



Great escape

Hervey Bay and Fraser Island provide a sheltered and relaxing alternative for bareboat chartering.

It was the second evening, with the sun gently sliding into the west that seemed to offer the consummate Hervey Bay experience. We had spent the day quietly cruising north on our Fraser Escape Bareboat Charters Seawind 1160 catamaran *Orla*, hugging the coast of Fraser Island as we came across the occasional pod of whales frolicking in the bay's calm, sun-drenched waters. With a couple of hours of daylight to spare, we

slid gently into the shelter of Rooney Point, a curving expanse of south-facing sandy coastline that took the edge off the north-easterly that had been providing a cooling breeze at the end of a warm late-spring day.

There was already a handful of boats at anchor as we entered the bay and once at rest we untied the tender and pattered to the beach, which we pretty much had to ourselves.

By Chris Beattie
Photography:
Steve Donnellon,
Chris Beattie

P116/117: Looking north across Sandy Point on Fraser Island, with Hervey Bay stretching away to the horizon.

Right: Orla, an 1160 Seawind, provided plenty of room for the crew of four.



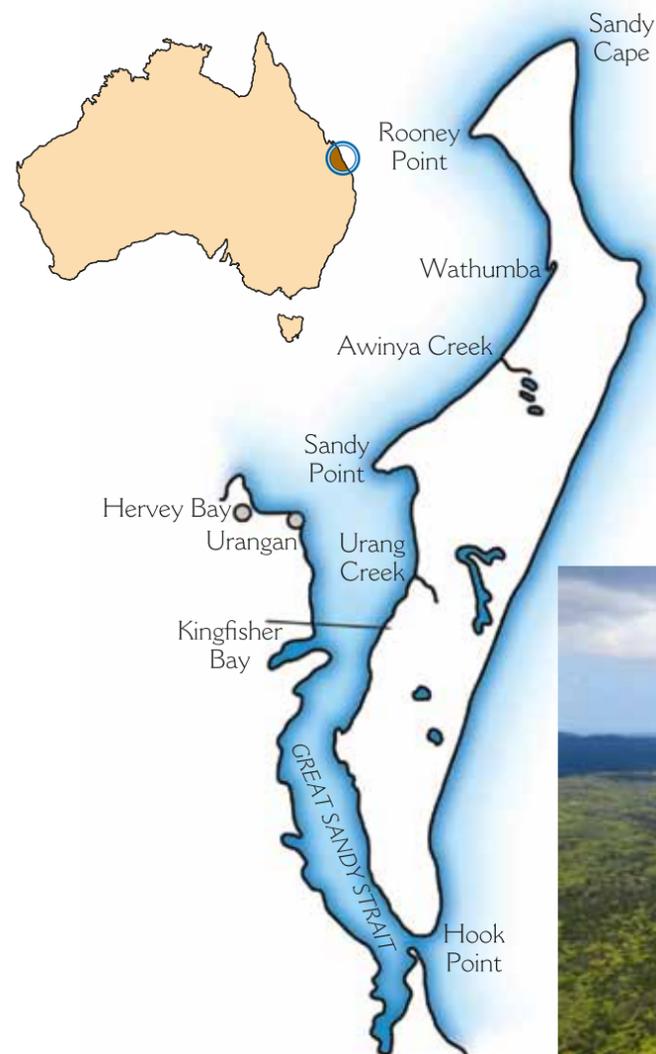
Sand like talcum powder and rolling, lightly treed dunes greeted us as we strolled along the beach and around the point effectively separating Hervey Bay from the Coral Sea. A sense of isolation and tranquillity enveloped us as we watched the ocean breakers washing onto the island, a refreshing breeze carrying the cares of the world away. Later that evening we enjoyed the sizzle of the cockpit barbecue and the gentle lap of the warm Hervey Bay waters against the hulls. Nodding off below, we were even serenaded by what I can only assume were some nearby whales, their unique and haunting 'whale song' transmitted across the bay and through the hulls.

We were finally experiencing Fraser Island as the folks from Fraser Escape had described it when they issued their invitation a few months ago.

Two days earlier we had flown into the coastal south-eastern Queensland hamlet of Urangan to begin our Fraser Island/Hervey Bay adventure. We had set aside five days in mid-October to explore the western coastline of Fraser Island, from Rooney Point in the north down to Deep Creek in the south, which is sheltered inside the Great Sandy Strait that separates the southern portion of the island from the mainland.

