

Halekai – 50' Alden – 5.5' draft – July - August 2010
Subject Area: Bundaberg to Darwin

Dear SSCA,

We sailed to Bundaberg, AU, across the Coral Sea from Espirito Santo, Vanuatu, in September 2009, stopping at the Huan and Chesterfield Reefs en route, both to break up the nearly 1,000 mile trip and to enjoy the shelter of these two beautiful, uninhabited atolls that are located so conveniently along the way. “Bundy” couldn’t be easier to approach, day or night, with prominent leading lights (“looks like an airport runway,” said a cruiser friend). The Bundaberg Port Marina is just a mile up the Burnett River with room to anchor temporarily if you arrive at night, as we did. Two friendly, efficient Customs officials cleared us in at the marina the morning we arrived. Quarantine charges a fee of \$330 AUD, payable in cash or by credit card. There’s an ATM in the marina office. We were allowed to bring in most any food item that was labeled with the country of origin.

The marina is pleasantly first world with a restaurant, yacht broker, chandlery, travel-lift, DIY boatyard and most marine services available. A new bridge now makes it possible to walk or bike to the little nearby town of Burnett Heads with a supermarket, café, post office, etc. “Boaties” are welcome to sign in as temporary members and dine at the Blue Water Club (sport fishing). Convenient buses run to downtown Bundaberg several times a day, and “rent-a-wrecks” cost \$35 AUD /day. There are a couple of indoor malls and large, well-stocked supermarkets in town. There’s also a chandlery at the Midtown Marina, which is convenient to town but not as safe a place to leave a boat in cyclone season.

Internet

Wireless Internet at the marina was expensive with a flaky signal. We bought a wireless data card, aka USB 3G modem, from the Telstra store in Bundaberg and enjoyed relatively fast Internet all over Queensland wherever there was cell phone coverage. We bought the largest data plan available for best value. We also bought a cheap cell phone and prepaid minutes, which were very convenient.

Campervan Rental

After having *Halekai* hauled and moved into the long-term storage area, we took the modern “tilt train” to Brisbane and rented a campervan for three weeks. The major campervan companies are located near airports; info is easily researched and a van booked online or by phone. We toured around the Outback of Queensland, which reminded us of the U.S. Wild West with its dry, dusty climate, small towns, cowboys, rodeos and country music. We bought a camping guide at the camping store in Bundy, which was very helpful; highlights were the national parks to see wildlife and Aboriginal rock drawings. We returned the van to Brisbane and flew nonstop to Los Angeles. Alternatively, there is a local airport in Bundaberg with connecting flights to Brisbane and Sydney.

We were pleased to find *Halekai* as we left her the following May. After launching, provisioning and preparing for the next leg of our journey, we sailed up the east coast of Queensland inside the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), then around Cape York and over the Top End to Darwin, close to 2,000 miles, which took us six weeks moving along at a fairly rapid pace. One can day-trip the whole way or speed things up with a few overnights as we did. There is a well-marked commercial shipping lane that winds through the reef-strewn passage; electronic navigation makes night sailing relatively easy. Even lighthouses had AIS signals. We learned to discount the “strong wind warnings” that were in force for most of our trip, much like small craft advisories that don’t apply to seaworthy vessels, unless, of course, they called for more than 25 knots, which was infrequent. The prevailing SE trades made for exhilarating, mostly downwind sailing with no ocean swell due to the shelter of the GBR.

We found *Cruising the Coral Coast*, 8th Edition by Alan Lucas to be invaluable for this trip. He tends to err to the side of caution, and we found several anchorages to be just fine that he warned could be rolly in well-developed trades. It was chilly when we left “Bundy” in June, it being winter then, so we sailed 48 hours to Scarfell Island to get north a bit faster, then day-tripped to Shaw Island. Both these uninhabited islands had beautiful anchorages, but the water was still a bit chilly for swimming in June.

Then onwards to fjord-like Nara Inlet on Hook Island in the Whitsunday's, where sulfur-crested white cockatoos visited us and other yachts for sundowners. We enjoyed a few nights each at marinas in Townsville and Port Douglas, as anchoring isn't easy there, and did some local sightseeing. Had we had more time we would have either ferried across for a daytrip to Magnetic Island or anchored there as it's reported worth a visit. Tours of the GBR and Raintree National Park are easily arranged from Port Douglas. We heard good reports from friends who anchored in Cairns and Cooktown, but gave them a pass due to time constraints.

We picked up free moorings at a few anchorages in the GBR Marine Park, such as in the Low Islets and Hope Island. We climbed to Cook's Look and hiked over to the Research Center on Lizard Island, a favorite stop on the way north. We learned too late that free tours, including transportation from the anchorage, are offered by the Research Center on Monday mornings: they call on VHF in advance to see if anyone's interested. We snorkeled around the Giant Clam Garden, a protected reef right in the anchorage. Cruisers met ashore for sundowners at a picnic table.

Though we had hoped to snorkel and dive as we made our way north, we found the chilly temps and windy conditions made the water uninviting, and north of Lizard Island the threat of saltwater crocs discouraged us completely. One could dive relatively safely at reefs further offshore, but we didn't want to make the detour, and winter isn't the best time for GBR diving.

