



castle walls so that it blended with the high trees surrounding it, and it sat brooding as if awaiting the return of the clans. A well-protected cove below the castle has moorings and a pier, with a pleasant area for picnics and barbecues. When we were there, several other boats were also using the area, including a big offshore ketch on it's way to the North Sea.

Departing Invergarry Castle, it's only a short cruise to the "Well of the Seven Heads," which also has a protected cove, picnic sites, water and a nearby grocery for restocking. The name refers to the scene where seven clansmen were killed during the purges after the battle of Culloden. Loch Oich, the highest point on the canal at 106 feet above sea level, leads into the manmade area called Laggan Ave, a peaceful tree-lined waterway with walking paths along the bank. It's pleasantly quiet, and reminiscent of European waterways.

Loch Lochy is the last natural waterway, with the mighty peaks of Sean Mheall and Ben Iarunn glowering nearby. The flight of eight locks, called Neptune's Staircase at the western end of Loch Lochy, also mark the end of the charter cruising area.

The stretch of the Caledonian Canal from Fort Augustus to Loch Lochy is called the secret stretch, because there are no highways or tourist areas nearby, and the scenery is literally untouched in most areas. It is much the same as it was when Bonnie Prince Charlie fled for his life through the area on his way to the Isle of Skye.

Our return was uneventful, although the breeze had swung again to give us a downwind slide along Loch Ness, and the

charter boats headed upwind were getting wet in the wind-driven chop. The lighthouse with its beacon burning brightly in the upstairs window appeared in the distance and we were soon nestled up at the Caley Marina dock as a work crew descended to prepare our boat for its next guests. Unlike charters we've had in other areas, our boat had been spotlessly clean, everything operated flawlessly and the entire week went by too rapidly. We celebrated our last night in the Highlands with, of all things, a wonderful Italian dinner at the marvellous Glen Moriston Hotel, where we had Nessie-dreams in a four-poster bed before flying to London the next day.

Do we have any regrets other than not seeing Nessie? Only one. I wish my parents had found out if the Queen uses stamps on her letters.

Notes for Charterers

Summer is, obviously, the best time to cruise the Caledonian Canal, but come prepared for rain and cold even in July. Scotland's weather is highly changeable, so a blustery day is often followed by a warm sunny one. Book as early as possible, since preferred weeks fill early.

For more information and charter rates visit www.caleycruisers.com; email: info@caleycruisers.com. www.visithighlands.com offers information on sightseeing and hotels around Loch Ness. ■

Mike Harker in Australia



Mike finds himself in demand at the Sydney Boat Show and feels the warmth of an Aussie welcome, travelling north along the east coast with some great people (including Alex – left) to the Whitsundays.

My first impression was that the people in Australia are so nice and courteous, starting with the two guys who came down to the quarantine dock to greet me. They were from immigration and customs and were extremely helpful and knew all about me. The man from customs had "googled" me on the internet after I had applied for a visa, online from my onboard computer through SailMail and my Pactor 3 modem.

The clearing in process at Brisbane was straightforward, simple and went quickly. I then waited 20 minutes for the quarantine inspector. I had heard horror stories of men coming aboard with sniffing dogs and tearing apart the boat looking under floorboards and behind cabinets. This man was pleasant and "just doing his job". He asked short questions about my stores, where I had purchased food items and asked to look in my fridge, freezer and storage areas. But before he started looking he unfolded a large, yellow plastic bag with "Quarantine Burn Bag" written in bold letters along the side.

My counter tops were starting to fill with all my fresh, frozen and bagged foodstuffs. He put almost everything into the bag and only left me with certain canned goods. When he was through, he needed help lifting the bag up the companionway and onto the dock. But the guy was so nice about everything. I

just shook his hand as he left to burn all my provisions.

So, my first mission upon stepping from the quarantine dock onto dry Australian land was to walk the short distance into town and look for a supermarket. I had a choice of three different shops with a variety of products not known to me. However, after reading the labels and looking at the photos on the packaging, I was able to "Buy Australian" and replenish with some very good and tasty products – as I was to discover over the next few days.

I had planned to spend only three weeks along the east coast of Australia before moving on to cross the Indian Ocean before Cyclone season, which starts in early November, but I was so ahead of my own schedule I decided to head south many hundred miles into Sydney. I had met the Australian distributor for Hunter at the previous Miami Boat Show and just called him up on the phone.

Matt Hayes is a famous sailor in his country, winning many sailing championships and competing for Australia in the Atlanta Olympics, and a really nice guy! Matt said that if I could get my boat down to Sydney and into downtown Darling Harbour within three days, he could put my boat into the Sydney International Boat Show. And, he would clean my boat for me. ▶

I couldn't pass up a free boat wash! So I headed south nonstop towards the famous Opera House and Bridge in Sydney Harbour. Matt came out in his launch and guided me into Darling Harbour. We had to wait just outside the lifting foot bridge for an hour to catch the very last opening before they closed it for five days during the boat show.

I was literally the last boat in! And Matt had organised the very best spot for my boat, right along the main walkway where everybody could see my unique bow arrow and the American flag waving off the stern. I was very pleased and excited to finally be able to just kick back and do nothing for the week of the show and socialise with other sailors. I had just sailed solo 9,000 miles across the entire South Pacific.

But the boat show organisers had other ideas. In order to get that special spot in the show, Matt had convinced them that I was somebody important and that I would give a daily seminar on the large stage they had in the giant hall. Matt had seen my presentation at the Miami show and was so impressed that he talked it up to all his friends; and he has some very influential friends!

