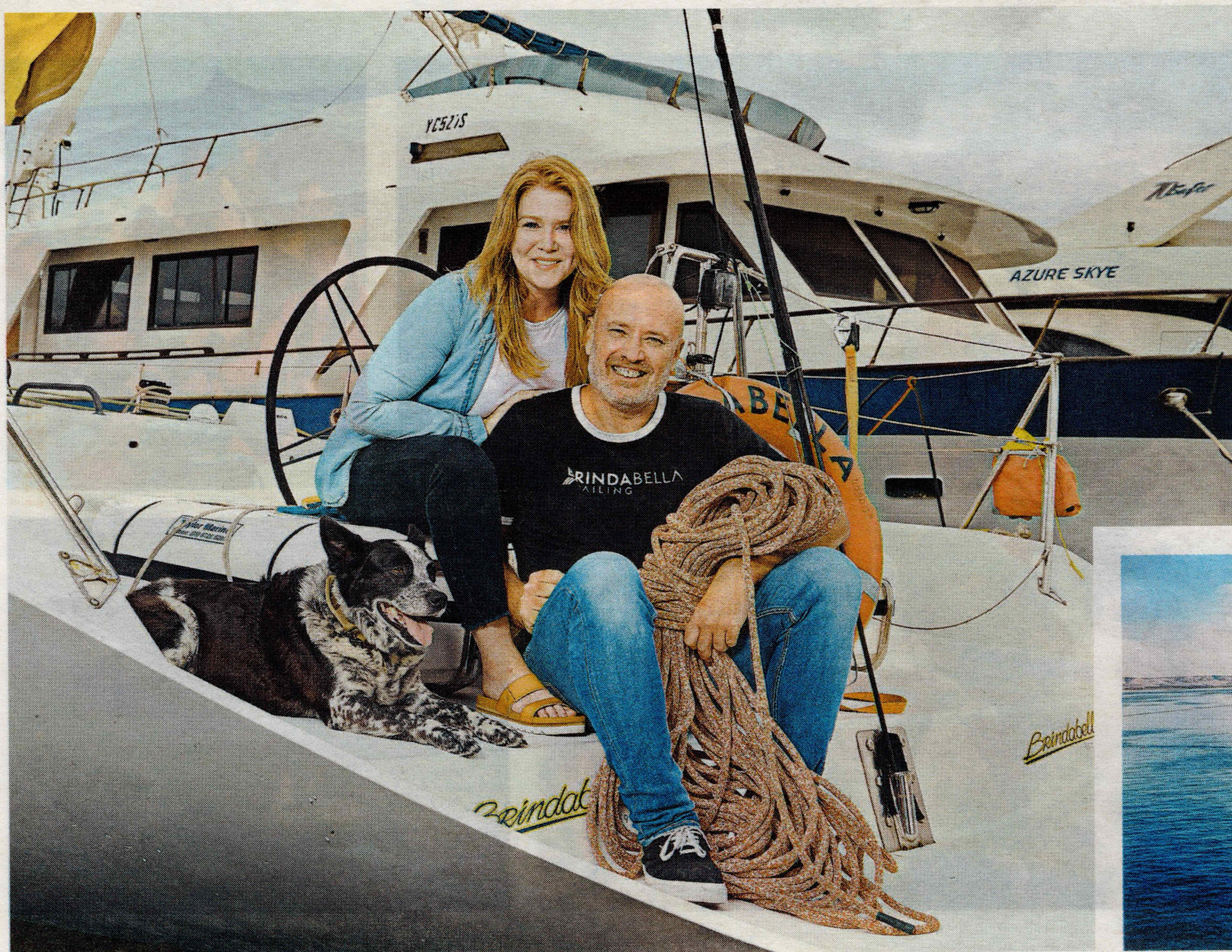




“Brig and I were going to bed with the laptop, looking up yacht porn, thinking ‘one day, wouldn’t it be nice to have our own yacht?’”



Changing tack

Adelaide couple Brigid and Johnny were looking for a new challenge. They had no idea that challenge would take the form of our most revered racing yacht

Story NATHAN DAVIES

She was the most famous yacht in the country, 80 feet of pure speed, a kevlar racing machine that took line honours in the 1997 Sydney to Hobart, captured the heart of the nation and earned the nickname “the people’s maxi”.

But all champion yachts, like champion racehorses, have their day and Brindabella had – to continue the racehorse metaphor – been put out to pasture.

She was moored in a marina in Drumoyne, Sydney, her serious racing days behind her, when she caught the eye of an Adelaide couple who’d made a habit of browsing what they jokingly refer to as “yacht porn”.

Johnny Hilhorst and Brigid Dighton would often flick through yacht classifieds in bed, wondering “what if”, indulging the harmless fantasy of a life at sea.

Johnny had a corporate job in finance and insurance, Brigid had a performing arts and design background working in film and television. Both were keen for a change,

something different to take them into the second half of their careers. Something exciting.

“It wasn’t a midlife crisis,” Johnny laughs.

