

Pied Piper II Cruises Hinchinbrook Island and Passage

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The World Heritage listed area of Hinchinbrook Island and the mangrove-forested channel that separates it from the north Queensland coast provide wonderful cruising grounds.

A visit this year is our third, and the area still delights and surprises us. Hinchinbrook is a high, continental island close to the mainland. How easy it is to imagine a slightly lower sea level and the island being part of the mainland. Cardwell Range and the north/south Bruce Highway and the town of Cardwell on the coast would then be in a valley.

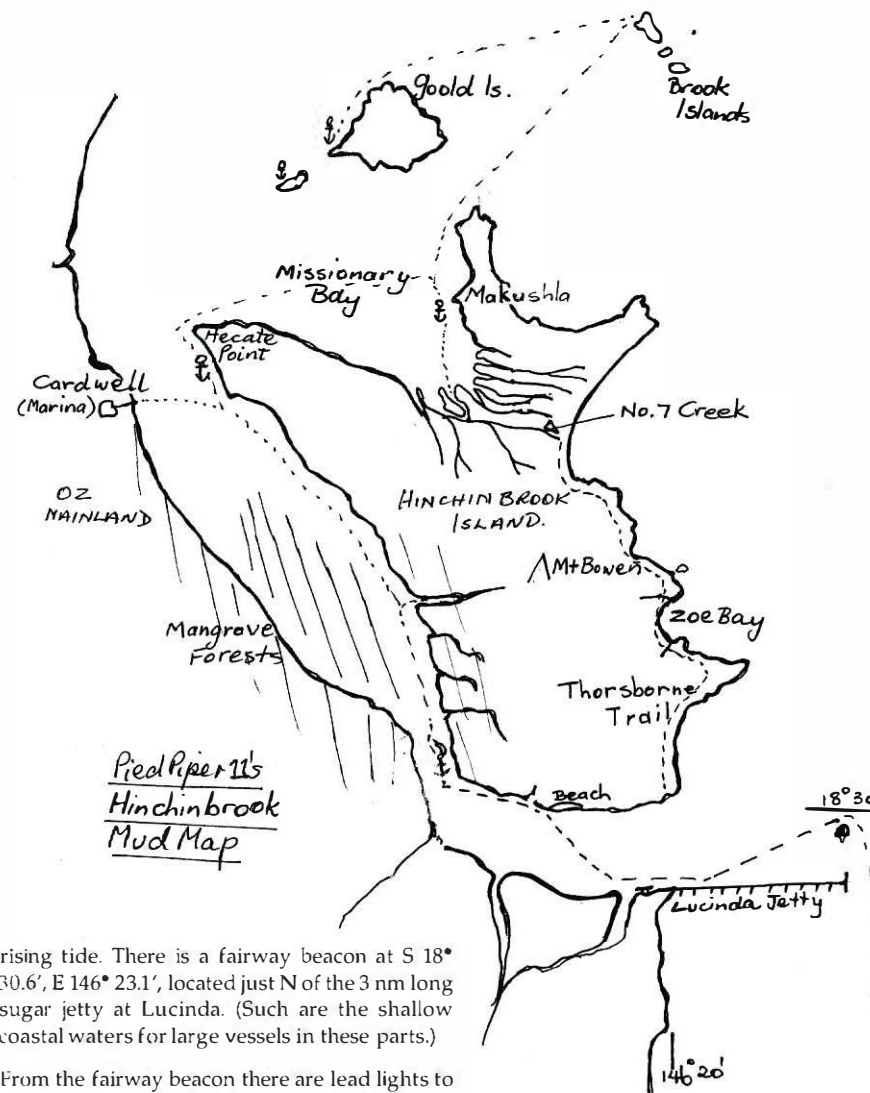
Locals and others fought hard in the early 1990s to stop a development of Hamilton Island type, which would have seen, amongst other ghastlies, a communications tower and helipad on the Island's wild and outstanding Mt Bowen. Bowen and its cloud piercing companion, aptly named 'The Thumb', rise over a thousand metres almost directly from the sea, dominating unique rainforest and mangrove landscapes.

