

SOUTHERN WHITSUNDAYS WANDERINGS

The views from the Thomas Island northern anchorage are to die for.

The Coronavirus may have put a spanner in the works, disrupting life as usual and forcing yachties to pause their cruising activities, but it does not stop us from plotting and dreaming about the next adventures. **CHRISTINE DANGER** takes us for a wander around the Southern Whitsundays.



Anchored in company at Burning Point, Shaw Island.



ABOVE L-R: Spearfishing at Connie Bay, Keswick Island.
Underwater world at Keswick.
Intriguing corals at Goldsmith Island.

What makes some anchorages frequented and others seldom visited? That is the question we often ask ourselves, particularly as we find gems that we are lucky enough to have to ourselves.

Is it because people are in a rush to reach iconic destinations further on and are not inclined to linger along the way? Is it because the cruising guides don't always describe an anchorage favorably and yachties are not enticed to stop in places described as affected by swell? Is it because there appears to be nothing particular to do once you get there? Or is it because if there are not several yachts already anchored, it can't be worth a stop over? Maybe it is a mix of reasons, but it is most times to our gain, since we like nothing better than arriving at a deserted spot, anchoring in the prime position and exploring from there.

We had been told that the Southern Whitsunday Islands from Scawfell to Lindeman were less busy than the iconic northern Whitsundays: less traffic, no charter nor commercial tourist boats. To us this was an invitation to discover and we made them our destination for the start of winter 2019 and again in 2020. We island hopped through Scawfell, St Bees, Keswick, Brampton,

Carlisle, Goldsmith, Thomas, Shaw and Lindeman. Each had something to offer, some we had to ourselves, all we anchored at for a minimum of two nights up to four nights. Being in the southeast tradewinds season and strong ones at that, we settled on the northern shores and were very comfortable.

One of the aspects we love about island hopping is that we never have to sail very far: short little sails of 12-20nm, which we tend to time with the tides to avoid major wind against current hassles, as the flow can be strong – 3-4kts.

For weather forecasts and communication, we found that some of the islands had little to no internet or phone coverage. If you are not equipped with a mobile



Moored at one of the four public moorings at Horseshoe Bay, St Bees.

signal booster, you may need to hoist your wireless hub to the top of the mast. There was no coverage at Scawfell and Goldsmith. Coverage at Brampton, St Bees, Keswick and Lindeman was reasonable although patchy, and the best coverage was at Shaw Island. For weather updates we used our HF receiver.

So here are the highlights in threes: Favourite anchorages, great walks ashore, and surprising snorkels.

THREE FAVOURITE ANCHORAGES

For the definitive reference about anchorages, we recommend Alan Lucas Cruising the Coral Coast and 100 Magic Miles by David Colfelt. These two cruising guides are our bibles.

Scawfell Island – Refuge Bay

What a surprise that was! Scawfell is a well-used convenient stopover between the Percy Islands and the Whitsundays. We arrived there under spinnaker from West Bay – Middle Percy. There were half a dozen yachts anchored in the central part of Refuge Bay, well off from the fringing reef. Yet there was no one anchored in the westerly cove, with its own little sandy beach. So in our usual manner, we selected that bay. A recent addition to Refuge Bay are four public moorings, two in each of the bays. We had the calmest of nights there. Although you need to keep your distance from the fringing reef, the cove was totally protected, not

a ripple, and we woke up to brilliant sunny days with birds singing. Heavenly after enduring many swelly anchorages on our way up from the Keppels! Only one draw-back: no internet or phone coverage.

St Bees Island – Horseshoe Bay

On the cruising guide chart, you see mooring buoys in the Egremont Channel, off Keswick Island, but they are long gone. They may well have created problems for the small planes that line themselves up for a landing at the bottom end of Keswick. But a year later, four public moorings have been installed at Horseshoe Bay, St Bees. The appeal is that you moor the big boat there and use your dinghy to explore the many snorkeling spots around Keswick and St Bees Islands. You will need to watch the current which can run at 4 knots so a stronger dinghy engine is useful.

Thomas Island – Naked Lady Beach

Described as remote in the cruising guide *100 Magic Miles*, Thomas Island does not feel isolated. It might be because it is surrounded by nearby islands, and we therefore feel close to the center of the Whitsundays. Yet we saw only one boat during the four nights we spent there hiding from a blow.

The island has a really nice feel: beautiful sandy beaches, teal water, tall hills, colourful rocky outcrops and panoramic views. You can anchor right in front of Naked Lady Beach, or to the eastern side opposite one of the smaller sandy beaches in 5m of water over sand. The holding is excellent. There are enough beaches to keep you occupied with fossicking, and there is a walk across to the southern anchorage.



Three Great Walks

Most of the islands we visited are National Parks. Some, particularly those where resorts used to operate, still have walking tracks, although most are very overgrown. So if you are keen to stretch your legs, put on some gaiters to protect your ankles and legs from burrs in the high grass, have a stick handy to fend off the cobwebs and be prepared for a bit of bush bashing. You will also need to be organised with your dinghy while you are ashore. Leave it on the beach at high tide and you will have a long drag along the sandflats to reach deep water when you return. Leave it at low tide on the sand and you will have to swim back to it after

ABOVE L-R: Scawfell Island as we sail away!

