I had too much sail up and I was about to do a jibe.



These are calmer conditions – see preventer

I prepared to jibe by undoing the preventer and moving it to the port side, then started to pull the main in via the electric sheet winch. At the critical point, I turned the autopilot to turn to starboard, and the wind got behind the sail and it came over – not with the bang I expected but with a gentle flop. Out went the sheet, I corrected the course and connected the preventer, and we were off and running again.

By this time, the waves had built to 4 or 5 meters. I know it's difficult to estimate the height of the sea as one faces down a water slope with the horizon almost completely covered in spray, but on this occasion, I knew the sea was big as a crest rolled down the hill and right into Malua's cockpit. No water down below (washboards in) but it wet my granny seat and filled the cockpit!

The autopilot alarm went off as I sat in the captain's chair and watched the dials and wind speed indicator. On the second occasion, even with two reefs in the main and no sail forward of the mast, I knew we were over-canvassed. What to do with only 40 nm to go to Bermagui? So I stepped into the cockpit and took control of Malua as we surfed down the face of the waves and swell. I have not done this often and had

not realised the effort it takes to keep a long-keeled boat on track with too much sail up.

Malua wanted to round up into the wind as we reached the bottom of the swell, so one has to anticipate what will happen. With all my effort on the large wheel, I leaned on the spokes and kept the bow on course and down the waves. This continued for a while, and then the wind started to ease, and the autopilot took over. We settled down for the final straight to the finish, but there was more to come.

What to do now was the decision to be made. Continue to head for Bermagui and a potentially dangerous bar entrance with seas breaking over the entrance, or slow down and wait for either the wind to drop or sail on to Eden? Now I am a great supporter of technology, but my confidence in NSW Maritime is very, very low, so when I fired up the computer and switched to the NSW Maritime Bar camera web site for Bermagui and saw a small swell with about 17 knots of wind, I thought they must be playing yesterday's video. I stuck my head outside and yes, the wind indicator showed 35 knots of wind and the sea and swell big, SO what was going on? I again checked the Windy app at a more detailed resolution and saw that there was a

patch of calm wind along the coast which I had never seen before. What was going on?

I set a course close for Montague so that I could drop the main in the lee of the island, but as I approached the island, the wind started to drop from 35 knots to 20 knots and then in the 15-knot range. The Maritime bar camera could be right. I phoned a friend. "Can you tell me what the Bermagui bar is like?" Sorry, I am 20 km away. My second lifeline did not answer, so I thought maybe the Windy app was right. Is there a pressure difference along the coast as a system moves north? Take a chance and go for it.

About one mile off the entrance, I turned up wind into 12 knots of wind and a moderate sea and swell and took the main down, furled the genoa and staysail, and put in the washboards again to cross the bar. I have a course which I have used in these situations which takes a curve towards the beach then moves west of the leads and comes in as close to the western break-wall as I feel safe. I adjust my speed to try to time a lull in the swell. I saw my chance and increased the engine revs and held the wheel with both hands as I aimed for my entry course. As I passed the headland, I looked up

and saw a few people standing watching me enter. Peter S was holding his camera. The below photos are thanks to Peter. One of the most dramatic shots of Malua that has been taken.

I entered the harbour, lowered the fenders, and made sure all the prepared docking lines were ready and headed for my berth. A group of friends: Jim, Keith, and Peter were ready to take my lines as Malua nosed into her berth. We were home. The whole trip had been a sailing success with nothing on the boat breaking. A great result. Malua had lived up to the reputation of the great thoroughbred horse from Tasmania.



Some final thoughts on storms at sea next.

Chapter 7 Epilogue

Some Final thoughts about Storms

The first and great lesson from sailing and particularly going through a few storms is about you and how you handle the situation, the decisions and how you reacted. In my case growing up as a single child in a wonderfully supportive environment I have always stood on my own two feet knowing that the worldly experiences I have been through I have come through them OK. Not all the decisions have been right but on reflection I have continually learned how to improve the decision making and how to carry out the process correctly. Sailing alone, it is easy to do this. There is nobody to worry about and the messages get through to me clearly and without misunderstanding. For a crewed yacht the only advice I can give is practice, practice until everyone acts perfectly and in unison.