ALL ABOARD

There were four of us in total aboard *Orla*, a roomy and fully-equipped Seawind 1160 that awaited us as we arrived at the Great Sandy Straits Marina in Urangan. An hour or so filling shopping trolleys at the nearby supermarket and liquor store saw everything stowed aboard, with enough time left over for Fraser Escape's Steve





Top: The entrance to Wathumba Inlet, a haven for birdlife.

Above: The sands of Fraser Island play host to wildlife in all shapes and sizes.

Robson and his daughter Keira to brief us fully on the boat and the sort of adventures that lay ahead of us. By early afternoon we were on our way, heading eastward across the southern end of Hervey Bay for our first anchorage at Sandy Point, approximately midway down the western shoreline of Fraser Island. Sandy Point is at the head of a fairly large inlet that meanders into the island and offers good shelter from winds blowing from the north and east.

Toasting our good fortune at being surrounded by such pristine wilderness only three hours flying time from Melbourne, we savoured the surrounding sights and some fine wine in *Orla's* spacious and airy saloon on our first night afloat. Tidal movements in the order of three metres meant we needed to be careful that we had enough water under the boat in the mostly shallow local waters we would encounter over the following four days.

Fast-flowing tidal currents also provided a cautionary lesson when one of our party decided to take a pre-dinner dip off the back of the boat. No sooner had he slipped into the water than he was swept inland at a fairly alarming pace.

Realising he had no hope of swimming back to the boat, 'Pete' (name changed to avoid acute, though well-earned embarrassment) quickly assumed the prone position as he floated up the inlet at an estimated 4-5 knots. Our initial alarm soon subsided though, as some nearby cruisers who were out on their tender spotted Pete and quickly motored to his rescue. A wet and somewhat relieved crewmate was soon back aboard.

It's not a major concern once you're aware of it, but worth keeping in mind when you go for a dip.

WELCOME WEATHER

Happily, the predicted relatively gentle weather materialised over the rest of our cruise, leaving us free to meander along the coast of the world's largest sand island, exploring local features and marvelling at the abundance and diversity of the wildlife, both in the sea and on land.

Fraser Island stretches 123km north-south and spans 25km at its widest point. It boasts a unique natural environment and is the only place on the planet where rainforest grows on sand. Its abundant and pristine freshwater lakes and crystal-clear creeks draw tourists looking for an authentic back-to-nature experience. Over 325 species of birds and several species of wallabies, possums, flying foxes, echidnas and eastern Australia's purest population of dingoes make Fraser Island their home.

Incorporating the Great Sandy Marine Park, Hervey Bay spans the area between the northern half of Fraser Island and the mainland. Bordered by 40km of pristine beaches, its northern boundary

runs approximately east from Bundaberg to the northern tip of Fraser Island, with the entrance to the Great Sandy Strait at its southern edge.

WHALES AHOY

Whale-watching is one of Hervey Bay's main attractions. The season runs from late July to early November, with a fleet of tourist boats combing the



bay to view the magnificent humpbacks as they feed and cavort in the warm waters with their young.

Whales were certainly in abundance during our time on the bay, as we enjoyed numerous encounters, plenty of them up close, with the huge mammals. There were many suckling pairs of mothers and calves, their antics keeping camera shutters busy on the many whale-watching boats that turned up each day.

We also encountered turtles and dolphins and kept a sharp eye out for the elusive dugong which, unfortunately, lived up to its reputation during our visit.

Heading south on day three we spent a few hours exploring Wathumba Inlet. Teeming with birdlife, it is a shallow waterway with shifting sands so we decided to use the tender to meander along its shoreline. It also provided one of many frustrating encounters with large schools of tuna, which were engaged in a feast, turning the water at the entrance of the inlet into a frothing wash as they herded up and devoured a school of baitfish. No matter where I cast my lure, the tuna treated it with utter contempt, happily gorging themselves while I continued my futile efforts.

It was a pattern that continued for the rest of our cruise. While there were fish in abundance,

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most notably energetic schools of tuna, no matter what bait or lures I presented, they haughtily carried on their energetic feeding totally oblivious to my efforts. The only highlight, from an angling point of view, occurred when one of the rods was ripped violently from its holder as we sat at anchor one afternoon. I have no idea what species the culprit was, but I suspect it was one of the offending tuna taking the opportunity to taunt me ...