Back from a dinghy ride ... that's my home!

Sponges filtering litres of water at Homestead Bay, St Bees.

your walk ... pick your poison! But what a reward when you get to the summit. The views are to die for and you will be surrounded by thousands of butterflies.

Brampton Island – Lookout Walk

You will find the start of the rough track half way along the beach that links the old resort to the derelict jetty on the northern side of the island. It is a three to four hour



FAR LEFT: Ray of sunshine on *Anui* at Goldsmith.

LEFT FROM TOP: Stunning seascapes and ocean colour are the hallmark of the Whitsundays.

Sunsets don't come any better than at Thomas Island.

The view from Mt Oldfield at Lindeman Island, looking towards Shaw Island.

return hike to the summit which takes you through dry eucalyptus and rainforest. It is not so much the distance (6.6kms) or steepness of the track (a moderate trail), but the state of the trail that will take time and gobble up your energy! But it is well worth the effort. There are two lookouts, one overlooking the Western Bay with views towards Mackay, the other overlooking Brampton Roads, a body of shallow water that separates Carlisle and Brampton Islands and just about dries out at low tide.

Thomas Island – Beach combing and walking across to the southern side

One of the pleasures of island hopping is beach combing, particularly shell collecting. We were in our element there with three or four sandy beaches to choose from. It is fun to do, you can dinghy from one to the other, stop for a moment or for a picnic – but no fire on the beach as this is part of the Lindeman Islands National Park! You can also venture across from Naked Lady Beach to the southern shores. The trail is very overgrown and a bit hard to locate, but aim between the little dry creek bed and a bush with some mooring buoys hanging, and you will find it. It is a relatively easy grade and affords a nice change of scenery and pace.

Lindeman Island – Mt Oldfield

Walking boots and gaiters on, stick to fend off the spider webs, and you could do with a machete at the start, but this walk is a must! The track is sign posted from Boat Port, on the western side of the island. The beginning is very rough as you climb up to a saddle, walk past a small lake covered with waterlilies, then above the old resort. From there you meet up with a maintained track to Mt Oldfield. It is a 9.5km round trip of moderate grade, and affords panoramic views of the surrounding islands at the summit.

Three Surprising Snorkels

When you come to the Southern Islands, the snorkelling is not wonderful. The fringing reef has been damaged by the effect of agricultural runoff and cyclones. The closer you get to the mainland and the central part of the Whitsundays, the more algae and rubble dominate. But yet there are some bays which are full of surprises. For those who write off fringing reef close to the mainland without even getting in the water, you are missing out! Don your wetsuit, flippers and snorkel and check out what is under there. Here are three sites definitely worth suiting up for. The visibility is acceptable, especially at slack water and the seascapes unexpectedly rewarding.

Scawfell Island – Refuge Bay

This would have to be the most unlikely snorkelling site around the islands, and yet one that is worth exploring. At first glance you think it is all a bit bland, but look closer and you will see some amazing colours and shapes surrounding you. A feature of the westerly part of Refuge Bay is the soft rubbery coral with finger-like projections, with shades of mauve, blue, beige and pink. The hard corals are fascinating too. There are many different types of brain corals with their odd convolutions, ridges and meanders.

Egremont Passage – Between St Bees & Keswick Islands

Both St Bees and Keswick are relatively 'undiscovered' islands, being a long way from the main centre of activities in the Whitsundays. The snorkel sites have been little visited over the years and as such have retained their untouched nature. Fringing reefs line both sides of the passage, but we favoured the Keswick side. The best time to snorkel there is at slack tide when the water is clearer and there is little current. You will see intriguing shapes, sponges and lots of soft corals. There are also a variety of juvenile as well as adult fish: coral trout, stripy snappers, rock cods, crayfish and other good to eat treats if you can catch them. Because it is quite shallow right at the edge of the rocks you can let yourself rest on the bottom without too much effort and if you are into underwater photography you will have fun! But you'd better not leave it too long to explore here as algae is starting to invade the site.

Keswick Island – Connie Bay

A feature of Connie Bay on the northern side of Keswick Island are the deep narrow canyons in the reef, where all sorts of fish patrol, some rather big! You are allowed to spearfish. We had a go without success, but had fun trying. The reef flats are just under the surface at low tide, sometimes not enough to swim over, so you follow the deep trenches which meander like a maze. This can make it tricky to find your way back at times. Along the walls of the trenches are an intriguing mix of corals, hard and soft as well as sponges.

So there you have it. As freedom of movement slowly returns, put this less frequented section of the Whitsundays on your cruising list and take the time to sightsee. Island hopping is the heart of adventure. See where the wind takes you, explore, have fun.



FROM TOP: Anchoring at Naked Lady Beach at Thomas Island.

Gap Beach, Lindeman Island – officially our worst anchorage because of beam swell during the nights!

Anchored peacefully at Brampton Island – no one else around!

Chris and her partner Wade Bishop have been sailing on catamarans of various sizes for over 20 years, cruising Bass Strait, Tasmanian waters and Australia's East Coast. In July 2017, they finally retired, and are now sea wanderers, living on board their catamaran, Anui, a 52ft Crowther. Follow their adventures on www.sv-anui.com