

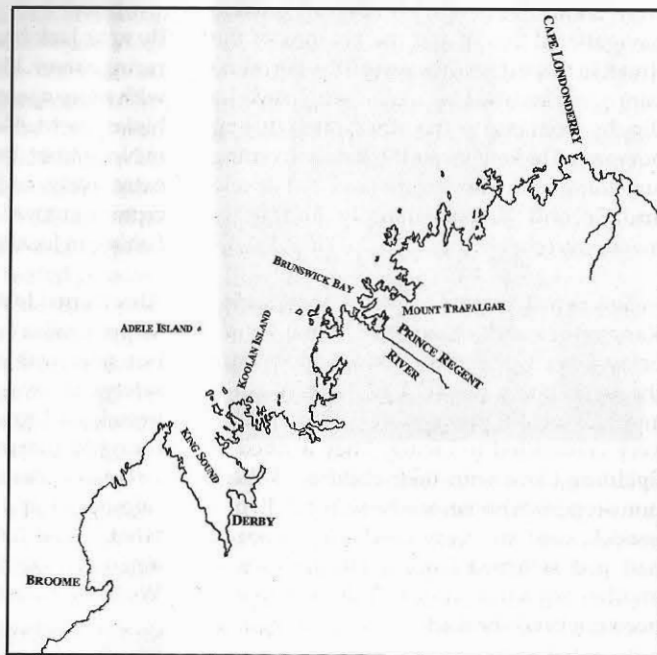
Fine Romance on the Wonderful Kimberley Coast

Ion and Margaret Ullett

Without a doubt this is the most remote and beautiful area we have visited. [That is a strong statement after cruising from RSAYS to Papua-New Guinea and the Solomons, as well as Indonesia, the former in *Alpha Centauri* and the latter in *Fine Romance*. — Ed.] In the month we were there we saw one yacht in the distance and a small settlement of people at a pearl culture farm. Day after day, week after week, we were alone in spectacular scenery, without seeing another soul. Most of the time there was very little wind. But back to the start.

In 1991 we participated in the Darwin to Ambon race, and returned to Australia via Bali and Kupang in Timor. Our companions were Pep and Alison Manthorpe. Prior to our departure on 22 July we organised with Customs in Darwin that we would be able to clear Customs and Immigration at BHP's Koolan Island in Yampi Sound, about 125 nm north of Broome. Koolan Island and its adjoining neighbour Cockatoo Island have giant iron ore mines right against the shore. Cockatoo is now worked out and closed. Koolan has about five years to go.

In early October we made the approach to Yampi Sound in the dark at the Adele Island Light. This was necessary because of the tide.



We were entering the land of BIG tides — 37 feet is common. You can just imagine what the currents are like. In fact it was quite impossible for us to go against the stream, and each day the first thing you do is consult tide tables to plan all activities accordingly.

We anchored at 0200 off Cockatoo Island to await our scheduled time of arrival with Customs at Koolan. The Coastwatch aircraft had buzzed us the afternoon before and organised that we would be inspected immediately after *Iron Whyalla* at 1100. We tied up beside the giant ore carrier, and were soon put through our entry procedures by a very pleasant young lass and lad who had flown up from Broome. The BHP people were wonderful to us. They placed a bus at our disposal, as we had a lot of provisioning

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to do. When you arrive in Australia from overseas by yacht you must have your cupboards completely bare. All left-over food is confiscated. As we had come from Indonesia we had to have our water tanks empty too.

About five miles from Koolan Island on the mainland is one of the Kimberley's most memorable anchorages: Crocodile Creek. We entered through a reasonably narrow entrance to wind our way past cliffs of scarlet and ochre deep into the mountainside. We were checking our depth and became a little concerned to have only thirty feet under us when the day's tide was close to forty feet. We had been assured that there was a deep hole at the end. With our hair standing on end we rounded a blind corner with sheer cliffs either side. They were only a hundred feet apart, closing to a dead end with a little waterfall dribbling into a boil hole about a hundred feet round. There we had seventy feet under us. We tied up to steel rings set in the walls with our anchor forward. Ten feet from the stern a superb stainless steel ladder disappeared into the depths, obviously a BHP amenity.

It was now high tide, bringing us level with the top rung of the ladder. Walking ashore we found the barbecue facility set up by the Koolan Island Yacht Club. This is adjacent to a rock pool filled at high tide with water and an occasional crocodile. A good look into the water before entering is advisable. Then the tide started to ebb. We had to tend our lines frequently as we sank until the top of the mast (sixty feet from the water) was at the level of the barbecue. *Fine Romance* was sitting in a pool thirty feet deep, surrounded by mud, and the creek out to Yampi Sound

was totally dry. Our anchor and its chain lay in the mud well above deck level. Next day we had to wait until 1400 for the tide to come roaring round the corner like a fast flowing river.

From Yampi Sound we spent days motoring in flat calm past magnificent headlands with the most wonderfully sculptured rock outcrops. Many looked as if they had been sawn into regular sizes and then stacked into varying shapes and forms. Most spectacular!