The next lesson is have faith in your vessel and its equipment. If you can not rely on how it will respond, then you may get a surprise. Remember the boat will last longer in a storm than a human, so pace yourself. Lastly eat well

because you consume massive amounts of energy keeping warm and undertaking the tasks.

So how does this all translate to a single handed sailor or a crewed vessel? Here are some points:

Practice, practice and practice again. From reefing, anchoring or just going to sleep while off watch. Of the latter people laugh at me when I say that but consider your routine, your sleeping posture, your thought patterns and most importantly how long you sleep for. It all matters.

Your vessel characteristics. What I mean about this is, at what wind strength do you take in the first reef, the second and the third. What to do with the sails forward of the mast. When does the sea state change these numbers. And so the list goes. When to take out a reef is as important in pulling one in. Finally in all circumstance do it the correct way as you practised many times before – no short cuts or variations because...

Never sail on a schedule or time table. That came through loud and clear in this chapter. The reason appears obvious that one should not

set off into a poor forecast for any passage. The question is which forecast should you look at? As many as you have consistently used in the past and not just the few days before you leave port. Watch how systems develop and move in your passage area. Then drill down to the lowest level on all attributes.

Lastly adjust and modify your plans as the situation changes. Consider alternate destinations, routes and lastly your watch routines. If a crew is sick or sleepy don't depend on them to keep you safe.

Lastly, use all technology available to get updated forecasts, to communicate to those watching you or even to contact a friend for some local advice or how to fix a piece of equipment. In the cruising situation that is not outside assistance, but don't ask a thoughtless question.



I could not have travelled the 70,000 nm I have cruised alone. My constant companion has been my vessel, Malua. Not every one has the opportunity to choose their preferred design – mine was an Australian, Joe Adams (yes he designed fast boat and then ones like mine faster but also sea kindly) but one has the opportunity to set up the systems to your liking. The interior is a given in a production vessel or a second hand vessel. I purchased the hull and deck form Bluewater Cruising Yachts and over three years fitted the shell out and built the systems to suit my style of single handed sailing. I designed the interior fitout after many years of cruising. If you have the opportunity to

build or redesign your boat take it, if not adjust the vessel to suit your passages and style of sailing.



What of the future and where to next? Well the cruising scene has changed over the 20 odd years I have cruised here in Australia and further afield. In the early days at a beach meetup one knew that the majority of those

attending had at least crossed one or more ocean, had experienced one or more storms and knew their boat inside out. They would come to your help flat or rough weather. Over the years that group has been overtaken by the bucket list brigade who have purchased a vessel as if it was a vehicle – to meet a price point, cabin numbers and coffee machine size. At the beach gathering today one finds they have only crossed one ocean, usually in a fleet and always with some generalised advice on this or that. Once they get to the tick in the box it is off on the next organised expedition. A call for help is answered with – “what is my liability and will it impact my schedule.”

Where is the next cruise destination? Not a easy choice here in Australia at the moment so I may have to wait a while but at 78 the sand in the hour glass is running out.

Having said that the places Malua has visited are many from the high light of Manhattan in New York (anchoring in the Hudson river adjacent to Central Park) to the poverty of Haiti, it is the people and the different cultures we have met that gives all on Malua a better understanding of ourselves and the human race. From the crowded anchorages of the Greek Islands to the

atolls of the Marquesas as the sun rises in the morning it heralds a new day with new opportunities, more places to visit and more cultures to explore.

To end I will use the quotes that remind me of how I started on this cruising journey:

Go to sleep with a dream and wake with a plan.

And then remember:

All men dream, but not equally. ...the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible.

T E Lawrence (my modification)

And lastly:

If you never try you will never know

Fast passages and safe landfalls to all who sail over the horizon.

Here are the websites with more photos and stories

www.malua.blogspot.com

www.malua.com.au