

Southern haven

by Bob Maxwell

A PART FROM a couple of exceptions, the vast distance of the Western Australian coastline offers not a lot of shelter from the prevailing sea breezes. In summer these can blast away from late-morning to beyond sunset; usually at anything between 17 and 30 knots, bringing lumpy water and salt soaked conditions for those of us who do round-the-marks sailing on the coast. We love the challenge, but admit it's not quite paradise.

Down in the cooler south-west corner of the state, between Bunbury and Cape Leeuwin, the sandy coastline of Geographe Bay sweeps away in a huge arc for about 30nm to the west where the prevailing winds are offshore; swinging from SE to SW and back again on a daily basis throughout summer. Towards Cape Naturalist, the last 5nm of the bay is rocky with a series of sheltered little bays nestling in against wooded hills. There a boat may drift on its anchor chain, seemingly suspended in space above its shadow in astoundingly clear water; under an endless canopy of blue sky from one week to the next. What more can I say!

Busselton, at the centre of the Geographe Bay coastline, has until recently been a sleepy little country town where espresso machines were used to froth milk over instant coffee and the usual visitor's meal would have been a greasy steak and chips in a scruffy pub. This has all changed now. Down towards Cape Naturalist and onwards to Margaret River and beyond, million-dollar "bungalows" with ocean views are now the go with wineries springing up like mushrooms.

Busselton now offers the best of country fare that just cannot be had in the big smoke to the north; a magnificent steak sandwich at a hotel for \$7.50, buffet dinners at the marina for \$15 and all the best wine, boutique

beer, cheese, olives and espressos that one could only dream of before; not to mention great scuba, fishing and surfing where waves break around the corner from Cape Naturalist.

Even more astounding, a country yacht club that hardly anyone from the big smoke had ever noticed, has trumped the lot in its audacity and breadth of vision; employing an events organiser and organising major sponsorships and, in only the second year, attracting a fleet of 51 yachts ranging from thundering offshore racers down to the little sportsyachts that flew around like maddened mosquitoes.

The key to all of this was a well-constructed harbour, good launching facilities, and a magnificent pub overlooking plentiful floating pens and marine facilities. This has come about with Port Geographe, a marina development next to Busselton that has been maturing for the last 10 years or so and is now coming into critical mass.

We registered for Class C, a mixed bag of light and heavy displacement boats. The race committee did a great job with the handicapping and did an outstanding and professional job running the races.

Thank heavens for the lay-day on Tuesday when we declined the golf tournament and winery tour put on by the organisers. Instead we opted for a morning of scuba at Gannet Rock and after a barbeque at Meelup Bay, an afternoon of snoozing on the grass.

Some great touches were: videos of the fleet played each day during happy hour at the marina pub; bands in the marina pub most nights; embroidered and stitched pennants; and also at race presentations, great descriptions of stuff-ups for "mug-of-the-day yellow T-shirt" nominations.

Unfortunately the magnificently staged open-air welcome party was killed by a freezing breeze. But the presentation night was a winner. After pre-dinner drinks, a well-oiled mob of 300 sailors and friends stormed the dining hall to give riotous cheers for every trophy awarded, every joke told and swarmed to the dance floor the minute the band started up and played non-stop til pumpkin hour.

We Sandgropers don't have the non-stop round of regattas of the east coast, but little Busselton has made an outstanding move that is an example to the rest of the west.

Taking in the racing from Busselton's touristic jetty train.



Multihull division winner *Raffles Class* and the Busselton jetty.

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and against all sailing rules, the PRO rushed towards this black sheep and invited him to turn back. None of the other competitors even contemplated lodging a protest for this obvious outside assistance.

And the winners are?

Brian De Vries and his team on *Steel de Breeze* battled throughout the week against sistership *Eftel* in class A. *Steel de Breeze*, a Swarbrick 125, achieved two first places, a second and a third, along with consistent places in the other races, to snatch the class A victory by a single point.

"We had a fantastic battle against *Eftel* and winning the event is a dream for us," said a delighted Brian de Vries. "This bay offers some amazing sailing conditions. The water is completely flat even when the sea breeze is blowing at 20-plus knots."

Gemos Recycling did not have the same difficulty in winning the sportsboat division. With two firsts, three seconds and a third place on handicap, Ashley Gabrielson and his team on the Thompson 7 controlled the racing from day one. Playing the shifts beautifully in light weather, *Gemos Recycling* crossed the line first in each race, an outstanding performance against strong competition, with half of the fleet also sailing on the popular Thompson 7s.

"I was here last year for the inaugural event, I came back this year to win it and I'll be back again next year to enjoy it!" said Gabrielson. "The conditions were perfect for us with a light and very shifty wind. We've had a ball."

Just Add Water (Damon Smith) achieved a first and three thirds to secure equal-first place in the trailer sailer division with *Space Oddity*, which had a first and three second places. To break the tie, the committee had to discard each boat's worst result.

The most surprised winner of the event was David Guest in the multihull division. The skipper of *Raffles Class* competed with an all-female crew. Having never raced before, he invited a team member from *Catatonic* - one of his main competitors - to coach him. The lessons evidently did the trick, as the *Raffles Class* team achieved two firsts and a third place.

"First time racer, first time winner. What more can you ask for?" said Guest.

"I was horrified each time I had to take a start. There were too many boats, too close.

"The funniest moment was when we were approaching a mark and another yacht was there. I tried to get up on the inside of them but it was very