

Bass Strait



Chris Danger and Wade Bishop live and work in Melbourne four days a week while their catamaran *Take it Easy* is moored in Paynesville in the Gippsland Lakes. Most weekends are sailing long weekends and every holiday is spent cruising in southern waters. With some 16 Bass Strait crossings under their hulls, they have had plenty of opportunities to explore Bass Strait anchorages. In this article, Chris takes us to Deal Island.

Many yachties frequent the coastline of the eastern seaboard. These are beautiful, warm, and very well-travelled waters. But whenever we think of stunning, unspoilt and less frequented anchorages, we think of places like Deal Island, bang in the middle of Bass Strait. Deal is the largest of six islands in the Kent Group which lies between Wilson's Promontory at the southern tip of Victoria and Flinders Island in Eastern Bass Strait, on a line running north west to south east. These are the northern most offshore islands of Tasmania.

The three larger islands in the group are Deal, Dover and Erith, and there are all clustered together. Dover and Erith are connected to one another by a tidal gravel bank and are the most westerly, while Deal is on the south eastern side, with the Murray Pass running in

between them, a fast flowing passage with eddies and overfalls when the tide and strong wind work against each other.

These granite islands hold particular attraction for us because of their remoteness, their imposing cliffs jutting out of the ocean, and once atop in clear weather, the sweeping views around Bass Strait to the distant shores of Hogan Island to the north west, Flinders Island to the south east and Judgement Rocks to the west. The fact that we can sometimes be there with no other yacht around, as we did last Christmas and again in late January, is an added bonus.

The approach to the Kent Group is spectacular, particularly when you arrive on sunset. The buttresses and sheer cliffs of Erith, Dover and Deal islands are majestic and take on a golden hue, highlighted by the characteristic orange

lichen that covers the rocks above the water line. It is a stunning time to arrive and a breathtaking destination to sail to.

There are a number of anchorages around Deal and Erith, the most popular being East Cove on Deal and West Cove on Erith, on either side of the Murray Pass. It is not unusual to have a fleet of half a dozen yachts doing the shuffle from one anchorage to the other, at the whim of the weather gods, especially during popular times such as January school holidays and Easter. East Cove is a well-liked meeting point, because of its old jetty, its barbecue, the short walk up to the cottages.

But we must admit to preferring the quieter anchorages of Garden, Winter and Squally Coves. Garden Cove, on the northern side of Deal Island, is a U-shaped anchorage, with a sandy beach right in, and granite boulders on

