

Six Days on a Very Small Boat

Townsville to Cairns on a Weta
David Mead and Daniel Donald

As my family will attest, I need little encouragement to have a go at something different, any excuse will do. In this case I mentioned to Daniel the idea for sailing to Cairns in the Weta and got a “yep that would be fun” response. This obviously meant “it’s a great idea, I am fully committed to doing it, I have my families agreement and I will quit my job if they will not give me leave”. So in that one brief conversation it was settled, just a matter of getting ready and going, how hard could that be.

As it turned out it was not that hard. The attraction of shopping in Cairns and a nice place to stay on the beach converted my self-centred approvals process into actual agreement by those that matter. The Weta had all the bits it needed, hull, sails and a pointy end to go forward so that was easy. No modifications were made, but we did fabricate a “mono wheel” to allow us to beach the Weta on rocky and coral ground.

We had decided that the trip would take 3 days minimum if we had 25k NE winds, 5 to 6 days with average conditions and forever with no wind since we had no intention of paddling. It ended up taking 6 days as we stopped at Fitzroy Island just short of Cairns to have a look around and stayed the night. They were however long days as the winds were light and variable for most of the trip.



Departing Townsville

We left Townsville on Sunday the 27th September into the dusty haze created by the dust storms sweeping across the country at that time. The first 20 minutes was great, a broad reach at 12 knots boat speed, three days was on. Unfortunately the dreaded ‘just north of Magnetic Island’ doldrums caught us and it became a driftathon. By 1pm as we drifted past Acheron Island we were wondering if we would need to get the paddles out, but an afternoon breeze came in and by 4pm we had reached the Palm Island group and decided to stay the night on Falcon Island. Put the mono wheel to use, it worked but was a bit fiddly to fit. On the positive we then discovered someone had conveniently left a fire going not 20m from where we beached.



Falcon Island



Mono Wheel



Hinchinbrook Island

The next day we sailed up inside Orpheus Island then along the outside of Hinchinbrook Island. Another day of dust storms and low visibility, with long periods of no land in sight. We had committed to the charts and compass technology for the trip, this being more in line with the “keep it simple” ethos of the trip. This served us well, and although I did have charts loaded on my iPhone it went flat pretty quickly. We could have taken a GPS (I have a whole collection at work) but this trip was about taking it easy and a back to basics approach.

We also carried a “spot” personal GPS tracker. These are great little devices for reporting that you are OK on remote trips. Each day once we reached shore, we could push the “I am OK” button and via satellite it links back to base and notified our families that we were OK and our current location. Great and highly recommended for family member peace of mind.



Half way down Hinchinbrook Island the wind dropped, forcing us to paddle several kilometres until a nice beach was located. By the way, one person sitting on the bow can paddle a Weta at about 4 knots in calm conditions. Left the sails up for the night and simply dragged the Weta above the high tide mark. This was the only night we used the tent as mosquitoes were biting, and soon discovered that my prized super light (taken due our strict baggage limit) tent had shrunk and two 40 something's was just a little too cosy.

Happy to get out of the small tent the next morning, we packed then paddled out in dead still conditions wondering if it was going to be a long day. The wind did arrive and we had a great sail down the rest of Hinchinbrook then across to North Island. We had hoped to get to Mission beach that day so we pressed on despite the wind dropping and a track of dead downwind. Not the best combination for the Weta as in light conditions it needs to sail on a shallow reach to generate apparent wind, boat speed goes up but VMG down. We determined that it was actually quicker to go dead downwind with a split sail arrangement (screacher to one side, main to the other). We got quite inventive this day with paddles for a spinnaker pole and all manner of rope arrangement to get the desired shape in the mainsail.



Doldrums



Catching Dinner

Hooked a few fish today but did not bother landing as no ice box. OK the combination of a hand line and good sized Giant Trevally meant they were beyond us to land anyway. As we got close to Hudson Island the wind finally turned NE (on the days it turned NE it also increased to 15 to 25knots) and we had a great run though to Mission Beach. Camped at a public camping area run by a rather interesting local, apparently the inn was full, but once he realised we would stay either way he took our money. As it was I ended up sleeping on the beach since it was quieter. That night Daniel offered to shout me dinner, then promptly found a pub offering a two for the price of one dinner special – you can only wonder at the luck of some.

Stocked-up on the essentials and left early the next day at 10am, by which time the Grey Nomads staying at the camping spot had already arrived at their next destination. As I explained earlier, this was not the trip that focused on schedules. We had what I think was the most scenic day of the trip as we sailed up past the South Bernard Islands, then up to the Hutchison, Jessie and Kent Island Group.

