

Ten unexpected gems of the NSW Coast

When nothing goes to plan for **Chris Danger's** return to Lord Howe the upside is the exploration of the NSW coast.

Is it the journey or the destination?

Yachties who, like us, are part-time cruisers live on a limited time schedule. This can often lead people to be too defined about where they want to go and when.

They head off in difficult weather, in winds that are less than ideal and can end up getting themselves and the boat beaten up. That is not our idea of summer cruising.

What we were planning to do for our summer voyage was a repeat of last year's wonderful sail to Lord Howe Island. Coming from the Gippsland Lakes and with eight weeks' leave, it was a big ask. We were lucky to achieve it last year.

So we had an intended route, a return date and the rest would just happen, dependent on the weather and the state of the sea. It is a terribly frustrating thing to fight what you can not control. But it is a wonderfully relaxing thing to yield to the elements.

Whenever we sail, we have a destination in mind, but have fall backs too. Friends often laugh about our loose plans, "which plan are we on today?"

"Plan A," we reply "and if that's not possible, Plan B or C will do."

So Plan A was to leave the east coast for Lord Howe Island before the end of December with three clear days of southerly weather.

When it became evident that Plan A was not to be, Plan B was invoked; we stayed on the coast of NSW, but did not let that wreck our holiday cruise.

We got as far north as Broughton Islands, six nautical miles past Port Stephens. Of course we were a little sad that we did not get to see Lord Howe again. But we also asked ourselves: "what would be really enjoyable to do instead?"

For us it was meeting up with friends along the way, having them enjoy unexpected, spur of the moment stays on board and discovering new anchorages we had never been to.

It is fun to look at a chart and plot the next adventure: "let's check this little spot, let's invite these guys on board."

Sharing our adventures, discovering new coves, playing with the toys: kayaks, snorkelling gear, camera or just relaxing is what makes cruising so enjoyable.

Ten unexpected gems

Our eight weeks on board were a little treasure trove.

For us the special finds were those that surprised us in some way. It might have been the intriguing geology of a stretch of coast, the amazing flora ashore, the fantastic birdlife, a sense of isolation, having a spot to ourselves, or sharing the experience with friends.

So here are ten of those unexpected gems.



Lake Macquarie

Once let in through the Swansea Bridge, Lake Macquarie was where we spent the few days coming up to Christmas.

The water was incredibly warm at 27°. The lake is an interesting stretch of protected waters, a 110 square kilometre coastal lagoon with numerous bays, twists and turns offering varied anchorages and sailing conditions.

Unlike our home, the Gippsland Lakes, some of the shoreline is built up but there are areas where you are surrounded by bushland, particularly at the southern end of the lake.

MAIN: Mist morning on the Moruya River.

BELOW: Wyee Bay at Lake Macquarie.

BOTTOM: South west arm of the Port Hacking River.



Broughton Islands

Just north of Port Stephens, these islands offer safe shelter in southerly or northerly conditions. You can throw the pick in three to five metres of water over sand.

Although crowded between Christmas and New Year, we had a wonderful time with friends we had picked up at Port Stephens who had never sailed on a yacht.

The underwater life was interesting with beautiful kelp, schools of darters, a moray eel or two, kingfish and grey nurse sharks. Being the breeding ground for those protected and harmless sharks, you get to see those creatures up close and personal.

Fingal Bay

Just outside the Port Stephens Heads was a dreamy anchorage to have to ourselves on New Year's Eve.

We picked up a patch of sand in between the weed and were set for the night in about three or four metres of water.

Tucked in against Point Stephens Island behind the sand spit, we enjoyed a bit of solitude and a stroll to the lighthouse.

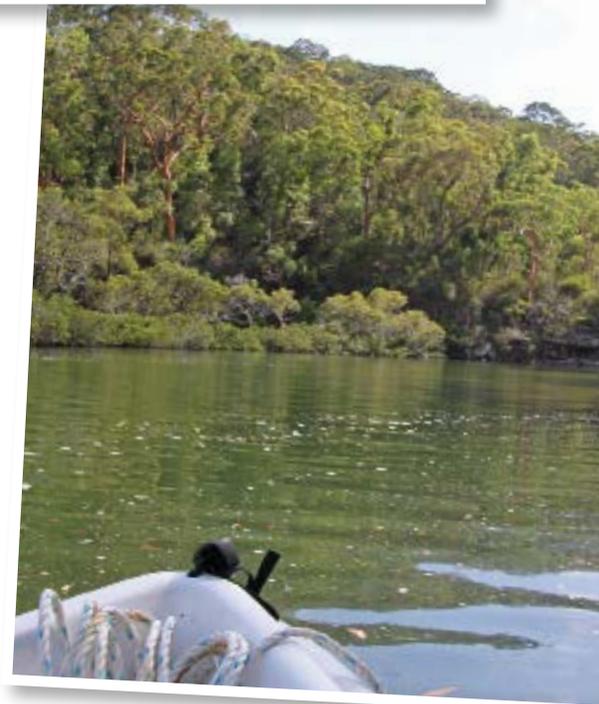
You can also walk across the spit at low water, but beware of the tide!

Port Hacking River

Winding its way through the Royal National Park, just south of Sydney, the south west arm of the Port Hacking River was a little treasure of tranquillity not far from suburbia.

Surprisingly, one can escape from the crowds and enjoy some peace and quiet, serenaded by cicadas and bird songs. With stunning Sydney Red Gums and rugged sandstone cliffs overlooking the river, paddling all the way to the end was fun and good exercise.

Watch out for the oysters covering the shores at low tide; they are sharp and unforgiving to tender feet and blow-up kayaks.