“Well, maybe it was a bit. We sat down in our studio about four years ago and actually wrote down all of the things that we valued.

“We knew we wanted to do something together as a business. I was tired of my role and wanted to do something different, and knew we wanted to start a business. We just didn’t know what that was.”

With four children between them aged nine to 15 they knew they wanted to prioritise family, to find that elusive “balance” all families are

Brigid Dighton and Johnny Hilhorst with their dog, Seb, aboard Brindabella at the Royal South Australian Yacht Squadron. The maxi yacht has been reborn as a charter vessel, but she is still capable of stirring up a cracking pace. Picture: Matt Loxton

seeking. “We sat on that for probably two-and-a-half years. We considered a restaurant, but the 24-7 stress level wouldn’t have worked with the family.

“So Brig and I were going to bed with the laptop, looking up yacht porn, thinking ‘one day, wouldn’t it be nice to have our own yacht?’. And then I saw this Jutson 80 on a website. I clicked on it and went ‘hold on, that’s Brindabella’.

“I said, as a bit of a joke, ‘what about this one?’ I saved it as a favourite and kept coming back to it and then one day I said, ‘hey, what about if the yacht WAS our business?’

“We laughed at first, but we couldn’t get the idea out of our head.”

“We couldn’t sleep, we became obsessed,” Brigid says.

As the couple thought more about Brindabella they realised that she ticked every box from that initial meeting in the studio.

Hospitality, creativity, being on the ocean. Now they just had to buy her, get her up to speed, get her back to Adelaide and launch a



“People say, ‘I can’t believe we’re actually on Brindabella’. We’ve even had people say, ‘it’s not THE Brindabella is it?’ We love telling them it is

new business. In the middle of a pandemic. Easy.

Deep inside Johnny and Brigid knew they could make it work though, and part of that confidence was tied up in the yacht’s name, which was taken from the iconic mountain range and conjured up memories for anyone with even the most casual acquaintance with yachting.

“I don’t think we could have done this with any other boat but Brindabella,” Brigid says.

“There was another famous yacht for sale – Ragamuffin – but it doesn’t have the same ring to it. And the boat itself didn’t have the qualities that make Brindabella special. There’s something quite iconic about her and people are drawn to it.”

When Johnny told his brother that they’d bought a maxi and showed him a picture his brother replied with “it’s nice, but it’s no Brindabella”.

“People come on board and say, ‘I can’t believe we’re actually on Brindabella,’” Johnny says. “We’ve even had people say, ‘it’s not THE Brindabella is it?’ We love telling them that it is.”

The couple set about getting the yacht re-

rigged and ship shape, and recruited a crew to bring her back to Adelaide. Sydney was in lockdown, and the crew isolated on board while Brigid ferried food and supplies from the shops to the marina.

Even when sailing her back Covid made its presence felt, with Brindabella forced to sail into Portland, Victoria, so the crew could get PCR tests before crossing the border into SA.

Five days after leaving Sydney, with a tailwind for most of the trip, Johnny and Brigid and the crew sailed Brindabella into Adelaide, her new home.

“Crossing the border, about 30 nautical miles out to sea, we were joined by about 150 dolphins,” Johnny says. “It was just beautiful.”

Now Brindabella is based at the Royal South Australian Yacht Squadron and is earning her keep by offering people the unique opportunity to spend a day sailing on a maxi yacht.

Brigid says there’s something about hitting your straps under sail that just moves people.

“As soon as you come through the heads and turn that engine off and the sails are set there’s a calm that comes over people and they’re just

Brindabella in her racing days: surrounded by spectator craft in the Derwent River as she nears the finish to take line honours in the 1997 Sydney to Hobart; the crew in rough conditions in the 2012 race; and battling 45 knot winds and big seas off Tasman Island in 2013. Pictures: Brett Costello, Craig Greenhill

like ‘wow’,” she says. But it’s not all cruising with a sparkling in hand and Christopher Cross on the stereo (although all of this can be arranged if that’s your vibe).

No, Brindabella is very much still a racing maxi, and still more than capable of hitting the speeds that helped her win the prestigious ocean race in Australia.

“Those that haven’t sailed before, and even some who have sailed before, are just in awe of how even a light breeze can get 22 tonne of boat moving so quickly and so gracefully,” Brigid says.

Everything from a couple of hours on the Gulf to overnights to Kangaroo Island and Yorke Peninsula can be arranged – Johnny and Brigid are happy to work on personalised itineraries, bearing in mind that a yacht goes where the wind takes her – and Brindabella’s new owners are excited to be offering a tourism experience out of Adelaide that doesn’t revolve around wineries.

Able to carry up to 34 passengers, the yacht is perfect for corporate or club activities, but if you want to book a trip for two for a romantic anniversary getaway it wouldn’t be the first time.

At the end of the day, Johnny and Brigid are just happy to be sharing the joy of sailing and sharing the beauty and history of Brindabella.

“Getting out on the ocean connects people,” Johnny says.

“It brings people together and it just feels good.” ■

www.brindellasailing.com.au