




Furious weather

BASS STRAIT HAS SOME OF THE MOST DANGEROUS WEATHER ON THE PLANET, BUT LESSONS ARE LEARNED FROM THE EXPERIENCE. **CHRISTINE DANGER**

 **WHEN** high winds descend on Jamieson Bay, at one of Bass Strait's scenic islands, it makes for spectacular photography. That is until it turns ugly and catamaran *Take It Easy* takes a beating.

During our summer 2016-17 cruise around Bass Strait, one thing stood out: the persistent and particularly strong westerlies. Throughout our two months afloat we were running from one beautiful anchorage to another hiding from strong winds, especially once we reached the Furneaux Group in Eastern Bass Strait. Situated within the renowned Roaring Forties, these islands can be exposed to mean winds.

They say you have not had a real adventure unless at one stage you have

wished you were not there. Well, we had one very big adventure last summer!

EVEN AT ANCHOR THINGS CAN GET HAIRY

In January 2017, a westerly flow settled in and persisted for twelve days, pinning us in one spot and making any venturing out of the anchorage a hazardous and uncomfortable endeavour.

We had taken shelter at Jamieson Bay on the south east coast of Cape Barren Island. I have heard it said by people in the area that "wind is made at Jamieson" and they might be right.

Part way through that period the westerlies were forecast to strengthen

with 40 knot gusts likely. When you hear the Bureau of Meteorology forecasts with the warning: "gusts can be 40% stronger than predicted and waves up to twice the height" take note!

During the early morning of 14 January, the wind was picking up and up, climbing steadily in the mid to high 30's. Then it really blew: 40, 50, 56, 60 knots! That is 50% more than forecast.

The bay was a sea of white angry plumes of spray. It looked like a snow blizzard. The shrieking through the rigging, the tugging at the anchor and our 50 metres of chain, the wind generator sounding like a truck revving its engine. It was spectacularly furious.

As I peeked through the side of the cockpit, my glasses got blown off my face, never to be seen again. There were



lots of spindrifts, in fact these were turning into willy-willies.

THE CHAIN OF EVENTS

When you are a keen photographer, wild weather makes for impressive images. I stepped out of the cockpit and stood on the side to look towards another catamaran anchored with us *Purrfection* and took some photos.

The spectacle was really astonishing. Then I looked up towards our bows. A lot of water was being picked up by the gusts in the distance near the rocky shore. This quickly developed into a willy-willy. I remember thinking “oh no, it’s coming towards the boat, put the camera away and hang on tight!”



MAIN: Spindrifts starting to form.

FROM TOP: Makeshift repair to the cracked frame supporting the struts, the solar panels and the davits.

What is left of the wind generator, now parked.



The next thing I was turning away towards the stern, getting drenched by the spray; I heard a loud noise and saw these black shapes spinning away and the start of this huge pounding noise. Spectacular had just turned to ugly and scary, two of the three blades from our wind generator had torn off. The last one left was sorry looking, half mangled and the whole unit, now unbalanced, was sending fierce shakes through the boat.

The pole and struts supporting the turbine were wobbling violently and uncontrollably, making a horrible jackhammer racket, threatening to tear the whole thing off the frame to which it was attached.

It took us well over an hour to secure the last broken blade, stop it from whizzing around and tie the pole and struts down to stop them from shaking. It is hard enough to lock the blades in calm conditions, but try getting it done when it is blowing at over 50 knots and you get the picture.

At one stage I was so nervous I could not remember how to tie a bowline: blank!

Wade was precariously perched up on the frame with only a wobbly pole to hang on to while trying to get a rope up and over the wind generator with a broom. Crazy stuff.

GETTING MATTERS UNDER CONTROL

After the initial shock and fear of getting impaled by the remaining blade, we collected our thoughts. We had to take action or we would lose more than a few blades.

We got things in check in stages. First we got the tail of the turbine into the wind and held in that position with the mooring hook attached to the rigging; in fact two hooks taped to one another for extra reach. Trying to get the hook at the end of the extra long pole through the little hole in the wind generator tail in high wind was a challenge. Doing so when you could hardly stand in the gusts was scary.