The area supports the major seagrass area for dugong populations along the entire east coast of Australia.

A scaled down development plan has resulted in a marina and accompanying residential development at Oyster Point near Cardwell. This is a boon for visiting yachties, local boaties, and rescue vessels, for the wide mud flats and a long fetch from the north and south east make anchorage off Cardwell difficult. However, building and big ideas at Oyster Point continue, and one gets the feeling that constant vigilance will be needed to keep the nearby areas pristine.

The world famous Thorsborne Trail, which runs along the east coast of the Island, is limited to 40 people at a time.

To enter Hinchinbrook Channel from S we usually leave from either Fantome or Orpheus Island in the Palm Island Group (wonderful coral snorkelling spots and worth a few days at least) and time our departure to arrive on a



rising tide. There is a fairway beacon at S 18° 30.6', E 146° 23.1', located just N of the 3 nm long sugar jetty at Lucinda. (Such are the shallow coastal waters for large vessels in these parts.)

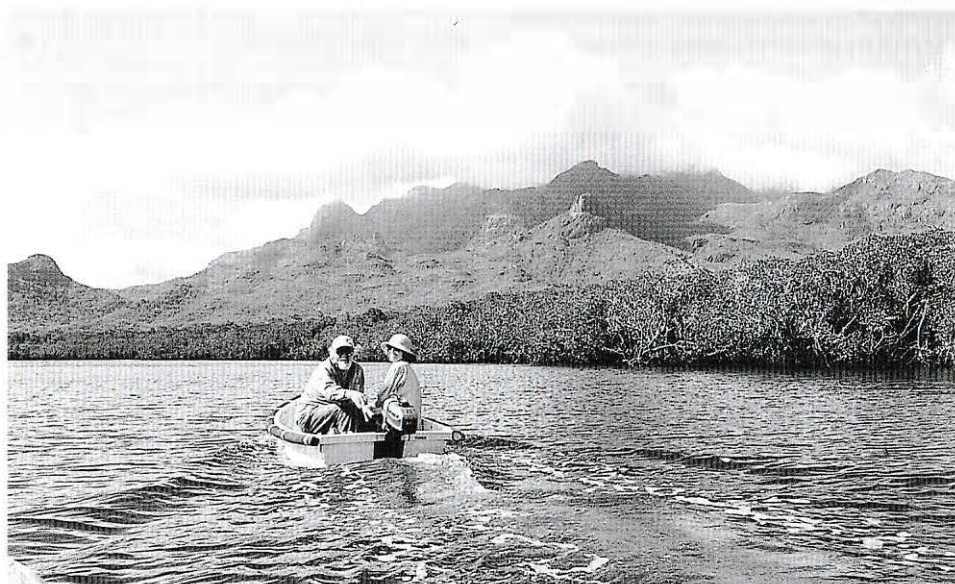
From the fairway beacon there are lead lights to take one diagonally towards the jetty. We always enjoy a close up view of the osprey nest near the front lead as we turn to skirt parallel to the jetty.

Then it is a matter of following the red and green beacons, first passing a smaller jetty used for loading molasses. As the official entry to Hinchinbrook Channel is from the N, one must keep the red beacons to starboard and the green to port. There is enough water for keelboats, but we like the top of a rising tide, just in case we inadvertently wander from deep water. The

shallowest place is the bar approaching the jetty leads.

Lucinda is a Standard Port for tides and Cardwell a secondary port, so predictions in the area are accurate.

The beacons from the molasses jetty take you across the Channel towards Hinchinbrook Island, and if you head for the W side of the island beach you can't go wrong. Then it's a turn to port to skirt the rainforest cliffs of Hinchinbrook off on



The Moncrieffs took their dinghy up Number 7 Creek, Hinchinbrook Island on a day when Mt Bowen and The Thumb were in cloud.

the starboard side. This is when I take a deep breath of wonderment and pinch myself to know that this place is real and I am lucky enough to visit again.