Awinya Creek provided another pleasant diversion. For a couple of hours around full tide it's accessible by tender and is navigable for a few hundred metres. We took the opportunity to explore it early one morning and were rewarded with a very calming putter through the mangroves, the creek's rich birdlife providing plenty of exercise for the shutterbugs amongst us.

The final day saw us use the tide to enter the Great Sandy Strait and explore the southern part of Fraser Island. Along the way we picked up a friend who had been staying at the exclusive Kingfisher Bay resort on the island before following the tide down to Deep Creek to explore the corroding remnants of the area's logging past. With the tide soon on the turn, we pointed *Orla's* bow north and spent a pleasant couple of hours heading back to Urangan, where we were met by Steve, who piloted us back to our berth.

UNIQUE MEMORIES

It had been an extremely relaxing few days, made more so by the sheltered waters of Hervey Bay and the welcoming shoreline of Fraser Island. Numerous encounters with whales, dolphins, turtles – and even those taunting tuna – left us with some unique memories and plenty of images to share.

From a navigation point of view, there are few obstacles for the uninitiated and those that do exist are generally well-marked. And by using the large tidal movements and strong currents to our advantage during the day we were able to cover ground at a fairly respectable pace.

With daily weather forecasts provided by radio, finding a sheltered anchorage each day was a no-brainer.



Above: There are plenty of safe anchorages on Fraser Island.

MOUNTING AN ESCAPE

Fraser Escape Bareboat Charters has been in the business of providing bareboat charters for more than 20 years. Run by Steve Robson and his daughter Keira, it boasts a fleet of six luxury catamarans, both power and sail, ranging from the custom-built and luxuriously appointed 42ft flybridge *Sounds Unique* to the 10m Seawind 1000, *Magnetic Islander*.

Some previous boating experience is definitely preferred, although a current boat licence isn't required, and all charterers are given a thorough briefing on the handling and maintenance of each craft.

Complete and detailed charts are provided for all areas and any on-water hazards tend to be well-marked and easy to spot.

Each boat is fully equipped in terms of cutlery, kitchen equipment, crockery and utensils, so charterers only need to stock up on provisions, which is easily done with a supermarket and liquor store within easy walking distance from the marina.

All linen and bedding is provided and, of course, all the necessary safety equipment and a first aid kit are onboard.

If advice or assistance is required, Steve and Keira are only a radio call away.

Really, the only things you need to bring with you are your personal items, clothing, fishing gear (although rods and some rudimentary tackle are available) and a willingness to relax and enjoy the great natural features that abound on Hervey Bay and Fraser Island.

Orla proved to be a spacious and accommodating host during our time aboard. One of Sydney manufacturer Seawind's most popular models, the 1160 boasts luxurious and functional interior spaces, with accommodation for up to eight guests, including two queen and one double cabin, with another convertible double berth in the saloon. It also offers two bathrooms and a well-appointed galley. There was more than enough space for food and drinks, with additional cold storage bins in the cockpit and saloon.

But the main feature of the Seawind from our point of view was the expansive living space, with the combined area of the saloon and cockpit creating an enormous area for recreation and relaxation. It allowed us to make the most of our time aboard, without ever feeling cramped or confined. Likewise, the vast bow area offered plenty of opportunity to relax and soak up the Queensland sun.

During our five days on Hervey Bay we chose to leave the sails unmolested and relied on the power of the twin diesels to travel around. They proved to be extremely reliable and economical powerplants and the autopilot made our daily travels easy and convenient. All controls were simple to use and it was a very uncomplicated boat for even novice skippers to handle. And of course, being a cat, *Orla* was very stable and handled all seas with a minimum of fuss.

All systems, from the windlass to the GPS and plumbing, were well-explained before we left and worked faultlessly throughout our cruise.

For anyone looking for a boating experience in a tranquil, protected and wildlife-rich environment, with plenty of safe and sheltered anchorages, Hervey Bay is well worth a thought.

Fraser Escape Bareboat Charters operates year-round and can be contacted on (07) 4125 5773, or at: fraserescape.com.au. 

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Above: Keira Robson of Fraser Escape Bareboat Charters welcomes us aboard.

Right: Rooney Point provides a sheltered anchorage at the north of Fraser Island.

