Cruising up the Prince Regent River lets you venture 70 km into the heart of the Kimberly Plateau, an area normally accessible only by helicopter. It is a beautiful remote wilderness with towering sandstone cliffs, innumerable islands, a placid inland sea, tide rips, crocodiles, and to crown it — King Cascade — a great waterfall tumbling down 50 metres amid lush vegetation.
We visited the area while on a ‘round-the-top’ cruise leaving Fremantle Sailing Club on August 29, 1983. Four nights were spent in the Prince Regent area before continuing on to Darwin, Queensland and New Zealand. Our Morning Wings is a roomy 13.2 m long, 1.5 m draft, bilge keel, flush deck ketch — a Hartley ‘Fijian’ with a 72 hp diesel. The crew comprised my wife Jacky, myself, our offspring Johanna (12) and Matthew (6), and a Sharp autopilot. To keep in touch with the outside world I had an H.F. Amateur radio. Getting the licence was agony but it is now great to be in daily contact with the ‘6KC Travellers’ Net’ run mostly by Arthur VK6ART in Perth and Doug VK3KY in Melbourne.

We left Broome on October 12 and took the Lacepede channel to Degerando Island where we anchored overnight, trying unsuccessfully to shelter from a brisk westerly sea breeze. Until now we had been used to sailing at night but without radar it was no longer safe. The hazards were too close together to chance the vagaries of satnav fixes and tidal currents. The next day we left Dugeschin Island to starboard and Forbin Island to port before closing in on Cape Wellington and the entrance to St. George Basin.

The first anticipated hazard, the mouth of Rothsay Water, we passed uneventfully at slack water. The first European to explore the area was King in 1820 and again in 1821. He found that strong tidal flows created whirlpools at this junction and on both occasions his vessel was spun around. We developed a great respect for King’s ability and persistence in exploring this area in an unwieldy engineless sailing vessel. The next hazard, a tide race in the constricted entrance to St. George Basin, was also passed uneventfully with only one knot ebb to contend with.

We entered St. George Basin in the late afternoon and anchored between St. Patrick Island and Python Cliffs on the Marigui Promontory. The anchorage was magical; as the sea breeze died away the basin became glassy and the cliffs glowed red in the sunset. The intense quiet was broken only by bird calls, fish jumping a metre or two in the air, and Matthew shouting himself hoarse getting a triple echo between the cliffs on either side.

A map of the northwestern corner of Australia shows an intensely crenulated coastline. Here an ancient rugged landscape with river valleys and hard sandstone bluffs has partly subsided beneath the ocean. In places the drowned valleys have been partly filled with sand and mud brought down by rivers, while in others the old valleys are kept clean by tidal currents. The next morning we ignored the sandbank shown on the chart and motored around the northern end of St. Patrick Island to look for a World War II fighter plane reputed to be lying on mud flats southeast of Mt. Waterlool. We found nothing, possibly because low water neaps was not low enough to expose it.

The northern end of St. George Basin is dominated by the twin flat-topped peaks of Mt. Trafalgar and Mt. Waterloo. Apparently a French navigator got in first and gave major bays and offshore islands along the coast French names; King appears to have tried to even things up with patriotic British names for secondary and inland features.

I felt it would be interesting to climb Mt. Waterloo so we returned to the southwest side where the mangrove barricade was thinnest but we ran into soft mud several hundred metres from the shore. Mt. Waterloo (344 m high) has impressive bluffs of sandstone and volcanics but looks to be fairly easy to climb from the southern side. However by the time I was a third of the way up the intense heat and humidity had removed all enjoyment from the project so I gave up.

During the summer wet season in the Kimberleys, grass one or two metres high carpets the ground between scattered eucalypts, and in the dry winter the grass goes to seed. As I pushed through the grass, my clothes became impregnated with itchy seeds which plagued me for months after. In the late afternoon we refloated and anchored in the lee of St. Andrew Island where we enjoyed an evening lightning display followed by a glow of a bushfire over the horizon.

