



Melbourne Whittley Cruiser Club

Mallacoota trip report Christmas 2019 – 2020

Attendee: ConKiki Peter and Audrey Nicolopoulos

Boxing Day 26th December 2019

Having heard of the fires in Gippsland at Tambo Crossing we checked with the caravan park at Orbost and they said the road from Bruthen to Omeo and beyond was closed, and posed no threat to the township of Orbost. With that in mind we departed for Orbost the next day and had an uneventful drive to Orbost where we stayed for the night and left refreshed the next day for Mallacoota.

Saturday morning we arrived at the jetty and launched our boat, put the trailer in storage at Col's back yard, met his parents who had come down from Hervey Bay and went back to the jetty. Five minutes later Col arrived and said we could not leave yet as he had a surprise for us. His friend Brett arrived with gifts, "abalone" six of them, fresh and still alive. Abalone was a running joke with another diver who visits the town every summer and promises to give us some but never does.

With fresh abalone on-board we took off and headed to our first destination "Captain Creek" no one was there, which was not unusual, tied up and settled in for the day. A while later a speed boat arrived and as is customary we greeted them and helped to secure them to the jetty. They spent the afternoon skiing and swimming and having fun (easy to do), then it was time for a snack, so I pulled out one of the abalone and prepared it for the fry pan. We invited the family to join us for some fresh seafood, they accepted and started to enjoy. One of the girls (girlfriend of one of the sons) said she couldn't eat our food as was too "expensive". Go figure, I assured her it was ok, I was offering so she should just enjoy the food. She kept reminding me that abalone is over \$100.00 a Kilo, so I said "no problem" I still have another five in the fridge. Who knows what she might have been thinking (we must be made of money), she really enjoyed the food. Eventually they left and we spent the night, just the two of us. Fishing was quiet.

The next morning we decided to leave early and headed for our next destination, Cemetery Bight, so we could get a spot on the jetty as this is a popular spot for skiers and the jetty gets full. That afternoon a local was swimming with his kids when he came over to us and asked if we had heard the news of a fire at Wingan River. Nope, where is it? Not far away and it is predicted to reach Mallacoota if the wind changes. Didn't think much of it, so we stayed put for the night thinking that our location was on the other side and we would be very safe.

Monday morning and Audrey was a mess with worry, limited phone reception and no media (tv or radio) maybe we should go back to the township for more information (by the way, Cemetery Bight as of 9th February still not burnt). We tied up at the main jetty in town and asked around for any



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news, it was grim and we were told it was too late to leave as the fire had crossed the Princes highway and the road was cut off. Well, we were fine, on the jetty and well away from any trees or any cluster of buildings. Another Whittley turned up, we did not know them, but soon became friends, Mick and Gail. By mid-afternoon we saw a lot of CFA trucks cruising around the foreshore as they were setting up a massive pump next to the ramp to supply the trucks with sea water to spray.

About 5.00pm we had a meeting with CFA, Police and ambulance on the foreshore and told us they expected the fire to hit us about 4.00am on Tuesday morning, imagery showed the smoke cloud had been measured at 16klms high, this was unheard of and they would do everything they could to save the town. Now I was getting scared. We were told to go to sleep and wake up about 3.00am or when we heard the sirens. Are they serious "go to sleep"?

Well we woke up about 3.00am and sat on the jetty, waiting, there was 20 CFA trucks patrolling the outskirts, waiting.

Dawn arrived about 5.15am and we could see daylight, no power, it had been cut off hours ago. AS the morning went on more and more people gathered around the tin shed, wrapped in blankets for protection. I told some of them with children to get into the shed as it offered more protection from any embers that were expected to come. By 7.30 it started to get darker and darker. 9.00am and it was pitch black, the kids were very confused, it was bed time already? I made a joke that we were going for the record of the shortest day on record, I think we won it. The kids laughed they thought it was funny. It was getting very smokey and we started to put on masks or anything we could use to block out the smoke. We needed torches to guide us through the obstacle course of bodies if we wanted to walk around.

Then it hit, embers flying over our heads and landing in the water, we had hoses set up to douse the boats to protect them from burning our covers. I took some photos of my boat, all I could see was black, with a faint outline of my boat, taken 3 metres away with a flash, so so dark.

This was really scary stuff and hard to fully describe unless you were there.

About 11.00 am and the sky turned orange. The CFA announced that the fire had passed, and we were safe, now all that was left was putting out some "spot" fires. In the distance (about 200 metres away) we could see fire balls exploding along Lakeside drive, on the other side of the jetty. It was still very close, still very scary, we could hear the gas bottles exploding, one after another. Each one was a house going up in flames, still scary. The fire continued to burn, heading away from the town ship, burning everything in its path and continued into the national park. By now it was late afternoon and the smoke was thick, you really needed a mask. All we could do is sit and watch, too dangerous to go for a drive in the car, no way would we go out in the boat for a cruise.

