

Getting to SE Asia is usually relatively easy because of the SE trade winds, but getting back can be another kettle of fish entirely. **David Bowden** shares his observations after having researched all the options and put his preferred one to the test.



Stuart and Nanette (right) are reunited with their yacht in Mooloolaba.

Getting back from SE Asia



There was never a shortage of fresh food!

Getting back from South East Asia can be a daunting thought sufficient to put cruisers off from even thinking about heading out to this adventurous cruising ground. The passage from Australia to Thailand has been well recorded by many writers. The west-bound trip can be completed in the winter months by joining the popular Sail Indonesia and Sail Malaysia Rallies but stories of the return to Australia are few and far between. This is the story of one way to return to the east coast of Australia from SE Asia but more specifically East Malaysia or Borneo, as it is commonly referred to by the locals.

2010 experience

In 2010 about 10 yachts returned from South East Asia by several routes and few, if any of these, were enjoyable. For example in August, six yachts

started from the north tip of Borneo, motored (mostly) through Indonesian waters over the top of PNG and via the Louisiades to Townsville. This trip was horrible with strong headwinds, adverse currents, big seas, storms along the PNG coast and not a sailing angle until approaching the Louisiades.

Another yacht which was not making much progress on the leg Saumlaki to Gove, ended up in Darwin from where it was trucked to Brisbane. Another yacht travelled via Irian Java to Thursday Island and noted very difficult wind and seas approaching Torres Strait. A very experienced yachtie reported using his engine for 1500 hours on the trip Kota Kinabalu (KK) to Brisbane. We had also planned to make the trip back from Borneo a bit in later in 2010, so we tracked these yacht movements and sought



Owner Stuart enjoying a beautiful sunset on Truest Passion on an earlier cruise.

information on their sailing conditions. Because we thought we were too late to make our run starting in September, we changed our mind and planned on a cruise to the Philippines instead.

Change in plans

Then our plans changed dramatically as yachting plans often do. A good friend, Stuart Simpson, was diagnosed with cancer and had to leave his catamaran in Kota Kinabalu while he and Nanette flew to Brisbane for extended oncology treatment. As things progressed and delivery options began to look pretty grim, I offered to bring his yacht back. It occurred to me that by moving quickly (eg planning on motor-sailing with few stops) via a more direct track to Gove (rather than north of PNG where our colleagues were having such a rough passage) we could beat the

cyclone season which was forecast to be bad.

An affirmative reply within 12 hours resulted in our cancelling the Philippine cruise (we had already cleared customs and were departing Malaysian waters) and returning to KK to look over his yacht and start preparing for the voyage. Because the trip was expected to be mostly continuous motor-sailing with long passages, I contacted a few colleagues to see if any were interested in joining the trip to share the watches. Fortunately Paul and Judy from Meridian of Sydney accepted the offer. They had sailed with Stuart and Nanette on their catamaran for the five-day Borneo International Yacht Challenge from Miri to KK, so had some knowledge of how things worked. We put our catamaran This Way Up in the Miri Marina (about three days' sail

southwest from KK) and together with Paul and Judy flew to KK to start the delivery preparations.

Well set up

Truest Passion is a Seawind 1160 and is very well set up by Stuart and Nanette (*CH* June 2006 has much of the background on Stuart's influence on the Seawind 1160) so it was a matter of loading fuel, provisions, checking all equipment, scrubbing the hulls, getting to know the systems and clearing out of the marina. Stuart had so many rope clutches and tweekers (he is a perfectionist) that we used a whiteout pen to mark all of them so that finding the right one in the middle of the night was simplified.

Our plan was to day-hop round the north tip of Borneo to the east coast where we would clear Malaysian



BELOW: Dutch relics are everywhere on Banda. This cannon overlooked the town and nearby plantations.



A jar of nutmeg and packets of other goodies were a present in Banda.

customs at Sandakan for Gove and not clear into Indonesia. We had no time to apply for an Indonesian Cruising Permit (CAIT) or obtain visas. However, with a letter of authority from Stuart which outlined the reason for the passage and appointing me as master, we planned a direct route through Indonesian waters with minimum stops claiming a "right of innocent passage" if challenged. A study of the latest BOM Interactive Wind forecasts for that area suggested light winds until approaching Gove. We departed KK on October 20. Our decision not to apply for a CAIT helped avoid wasting time in port clearances. We were never challenged by authorities to show documentation. During our stops and while getting fuel I was often asked where I was from. My response of "Australia" resulted in big grins and replies of "good country" etc.

