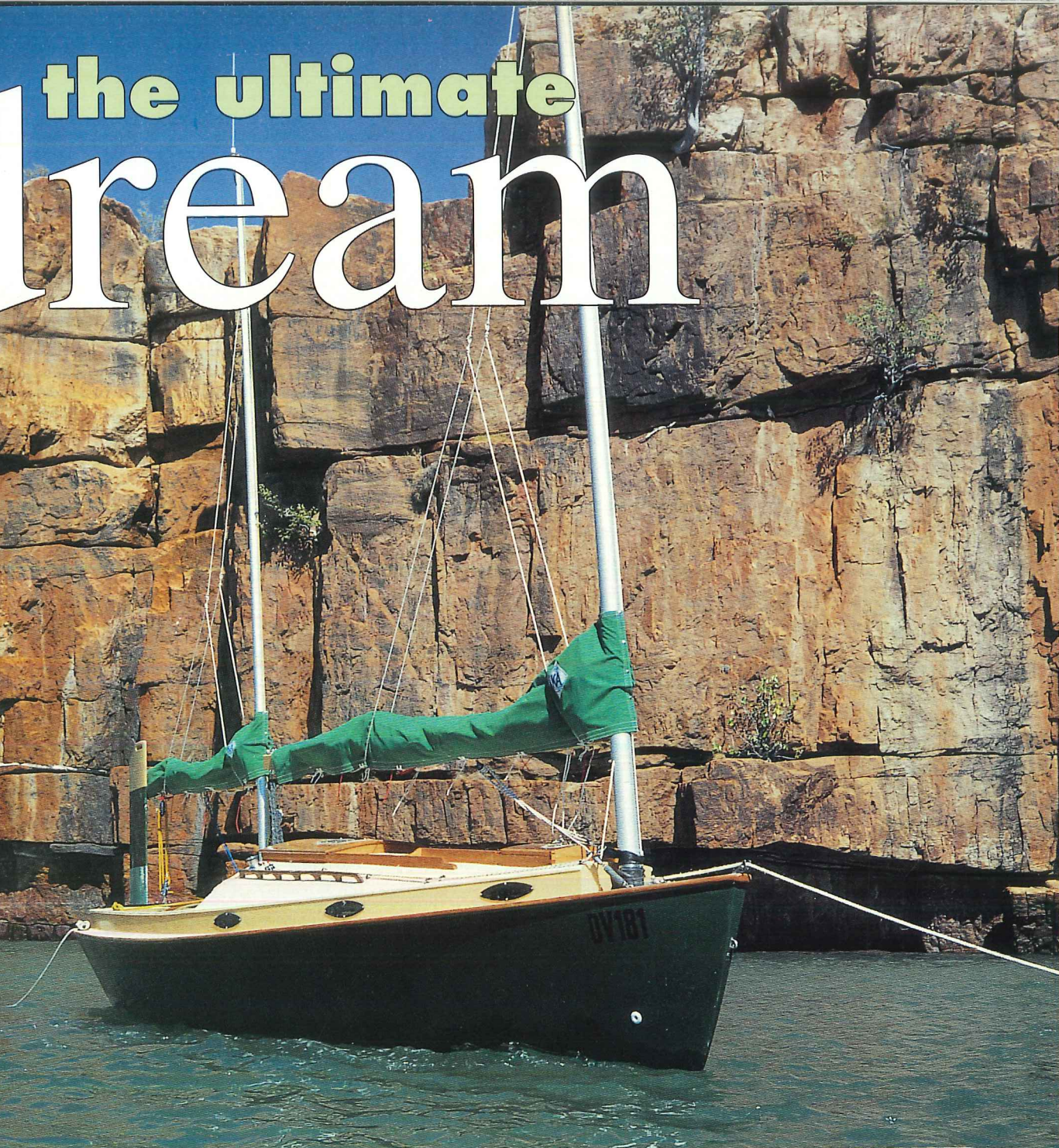


the ultimate dream



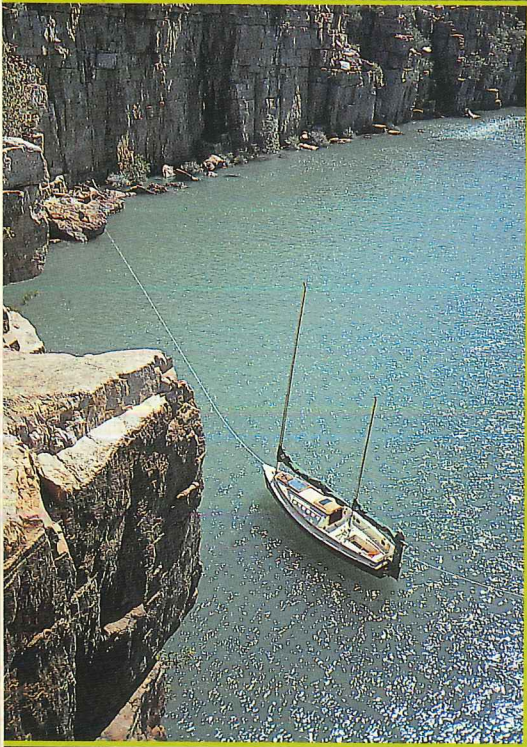
David Nelson built a small wooden cruiser and took it to the Kimberley region for the cruise of a lifetime.

I'd spent years dreaming of building my ultimate forty foot cruising yacht, read everything written on the subject and bought endless sailing magazines. I probably could have gone on dreaming about cruising exotic places given the seemingly conflicting realities of four weeks annual leave, family responsibilities and limited money. Two years ago at the Adelaide Boat Show I saw Rob Ayliffe's 23' Norwalk Islands Sharpie "Charlie Fisher" on the Duck Flat Wooden Boats display. There is something very beautiful about simple, functional and effective design and Bruce Kirby has done a wonderful job on this line of boats.

It finally occurred to me that what I really needed was a versatile, portable, all terrain cruising boat. A boat that could explore the shallowest bay, dry out upright between tides, was a safe and fast coastal cruiser in good weather. Indeed a yacht I could easily handle single-handed and which was capable of adventurous forays with a friend, but was also a safe family cruiser on more sedate outings.

I bought a kit of materials from Duck Flat Wooden Boats and completed the boat in one year of part time work. The boat was launched and named Matilda by our 2 1/2 year old son. Sailing trials followed and perfor-