We went to bed at 9.00 pm New Year's Eve, too tired to try and stay up for a glass of champagne.

For the next few days all we did was wander around with not much to do.

Friday the 3rd January and the first lot of evacuees were taken aboard the Navy ship and set sail for Hastings.

Saturday, and the foreshore caravan park had power back, we were on the jetty and my boat batteries were struggling to keep two fridges and lights going, so we spoke to the park manager who



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graciously allowed us onto 2 sites in the park and plugged into 240 volt power, now my batteries were happy.

The main shopping strip was back to normal, 2 supermarkets open, the pub serving cold beer, the chemist filling out prescriptions, the bakery, cafes, and most of the shops were serving customers, as normal as normal could be after such devastation. The 2 petrol stations were rationing petrol, no diesel as this was needed for the fire trucks who were still patrolling for spot fires (and there was plenty of them).

The days rolled on, and still no news as to when the roads would be open. Originally we were told maximum 2 weeks and the roads would be open to Orbost. Well that didn't happen.

Time to go back to New year's eve and mention that we were expecting 4 more Whittleys to join us, one decided it would stay at the Gippsland lakes, another was stranded at Metung and was told it was too late to leave and was stuck there for 3 days, and when the roads were opened, made a dash for the safety of Sale. Another was stranded at Orbost for 3 days and was evacuated from the caravan park to the footy oval for safety, and then to the community centre during the height of the fire. When the roads opened they too made a dash to Sale. And the last one was going to leave Melbourne on New Year's Eve and drive straight through to Mallacoota and join us. Well they decided to stay in Melbourne and seek refuge in their lounge room (and I can't blame them).

So here we were, just us, in the caravan park until they announced they would open the road north to Eden, on the 14th January 2020.

We assembled at the meeting point at 9.00am for a 10.am departure, and were met with the Police, CFA, ambulance and the army to escort us to Eden. There was more than 100 cars lined up with either boats or caravans in tow. The trip north was slow, almost 2 hours of nothing but burnt forest, quite disturbing and surreal.

Once we reached Eden we were no longer under escort, and were told we could go in any direction we wanted to, except back. (Who in their right mind would want to go back)?

We decided to go to South Pambula and turn left onto the Mount Darragh Rd over the mountains and onto Bombala. Good idea, as the only other 2 roads were:

1. Imlay Road, closed as was surrounded by fires. The flattest run to Bombala.
2. Snowy mountain Hwy, open but a very steep climb through the divide up to Browns mountain, and a lot of cars would struggle to climb, and we had to go up to Bega first, the long way, and as it turned out was also surrounded by fires and potentially could be closed during the day.

Mount Darragh road is a sealed bitumen road, narrow, winding up through the great dividing range, not a great road but it got us to Bombala where we stopped for lunch at about 1.00 pm, a quick bite and on the move again towards Cooma, then to Canberra, and then Yass, WOW finally the Hume highway. Now we could head for Melbourne with no fires around us, finally got to Gundagai about 7.30pm, and checked into the caravan park. It was hot, very hot, about 39 degrees and we spent an uncomfortable night, the temperature never below 30 degrees. We considered staying there for a day, decided against it, it was going to be hot, and nothing to do. So the next morning we made tracks for Melbourne, we got home at about 4.00pm.

Safe and sound, ConKiki in the driveway.



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I would now like to express our massive thanks to all the CFA crews that attended this fire. We know that there were only 2 Mallacoota trucks, with an additional 18 CFA trucks that assembled from all over Victoria. 18 trucks with relief crews being flown in to relieve them.

May not have survived without them, and my apologies if I missed any, they are:

1. Tarneit
2. Seville
3. Gisborne
4. Warburton
5. Rowville
6. Bayswater
7. Kangaroo Ground
8. Upwey
9. Wattle Glen
10. Yellingbo
11. Scoresby
12. Silvan
13. Bendigo
14. Mernda
15. Lara
16. South Morang
17. Clarkefield
18. Dooen
19. Doreen
20. Menzies Creek
21. Yarrambat
22. Kalorama
23. Eltham city
24. Belgrave South
25. Panton Hill
26. Narre Warren
27. Truganina
28. Carlsruhe
29. Taradale
30. Talbot
31. Maryborough
32. Eaglehawk
33. Dunolly
34. Wandin
35. Tylden
36. Kyneton
37. Pastoria
38. Fortuna
39. Warrandyte North
40. Springhill



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41. Craigieburn
42. Arthurs Creek
43. Strathewen
44. Monbulk
45. Olinda
46. Emerald
47. Riddles creek
48. Selby
49. Ferntree Gully
50. Mallacoota

If you live near any of these stations please visit and extend my thanks as well as the thanks of more than 4000 people who they helped to protect.

As Australians we should be very proud of them and the work they do.

This trip report compiled by the only one attendee.