

HOPPERS FLOTILLA

HOPPERS NORTH ISLAND FLOTILLA

TEXT BY LINDA HOPPER



The idea to circumnavigate the North Island and spend time exploring Tasman Bay and the Marlborough Sounds on his own launch was a bucket list item for Leigh Hopper. A lifelong boating and fishing enthusiast, Leigh put the word out to friends and family in June 2021 that he and wife Linda planned to set off from their home in Whitianga the following January, for a six week adventure aboard his Maritimo M70 Moon Shadow.



THE ADMIRAL –
LEIGH HOPPER



1. Cool Change enjoys the fishing on Ranfurly Bank on the trip North

2. Admirals Uber to dinner ashore in Nelson

3. Visitors for dinner on Encore. Photo Miriam Godfrey

4. Crews from Adria and Cool Change enjoying meals ashore at Cloudy Bay.

Word soon spread around the Coromandel and beyond via the boating community, and within a month Leigh had a list of over 20 skippers with vessels and crews keen to take up the challenge. Over the months that followed Covid lockdowns, shipping delays, family commitments and even severe weather events all conspired to trim that list to a hard core group of ten motor yachts and two sailing yachts who were ready, willing and able to make the meet up date of January 20th 2022 in Whangaroa Harbour.

Leading up to departure, an underwater volcano erupted off the coast of Tonga, and a cyclone loomed off the coast of Australia. Heading north to join the Flotilla from Bayswater aboard their recently purchased Riviera 61 Halo, Matt and Tania Tuck took shelter in Tutakaka

Marina but became hemmed in with floating debris and damaged boats, as unprecedented swells pounded the upper North Island coast for 24 hours after the eruption. However, undaunted, boats came from far and wide: Adria, the 50' Azimut of Bruce and KC Anderson out of Whangamata. Cool Change, the Maritimo 55 of Barry & Catherine Cawte from Whitianga. Ruben Jane, the 75' Salthouse from Gulf Harbour owned by Doug and Miriam Godfrey. Encore, the Maritimo M54 of Blair and Sue Summerville from Pauanui. Lief Blair was on his 54' Riviera, Silverado and Mark Nicholson aboard Whatever his 42' Riviera, and Lockdown, a Riviera 51' purchased specifically for this box ticking adventure by Grant Sagar. Two yachts rounded out the Flotilla - Racing Yacht Starlight Express, and the Ketch

Raw Cotton.

Boats cruised through Great Barrier Island, The Poor Knights and the Bay of Islands on their way north, with the improving weather setting the tone for an awesome start to the adventure. The journey to Whangaroa, gave crews a chance to hone their fishing, diving or boating skills or get to know their new craft with great weather conditions and calming seas as the meet up date drew near.

A couple of crews tried their hand at trolling for Marlin with strikes but no catches, while others took in the sights and delights of Russell or took the chance to top up fuel and provisions. In addition to the ship to ship communications on channel 6 a WhatsApp group was formed for Flotilla members, and family and friends ashore to keep up with the lighter

side of the trip and many funny moments were captured and shared throughout the journey.

The first of these was aboard Encore when a crew member discovered they had left home without their underwear! Always in control, the skipper “called a friend” who was despatched on his JetSki with the requisite undies, and caught up to Encore as she left the harbour at Tairua. The Uber-undies story became a classic and set the tone for laughs and camaraderie for the entire trip. As crew changes came and went those back on shore could maintain a keen interest in the progress of the Flotilla via the many posts.

AROUND THE TOP

The plan was to meet by the water buoy on the eastern arm of Whangaroa Harbour at 1500hrs on January 20th. Leigh soon became known as “the Admiral” and as the fleet began to assemble by nightfall there were seven launches and their crews, meeting, greeting and planning feverishly over a drink or two, for the next stage “around the top”. The weather window was on schedule and as per the Admirals plan, the boats set off on the 21st for Tom Bolling Bay with the intention of heading around Cape Reinga at 0600 the next day. The



last of the flotilla caught up rounding Cape Maria van Diemen.

Sea conditions down the west coast were pleasant with a light SW swell and variable winds from 5-10 knots. All were trolling with the hope of catching a Marlin or Tuna and remained within sight of each other. Three Marlin were tagged and a few Albacore were hauled aboard for eating.