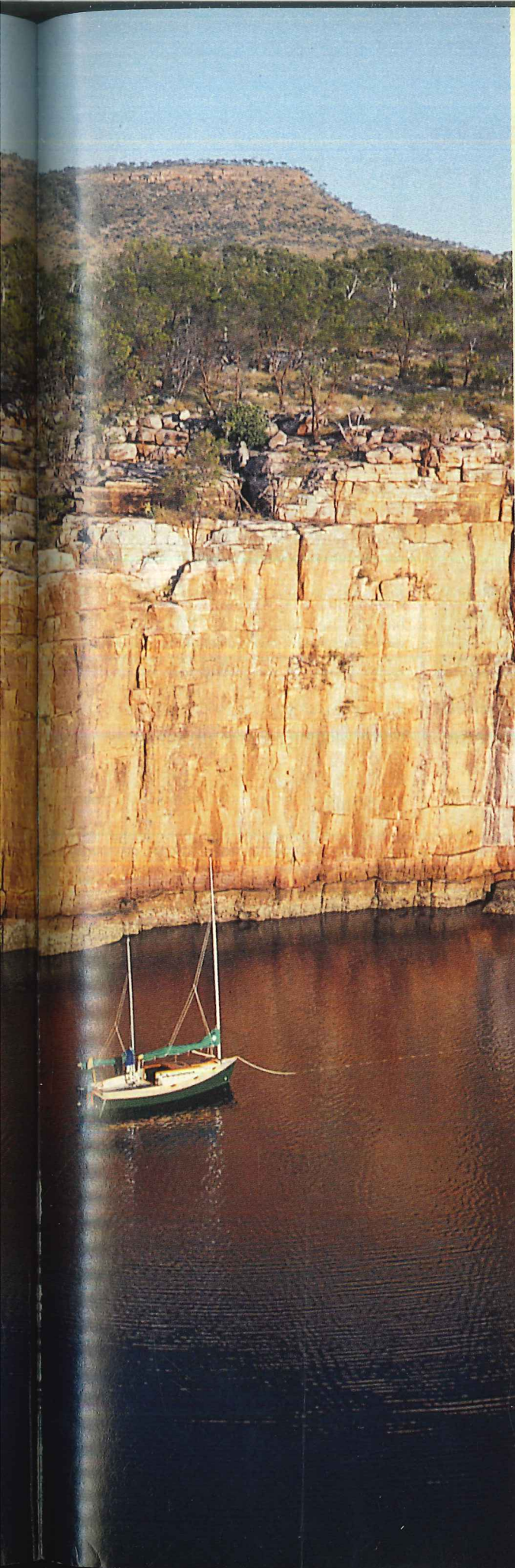
the ultimate dream



Moored in the amphitheatre, Casuarina Creek.



Sailing under mizzen on the Berkley River.



mance exceeded all expectations. Matilda was specifically fitted out for extended cruising. We wanted to be able to cruise remote areas independent of shore based facilities for weeks at a time.. the Kimberley dream emerged.

From Adelaide it's hard to imagine a cruising ground further afield than the Kimberley with a round trip of 7,000 kms. The thought of towing a 23ft yacht this far is enough to deter many people, but it shouldn't be. Julian Trudinger and I left Adelaide on a rainy winter's morning heading north after completing a seemingly endless job list. I had been so preoccupied with the sailing part of the trip I viewed the drive up as a means to an end, something that had to be endured to cruise an area I had dreamed of. The landscape, however, was everchanging and always interesting, unlike the blur of monotonous roadhouse fuel stops.

We had decided to cruise the northern end of the Kimberley. In particular we hoped to explore the upper reaches of the Berkley River. This plan allowed bitumen road access to our launch site of Wyndham. The shiney gibber deserts of northern South Australia merged into the red sand dunes and ghost gums of central Australia. Each night we would pull into a roadside stop and climb into the boat's quarter berths for a sleep before continuing on our way early the following morning.

After three long days we arrived in Wyndham and spent a day in the caravan park getting organised. We visited the Harbour Master who was very helpful, giving advice on the preferred route down the Cambridge Gulf and allowing us to fill water tanks alongside the wharf on the morning of departure. We had previously advised Coastwatch of our intended route.

The boatramp at Wyndham is concrete and allows launching and retrieval over a wide tidal range. We launched "Matilda" and motored over to the wharf where we filled our water tanks with good quality town water with the assistance of Marine and Harbours staff who were friendly and helpful. We left Wyndham half an hour before the tide peaked at seven metres. We were sailing at four knots in a light easterly with the Wyndham jetty remaining almost abeam till the tide turned and we were off. Our course took us forty five nautical miles down the Cambridge Gulf to Lacrosse Island and open ocean. We entered various narrow sections where there was turbulence and strong currents, often punctuated by mirror calm sections joined by what appeared to be a 'shear line.

Matilda sailed on at five to six knots totally unaffected making up to ten knots over the land. The surrounding country was a beautiful mix of craggy hillsides and intense isolation. As we exited the last of the narrows Lacrosse Island appeared on the horizon. In fading light and breeze we entered Turtle Bay and crept close inshore to get away from the four knot current sweeping past the mouth of the bay. We anchored off the sandy beach expecting to dry out during the night. The gentle bumping on the bottom woke me and I climbed out into the cockpit and surveyed the situation with the spotlight. The pink eyes of a large crocodile appeared in the shallows fifty metres away, followed by another three pairs of eyes on the beach - any thoughts of a moonlight stroll were cancelled as I climbed back into my quarter berth and installed the companionway board. To the uninitiated it is a sobering experience to realise that for once you are not on top of the food chain!