Into the grove

During the first few days out of KK we settled very comfortably into Truest Passion, proved its systems and enjoyed one another's company and the scenery.

This was very pleasant, covering about 50nm a day across the top of Borneo but quite close to Philippine waters where tensions do exist and pirate incidents are more likely to occur. Insurance companies do not like yachts entering the Sulu Sea. The watermaker performance was important because I wished to keep just enough water on board to get us to each destination without having the weight penalties of full tanks. Catamarans going to windward do better if they are light and Truest Passion was in cruising mode, i.e. loaded. At Sandakan we completed clearances and final provisioning.

There is always an enormous amount of debris floating in these waters (plastic bags, bottles, polystyrene, branches, wood etc) but logs are a big issue. In Borneo heavy rains in the upper reaches of the numerous large rivers cause flooding and the logs float out to become hazards for yachts. We maintained a log watch at all times although the frequency of sightings decreased the further we were from Borneo. Near

river mouths we were constantly changing heading to avoid them.

Planned route

Our planned route through Indonesian waters now required several passages of about 300-400nm each. We carried a total of 520 litres of diesel (400 internal and 120 in jerrys) and were expecting to motor-sail at just over seven knots on one motor using 2.3 litres per hour which gave us a theoretical max range over 1000nm. The figures were pretty good, but we did not always maintain the 7+ kts (SOG) because of wind, sea and current which at times can be fierce, eg more than three knots in straits or 1.5 against for days at a time.

Fuel was obtained from service stations because the fuel available at the waterfront from drums and other sources was easier to source but was more expensive and of doubtful quality. At each town it was quite an experience to head off with a couple of jerrys riding on the back of a small motor bike looking for the nearest servo. It was a good way to meet the locals! Once this initial reconnaissance was successfully completed, follow-up runs using a bemo (taxi) with all jerrys was easy. While

We gave this fisherman supplies more than 100nm from land.



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this was occurring some of the crew went to the fresh markets for vegetables and other supplies which are plentiful and cheap. The only ATMs after Sandakan were in Bitung (NE tip of Sulawesi), and then it was only one bank that would work with a Cirrus card and there were withdrawal limits. So lots of visits to that ATM were needed.

Easy and comfortable

Motor-sailing through Indonesian waters at this time of the year was easy and comfortable. Light winds up to 10 knots ensure low seas and our route was entirely in open waters until nearing destinations or passing through a wide strait. Skies were generally clear or with high overcast but most nights resulted in local squalls which lasted about 30 minutes and then cleared with standard conditions slowly returning. Maximum wind strength encountered in these squalls was 30 knots. Our best sailing configuration was a code zero, genoa and full main with the windward motor (Gori overdrive props) at 2200 rpm. With a beam wind of a 5-8 knots we easily exceeded seven knots of hull speed.

Metal buoy moored in 4000m depth more than 100nm from Sandakan.



Pirates and other hazards

We were not concerned about pirates although one afternoon we were unexpectedly approached from the stern by three small motorised outrigger canoes when we were between Indonesia and the Philippines and more than 100nm from any land. Although initially surprised, we waved, and we thought they would like a few provisions, so we indicated they should motor along side (we were doing seven knots). We passed over water bottles, soft drink cans and some biscuits. They kindly offered a modest tuna in return, but we declined because this was their livelihood, and we could catch our own anyway. We still do not know if they were operating from a mother ship (none in sight) or this was their normal fishing area, but we were impressed because in either case they had no navigation aids, no shelter, no radios and were in a small open boat using a small motor in open seas — amazing seamen. After the transfer, a photograph and a grin they turned 180 degrees and roared off. We hooked a large tuna 30 minutes later.