“The memorable moments are the ones you are not looking for”

Wreck Bay

This large bay offers a choice of secluded little coves in northerly conditions and was a good alternative to popular Jervis Bay just around the corner.

Each little bay is surrounded by rocky outcrops so you need to be cautious as to where you throw the pick. However the fishing is great, the water is crystal clear and turquoise and, chances are, you will be on your lonesome.

Do not get caught there in a southerly change or it might live up to its name!

Snapper Island – Batemans Bay

Right inside Batemans Bay is Snapper Island, a rugged islet at the head of the Clyde River.

Surprisingly, it provides fine shelter from a variety of wind conditions and the holding is good.

The islet itself is interesting with impressive folded strata lines and sea caves. No sandy beach here, just pebbles but the geology is amazing.

It is very small, so it is not an anchorage you will spend much time in unless, like us, you get caught in stormy, rainy weather for a few days. A quaint-looking dome of an island with tall eucalyptus trees and rugged cliffs.

Chain Bay – Batemans Bay

A broad sandy beach perfect for northerly conditions, Chain Bay provides a safe, though not totally private anchorage.

The appeal for us was the change of scenery, after three days of rain at Snapper Island, plus the easy access to small beaches further east for long walks ashore in the Murramarang National Park. The geology of the place is intriguing.

You get some interesting rock formations and sea caves, a feature of this area quite different from the sandstones of the coast further north.

The views towards the Tollgate Islands were beautiful too and although we would have loved to anchor in its shelter, the newly declared sanctuary zone precludes this now.

Broulee Bay

The beauty about Broulee is that it works in a variety of conditions. In southerlies you can hide behind Broulee Island and in northerlies it is possible to cross the bay to Barlings Beach.

The history of the bay is interesting, as it was an active commercial port in the mid-1800s.

The island of Broulee is separated from the mainland by a tombolo: a sand spit. Broulee is a nice spot to swim, stroll, snorkel and even enjoy the ocean beach of Bengello. So stopping there for a few days offers a variety of things to occupy oneself and the holding on sand is good.

It is a popular place for campers, but rarely visited by yachts.

Moruya River

Having never really explored up a river other than Port Hacking and being weather bound for a few days, we chose to motor up the Moruya River and tie up at the jetty before the bridge, three miles upstream.

It was delightful to be able to step off the boat and go to the weekly Saturday market right on the banks. There is fresh water at the jetty, two large supermarkets in town, a laundromat and a service station across the bridge, so it is a handy spot to replenish supplies and sit out contrary weather.

You can anchor in the river if you wish. We ended up tying up at one end of the jetty, with the bows sticking out a few metres beyond it to give the local fishing charter vessels enough space to do its business.

But apart from the market, the convenient provisioning facilities, the friends' visits and the stream of interested onlookers, the highlight for us was our arrival and departure in the early morning stillness and mist. Such beautiful reflections and dreamy scenery!



Bittangabee Bay

An absolute gem of a find, this is not an anchorage for everyone and there are times when a yacht just cannot get into the narrow entrance.

But in calm conditions it is wonderful; the main anchorage is in front of the old store house in three metres of water over sand. It can get a bit swirly in there. If you are like us and have a shoal draft vessel, you may be able to sneak around in the creek. If you do this, you will need to tie yourself to the shore and be prepared to sit on the bottom at low tide as it is very shallow.

We have been tucked in there and snug in a 40 knot blow and did not feel a thing!

A walk from there to the Green Cape lighthouse is a delight with many rainbow lorikeets amongst the Banksias, or you can head north towards Hegartys Beach and likely see lyrebirds.

Amazing sailing

There were of course a few more secluded spots we discovered, but they will remain secret!

However the biggest secret to our explorations is just that: taking the time to explore, checking out nooks and crannies, not just relying on the main anchorages and the well-beaten track.

It is worth doing some research, peering at the chart and sticking your nose into interesting little coves, just to have a look. We are curious sailors and make lots of notes.

Some people can take it or leave it when it comes to sailing between beautiful anchorages. It becomes a means to an end. But we absolutely love sailing. We do not mind demanding conditions in small doses and we certainly experienced rowdy seas around Jervis Bay on the way north. The ocean looked like a pot boil and the motion was chaotic, but we managed.

We particularly enjoy beautiful easy sails under 'big red', our symmetrical spinnaker.

Once launched, it is effortless, stable and fast. We are hard to miss when big red is flying and we enjoy the speed. It is our most used sail.

A big advantage of sailing along the east coast is that it can all be done as day sails; no overnights, no night watches.

We meet a lot of people who do what we would describe as the 'hell runs' – big, long one or two overnights. They leave port and are on a mission to get somewhere in one hit: Sydney to Eden, Eden to Hobart...

For us it just sounds too hard. We will do this only if we have to, not much choice between the mainland and Lord Howe Island for example.

But in the main we enjoy short sails, short hops that leave us plenty of time to relax and explore our surroundings. So we plan our trips accordingly.

Go with the flow

The key to cruising for us is flexibility.

Beating into wind in more than 15kn breeze is not our thing. Neither is heading off in more than 25kn on our stern.

With a boat's name like *Take It Easy*, you can guess what we like doing. So for us, this summer cruise was about living in the moment. We found it is best not to 'expect'.

The memorable moments are the ones you are not looking for.

Nature steers your course, providing unexpected thrills along the way. Relax and let it happen. 

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Secluded Wreck Bay.
Gorgeous day at
Bittangabee Bay.
Broulee Bay and
Barlings Beach.

cruisinghelmsman Christine Danger



Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for the last 15 years. Their favourite cruising grounds are the Bass Strait Islands and Tasmanian waters. They live for the day when they can give up work, cruise full-time on *Take It Easy*, and explore further afield. Follow their adventures on www.sv-takeiteasy.com.