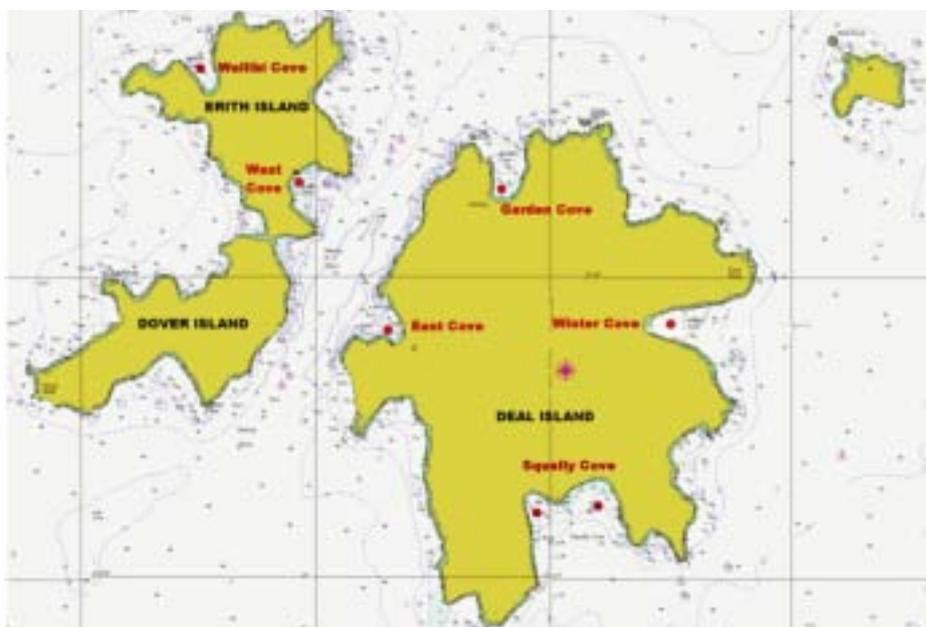
anchorages



either side. It offers good protection in east through to west breezes. From Garden Cove, it is an easy and reasonably flat walk to the old cottages which are situated at the top of East Cove. Winter Cove, on the eastern side of Deal, is well protected from south through to north east breezes. We have been known to hide in there from a south westerly storm, with winds in excess of 50kts/hour howling through. Apart from much yanking at the chain and wind gusts sounding like a freight train running through the rigging, we were safely anchored there. Winter Cove is a gorgeous anchorage, with great depth of colour: ultramarine water, ochre cliffs all around, and a white sandy beach. The climb up to the top of the hill is however very steep, and the walk to the cottages an eight or nine kilometre round trip. As for Squally Cove, this is a broad double bay at the southern end of Deal Island offering shelter from west through to north east. However both east and west bays are deep anchorages (8-14m). There are a few sand patches but you need plenty of chain, and the wind can be a little swirly in places. There is the remnant of the old shipwreck of *SS Karitane*, and a track up from the beach, but be ready for a long steep climb to the top.

Regardless of where you choose to drop the pick, the scenery is magnificent: pristine and crystal clear aqua water close to the sandy shores, ultramarine further out, rocky outcrops and rugged cliffs, underlined by a bright orange strip. You could very well imagine you are in the tropics, until a dip in the water brings you rudely back to the reality of the very chilly Tasmanian waters! 15-17° in summer, and I don't want to know the temperature in winter!

The great attraction of Deal Island is that once there, there are many things to do, whether the weather is clear or stormy. You can explore the shoreline by boat, snorkel in a warm wetsuit in the recently declared marine park, or take one of many scenic walks ashore to explore the different coves and cliff lines. There is the site of a Second World War plane crash, the fascinating visit to the museum set in one of the historic cottages, the climb up to the highest lighthouse in the southern hemisphere,





But Deal is not just about the destination. It is also about the experience of getting there. We have attacked it from different directions over the years. It is a 45nm trip from Refuge Cove at the southern tip of Wilson's Promontory, 60 miles from Port Albert or Corner Inlet, 90 miles from Lakes Entrance, 45 miles from the north west Coast of Flinders Island.

To yachties with an aversion to crossing Bass Strait, all I can say is we are cowards at heart. We don't like it rough, we don't like to scare ourselves, we don't like to be sick as dogs in big seas. So we only venture across when the weather is right. And that means being prepared to wait for safe conditions, or not going at all if a weather window does not present itself at the time you were hoping to go. Plenty of accidents and unpleasant passages happen when people are on an inflexible schedule and go when they should not.

In the right conditions, the crossing can vary from exhilarating to slow and steady, but it is always, always a feast for the senses: strong ocean smells, the changing moods of the sea and the light on the water, the big skies, the 360° of uninterrupted ocean around you, the special feelings of remoteness and adventure. And of course there are the wonderful sights of playful dolphins and seals, the awe inspiring flights of albatrosses, the aerobatics of gannets and diving petrels, the rafts of thousands of shearwaters, the odd flying fish skipping across the water like a giant dragonfly.

Every passage to Deal is a big deal. It is an adventure and a great experience. Every crossing we make, we feel lucky. And it is not because we have survived another trip unscathed!

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the steep track down to Little Squally Cove, which we affectionately call Bunnings Corner because of the mass of timber that collects there in south westerly blows ... and everywhere, amazing views and a sense of being in a truly wild place. For the bird watchers, the antics of the territorial and odd looking Cape Barren geese afford lots of fun, and so do the colourful but much smaller firetails, scarlet robins, quails. And on the shores, the usual cormorants, Pacific gulls, and ducks

abound. At night, the little penguins come home to their burrows in the hundreds, making an endearing if noisy spectacle. For encounters of the furry kind, possums and wallabies are there, especially around the caretakers' compound.

And speaking of caretakers, this too is a special part of the Deal welcome, and when, as was the case for us at Christmas and in January, you happen to come when your friends are on duty for their three month gig, the feeling is even more unique. These guys are volunteers who are selected by Parks and Wildlife to look after the Deal Island National Park and its visitors for three months of self-sufficiency, self-discovery and island maintenance.

