CRUISING

RIDE THE GUGARI
RIP TO GOVE
The shortest way from Darwin to Gove is through the Hole in the Wall. But if you choose it, be prepared for an exciting ride on the Gugari Rip.

By David C. Lowry
Cape Wilberforce predicted for 7.20 am so we had the water the better. High tide at Gove was a convincing southern passage or the extra 60 miles try. The extra 40 miles around Cape Wessel was a convincing weather was typically calm and sultry so we decided to give the Hole in the Wall a winter. The islands are low and almost featureless while the narrow channel itself is obscure unless you can sight directly through it.

As we motored into the channel the walls closed in and we were carried forward by a marked east-going current. We could see right through the mile-long passage and this gave an illusory sense of security. On each side were low cliffs of pale hard slabby sandstone but there was little time to admire the scenery as the cliffs progressively closed in and the current quickened. It felt like motoring down a swift river.

Near the eastern entrance the excitement increased — at this stage the cliffs were only about 50 metres away on each side and were flashing past as four knots of boat speed were augmented by five or six knots of current. The bottom deepened and became irregular, throwing the current into boiling eddies and standing waves. The helm alternately kicked and went limp as eddies caught the boat and she yawed unpredictably. By now I felt we should be in a New Zealand jet boat, not a sedate 20-tonne ketch. But then we were through and the turbulence dissipated in the open sea.

From the Wessel Islands we continued to Gove, the only significant hazard being the passage between Wigram Island and Cotton Island. Chart AUS 715 shows an incompletely drawn shoal area on the southern side of Wigram Island. The shoal area in fact extends westwards, constricting the channel. A trip to the spreaders showed it was desirable to head south along Cotton Island before heading southeast to Cape Wilberforce.

Gove

When we arrived at Gove, we congratulated ourselves on having circumnavigated one third of the Australian continent since leaving Fremantle but then we threaded our way through the anchored yachts and our egos were deflated as we read ‘Fremantle’ on the sterns of one third of them. Gove is an interesting cross-roads for cruising boats and we found it more congenial than Darwin. Around 1970 the area was transformed by the development of a major bauxite mine and alumina refinery with an associated port and town. This town, Nhulunbuy, is still too fresh to appear on most maps of Australia although with 4,000 people it is one of the major population centres of the Northern Territory.

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