Second, we secured the pole with multiple ropes to minimise the wobbling. This created additional support in a triangular fashion.

Third, we got the rope noose we keep on the pole to lock the last blade so it could not whizz around. This involved getting the rope over the turbine to pull the loop up. Not easy in the howling wind when you have to reach up high.

We tried using a broom to catch the rope in the bristles. That did not work. In the end we used a Hawaiian sling to bring the rope up and over turbine engine. After many wobbly attempts, it finally worked.

Things were a bit more under control by then and we could survey the damage. There was a nasty crack along the frame where the struts attach, not to mention the dinghy davits and the solar cells. We needed this stabilised. Wade cut some lengths of wood with a hand saw, drilled some holes in it with his electric drill and bolted them on either side of the frame to strengthen it.

I am very proud of skipper Wade, resourceful and calm in a crisis. But all we can say is thank god it happened in daylight.

It continued to blow hard all afternoon. It was 56 knots when all hell broke loose



LEFT TO RIGHT: At anchor in 56 knots!

Take It Easy in 50 knots, after losing the wind generator blades. Image courtesy Ian on *Purrfection*.

“WHEN THE WILLY-WILLY CAME, IT WAS THE LAST STRAW. HAD WE ATTENDED TO THE FIRST TWO PROBLEMS, IT MIGHT NOT HAVE WREKED HAVOC.”

but it reached 60 later. It is not until late that evening that it calmed down to 30 knots. It is all relative.

When we reflect on the day’s event, we got off lightly.

LESSONS LEARNT

We believe the wind generator failure happened as a result of a combination of elements, some due to a natural phenomenon, others because we failed to anticipate problems and attend to them early.

The pole for the wind generator was never stable enough. Two years ago, when we bought the unit, the struts we had engineered were not installed exactly as planned and consequently were not strong enough to properly stabilise the wind generator.

We did not think of the consequences at the time. But this is where our problem started.

In low wind, the set up was fine, though it had some flex. But in high winds, it was asking for trouble.

We should not have accepted a compromised construction in the first place. At the beginning of our trip, we noticed a small crack in the frame where the struts attached and thought: “we’ll have to attend to this when we get back”. In hindsight we should have strengthened the frame then and there, as soon as we saw that. The additional flex in the pole in the high wind was opening the crack with every strong gust and we had lots of strong wind throughout the cruise.

When the willy-willy came, it was the last straw. Had we attended to the first two problems, it might not have wreaked havoc.

There are a few lessons there, but the main four are:

1. if you notice something wrong, figure out the cause and take action immediately to minimise risk. We should have done early on what we did after the incident: clamp the frame with the two strips of wood as soon as we noticed the crack in it. We should have put extra ropes to stabilise the wind generator pole and park it when we knew 40 knot winds were forecast.

2. check the wind strength your wind generator can operate at and if it looks like the wind will be close or in excess of its safe margin, park the blades. It is easier to do this before the wind picks up too much. The Ampair is rated for storm conditions but, in future, if we get a 40 knot forecast we will park the blades.
3. make the parking of the blades easier by threading a loop of rope through the eye of the wind generator tail. It would have been much easier to put the boat hook through a loop of rope than a small hole in the tail.
4. carry extra ropes, sheets of marine ply, fibreglass sheets, epoxy, nuts and bolts for any eventuality.

We were lucky we had plenty of that and for once I have to say being a hoarder has its uses. Power tools make things easier too.

We finished our cruise a month later without experiencing further problems despite continued strong winds and, once back on terra firma, were attending to repairs. We now have a brand new frame, new wind generator blades, reinforced struts and a revised high wind safety process. The hip pocket has taken a bit of a beating.

One thing stands out in our mind: prevention is better than cure; it is a lot cheaper and easier on the old ticker too! ≈



CHRISTINE DANGER

Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for the last 15 years, cruising Bass Strait, Tasmanian waters and Australia’s east coast. Of late they have been preparing themselves and their beloved *Take It Easy* for full time cruising. They will soon be ready to cast the mooring lines and become sea gypsies. Follow their adventures on www.sv-takeiteasy.com.