On the 17th we attempted the Prince Regent River, motoring in on the last of the flood. On the ebb, the current did not exceed two knots, so we kept going. Initially we kept to the centre of the river because the air photos taken at low tide showed the occasional rock on the northern side. There seemed no danger of hitting anything. At 20 km above the river mouth (grid refn. YC755423 on the Prince Regent 1:100,000 topo sheet) the airphotos show a complex of sandbanks but when we passed over at about half tide we had no problems and the channels seen on the photo (CAF 4053; Run 5; No. 2227) seemed no longer in existence. However on the last kilometre up to King Cascade.
the tide was dropping quickly and we ran aground three times. Each time it appeared that there was a deep channel near the bank with sand bars in the middle of the river. On the third occasion we stuck fast in front of King Cascade so we took to the dinghy.

The falls, which are on a tributary of the Prince Regent, are set back 100 metres from the river and cannot be seen until opposite them. We had been told that at the time of our visit at the end of the dry season, there would be no streams flowing, so we expected to be disappointed. However as we neared the falls shrieking parrots raised our hopes. When last we drew opposite the falls we were overjoyed to see an abundant cascade. After weeks of drinking stale water, the sight of all the fresh water spraying down the cliff had us yelping for pleasure and soon we were dancing around under it and drinking it.

I cannot improve on King's description —

"The rock, a fine grained siliceous sandstone, is disposed in horizontal strata, from six to 12 feet thick, each of which projects about three feet from that above it, and forms a continuity of steps to the summit, which we found some difficulty in climbing; but where the distances between ledges was great, we assisted our ascent by tufts of grass firmly rooted in the luxuriant moss that grew abundantly about the water courses. On reaching the summit, I found that the fall was supplied by a stream winding through rugged chasms and thickly-matted clusters of plants and trees, among which pandanus bore a conspicuous appearance and gave a picturesque richness to the place."

At the foot, the water splashes into a tidal arm of the Prince Regent flanked by soft mud banks and mangroves. Getting in and out of the dinghy was a messy business. Back at Morning Wings we waited for the rising tide to float us off and we anchored in the channel near the cascade where we could fall asleep to the glorious sound of rushing fresh water.

This area is one of the most remote parts of Australia. The first harsh dry seasons alternating with steamy wet seasons drove them and the Aborigines south to more fertile areas near Derby. Prospectors and geologists have scouted the area, engineers have examined a possible tidal power scheme at Walcott Inlet to the south and crocodile shooters scoured the inlets until the crocodiles were protected to save them from extinction.

Much of Australia has been transformed by European settlement, but here the rugged landscape remains harsh, empty and untouched. How many people visit the cascade each year? Is our Matthew the youngest to stand at the top? There is no way of knowing, as few people seek official permission. The crew of the Customs patrol boat in Broome casually mentioned that they had visited the area a few weeks earlier and had pulled a couple of yachts off a sand bank but the names of the yachts could not be recalled.

The next morning we waited for the fall to pass its peak strength and motored off downstream against it. After the tide turned we picked up a couple of knots ebb and by late afternoon we passed Rothsay Water at slack low water and anchored in a bay nearby. On October 19 we motored and sailed through the northern gap in the Coronation Islands and anchored in Boomerang Bay on Bigge Island. The 20th saw us entering Fenelon Passage and we anchored off Cornelle Island to shelter from a southeasterly squall. That anchorage gave us the unnerving experience of scraping a bilge keel on a rock pinnacle while the echo sounder showed 17 feet of water under the transducer. The next day we passed Troughton Island and out into the unobstructed water of Joseph Bonaparte Gulf.

The area has special hazards for visiting yachts. Perhaps crocodiles provide the greatest scope for the nervous imagination and in bars of the north gruesome stories of crocodiles are as popular as those about cyclones. We had no previous experience of crocodiles and were rather apprehensive. The best advice I could assemble was —

- Do not get between a croc and the water.
- Do not linger at the water's edge — the few recorded attacks on humans usually involved people paddling or washing.
- Take more care in the wet season when they breed and become more territorial.

As we entered the St. George Basin we nervously scanned the banks and made feeble jokes whenever we saw a floating log. After three days the jokes were wearing a bit thin, but eventually one of the logs did turn out to be a croc, about two metres long. It was a bit of an anticlimax and I suspect the population has not recovered from the earlier period of shooting.

Stories of savage tide rips and whirlpools also intimidate the prospective visitor. The important thing is to recognise the enormous difference between spring and neap tides. In Broome the tide tables showed a tidal range of 9.6 metres for Saturday, October 8, but only 2.1 metres range one week later when we reached Prince Regent River. We experienced currents of no more than two knots, but I am sure that a week earlier, the stories of rips and whirlpools would all have been true.