Along this coast we use the binoculars to pick up front leads. They are not lit, and are just big white triangles. Approaching the front lead, we bear off to starboard to put a green buoy to port. As you come around the next corner of the channel and put a red buoy to starboard, tiny Haycock Island shows itself. This is a perfect first anchorage in the Channel. We anchor in about 5-7 metres of water either N or S of the island, depending on wind. There is tidal movement, strong enough to swing the boat if the wind is light, so room must be left for that. Some we notice anchor successfully at the E side of the Channel near the mangroves. The mud bottom provides excellent holding.

Going ashore here is impossible because of extensive mangrove forests, but a quiet day on the boat or fishing for barramundi (preferably from the dinghy up the nearby creek) gives an opportunity to acclimatise to this special place. Haycock Island is a favourite fishing spot with locals. I like to watch throughout the day, as the colours change and the mists come and go on the surrounding mountains.

The creeks that pierce Hinchinbrook Island mangroves provide wonderful anchorages, although we much prefer them in winter rather than spring to avoid sandflies. Gayundah Creek is our favorite. One time it rained: marvellous warm, heavy rain with not a breath of wind. We filled the water tanks, took a long shower and didn't tire of watching the vertical splashes as big raindrops fell noisily on the still waters of the creek. Afterwards we dinghied to the creek head where the mangroves close in on either side. A brilliant rainbow streaked its colours across the W rock face of Mt Bowen, which rises dramatically above the anchorage. This was the *African Queen* all over again.

When the tide recedes, exposing a mass of mangrove roots, a cacophony of crackling starts. Surprisingly it is shrimp's claws making this noise. We have seen crocodiles at both Haycock Island and Guyundah Creek, so we take local warnings very seriously.

The mainland side of the Channel has a huge mangrove forest on the W side. It is apparently

navigable, but we have not yet tried it. We would like to some day, but we were too late in the season this year — we would have been a meal for sandflies!

Following the buoys N from Gayundah Creek, one can anchor in the lee of Hecate Point, or round it to starboard and enter Missionary Bay. However, we quite like to have a day or two in the Port Hinchinbrook Marina at Oyster Point and a visit to Cardwell township before going to these northern parts of the Island. Silting is a constant problem in the marina channel, but Debbie on Channel 16 gives up-to-date information according to tide. A mud bank extending from the rock wall corner on the starboard side (where you would expect to turn directly right into the marina basin) must be avoided. It is best to keep going forward and take a very wide turn. Not that going aground is a big issue; it's all soft mud.

It's a pleasant walk into town with a good butcher, a greengrocer, supermarket, pub and pharmacy in the main street. The mangoes hanging from trees in the main street have always been tantalisingly green on our visits! The Hinchinbrook Interpretation Centre is a must. It is excellent.

Missionary Bay is large and shallow, with sea grass vital to the survival of dugongs and turtles. There are recommended transit lanes to minimise damage to the grasses. Lanes have lit beacons and coordinates are given in a wonderfully informative map and brochure, *Marine Wonders of Hinchinbrook*, published by the Hinchinbrook Local Marine Advisory Committee.

Anchorage in the large northern scoop that is Missionary Bay is deep enough and secure in S to NE winds off Makushla, but this year we were successful in also taking *The Piper* up Creek number 7. This gave us access to a boardwalk allowing you to leave the creek head and cross a narrow isthmus to the E side of Hinchinbrook Island.

This was a great thrill, for we were able to do a day walk through rainforest along the famed Thornsborne trail from Ramsay Bay as far as Nina Bay. It was low tide when we arrived at Nina, and from the water's edge on this very wide beach, the view back to the (now eastern) side of towering Mt Bowen and Thumb was truly spectacular. French yachting friends

cruising in company with us, exclaimed at the similarity to the Marquesas in the SE Pacific.