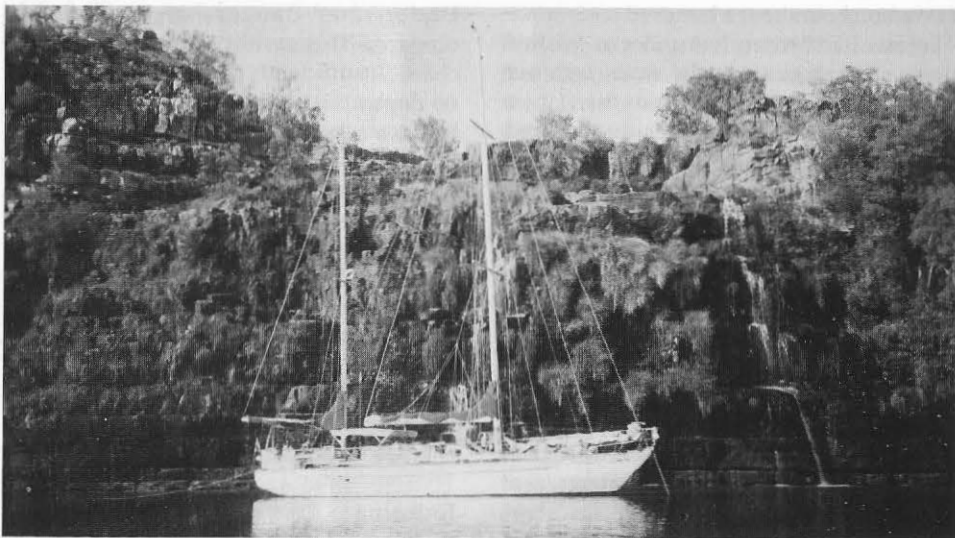
We saw plenty of hump-backed whales (a number with calves) heading south. Motoring in and out of countless bays with white sandy beaches it was like having the Flinders Ranges as a backdrop. The only disappointment was the water, which was brown and opaque from the boiling currents creating whirlpools of sand and mud. Underwater dangers are completely obscured. This is with continual notes on the chart, "Insufficiently surveyed" — "Caution: no depths surveyed" etc. The speed of the boat over the ground at times was over ten knots with the engine just ticking over. It's not for the faint hearted!

An excursion up uncharted Sampson Inlet for about three miles found us among completely untouched banks covered with the largest black-lipped oysters you can imagine. We filled a billy and broke off full shells, which we later barbecued until they opened. A touch of fresh lime and a glass of chateau cardboard made a superb feast.

Entering Brunswick Bay, with its wonderfully imperialistic names and the tide boiling under us, we started our much waited

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for passage to the famous Prince Regent River, flashing past Whirlpool Point through Strong Tide Passage with the backdrop of the giant mesas of Mount Trafalgar and Mount Waterloo into the Saint George Basin. There was up to 70 m of water under us in making these passages. Saint George Basin is a vast inland lake with beautiful headlands and limestone outcrops all tinted red with ironstone. We saw baob trees, stunted lontar palms and small eucalypts. After anchoring to await the tide, we motored 19 miles up Prince Regent river to King's Cascade. Although this was the end of the dry season (October) there was still plenty of water falling down the cascade. We anchored with a stern line to a mangrove so that we were parallel to and only thirty feet from the face of the Cascade. We had dinner on the after deck to absorb this wonderful scene, with three crocodiles cruising about daring us to go for a swim — and we have photographs



King's Cascade, Prince Regent River

to prove it! At low water the bottom three feet of the keel settled into the mud. At sunset we dined on barbecued oysters and Spanish mackerel, marvelling as the colours of the cliffs turned to those glorious warm pinks only the Kimberleys can achieve.

After King's Cascade we motored back down the Prince Regent River to Camp Creek, which is a narrow creek winding deep into the red cliffs to stop abruptly at a rock wall. It dries out completely at low water. We had been given plenty of advice on how to handle mooring. We closed our water inlets and waited to settle, hoping to stay upright. There was no worry as we sank into black ooze, like being in a cradle in the mud. No crocs fortunately came to check us out, only innumerable Mud Skippers. These are the unusual amphibious fish fascinatingly described by Flinders in his journal. At high water we went ashore in the dinghy to enjoy

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Fine Romance in Crocodile Creek

a walk far above the rock wall. There we found a perfect billabong, with pandanus palms, tall paperbarks and water lilies in the rock pools. It was wonderful to swim in a natural spa where the water runs through some rocks. It was a magnificent naturally landscaped area — one of the best we have seen — and totally unspoiled. We had a very quiet night embraced by the mud.

Once back in Saint George's Basin it was refreshing to have a gentle breeze after the total shelter of the river. In these waters we spent a month away from the open sea as we passed along inland waterways behind islands and reefs. In Scott Strait the seas heap up with the tide and can be quite dangerous. We waited to catch the tide under us, and hurtled along, passing island after island.