This is one reason why it is difficult to generalise on 'safe' and 'risky' activities in the area. I am told that some skippers prefer to motor against an ebbing tidal stream because it is possible to keep a controlled speed over the bottom, whereas others prefer to go in with the flood so that they will be lifted clear if they ground. Perhaps a more important consideration is that the deepest part of most boats is aft end of the keel and if it grounds while motoring against a current, the bow will immediately swing around. If more of the keel catches while broadside on, there is a risk of the current rolling the boat over and flooding her. We planned on going with the currents if they were strong, and kept a stern anchor handy so that if we grounded on a rising tide we would not be carried too much farther forwards onto the obstacle.
Morning Wings with her moderate draft, good load carrying capacity, roominess and bilge keels is the nautical equivalent of a Land Rover — she is certainly no sports car. Later when we bashed into the tradewinds down the Queensland coast we longed for better windward ability, but in exploring the Kimberlys she was in her element. With bilge keels, running aground on a falling tide was a minor irritation, not a shambles. Self-sufficiency is all important; the Prince Regent River is an awful long way from civilisation. The town of Derby lies 250 km to the southwest, but people who have visited it scarcely class it as ‘civilisation’. We saw only one other vessel between Broome and Darwin although a Coast Watch aircraft appeared occasionally. Thus a good stock of supplies and spares is necessary.

Cruising people who have built their own boats are at an advantage because they usually try to carry all their tools and left over materials. This is partly because they cannot bear to part with their treasures, and partly because they have the silly idea that they will finish the fitting out while they are cruising. When I left Fremantle I had a long list of projects to finish — now in New Zealand six months later the list has changed but slightly and the bundle of teak trim is still tied up over the galley.

Navigation close to the Kimberley coast is tricky, partly because of the poor charts. One dismal piece of advice I received was to stick to the lines of soundings on the chart; that way you know that at least one other vessel has preceded you and survived.

Once among islands, our hand bearing compass was our principal instrument. I imagine radar would be useful because it would allow night travel. If your sailing becomes constrained by both tides and daylight, there may not be many hours in the day for sailing. Around the St. George Basin the water is murky and it is easy to hit the bottom before seeing it. One idea I tried was to visualise the landscape with sea drained away and to follow the course of the ancient rivers or their tributaries that is, to follow the deepest parts of the drowned valleys. In the event I did
not hit any rocks, although it did not stop me running aground where the valleys were filled with soft sand and mud.

The time of year should also be considered. In October we found the weather hot, humid and mostly overcast with calm mornings (or light southeasterlies) and an afternoon westerly sea breeze. A visit during the wet season (about December to March) is not advisable. The cyclone risk is high and rivers are in flood. However the sight of Prince Regent River and King Cascade in flood must be awe inspiring and the thought of trying to witness it is tempting. June to August is probably the best time for a visit.

Much of the land and sea in the area is Aboriginal Reserve and visitors should have permission from the Aboriginal Lands Trust in Perth. Write months in advance with specific proposals because the request will be referred to the traditional owners who now live at the Mowanjum Community near Derby. The remaining land in the area is a Reserve administered by the W.A. Fisheries and Wildlife and permission is also needed from that department who will also refer your request to the Mowanjum Community. In general the Wildlife authority requires no fires, no shooting, and no litter, while respect for the Aborigines requires that if you stumble on a sacred site, steer the women and children away and do not touch things or publish photographs.

Background information can be found with a little patience. The only chart of the area BA 1242 contains information up to 1948 and the Australian Government should be ashamed that nothing better is available. Topographic maps at 1:100,000 from the W.A. Lands Dept were very useful for identifying offlying islands from their contoured shapes. As an old field geologist I do not feel really happy unless I am piloting with an airphoto in my hand. Good airphotos for the area can be inspected in Perth (W.A. Lands Department) and ordered from Canberra. We also had a photocopy of...
King's Journal describing his visits in 1820 and 1821. The Australian Pilot describes the Prince Regent River but it seems to be copied solely from King's Journal. We supplemented the published data with information from professional skippers in Broome. Manny Manolis and Alf Corpus were very helpful and suggested routes and anchorages that looked poor or risky on the chart but were fine in reality.

No cruising guide is available for this area, and this article is intended to go some way towards filling this need. Cruising the Kimberley coast can be a daunting proposition but we found the rewards were great.