

TIDELINES

A source of wonderment

An intrepid search failed to uncover the source of the Clarence River, writes **David Lockwood**.

I thought we had hit the high point of the Jacaranda Experience, a cruise in company for like-minded Riviera owners from the Gold Coast along the NSW coast and around the bends of the mighty Clarence River. But our host, Keith Hanson, wasn't done. He launched the whale boat (read tender), chucked a spare can of fuel aboard and summoned a search party.

A motley bunch of modern-day explorers disappeared in a shower of spray on a sortie to survey the Clarence beyond the Crown Robinson Hotel, off which we were anchored at Grafton.

Some 40 kilometres later and the Big River seemingly had no end. Eventually, in the freshwater reaches, a farmer caught their eye. "How much further can you go?" inquired Cap'n Hanson.

"Ahhh, a fair way," replied the farmer.

"How many more miles?"

"Ahhh, a fair few."

With no end in sight, the search party turned for home, arriving back at the communal raft-up of Rivierras on the fumes of their reserve fuel tank and near dying of thirst.

The Clarence is a b-i-g river. It meanders for 430 kilometres from its source near the Queensland border, has a catchment of 22,600 kilometres and boasts 102 islands, including Woodford, the largest river island in the Southern Hemisphere and the only one with its own mountain range.

Along the way, the lush, green countryside resembles a landscape painting. Portly cows waddle along grassy banks dotted with jacarandas, historic towns and grand old estates.

But in a sense, we cheated. Rather than risk running aground, the organisers of this jaunt engaged the services of a

local fishing-boat captain to lead the way. Not that the Clarence is tricky to navigate. In fact, all you really need follow is that most elementary of river cruising rules - stick to the outside of the bends.

From Yamba, cruising at a languid 8-10 knots, we reach Grafton in four hours, clocking up about 80 nautical miles.

Given more time and a flood tide, there's plenty to discover off the main channel - like Yamba Shores Tavern, which has casual berthing at a pontoon, cold beer and a bottle shop, apparently top grub and a courtesy bus. Crystal Waters canal estate alongside offers shopping and, I have it on good authority, mud crabs abound in the back channels here.

Cruising author Alan Lucas adds that the sandy beach at the southern end of Freeburn Island is a delightful, protected anchorage. Providing the tide is high, you can sneak up Freeburn Island Channel and connect back with the main river. On the opposite bank above Iluka, North Arm takes in the Esk River and a string of the low-lying islands that characterise the Clarence. Not that you notice them. Most of the adjoining channels and creeks aren't navigable with anything bigger than a tinnie.

Not long after Yamba, several groups of leads direct us around Freeburn and Palmers Islands. The latter has a ritzy homestead fronted by fat pelicans and cheery cormorants. And there's the reason why - prawn farms, unequivocally this state's greatest aquaculture success.

There are tinnies anchored off the caravan park along the next bend, where I spot the first flowering jacaranda behind a stone breakwall popular with anglers. We pass under the Harwood Bridge without drama. There's 8.5 metres clearance at



Expeditionary fleet ... Rivierras raft up off Grafton for the Jacaranda Experience. Photo: Kat

high water, but the bridge can be opened for taller yachts with a day's notice (phone bridge operator Craig Knox, 6682 8388).

We do a highland jig at the Scottish township of Maclean. By all accounts, it's some experience wandering around the Gaelic streets festooned with tartan. You can visit Walters Butchers for a haggis, the local baker for a bap, and the Maclean Cellars for single malt. More than a century old, the Maclean Highland Gathering at Easter is a big drawcard.

Another set of leads helps us pass the mouth of South Arm, which separates Woodford Island

from the mainland. South Arm is supposed to be navigable, though the bridge at its downstream end has a height of just 4.6m. Enter its upstream end near Brushgrove and you'll find a height of 7.60m under Wingfield Bridge.

Above Maclean, a set of leads direct you away from the shallow Broadwater, a giant puddle off the main channel. Next, we hit the car ferry at Lawrence, where there's a charming riverside park with picnic facilities. There's a deep hole famous for producing flathead of biblical proportions.

But just as suddenly, the river shallows. We slip by a series of

port markers in of water and shore to avoid near an old but

The second river is above, but then the town beckons. You can't settle for a collection of old ar

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delivered to our boats and there's a fireworks display at night.

The annual Jacaranda Festival in Grafton commands attention for the next few days before we return to Harwood for a send-off in the local pub, complete with a Scot dressed in a kilt playing those blessed bagpipes.

Anchors are weighed in the wee hours for a bleary-eyed voyage back to Yamba. I note internet and phone reception the length of the river, so one could work and play. And, though ours was a fleeting visit, the king of the northern rivers casts its spell. We will return.

MAKING WAVES

NSW Maritime has released its annual Sydney Aquatic Events guide detailing all the best places to anchor, the preferred vantage points, exclusion zones and speed restrictions on the harbour during what is an especially busy calendar of boating events. Starting this weekend, there's the Rolex Trophy Rating Series held off the Heads for offshore race yachts, and also the Sydney International Regatta for Olympic aspirants on what will be a heaving harbour. Of course, there's the Sydney to Hobart on Boxing Day and the 27th Pittwater to Coffs Harbour race and Coffs Offshore Series starting December 28 from Broken Bay. Big things are planned for NYE celebrations on the harbour and then Australia Day. The season winds down with Sydney Harbour Week, which includes the Classic and Wooden Boat Festival in early March. Download the guide at www.maritime.nsw.gov.au or call 13 12 56.

Predictably, there's plenty happening on the water during the lead-up to the Sydney to Hobart - including some not-so-pretty bingles among racing yachts. Sydney to Hobart hopeful Scarlet Runner, a Sydney 38 from Melbourne, was T-boned by X3 in the first race of the Rolex Trophy One Design Series last Saturday. No one was injured, but now the crew has a race against time to try to repair the substantial hole in her topsides.

Chasing a third straight line honours victory in the Sydney to Hobart - a feat only achieved only once before, in the 1940s - Bob Oatley's Wild Oats XI had its new 45-metre carbon-fibre mast stepped last week after the dismasting during racing at the Maxi Yacht Rolex Cup in Italy in September. The 30-metre maxi has spent almost two

months on the dry undergoing repairs. The test sail on the harbour last weekend went according to plan and, unless the mast issue is interpreted as a handicap, the ability to fly yet more sail is sure to mean Wild Oats is the race favourite once again.

The early summer rains have been great for the waterfalls in Cowan Creek. The perennial ones like those in Refuge Bay and at Cottage Rock had their water pressure turned up to barely tolerable fire-hose strength, while the less common waterfalls such as the one up the back of America Bay have been flowing with the kind of vigour we haven't seen in years. After the best part of a week noting such treasures, we're now readying the boat for another round of memorable Hawkesbury holidays. And I bet we're not alone.

A Brooklyn local said the rains have prompted the local Hawkesbury River prawns to run to sea, which will be good for holiday fishing prospects. But not one to miss an opportunity, a couple in a tinnie was doing the rounds of Cowan Creek anchorages selling fresh prawns. I called them over to our boat and was told they were ocean prawns from the Clarence. On closer inspection, they proved to be imported prawns from Asia. Not only was this misleading, they were asking \$30 a kilo for prawns that sell in the supermarkets for less than \$10 a kilo. Be warned.

There are few more effective ways of winding down than kicking back on your boat, but don't drop your guard with onboard security. Holiday time is peak season for thieves who target unlocked boats laden with expensive fishing gear, water toys and personal effects.

lockwood@intercoast.com.au