The following morning we left Lacrosse Island at first light on a forty nautical mile course across the mouth of the Cambridge Gulf and down the coast to Revelley Island and the mouth of the Berkeley River. Once out of the lee of Lacrosse Island the south east wind increased to 25kts against the incoming tide producing areas of con-

Early morning on Casuarina Creek with Mt. Casuarina in the background.

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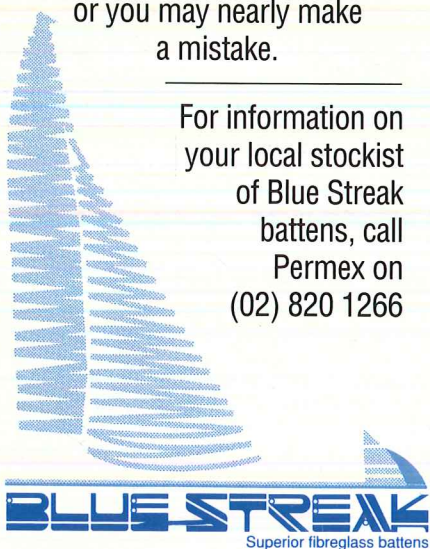
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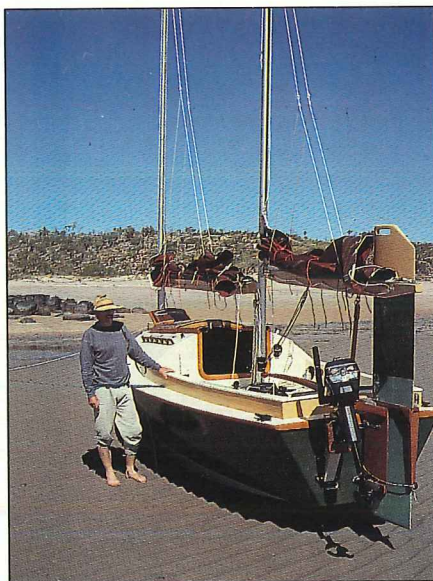
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**Above: Author and Matilda waiting for the tide on the Kimberley Coast.
Below: Launching ramp at Wyndham.**

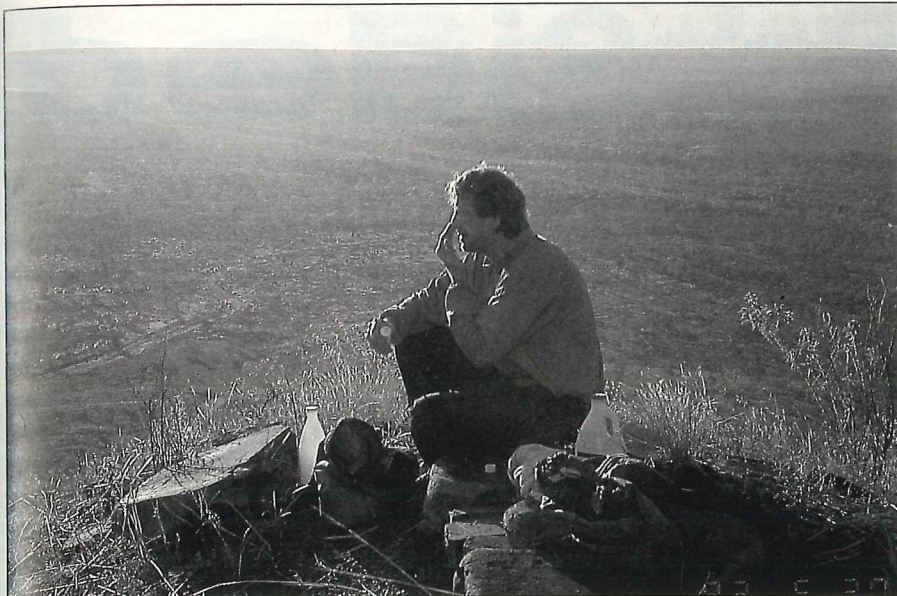
siderable turbulence and disturbed seas. I made the mistake of rounding Cape Dossejour close in shore and while passing between it and Fathom Rock, about one nautical mile offshore, we encountered areas of standing waves two to three metres high. The boat would climb up the back of the waves and surf down the front at seven knots. "Matilda" sailed on through the chaos oblivious to her surroundings or the anxiety level of her crew, tracking beautifully. At times we were surrounded by breaking waves looking for

a cockpit to fall in, but none did, the boat remaining dry and predictable.