Two to three hour watches were the norm apart from Adria, where Bruce and KC shared the days and nights between two. At 0600 on Monday January 24 the Flotilla rounded Farewell Spit, having travelled together for 48 hours with some of the leg over 100 nm off shore. All enjoyed the comfort of the banter on channel 6 and WhatsApp when coverage was available,

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1. Crew from *Encore* enjoying lunch at Punga Cove after the rain!

2. Grant Sagar surveys the rope that had his anchor well caught on the floor of Nelson Harbour.

and maintaining visual contact on the trip south. Extraordinary images were captured by the two professional photographers aboard *Ruben Jane*, with many thanks due to Jen and Miriam for giving everyone such a fantastic record of the adventure. On arrival boats tucked in behind *Tata Island* for a hearty breakfast raft up and debrief, followed by refuelling at Port Tarakohe. The sight of a raft of launches apparently got the tongues wagging amongst Golden Bay locals but the fuel supplier had the biggest grin! Skippers and their crews all had different plans on how they wanted to explore the Tasman area, and boats broke away and rejoined as they enjoyed cruising and fishing across the region. Crew changes were scheduled events for most, and shuttles and taxis from Kaiteriteri back to Nelson became the norm as one group departed and another excitedly joined.

ABEL TASMAN BEAUTY

The beautiful beaches and golden sands were an instant attraction and many boats lingered in Abel Tasman park enjoying both water and land expeditions. The opportunity to walk a portion of the famed Abel Tasman track was too good to miss. The pristine bush and bird life provided luxurious material for

photographers of all capabilities which were shared with friends and family. Team drinks aboard one boat or another at the end of a day always included much banter about the boats and their performance or the days adventures, or an award for “Dick of the Day” when needed - especially if it was for the Admiral himself!

While some stayed to enjoy the delights of Abel Tasman, others were keen to get underway and head to the Marlborough Sounds area via D’urville Island or French Pass ahead of forecast high winds. A large pod of dolphins greeted boats as they made their way across Tasman Bay. Enroute *Ruben Jane* took refuge in Croisilles Harbour to address an onboard repair, and with a change in the weather due overnight some local knowledge had indicated that a good anchorage could be had in Mills Arm in the far reaches of Greville Harbour on D’urville.

Matt & Tania on *Halo* were cruising with their two children who were proving to be highly capable boaties as the family joined *Ruben Jane*, *Moon Shadow* and *Lockdown* to wait out the approaching SW winds. At sunset all was calm, fishing rods were out, dinner was on and it looked to be a fine choice for an overnight. However, by 0300 the wind was gusting 50 knots down the valleys and swirling all the boats

like corks in a washing machine. With conditions deteriorating rapidly and one of the anchors not holding the group headed back out to find safer anchorage and tucked into an eastern arm of Greville in the pitch black of night. All eventually re-anchored securely and managed to get some sleep.

The morning brought praise for the young crew on *Halo* for their cool calm heads during the chaos! It was a lesson for even the most seasoned salts - Mother Nature always has the last word, and it’s great to have a team around you when the proverbial hits the fan! Other crews took a much more measured approach to the weather however, and found that sea conditions at the Urban Oyster Bar in Nelson were very much to their liking, so shared pics and menu choices via WhatsApp accordingly!

French Pass is a narrow and sometimes treacherous navigation channel which separates D’Urville from the mainland, and was the most appropriate access way to Pelorus Sound for the group coming from Abel Tasman Park. The Pass narrows to 100m at its midpoint, and descends to 100m at its deepest. Keen to navigate this stretch the team did so in smaller groups. The first to travel were *Halo*, *Ruben Jane*, *Moon Shadow* and *Encore* with conditions



relatively benign. Once again the action was beautifully captured but the photographers onboard and quickly dispatched to the folks back on shore and the rest of the group cruising elsewhere.

RUNNING REPAIRS

Hydraulics and winches, anchors and water makers all gave the fleet various amounts of drama, a number being handled on the spot with help from within the flotilla.