Our only other encounter with local boats at sea involved an unnoticed motorised fishing canoe crossing our stern rather closely on the first day out from Malaysia. To my surprise (which quickly turned to alarm) the trailing lure attached to a 200lb-breaking-strain line took off with the big reel peeling off line at a terrific rate. I initially tried unsuccessfully to signal the fisherman then yelled for a knife to cut the line. Fortunately the line was cut before the end was reached when I feared the big game reel would have been ripped off the yacht. As I say, Stuart does not do things by half with that 200lb line to ensure he does not lose a fish! A few seconds later the fisherman (now hundreds of metres astern) was noticed to be stopped and removing some very

WITH THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT

The following generalisations sum up my findings for these passages.

1. Be prepared to motor

I do not believe it is possible to sail without motoring through Indonesia on that route at that time because the winds are just too light. The Gulf and the north Queensland coast are a different case. The alternative route over the top of PNG which was so bad in 2010 may be suitable in other years, but there are sufficient other factors which would cause us to avoid PNG — fuel can hard to find, security concerns, currents, wind direction etc.

2. Conditions in the Gulf change in summer

Many cruisers seem concerned about crossing the Gulf, perhaps because of their experiences heading the other direction in the winter months when winds are strong and big seas are common. At this time of the year a reasonable weather pattern can be expected to allow a four-day crossing sailing all or most of the way. You may have to wait in Gove for a week. More favourable winds occur later in December or January but the risk of cyclones increases.

3. The trap of diverting to Darwin

For yachts starting from Singapore and retracing the rally route back via Bali and Kupang, there is a temptation to divert into Darwin either from Kupang or Saumlaki because the wind angle and currents are likely to favour that entry port. But then you have to sail from Darwin to Gove at that time of the year which is still challenging and in most cases will still require motoring for all or most of the way unless you wish to do lots of tacking. Day-hopping is slow because of the location of some of the anchorages and you still have to tackle the Gulf. In October 2006 I sailed This Way Up back from Darwin and sailed all the way 20 days close-hauled to Dunk Island (but that is another story).



Dave and Pattie departing after the seven-week passage.

strong line from round his outboard propeller — sorry about that!

Another even less pleasant revelation was the appearance of a large metal moored buoy in open seas northwest of Sulawesi on our first day out. We were in depths exceeding four kilometres. That's right — four kilometres! The first one was just an unusual black shape on the horizon and then another much closer to us which we could photograph. It was a pointed metal drum about two metres long and was tethered in very deep waters and making waves because the current here was 1.5 knots against us. We saw a trawler moored to one later in the voyage. Who paid for and installed them is a mystery but our aim was to miss them. Running over one in a catamaran was not a good outcome. Night sailing watches took on another major responsibility — continuous radar watch. Fortunately these buoys did show at 0.5nm on our radar. We subsequently met one of our passage-making colleagues back in Mooloolaba who had scraped his hull on one during his trip earlier that year. In all we saw more than six, but we suspect that there are many more out there. We still wonder what is at the bottom of that four-kilometre nylon mooring line! We also saw many moored fishing

platforms although these were closer inshore (within 10nm of the coast) which were made of bamboo poles secured across 200-litre plastic drums. They often had local fishing boats operating nearby.

The other major challenge apart from the night squalls was the current. In straits, we encountered strong currents of up to three knots. We were fortunate to have the current with us on most occasions, but we had no way of predicting them in the areas we were travelling. There are also large circulating currents of up to two knots in these seas. We found you could be against these sea currents for days on end.

Daily routine

The daily routine soon established itself. Sailing conditions change very slowly in the tropics so attention to sails is infrequent and with light winds we motored all the time, changing engines every 12 hours — just one benefit of a catamaran. The days passed with activities such as reading, cards or sudoku, talking, sleeping, making water, emails and breadmaking. Yes, the ladies played hundreds of games of cards, teaching each other several varieties of Patience, and we received by email

the rules for Frustration. Happy hour at dusk was, as always, a high point. Closer to Australia our replacement trailing fishing lure provided some good results. With large forward-opening hatches the air flow made conditions pleasant except when a gust blew the cards off the table! Sleeping in the forward cabins was comfortable in the low seas. Night watches were three hours for the men and two hours for the ladies although if a squall was near, extra hands stayed on deck. We generally covered about 150+ nm per day so a 400nm leg involved three nights at sea.