Further along the coast conditions became easier as the effect of the currents reduced and we ran down the coast, sometimes surfing at seven knots. The magical Kimberley coast, lined with one hundred metre orange sandstone cliffs dropping seaward, slipped by. We decided to seek shelter in a tiny unnamed bay which, from the chart, appeared to offer shelter. As we rounded the rocky headland a small bay slowly unfolded tucked right away from the South Easterly winds. We entered the bay at three quarter tide, lifted the keel and raised the rudder blade to shallow water mode as we glided into exquisite flat, turquoise water too shallow for any deep keeler and nosed right on to the beach, stepping ashore dry shod. After checking the tide tables we allowed Matilda to dry out, sitting upright on her flat bottom.

Early next morning we left for Revelley Island at the mouth of the Berkeley River. By mid morning the wind had increased to thirty knots and as we passed Buckle Head we decided to seek shelter as conditions were becoming a little too exciting. From the chart the bay seemed too shallow to be useful but a draft of 200mm with the keel up allows considerable latitude. We dropped anchor and caught some fish for lunch and waited for the wind to moderate later in the day. The wind dropped to a sedate ten knots by





four in the afternoon and we headed across to Revelly Island with the surrounding sandstone headlands glowing orange in the late afternoon light. An Indonesian fishing vessel head north looking like a floating market stall. We carefully navigated the sandbars lining the river mouth and entered Berkley River with the start of the incoming tide, anchoring half a mile upstream. The mangroves crackled with life, the mirror-calm water of the river contrasting sharply to conditions at sea. We had at last arrived.

The following morning, after inflating the dinghy, we motorsailed five nautical miles upstream of Casuarina Creek and proceeded to its end - a sandstone walled amphitheatre. The water was thirty metres deep so rather than anchor I wedged rockclimber's camming nuts in the rockfaces and secured Matilda in the middle of the amphitheatre. It was an awesome setting as we rowed the inflatable over to a weakness in the rock face and scrambled up the cliff face exploring a series of fresh water pools along the creek bed above. Grevilleas in flower lined the creek bed filled with honeyeaters attracted by their rich nectar. We swam in freshwater pools dotted with waterlilies. I gazed down on Matilda at rest in such a setting and wondered if I would have ever sailed my imaginary forty foot cruising yacht half way around Australia and cruised this area.

Leaving Casuarina Creek we headed back into the Berkley River and continued to its navigable end. The river

Early morning from a hill top near Berkley River.

became narrower and was lined by eighty metre high orange sandstone cliffs. At the head of the Berkley we explored a series of small creeks. Our daily routine revolved around fishing at the change of the tide and exploring many freshwater pools above the tidal waters. All too soon our time on the river expired and we headed downstream to the river mouth on the outgoing tide.

We had been dreading the prospects of beating into strong winds and short steep seas on our return journey to Wyndham, however conditions were mild as we sailed past Revelly Island towards Buckle Head. As the sun set the light on Lacrosse Island was visible and we headed offshore and sailed on through the night. We reached Lacrosse Island at four in the morning and turned down the Cambridge Gulf. With Matilda self-steering I slipped below and made some coffee while Julian contentedly slept in the quarter berth, the cabin illuminated with the soft hues of sunrise. We reached Wyndham late that afternoon and quickly sought out showers and a cold beer.

The Kimberley is an awesome place and like other wilderness areas, provides an almost spiritual experience. I found sailing my homebuilt Norwalk Islands Sharpie through such an area a very satisfying and memorable challenge.



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