

The Western Australian Cruising Guide – a coast less travelled

Kim Klaka

About 20 years ago I met one of the very few people who have sailed out from England to explore the Western Australian coastline. He made a profound comment that has stuck with me: "I view West Australian yachtsmen with a mixture of admiration and concern; admiration for their skills and concern for their sanity". He was right – what would possess a sailor to cruise along thousands of miles of lee shore in winds typically of force 5-6 with fewer than a dozen harbours of refuge? The answer is surprisingly simple: breathtaking scenery, persistent sunshine combined with abundant wildlife and seafood, accessible only by adventurous sailing.

Geography

Western Australia has about 2.5 million inhabitants with over 80% of them living in the capital city Perth. It has an area of just under one million square miles.

Much of its 7,000-mile coastline is empty; there are 10 accessible commercial harbours, 12 marinas and just 2 towns with more than 50,000 inhabitants. Less than half the coastline has VHF or mobile phone coverage, so you are often relying on sat phone or old-fashioned HF radio for your weather forecasts.

The northern part of the state has some of the largest tidal ranges in the world, up to 12 m. Conversely, the southern part of the state has a range of about 1 metre, with only one high tide per day instead of the more familiar two per day.

How to get there

Getting to Western Australia by boat necessitates a long voyage, which is part of the attraction. The shortest passage is by way of Indonesia requiring an ocean crossing of about 500 miles. Alternatively, if sailing from the east coast of Australia "over the top" it is about 300 miles from Darwin to the Western Australian border; along the bottom across the Great Australian Bight it is 1,000 miles from Adelaide to the nearest harbour.

Chartering is an option, though the choices are limited. There is a handful of skippered yachts available at present. "A handful" means fewer than a dozen charter yachts in total along 7,000 miles of coastline – a bit less crowded than the Greek Islands!

Weather and climate

The weather is full of contrasts, though the predominant theme is sunshine. The southwest coastal area has a Mediterranean climate. Thanks to the offshore Leeuwin Current this part of the coast is one of the world's top six regions for marine biodiversity and contains the most southerly coral reefs.

The Kimberley region in the north has an extremely hot monsoonal climate with average annual rainfall ranging from 500 to 1 500 mm, but there is a very long almost rainless season from April to November- ideal for cruising.

Fremantle

The sailing mecca of Western Australia is Fremantle, best known for the 1987 America's Cup and the 2011 ISAF world sailing championships. The waters around Fremantle make for wonderful if robust sailing, with the afternoon sea breeze usually blowing at 15-25 knots. The aquamarine water is clear down to depths of greater than 10m, there is no fog, no tide and very little shipping. The holiday island of Rottnest is but an afternoon sail from the mainland, its sheltered bays and gin-clear water full of rock lobster, rays, and dolphins. On land you will find osprey nests and come across quokkas - cute, cat-sized marsupials found in only at Rottnest and two other much smaller colonies.

There are 20 sailing clubs in the Perth region, though most of them are on the Swan River. Access from the river to the ocean is limited by the Fremantle bridges, with any yacht longer than about 6m having to lower its mast. However, this doesn't stop them getting to the ocean; nearly all the river yachts have hinges in the mast section just above deck level, making mast lowering and raising a standard 15-minute procedure whilst under way – even for 60 footers. The local spar makers have been incorporating these hinges into masts for decades, without any failures.

Fremantle Sailing Club is the largest club in the region, with 3,000 members. As you walk into the foyer of the FSC Clubhouse, on your left is a varnished wooden honour board on the wall, listing the names of the Club members who have circumnavigated the world. There are 20 of them, including the legendary Jon Sanders who has circumnavigated 9 times, five of them single-handed and non-stop. He is currently in the Atlantic Ocean on his 10th circumnavigation. There isn't sufficient space to display a similar board for the scores of members who have circumnavigated Australia. When you consider that three laps of Australia is about the same distance as a global circumnavigation, you start to develop an understanding of the type of sailor who plies up and down this West Australian coast.

Kimberley

Whilst Fremantle is excellent for day and weekend sailing, the true cruising adventures are to be found much further afield. Arguably the most fascinating region is the Kimberley, about 1,300 miles north of Fremantle. It is one of the world's "best-kept secret" cruising grounds. The voyage from Fremantle to the Kimberley theoretically can be done in 12 days, though I have never met anyone who has managed that pace. Most cruisers take a few weeks to get there, stopping at some of the deserted anchorages en route. The Kimberley is a region of great beauty, ruggedness and wilderness which has still not been thoroughly explored. Many of the anchorages contain Aboriginal rock art, some of it over 30,000 years old. Bird life, crocodiles, turtles, dugong, sharks and many varieties of fish all add to the fascination of the place. Its remoteness has enormous appeal.

The Kimberley region covers 150 000 square miles with a population of just under 40 000. In some of the busier anchorages you may find yourself in the company of 3 or 4 other yachts, but most of the time you will be on your own in utter tranquillity - no fishing boats, no tourists, no shops, no roads. You can quite literally count the number of refuelling places on the fingers of one hand, and they all require several days' notice.

The preferred months for cruising in the Kimberley are May to October (the dry season). Offshore winds are prevalent in the morning, easing in the afternoon. Allow six to eight weeks cruising in the Kimberley. There are no marinas, and virtually no moorings. Anchorages may be in coastal indents, or several miles up secluded rivers. The gorge of the Prince Regent River, for example, is perfectly straight for its entire 54 mile length with no houses or roads. 17 miles of it are navigable, with freshwater pools and waterfalls at the head of the river. The scenery comprises primary colours of red and blue that make your photographs look like they have been photo-shopped.

