

## **Around the world in four and a half years.**

**By Peter Lewis**

I was born in Busselton in 1948, attended the local Primary school and later the high school where I received an average pass in what was then known as the Junior Certificate, a state-run exam at the end of third year high school or year ten.

I left school, joined the Australian Army for nine years and spent the majority of my working life in various jobs from rough neck on a drill ship to tradesman, small business owner and various other jobs.

With our four sons grown up and left home my wife and I mutually agreed to separate. I had played with boats all my life and now I had the space to pursue a long-suppressed dream of crossing blue water. (The term I use for travelling the open ocean from one land mass to another.) Asia didn't appeal to me but there was a small speck of land out there in the Indian Ocean 1500 nautical miles north west of Fremantle. At this point I made my first mistake (one of many). Whilst preparing the boat people enquired as to my intentions.

'I'm going to sail to the Cocos Keeling Islands,' I boldly replied. 'May even sail right around the world!' At this time, I had never really been out of sight of the mainland except when Rottnest was in the way. I estimated a 3-year jolly.

Words once spoken I believe should be lived up to. May 17 2003; without fanfare I caste off from Geraldton and in the gathering darkness bade a nervous farewell to Australia. I was not confident in my abilities, felt it would be wrong to put someone else's life at risk so was going on my lonesome. I wondered if I would survive to see my home again. (We being the boat and I.)

For fourteen days we battled the elements the loneliness my own fear and the deficiencies in my pre-sailing preparation. Finally palm trees rose above the horizon. We had made it to Cocos. The next three months were spent modifying and upgrading power systems,

repairing the engine and partying beneath the shelter on Direction Island. It truly was a tropical paradise; crystal clear water beneath the keel, fish a plenty, white sandy palm fringed beaches warm tropical days and fellow sailors from all over the world. What a time I had.

From here, after much discussion with others I decided that rather than try to battle my way to windward back to Australia I would follow the trade winds around the world. I was committed. The next rock westward was Rodriguez 1700 nm away. Four days out from Cocos around 03.00 hrs on a dark stormy night I was thrown down by a backing mainsail smashing the side of my face into a winch, fracturing some teeth and cracking a rib or two. Tiredness the driver, neglect the culprit. It was painful, but alone in the middle of the ocean out of radio range the show goes on. Mother nature doesn't care about my ailments. With care and good management of the boat and myself we still managed to make fair progress to Rodrigues 14 days later.

A 10 day break then on to Mauritius, Reunion, around the bottom of Madagascar and into Durban, South Africa for Christmas and a couple of months rest and repair. I was now committed to this way of life for the foreseeable future. It transitioned from an odyssey to a way of life.

Next came Port Elizabeth and Port St Frances on the south coast of Africa then on to Cape Town. Two months later and with a load of an estimated tonne of dry cat food stuffed on board for the cat lovers of Saint Helena (that's right, where Napoleon died) we struck out north north west for the middle of the South Atlantic 2000 nm distant. From here after disgorging the pet food and topping up the food we stuck out for Trinidad, the southernmost island in the Caribbean, the longest leg yet. 3800 nm and 12 degrees north of the Equator. This took in excess of 5 weeks at sea. I was now broke, down to my last couple of hundred US dollars and in desperate need of cash.

Being broke took me away in a whole new direction. I managed to score a contract job in Grenada as a marine engineer carrying out repairs on cruising yachts mostly from the States and Europe. I was making and saving money when the island took a direct hit as category 4

Hurricane Ivan passed over us. A damaged boat and a battered demoralised soul limped back to Trinidad. Grenada was destroyed and I needed the haul out facilities for repairs. I had estimated I would stay in the Caribbean for six months. I had a girlfriend back in Oz at the time and was faithfully heading home.

Repairs consumed my available cash so I decided to stay another year in Grenada. It was tropically warm, I could make and save money and Rogers Bar a stick and corrugated iron structure a couple of bays north provided a venue to relax and revel on those occasions Roger chose to open. The place was a magnet for cruising yachties and locals alike. Hurricane Emily arrived in July again disrupting life. At cat 1 she was a pup compared with Ivan and the island quickly returned to normal.

Come Christmas I was ready to leave. Love and lust; I confuse the two and don't seem to be able to sustain either for very long. At this time, I was shanghaied by a lady. I sailed to Trinidad to prep the boat for the long haul back to Australia. On the return journey to Grenada to say my goodbyes I suffered a repeat of the Indian Ocean incident, this time fracturing my right fema. Several days in the local hospital, five weeks ashore recuperating and a plane back to Australia for a hip replacement followed.

It was May by the time I returned to the boat. In June, following the lady I moved further north to St Vincent for six months. At the end of the year she returned to the States and I returned to my life afloat and headed for the Panama Canal, one of the great engineering feats of the world. After across the isthmus we struck out into the wide Pacific making our way down the Ecuadorian coast in search of the South East Trades to carry us west

Next, 1200 nm to the west is the Galapagos Islands, a feature in Darwin's "The Origin Of The Species". This is a wonderful group of Island straddling the Equator and surrounded by the frigid Humboldt Current giving rise to a very unique environment.

West again, this time for close to 3000 nm to the Marqueses Islands. Thirty-four days later clouds indicated the presence of land and the upper peaks of the Island of Hivoo hove into view. A side trip to the neighbouring island of Nuka Hiva and then due west for another

1000nm to an atoll in the eastern Cook Islands. Here I learnt something about myself. I heard of golden pearls. They could be found in these waters. I felt I had grown, matured and was now beyond greed. I had left all that behind in my wake four years previously. Not so. I was awake all-night thinking about these little gems and the glory they could bring me if I found one. The next day I searched around till I came upon a rocky outcrop just below the surface. It was covered with them. I harvested 40 small oysters that day along with three large black pearl oysters. I worked my way through about 30, carefully opening each one for no result. I despondently continued then there it was. a small hard growth in a sack within the oyster, the most beautiful natural sight I have ever seen. My hand shook, I shook, and as if still seeking its freedom the pearl fell from my grasp nearly disappearing down the cockpit scupper. Greed and my desire for glory was alive and well. I looked at the destruction spread about the cockpit. That little golden pearl was beautiful but the life I had destroyed to satisfy my own desires disappointed me deeply. That night, in an attempt to bring some justification to my actions I cooked and ate the oysters so it became something less than total mindless killing.

Westward yet again. This time to Western Samoa, a place to be ravaged a few years later by a tsunami. From here we rounded the north end of Fiji, turned southwest skirting the southern end of Vanuatu then rounded up to enter Noumea, New Caledonia.

After a visit from my sister I ventured forth once again, this time for the relatively easy 800nm run to Coffs Harbour Australia. As dawn broke the mountainous peaks of the Great Divide showed blue through the morning haze. That was Australia, my home. At 08.02 on 1/11/2007 the anchor gouged into Australian sand for the first time since leaving Geraldton four and a half years earlier. That's one and a half years late. I guess time is the consumable in an experience.

I'm broke again now so best I go find a job.