It turned out that I was the hit of the show. After the first day of people standing in the aisles, they brought in 40 more chairs to raise the seating from 80 to 120. But they were still overflowing into the aisles, so they asked me to present twice a day. So much for kicking back and resting. Between two presentations a day and then talking with folks down on the Hunter docks, I was really ready for the two weeks rest that Matt had promised me, and to keep my boat at his docks after the show.

At last I was just a tourist. I rented a Harley and toured the Outback and other highlights out of the big city for three days, but then I began to meet people



around Sydney on my boat/bike. My first impression of Australians was enhanced; they were really nice and courteous, and a total joy to be with. I was enjoying myself so much with Sydney and the Aussies that it was hard to leave. For a short time I even considered just staying put for a season and do what most Australian sailors already know, sail some of the most fantastic areas and destinations in the world.

But, if I wanted to cross the Indian Ocean before the start of Cyclone season, I had just five weeks more to enjoy the most famous cruising grounds in the known world, the Great Barrier Reef and Whitsundays.

As it happens, of the many people that came aboard my Hunter 49 at the boat show, four sailing families had actually put in orders for their very own H-49. I had met them all during the show and had even taken some out for day sails on the bay, while I was learning about my brand new spinnaker, the Parasailor.

I had the brilliant idea to simply invite each of the four families to come aboard for a few days to get to know how easily the H-49 sails and how comfortable she is to live aboard as I sailed north up the east coast of Australia

The first family owns a ranch just "outback" from Maloolaba, so that was my first destination. A long solo sail up the same coast I had sailed south along just five weeks previously. In fact Maloolaba is just north of the entrance into Brisbane. The Williams family were terrific. The dad had come to Australia from Wales and married an Australian girl. They had two young kids and were ready to sell the ranch and sail back to Europe.

The next stop was Airlie and its famous beach. I loved it there and enjoyed meeting the "backpackers" that frequent the local establishments and fine beaches. But the highlight of my entire South Pacific voyage was taking the Hayes Families out to the Whitsundays. The two dads had each brought their two kids and had to leave the mothers at home to work.

Of the four children, Matt's two boys Alex, 8 and Josh, 13, were the sailors and they took command. I just sat back and let them choose our destinations and set the sails. Matt's best buddy and a former Navy SEAL brought his 13-year-old son Kevin and 16-year-old Kayla. Being the eldest, Kayla was definitely in charge. She kept the other kids busy and safe while the dads hung out in the two hammocks I installed. We overnighted on some of the most famous islands in the group: Hamilton, Whitehaven, Fitz Roy and many others during our seven-day sail up to Cairns. As I said, this was the highlight and most fun week of my entire year at sea. ▶



LEFT
Mike's first test sail with the new spinnaker, "The Parasailor", in Sydney Harbour.

RIGHT
Fun and games along the east coast with the Williams and Hayes families





Mike gets some exercise around Dunk Island.

The next group of guests sailed from Cairns to Townsville with me, and the final guest, Paul, came alone but sailed the treacherous inside channel from Townsville up to "Lands End" and into the Torres Straits. We only stayed four hours on Thursday Island before he caught the flight back to his home.

Once again, I was alone. I had the greatest time with the Aussies and their country. I had also received my two new pieces of sailing equipment: the Parasailor spinnaker and the new AIS, Automatic Identification System, for my RayMarine chart plotter. This new AIS was such a great improvement to the safety parameters that a small sailboat has over the large freighters out on the open ocean. AIS puts a small icon of a ship on the chart plotter screen – as many as 99 ships at once. When you place the cursor over the ship's icon, the ships' identity and particulars show up. Important information like speed, heading, destination and even the boat's name and call sign. But most important to safety are the two numbers that come up after these two columns: CPOA and TCPA – "Closest Point of Approach" and "Time to Closest Point".

The computer takes my GPS reading and the GPS reading from that ship and calculates just exactly how close the two ships will get AND exactly how long before they are at their closest point. I can put a warning circle around my boat, anywhere from two miles out to ten miles, and the time to that closest point between two and thirty minutes.

All ships above 200 tons are internationally required to transmit this AIS information on dedicated VHF frequencies. At one time in the Torres Straits, I had 24 ship icons on my display. But the most interesting thing for me was that none of these 24 ships would ever come within two miles of my vessel within

my set perimeter of 30 minutes! In fact, only once did I have to change course because a ship would come within my warning zone and that was heading north in the South Atlantic while a ship was crossing from Rio to Dakar just one mile off my stern within 10 minutes. AIS is simply fantastic and allows me a feeling of confidence I normally would not have. It also allows me to sleep soundly up to 45 minutes at a time while underway.

After a total of nine weeks in Australia I would have to get back to my "normal" sleeping rhythm in phases of 20-45 minute naps about 10-12 times a day or night. This does take a while to get used to, but after only three days I was back in my sleep rhythm and felt rested and excited to be underway again.

I was very close to cyclone season. It was late September when I left Thursday Island in the Torres Straits. I had about 7,000 miles to cross the Indian Ocean before early November and the first predicted cyclones. I intended to stop at only three islands on the way and only for a couple of days at each.

The first would be Christmas Island which still belongs to Australia. I would clear out of Australia there and then head west to Cocos Keeling, which isn't really much of an island, just a coral lined atoll. The final stop in the Indian Ocean would be Mauritius, just before heading south of Madagascar and into Durban, South Africa.

I was prepared to make a fast run across. I had my new Parasailor spinnaker and I had rigged my boat for a downwind passage with the wind predicted to be SE or off my stern port quarter and no storms above 30 knots. In the predicted calms I would prepare my new Australian provisions for many days' meals and pack them in containers in the fridge or freezer. I was ready. ■

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