Our last big adventure in the Kimberleys was to visit King George River just under Cape Londonderry, which was our most northerly point. Anchoring off the river entrance we prepared for a start at 0630. Just before high water we set off, and for two hours tried in vain to find a channel which would take us across the bar and into the river. It was now the end of the dry, and the entrance was completely silted up. Pep and Ion searched with the dinghy and lead line, but nowhere was there enough water. Anchoring *Fine Romance* just outside the bar in millpond conditions, we stocked the dinghy with fuel, water, etc, and set out for a memorable day. The King George River is set in a deep gorge with red cliffs three hundred feet high. We stopped the motor to drift in total silence. The slightest sound echoed from the giant walls, and the shrill squawk of cockatoos reverberated back and

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forth. At the end of the river, some seven miles inland, are two giant waterfalls. We found them dry, but in the wet they must be magnificent. The King George River is a masterpiece of nature, and only available to yachties. This is the most remote part of the Kimberleys, and has to be one of the world's great wilderness areas.

[John Lort Stokes placed many of the names on the charts when he surveyed the area in HMS *Beagle* (and the ship's boats) in February, 1838. Manoeuvring under sail in the strong tides was very difficult. They were much troubled by musquitos (sic) and intrigued by the shapes of the Aborigines' kileys. From the illustrations in Stokes' *Discoveries in Australia* we would call them

boomerangs. Marsden Hordern's *Mariners be Warned!* is an excellent account of Stokes and HMS *Beagle* in Australian waters 1837—1843. The description of Bass Strait is as interesting as that of the Kimberleys.

After completing the Kimberley section *Fine Romance* reached Darwin in early November. Peter Last joined Ion and Margaret for the passage to Gove, Thursday Island, Cape York, Cooktown and Cairns. Recommissioning after Christmas at home, Ion and Margaret spent the remainder of 1992 on the east coast, mainly in and about the Whitsunday Group. It was a pleasure to welcome them home for Christmas, before they return to Gladstone for the 1993 program.] SQ

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Never was any King's cutter that beat her

Peter Last

Of the names on our charts and maps much can be written, for some notable people were commemorated, as well as some equally notable boobies. One of the latter was Lord Gambier, for whom Flinders named the group of islands dominated by Wedge. Fourteen months earlier James Grant called a mountain after him, and nearby another for the inventive Captain John Schank. He was the man who introduced sliding keels into His Majesty's ships. "It was in America, during the fatal contest between the Mother Country and her Colonies, that Captain Schank, ... in 1774 solicited Lord Percy [subsequently Duke of Northumberland], then at Boston in New England, to permit him to build a boat with ... a deep Keel [which] was made movable, and to be screwed upwards into a trunk or well formed within the vessel." In 1789 and 1790 two more were built: the *Cynthia* sloop and the *Trial* revenue cutter. The latter was a great success, and "never was any King's cutter that beat her," as recorded in copies of the official reports in the appendix to Grant's *Narrative*. This must surely have one of the longest titles ever given to a book of exploration —

The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery performed in his Majesty's Vessel The Lady Nelson, of sixty tons burthen, with Sliding keels, in the years 1800, 1801, and 1802, to New South Wales. By James Grant, Lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Including Remarks on the Cape de Verd Islands, Cape of Good Hope, the hitherto Unknown Parts of New Holland, discovered by him in his Passage (the first ever attempted from Europe) through the Streight separating that Island from the Land discovered by Van Diemen: Together With Various Details of his Interviews with the Natives of New South Wales; Observations on the Soil,

Natural Productions, &c. not known or very slightly treated of by former Navigators; with his Voyage home in the Brig Anna Josepha round Cape Horn; and an Account of the Present State of the Falkland Islands. To Which Is Prefixed An Account Of The Origin Of Sliding Keels, and the advantage resulting from their use; With an Appendix of Orders, Certificates, and Examinations, relative to the Trial Cutter. The Whole Illustrated With Elegant Engravings. London: Printed by C. Roworth, Bell Yard, Fleet Street, for T. Egerton, Military Library, Whitehall, 1803.

After all that, there are only 195 pages of somewhat dreary prose, with frustrating absence of vital information. Grant began with a justification for the new development to a conservative profession suspicious of innovation. He emphasised the added safety which sliding keels provide in avoiding "the worst consequence of a difficulty in steering, and that is a ship's broaching-to. A ship scudding before the wind, or quartering, having little sail set and that low, such as a reefed foresail, when between two seas is almost becalmed, and therefore loses her way: the next following sea raises her stern, her bow inclines downwards, the stern by this is lifted so high the rudder has little or no power, being almost out of the water. In this situation, the ship pressed on the lee-bow by the water having got on the weather quarter and the ship on the top of the sea, she flies with such violence as to bring her head round; and then lying on the broadside she plunges with the greatest velocity into a high or raging sea, the water breaks into her, washing and carrying everything off the deck, frequently some of the crew; and it is to be feared by such accidents vessels themselves go to the bottom, and are no more heard of. Now there is nothing more clear and certain, than that Sliding Keels