So how to get into Creek No 7?

Use the above mentioned *Marine Wonders of Hinchinbrook* map to reach Waypoint G (S 18° 16.13', E 146° 13.05'). It will be shallow, but arrive near the top of a rising tide and there is ample water for at least a full 2 metre draught. Head SE to the creek entry and find the National Parks sign to Ramsay Bay. If you have electronic C-Map, follow it, for it is very accurate for this entry.

Once inside the creek, there is plenty of water, even close to the mangroves on either side. Keep an eye out for the ferry from Cardwell, which also uses this creek and boardwalk to drop off walkers to the Trail. At the first fork, choose the starboard creek, then port ones thereafter. We recorded 16 m depth at one fork, but mostly there was 6-8 m of water. As the creek narrowed, we found a mooring buoy and presumed that it belonged to the ferry. We turned around and anchored about half a mile downstream of the buoy, and to one side. We put out a stern anchor to prevent the boat swinging into the stream and blocking access for the ferry. From there it was just a dinghy ride to timber steps leading out of the mangroves and onto the boardwalk.

Fortunately we took *Pied Piper II* in on a high tide early in the morning and left similarly on the rising tide in late afternoon. This gave us a full day on the trail, with the added enjoyment of being at Ramsay and Nina Bays at low tide. A swim in the light, warm surf was delightful. If it had been May through August we would not have hesitated to stay in the creek. Being October, dusk heralds the arrival of many insects and an open, breezy anchorage is much preferred, so we returned to the Makushla anchorage.

Another rainforest trail, from Makushla to Cape Richards, the most northern point of Hinchinbrook Island, is also beautiful but in a different way, for it traverses an extensive palm valley. The dappled light and bright green foliage make a brilliant contrast to the deep shadows cast by tall trees and dense foliage in the rainforest. A cold beer and lunch can be had in the Cape's small and delightful resort.

About 4 nm north east of Cape Richards are the Brook Islands and a short way to the NW lies Goold with its satellite, Garden Island.

Thousands of pied imperial pigeons and terns nest on the Brooks and we saw many groups of the black and white pigeons at dawn and dusk flying over us at Makushla, as they spend the day foraging for food on the mainland. Landing on The Brooks is prohibited but their protected reefs attracted us for a spot of snorkelling. Mooring via Great Barrier Reef Marine Parks buoys on the northern side of the most northerly Brook is easy, though there is wind on tide to watch for.

Access to most of the reef in a brisk SE breeze is a challenge. However, we found the fringing reef not far from the buoys alive with fish and a few unusual corals. Swimming in the centre of a school of shimmering silver fish (unidentified but similar to mullet) was magical, as they circled anticlockwise round and round me at great speed.

We have learnt that every coral reef is different, and sometimes one which initially seems to promise little in form and colour offers a great surprise. (It was on a bleached coral reef fringing Fantome Island that we found an enormous giant clam, which our cruising friends claimed was the largest they had seen in ten years cruising and snorkelling the South Pacific).

It was just a short sail from The Brooks to Goold Island for the night. There are a walking trail, camping spot and small beaches on Goold; a lovely place.

There is little shelter on the east coast of Hinchinbrook other than a tuck behind Agnes Island favoured by prawn trawlers during the day. The attractive Zoe Bay is rarely accessible. However, sailing along the rugged coast, with the cloud-tipped mountains of Hinchinbrook towering up high is spectacular.

It is not an easy sail to the S with a strong SE wind blowing, but in the afternoon, a NE sea breeze usually kicks in and you can enjoy a beam reach.

There are still places in Hinchinbrook for us to explore, and we would not hesitate to visit yet again. But whether we will ever be lucky enough to sail into Zoe at the right time, in the right conditions . . . well, who can tell? Maybe we will have to walk in. SO