For more serious issues however it became necessary to pay a visit to the marina at Havelock or Nelson and services there became a safe harbour for some during running repairs. Thanks are due in particular to the friendly team at the Havelock Marina and their suppliers for making room for the various boats at short notice. Being moored for the night between two mussel barges was just another part of the adventure! Stays at the marina were extended for some as more bad weather arrived or significant boat repairs were called for, and crews spread out to explore on land and by car the many delights of the wine making regions a short drive away. Seals and dolphins were regular

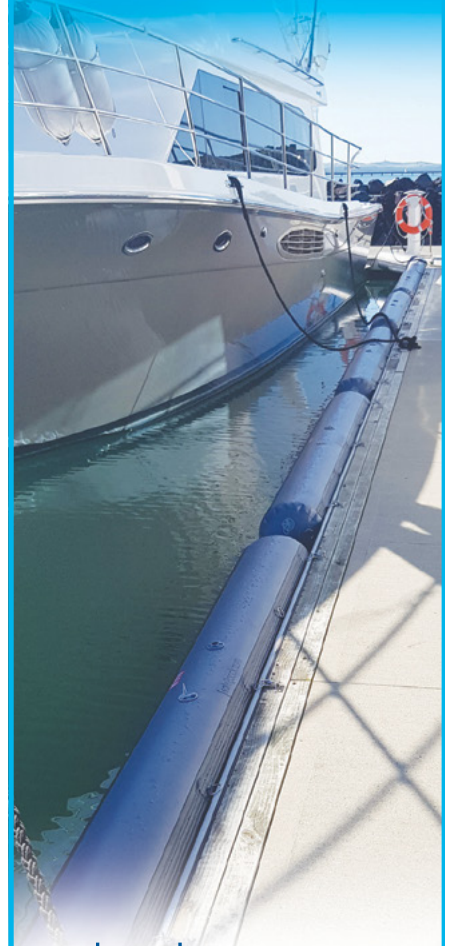
sights, either feeding or playing around the Sounds and one even visited the crew at the Marina and posed for some pics!

Local knowledge once again suggested a stay at Worlds End in a wee southern corner of Pelorus was worth a visit, so at various times and in various combinations the boats found their way there. Boats spent splendid evenings sharing great food and stories over a tippie into the wee smalls, and on one occasion at daybreak it was apparent the raft was on the edge of the local waterskiing lane, so what else to do? The Admiral showed his style skiing off the back of the boat behind the tender, as did Mike Livingstone on Encore.

By mid way through the voyage all crews were becoming well used to problems or faults that might interrupt their plans, so when Moon Shadow experienced an issue with the sewage tanks onboard, it raised no real concern as it appeared a fix was at hand. The fix did involve moving the entire raft of boats in the dark so said tanks could be emptied in deeper water however. The exercise generated much speculation from the locals, and hilarity from the crews.

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The catching of, the preparing of, who had the inside running on a dive spot or restaurant on shore. Who knows how to cook the Crays just right etc etc. While Cool Change enjoyed Snapper and Mussels in Ketu Bay, Ruben Jane enjoyed a walk and dinner further afield at Furneaux Lodge. When Lockdown found a great dive spot Encore was enjoying fantastic meals ashore in Nelson. Starlight Express missed dinner altogether in Ketu Bay when they decided to go for a walk onshore and got back after dark, having to use their mobile phones to find their way down a steep bush clad hill and back to the boat. Ruben Jane crew ventured early into Queen Charlotte Sound and walked in James Cooks footsteps on Motuara Island, enjoying the bird sanctuary on a warm and windless day. Aperol Spritz was enjoyed by the crew of Moon Shadow after they convinced Halo they needed rescuing from their tender adrift south of Maude Island. Adventures included morning walks ashore in Fairy Bay or an impromptu Gurnard filleting lesson, a photo safari in a glorious bay or capturing another magnificent sunset off the back across Kenepuru Sound. A late lunch at Te Rawa Bay came recommended by the Cool Change crew so Encore lined up, or tied up, the next

day. Lockdown had great success diving off Checkwood Island and presented the raft with incredible edibles for an evening menu - mussels in Grants special sauce, Blue Cod on the BBQ and magnificent crays for main course.

The battle for dinner was hard won however with one crew member being severely skewered by a king claw of the largest cray he caught. First Aid administered and photos shared, all settled down to enjoy the days catch while dolphins played nearby. Again, the ability to keep in touch across the boats meant that great experiences were shared and itineraries were adjusted on the fly. Days were for exploring and for the most part the weather and wind was favourable well into early February.

However it took a turn for the cooler and wetter and several boats again headed to Havelock for refuge and repairs. While gathered there crews once again found a good gathering spot on the back of Ruben Jane to swap stories over a tippie. Prior to departure from Havelock, once again local knowledge suggested that engines should be started and left running for a short time before departure to deal with any eels that may have taken up residence inside thrusters! Advise duly taken, Metvuw and

WindPredict consulted, some of the group departed Havelock and again spread from Queen Charlotte Sound or back to Abel Tasman to continue adventures.