Ningaloo

Tucked in just below the northwest corner of Australia about 500 miles north of Fremantle is another "best-kept secret": Ningaloo Reef. Not quite as big as its more famous east coast sister the Great Barrier Reef, it is far less crowded, has better beaches, clearer water and is more accessible - the reef is only a mile or so off the coast in many places. This is a beautiful, unique and fragile environment to explore, supporting over 500 species of fish and more than 200 species of coral. It is visited by giant whale sharks and there are over 35,000 humpback whales migrating past. Anchorages are open roadsteads protected from the Indian Ocean swell by reefs awash. There is just one township along the 100 miles of reef coastline. The passage from Fremantle to Ningaloo includes a 150 mile stretch of exposed lee shore with no anchorages or harbours, just the near-vertical Zuytdorp cliffs. A well-found yacht is essential

and it pays to pick your weather window carefully.

Houtman Abrolhos

Fortunately there are remote cruising grounds not quite so far from Fremantle. One of the most extraordinary is the Houtman Abrolhos, 200 miles north of Fremantle. They are a group of 122 low islands spread over 50 miles, most of them less than 4 metres high, situated 40 miles off the coast. In many respects they make an idyllic cruising ground – clear water, warm temperatures, uncrowded, with an abundance of fish, coral and sea lions. There are a few precariously perched fishermen's shacks but no shops, no roads, no water, and no phone. If you do not have your own boat, the only link to the rest of the world is by light aircraft, provided the gravel landing strip is clear of resting sea lions.

In 1629 the Dutch trading vessel *Batavia* inadvertently became the first vessel to discover the Abrolhos – they ran hard aground on the outlying reef. Of the 322 people aboard the vessel at the time of shipwreck, 282 made it ashore to what they assumed was relative safety. The lack of food, water and shelter turned out to be the least of their worries; 115 men, women and children were murdered on the islands over the ensuing two months. The perpetrators of the *Batavia* mutiny were tried and hanged on the islands. The *Batavia* shipwreck is a story that might well have formed the basis for William Golding's book *Lord of the Flies*, and it makes *Mutiny on the Bounty* seem like a cosy afternoon tea party.

It is perhaps worth noting here that the wreck of the *Batavia* predates Captain Cook's "discovery" of Australia by 150 years. It is not so well known in the English-speaking world that the first Europeans to set foot in Australia were not English but Dutch. Western Australia in particular is full of Dutch shipwrecks. Heading for the Spice Islands of Indonesia, they crossed the Indian Ocean from the Cape of Good Hope by sailing due east in the roaring forties until they reckoned they were at the longitude of Jakarta, then turned north. Unfortunately they were using this passage plan in the days before longitude could be worked out accurately, so many of them left it too late to turn north and followed in the *Batavia*'s wake, discovering Western Australia the hard way.

Geographe Bay

Perhaps all this adventure cruising has exhausted you, and you dream of gentler surrounds and a taste of civilisation to boost the spirits. Fortunately, heading south from Fremantle just 90 miles brings you to the tranquil delights of Geographe Bay. During the summer months, this bay provides smooth water sailing and shelter from the prevailing southerlies, right across its 20-mile width. Sheltered Bunbury harbour is nearby and there is even a marina in the bay. Shoreside, this area is gateway to the Margaret River region, home to Australia's premium

cabernet sauvignon and chardonnay wines, with bucolic restaurants serving locally-grown gourmet food to match. (Did you know that Western Australia is the largest producer of black truffles outside Europe?)

Geographe Bay holds a high diversity of finfish, seagrasses growing at incredible depths, whales, dolphins and a network of intertidal and sub-tidal reefs. In winter and spring, humpback and southern right whales make their way through the Bay on their annual migration. Blue whales also travel through the shallow waters of Geographe Bay between October and December, and can be seen as close as 50m from the shore. When Stephen Fry was searching for them in the final episode of TV's Last Chance to See, he was looking in the wrong place!

The South Coast

After the soft luxuries of Geographe Bay it is time to get back into adventure mode for the final part of this virtual voyage: the south coast. The coastal scenery is grand, the fishing is good, the water is cool and clear. The preferred time for cruising this section of the coast is late summer: winter gales have yet to arrive and generally the winds are at their lightest.

The region starts at Cape Leeuwin, one of the three (arguably four) great capes of the world. It is the most southwesterly point of Australia and it is where the Indian and Southern Oceans meet. There are few secure all-weather anchorages on this 400 mile stretch of coast. Among its surprises is yet another unexplored region: the Archipelago of the Recherche. This is an extensive group of uninhabited islands and rocks separated by deep water, that lie up to 40 miles offshore and stretch 123 miles along the coast. There are only a few good anchorages, but their majesty and remoteness take your breath away. From the Recherche it is a mere 500 miles across the Great Australian Bight to South Australia, where you have finally left the shores of Western Australia.

More information

Now in its fifth edition (December 2017), the Fremantle Sailing Club's *Western Australian Cruising Guide* is regarded as the coastal cruising bible for Western Australia, covering the entire coast, including the Christmas and Cocos Islands. This book is a definite "must have", especially for cruising the Kimberley. <https://www.fsc.com.au/onwater/publications/>

Skipped yacht charter and RYA courses in Geographe Bay from OceanWest Charters <http://www.oceanwest.net.au/skippered-charters.html>

For chartering in the Ningaloo reef contact Sail Ningaloo <http://www.sailningaloo.com.au/>

Author brief bio

Kim Klaka has sailed over 30,000 miles offshore - 20 years in UK waters and 30 years in Australia - and is the current editor of the Western Australian Cruising Guide. He is a naval architect with 40 years' experience in yacht design, with a Masters degree and a Doctorate in sailing yacht performance. He is a recipient of the Yachting WA David Walters Memorial Medallion for services to yachting safety, only the fifth person ever to receive this award.