We then beat off an army landing craft (although they would return the next day for a drag race) and continued up the coast past Innisfail, then on to Cooper Point. The beaches around this area did not look attractive (swampy areas behind and likely to have mosquitoes – the small tent remember!) so we decided to continue to Bramston Beach. This turned out to be a very long 5 miles, with wind (what there was of it) against tide creating a very



Cleaner Required !

confused sea. We arrived after dark to a steep beach and dumping waves. Managed to get in and up the beach without breaking the nice new carbon fibre rudder. That night we had our only incident of the trip when my MSR cooker leaked shellite fuel as Daniel was pumping up the bottle, luckily he is quick thinking since the resulting fireball was large and loud, and while he did not need to shave for the rest of the trip it could have been much worse had he not moved in time.

What did we take:

- Too small a tent, wafer thin sleeping mats and not enough padding on the boat !
- 20l of water
- Cooker and food for a few days
- Maps
- EPIRB and “spot” satellite tracker
- iphone
- Waterproof VHF Radio
- Batteries and a small solar charging system
- Spares



Captain



Crew

Headed off the next day though the breakers, a feat that in our own not so humble opinions demonstrated skill levels unseen among sailors for many years. Well perhaps an exaggeration, but the locals were impressed and we did not break that carbon fibre rudder. Today we finally had some wind and could easily have made Cairns, but we decided to explore a bit and went out around Normandy Island, then got a bit silly as we approached Fitzroy Island surfing the swell.



Bramston Beach – we must have launched during a large set !

In a swell the Weta is a blast, initially the wind was light so reaching was needed for boat speed, then turning onto the swell to see how long we could surf the wave. Later in the day the wind picked up and we were able to overtake the swells, again great fun as the screacher does lift the bow and reduce the likelihood of a sudden stop at the bottom. Spent plenty of time above 10knotts boat speed that afternoon with periods of 14knotts plus, not bad considering the load.

Nothing broke and we flew into the bay at Fitzroy Island deciding to camp the night rather than carry on to Cairns. Fitzroy Island was an interesting place with a several year old uninhabited resort on the water front. Apparently the build did not meet standards, the first and second developers went broke and the bank was currently fixing it so it could be sold, or something like that. Fitzroy Island also delivered the most and least friendly persons on the trip. On asking a day tour operator if there was anywhere we could get a cold drink, the answer was sarcastic to say the least, never ones to give up we asked a couple of builders waiting for the ferry to depart, one promptly pulled two (free) cold beers from his bag then arranged for two roast dinners to fall off the back of a truck later that night – what can you say, but thanks !



Fitzroy Island Resort

What advice would we give to others doing the same.

- Daniel marked our maps with all the nice beaches before leaving using Google Earth. This allowed us to be flexible with stopping points each night as we could simply sail until we did not think we would make the next nice location.
- Take a comfortable seat, 12 hrs on a carbon fibre beam isn't the best
- A fishing rod is a must, as is a larger tent!
- A waterproof portable VHF radio for weather and coastguard, a "spot" satellite tracker for family peace of mind and an EPRB and life jacket if it all goes horribly wrong.

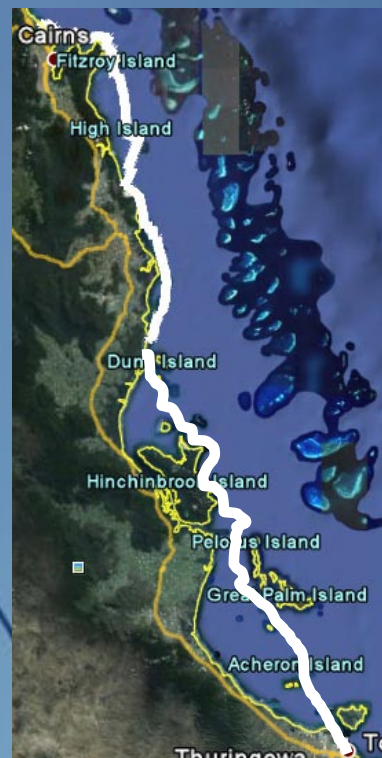
Friday 2nd October - the final day !

Sailed from Fitzroy Island to Yorkeys Knob just north of Cairns doing our best to avoid the daily race as the tourist vessels head out to the reef. Arrived at Yorkeys without incident to the rapturous applause of a couple of seagulls. Apparently if you don't ring and advise the families as to EXACT arrival time it's your own fault. Anyway the kids were pleased to see us when they eventually arrived.

All in all the Weta performed flawlessly and we had a great adventure through a beautiful part of Australia. Thankyou to our families for supporting us and to the friendly people we met along the way.

This sort of thing should be compulsory every year, we all need some adventure in our lives. And at least for the time being it is to be, because in August this year we are going adventuring on the Weta again.

David and Daniel



What about a lap around Australia on a beach tri ?

We think it is about time Weta Marine built a 20 (ish) footer, (carbon, canting wing mast, wide with long amas, lifting foils, dual rudders, self recoverable) - a Multi 23 on steroids or an Exploder 25 spec would do nicely guys

Happy to then give it a good test before it goes into production – 6500 nm sounds about right !