We used HF sailmail for correspondence with Stuart, friends, customs, position reporting and downloading GRIBS or a weather FAX. GRIB files were reasonably accurate, especially if the arrows showed consistency of direction over a large area. Wind speeds were less reliable. The weather patterns over Australia were ideal for the trip across the Arafura Sea and Gulf of Carpentaria. There was no high in the bight to generate the SE trades for weeks — most unusual. We did not get any significant SE trades until we passed Cape York and south bound to Margaret Bay. Because of the good conditions and our fuel capacity we did not stop at Ambon (it is up an inlet and reportedly not a very attractive anchorage) and although we stopped for three days at Banda we again did not refuel.

Keep going if the going is good

Our sailing plan was simple: if the conditions were sailable we kept going. This was primarily a passage-making trip because we knew that the insurance company was keen to have us south of Cape York by December 1. We would only stop for fuel or if the weather conditions were unacceptable, i.e. if the winds were more than 20-25 knots

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and with a poor forecast. Although we stopped for a total of 31 nights out of the seven-week trip, many of these were while we were day-hopping round the tip of Borneo or late-night entries into an anchorage because of bad weather. If the day hops were removed along with the refuelling stops, the passage looks more like a continuous sailathon.

The most interesting anchorage was in the Banda Island group where we spent three nights. It is a treasure trove of history covering the spice trade era and the attempts by the Portuguese, Dutch and British to control this initially extremely rich commodity. Today Banda is a delightful but little-visited tourist destination with many interesting Dutch forts and ruins. I recommend yachts transiting this area plan a few days in Banda including a meal at the Mutiara Guest House. Rizal Bahlawan (Abba to us) who owns this guest house is a great guide and source of information. A service station is supposed to be established there this year — otherwise drum fuel only is available.

With the good weather continuing, the stop in Gove was just 28 hours during which we cleared customs, provisioned, refuelled, did a double engine oil change, fitted a new navigation light, sewed a cringle on the mainsail and filled gas bottles. The Gove Yacht Club has lost some of its appeal and character and a one-way taxi trip to town is now \$30. We caught the afternoon outgoing tide, crossed the Gulf of Carpentaria and arrived at the entrance to Endeavour Strait (near Seisia) two days later. This was my sixth rounding of Cape York, so these waters were familiar and allowed us to make maximum progress knowing what conditions we could get. I think we were very lucky with the conditions we experienced because a wait for good weather at Gove should be expected.



A fast run through the Hole in the Wall approaching Gove.

Down the coast

The passage down the Queensland coast was as usual a mixed one. A persistent high-level trough hovering along the east coast resulted in difficult conditions with winds turning against us in the afternoon and evening and seas building despite a pressure gradient which should have given us easterly winds. Each day started well but each evening the situation became uncomfortable and we can all confirm that sleep is impossible in the forward cabins of a catamaran going to windward in anything more than a one-metre sea (remember we were well loaded). We anchored for three days at Flinders Island waiting for strong winds to pass and sought anchorage on several nights down the Queensland coast when adverse conditions eventuated.


Our 1am arrival at Bundaberg was notable for the bad conditions which again developed that evening plus having to negotiate a tug and attached barge moored in the channel entrance. Next day we were met by Wal and Robyn from Annwn who joined us for a farewell lunch for Paul



Fishing in North Queensland waters is much better than Indonesia.

and Judy. Wal had just sailed on one of the yachts which returned via PNG and endured those difficult conditions. At 2pm we departed for Kingfisher in fine conditions only to encounter yet another severe weather pattern for most of the afternoon and evening across Hervey Bay. Thereafter, conditions improved such that we required no motor on the last day to hold 7-8 knots on a broadreach into Mooloolaba — marvellous conditions.

We handed over Truest Passion to Stuart and Nanette at his berth after a great adventure, thanks to the support of Paul and Judy over the last seven weeks.

We intend to bring our yacht This Way Up back via the route described in this article starting a little earlier but still passing Cape York about the end of November or early December. 

cruisinghelmsman David and Pattie Bowden



David and Pattie have been cruising for 11 years aboard This Way Up, a Grainger 430 catamaran.