Next we continued on to Bathurst Bay and found it not rolly, despite the Lucas warning. At Morris Island, a sand cay five miles offshore, a sailor reported seeing a four-meter crocodile ashore—we learned this right after Burger dove to check out our stuck centerboard! Onward to Portland Roads, Margaret Bay (not rolly), to the Escape River, where we were lucky not to have hit the unmarked reef upriver that another boat did hit. Better would be to anchor at the pearl farm at the mouth of the river. From there we sailed with favorable tide through the narrow Albany Pass and around Cape York to Horn Island, just across the channel from Thursday Island. We took the ferry for \$10 AUD roundtrip across to Thursday Island for some groceries (expensive) and visited the Gab Titui Cultural Center in town, where we watched an interesting movie about the island history of pearl diving. There are special quarantine rules for the Torres Strait islands, so before leaving we paid a visit to the Quarantine Office to avoid a quarantine inspection in Darwin, which would have cost another \$330 AUD.

An alternative to stopping at Horn/Thursday Island is to anchor at Seisia, where there's a small restaurant and a supermarket nearby. There's daily ferry service from Seisia to Thursday Is., an hour-long ride for \$110 AUD roundtrip. We don't think Thursday Island is interesting enough to warrant the cost, though.

The trip across the shallow waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria can be a bit of a washing machine, so it's worth waiting for moderate winds. We stopped overnight at the northernmost of the Wessel islands at Two Island Bay and went for a walk to stretch our legs on the long, sandy beach. We saw croc tracks, but no crocs. In fact, we didn't actually see any crocs on the whole trip till we went on a tourist trip in Darwin, although they are reportedly everywhere. Unfortunately, they prevent swimming for the trip north of the Whitsunday's unless you go diving to reefs well offshore, but the boisterous winter trades made that unappealing.

Darwin

We arrived in Darwin just after the 100+ yachts in the Sail Indonesia Rally departed, so there was plenty of room to anchor in Fannie Bay. We were originally planning to take a marina slip, but after scouting out the situation decided to remain at anchor for our two weeks' visit, despite the long dinghy ride ashore, due to the bay being shallow pretty far out and the large tidal range. It's not only cheaper, but cooler at anchor; the marinas, all located in locks, charge a hefty lock fee and liveaboard fee in addition to berthage. The Darwin Sailing Club is convenient, cruiser-friendly and full of amenities. For \$10/ AUD week temporary membership you can use the laundry, dispose of trash, leave your dinghy at the beach (drag it high enough; if you put out an anchor, you may have to swim to it), use the free phone to call for a taxi (\$10-12 AUD to town) and enjoy food and drink in the lovely waterfront setting at reasonable prices. The well-stocked Yacht Shop chandlery is on the premises, and the owner, Wayne Bateman, offers electronic and electrical services, wayne@whmelectronics.com. Get the bus schedule from the club office: the #4 bus stops close by and takes you to town in one direction (last stop is near the Indonesian Embassy)

and the large indoor Casuarina Shopping Mall at the other end of the bus route. An \$2 AUD bus ticket is good for 3 hours on any route, in any direction. Woolworth and Cole's supermarkets are located both in town and at the mall.

We fueled duty-free at the Fisherman's Wharf in Francis Bay, which meant first getting a form signed by Customs when we cleared out (you have 24 hours to actually leave) and making an appointment with Bailey's Marine Fuels, tel. 618 9335 7822. We paid \$1 AUD/liter duty-free. Alternatively, one can get regular priced fuel at the Cullen Bay Marina's fuel dock just outside the marina lock. The fuel pump is self-service by credit card and PIN for both diesel and gasoline. If the dock isn't busy, you can use the fire hose to wash down your deck (it doesn't rain much in dry season). There's a semi-protected anchorage just outside the fuel dock lagoon in the shelter of a sand cay that submerges at high tide, and dinghies can be left at the dock. Several restaurants are in walking distance at Cullen Bay.

Customs will refund the GST tax when clearing out if presented with receipts totaling at least \$300 AUD each (multiple items can be on one receipt). Unfortunately, we discovered this the day after buying an alternator for \$297 AUD!

Booze (excluding beer) can be purchased from JR/Duty Free. Price lists and ordering information are at the Sailing Club. Orders must be placed 48 hours prior to clearing out from Darwin. Deliveries will be made to the club.

I had a good haircut at Shop 13 of the Mitchell Centre, a small shopping mall in town. There's a large selection of used books at The Book Exchange at the downtown pedestrian mall. There's a nice walk from town down Smith Street to the Pearl Luggar Museum past the Convention Center and a big inviting public wave pool.

From the Sailing Club one can walk along the Fannie Bay coastal path to the Museum of History and Art, the Botanical Garden, the Casino, and to Mindl Beach, where there are Thursday and Sunday late afternoon markets with multi-ethnic food vendors, arts and crafts, live music and entertainment. It's a great place to enjoy the sunset, along with half the Darwin population who come out each week, especially Thursdays. We loved the quadruple didgerido performance.

We felt safe leaving the boat at anchor while taking a three-day guided bus tour of Kakadu and Katherine Gorge National Parks, including a cruise on the Adelaide River to see the jumping crocodiles. It was a welcome change from life aboard. There are several tour agents in town who specialize in booking one-, two- or three-day trips. You can go budget and stay in safari tents or spring for air-conditioned hotel rooms as we did: the Holiday Inn where we stayed was in the shape of a giant crocodile!

We enjoyed our stay in Australia and hope to return by plane one day for more land travel. From Darwin we left for Indonesia. www.sailblogs.com/member/halekai

COMMODORES NANCY AND BURGER ZAPF