Moon Shadow headed back to Nelson for a crew change along with Ruben Jane, Encore and Lockdown. This time the trip through French Pass was not so gentle! Wind gusts of well over 60 knots were recorded on board Ruben Jane as they rolled off the hills and across Delaware Bay. A stop was made tucked under the cliffs at Cable Bay to check for any leaks and grab a bite before continuing on with conditions clearing on approach to Nelson. The Marina had no further space at short notice so three of the boats had to put the pick down in Nelson Harbour, just outside the shipping lane by the port. At sunset all was calm (yes, there's a common theme here!) so crews rafted up to enjoy a shared meal and admire the insta worthy sunset view. The wind came back with a vengeance by midnight and once again the decision to break the raft was made. At daylight it became apparent that Grant, alone onboard Lockdown, had not managed to secure anchorage and spent several hours on the helm endeavouring to reset with a winch that failed in the early hours. With assistance from Encore

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Crew breakfasted and smiling after a wet and windy night on Moonshadow

and Moon Shadow the anchor was slowly recovered to reveal the cause50m of sodden abandoned shipping rope hooked from the bottom of the harbour. The harbourmaster watched amazed as the huge filthy coil was hoisted aboard the bow of Lockdown. An exasperated Grant headed for the showers, I mean marina, to take delivery of one of the three new winch motors he had ordered over the weekend - philosophy being at least one would be delivered! Crisis averted Moon Shadow and Encore prepared to leave for sunnier spots, but not before Moon Shadow hooked on some abandoned chain in another part of the Harbour! The crews then headed to lovely Mapua for a spot of sun, lunch and ice cream! The benign weather however was of no help when Moon Shadow was unable to lift her anchor off the bottom of Ruby Bay, and soon she too was headed back to Nelson for a couple of nights repairs. Meanwhile back at Havelock the weather continued to encourage land based activities, like a fantastic lunch in Picton or Cloudy Bay for the crews on Cool Change and Adria.

HEADING HOME

By mid February discussions turned to the return leg of the journey with various plans made to leave for the trip north.

Ruben Jane and Halo were the first to depart, going in opposite directions as Matt chose to head back up the West coast, and was even spotted from an Air New Zealand plane by some new crew on their way south. Meanwhile Doug headed to Cape Palliser with a 10 knot following wind at the beginning of a dream run back up the east coast. Still other boats continued to enjoy the delights of the region as the weather continued to improve. Moon Shadow and Lockdown paused for a crew change in Kaiteiteri and after farewells and a restock of the galley headed towards D'urville Island once more. Morning pre departure being somewhat chaotic, an oversight of the daily engine room inspection resulted in an onboard engine room fire. Fortunately the fire suppressant system was triggered, unfortunately causing both engines to stop. A hurried inspection of the engine room revealed a plume of smoke on opening the cockpit hatch, with the only course of action to divert once more to Nelson for further investigation, consideration and repairs. Fortunately there were yet more crew coming who could bring the necessary air filters which were duly fitted, and after some serious cleaning the team were able to set off once more. Lockdown remained close at hand throughout and the incident revealed yet

again the benefits of being in the company of other boats, especially when the worst happens.

For the homeward leg Moon Shadow rejoined the remaining Flotilla who had gathered at Ngaruru Bay in Tory Channel, and at 1200 on Tuesday February 15 with a wager on the first Marlin to be caught, they headed out. Cooks Strait presented a blustery NW beam sea and backing to aft as the flotilla neared Cape Palliser. The leg from Palliser to East Cape consumed a day and two nights at 8 knots. Moon Shadow hooked up on a stripey early after daybreak south of Waipukurau and another soon after. No other Marlin were caught. East Cape saw most of the Flotilla trolling or bottom fishing around Ranfurly Banks with no game fish but some success for Lockdown and Coolchange with Hapuka, Kingfish and Bluenose. Some of the boats continued north, Moonshadow, Lockdown and Cool Change spent a comfortable night in Whangaparoa Bay to settle up the wager over a rum or two prior to departing homeward the next morning under clear skies and a light SE tail wind.

All arrived home safe and sound with fantastic memories of a special and unique adventure with new friends. All agree it was made even better being part of a Flotilla, and are looking forward to the next adventure together on the high seas! ☼