

Colourful spinnakers.



Try your hand at racing

Given the opportunity to try her hand at racing, **Briar Jensen** steps onboard at Hamilton Island Race Week and shows us how cruisers can compete.



IMAGE COURTESY ANDREA FRANCOLINI.

“You can’t manoeuvre with a diamond between your balls”, explains our skipper, describing how to remember the nautical shapes for ‘restricted manoeuvrability’ (black ball, diamond and ball shapes displayed in a vertical line).

The reason for this discussion? We were limping uncomfortably back to Hamilton Island Marina in a 1.5 metre swell under auxiliary steering – an aluminium pole tiller that is too heavy to handle – after losing wheel steering of our yacht in Audi Hamilton Island Race Week.

As cruising sailors we have never raced our own yacht, too hard to remove all the weighty cruising gear and too expensive to repair racing damages. But we have occasionally raced on other people’s boats and loved it; the tension at the start, the ‘discussions’ over tactics, the excitement of racing, the thrill of finishing well and, of course, the camaraderie of the post race celebrations.

My husband has always yearned to participate in Hamilton Island race week, something we only thought possible if you entered your own boat or were part of a regular racing crew. But it turns out there are several options for the cruising sailor (or complete novice) to participate in this fun event on a level playing field.

Charter boat companies and sailing schools rent out yachts by the cabin, so if you can’t get a full contingent of mates in order to hire a whole vessel, bareboat or skippered, you can book by the cabin.

We made it a family affair, together with my husband and 15-year-old son we were invited guests of Hamilton Island-based charter company Sunsail.

Pre-race excitement

The excitement of race week began aboard our flight from Sydney. The usual sullen aircraft silence is replaced by excited banter that grows louder as we approach Hamilton Island, where sailing jackets are shrugged off in the tropical sun, exposing winter-white flesh.

At the Sunsail pontoon we met our skipper, sailing-school principal Jon Croft and board our boat for the week a brand new Jeanneau 44 *Defiance*. There’s been a cancellation, so our only fellow crew member is Hugo from Western Australia, who’s signed up to improve his sailing skills.

There were 195 boats registered for Audi Hamilton Island Race Week, although there were only 39 in our cruising division. But with five Sunsail boats entered in the same division, there’s some friendly rivalry too.

Race eve the Sunsail pontoon was buzzing. Engineers make last minute checks, crews familiarise themselves with their boats, serious teams substitute standard equipment for their own. Bottles clink as trolleys of grog are loaded onto boats, outboard motors whine around the marina and a sound crew tests volume on a nearby stage.

As the sun goes down the mayhem subsides and the Sunsail welcome party cranked up. A Coopers keg is tapped, Coopers Brewery sponsored a team and their boat is ablaze in green lights and we got to know fellow crews over prawns and sushi before the sky erupted in jewel-coloured fireworks.

We grabbed a curry for dinner from the food tents set up on Front Street, which is closed to traffic. A carnival atmosphere pervades with marquees, fairy lights, musicians and plenty of outdoor seating. People promenade in an eclectic mix of sailing garb, dinner wear, deck shoes and stilettos. Kids weave through the action on scooters as bands take to the stage, there’s dancing in the street and a few sore heads next morning.

Racing begins

The first race was a 23 nautical mile sail around Lindeman Island.

Wind was 10-15 knots and the sun was out. I’m sure I saw a whale spout in the distance, but keep it to myself in case I’m mistaken.

Racing is closer than what cruisers are used to.



IMAGES COURTESY BRIAR JENSEN

Putting in some effort on *Defiance*.



“It’s mayhem as we scramble to dump the sails, locate the emergency tiller and scream at the boats bearing down on us.”

MAXI RACING

Another charter option is to grab a berth on one of Prosail’s maxi yachts like *Condor*, which has won every major ocean race in the world twice, or *Hammer*, which won the Brisbane to Gladstone race four times. The guys from Prosail delight in welcoming aboard both experienced sailors and complete novices and melding them into a formidable crew. In 2011 *Condor* placed 3rd and *Hammer* 5th in their division.

Amongst the crew I met included an army major and her father, a world class sailor from Japan, numerous husband and wife couples and a gentleman who saw *Condor* sailing in Sydney in the 80s and promised himself “I’ll sail on her one day.”

At 23 metres there is plenty of space for the three crew and 23 guests. You can live onboard or take up a package that includes accommodation onshore. Breakfast, lunch and lay day activities are included.

www.prosail.com.au

We each took a turn at the helm and on the winches. Ropes groan under strain and water rushes past the bow as we gradually worked our way up through the fleet. But we made a tactical error in launching the asymmetrical spinnaker at the halfway mark and by the time we replace it with the better-suited symmetrical one, the fleet had receded into the distance. We finished a disappointing second-last. “Well, we don’t want to peak too early”, Luke quipped.

As we motored back into the marina mouth-watering barbecue smells wafted on the breeze. Even though lunch was provided onboard, we descend on the daily *Sunsail* sausage sizzle like we hadn’t eaten all day.

That night we sipped pre-dinner drinks on comfy sofas under the stars watching the day’s race highlights on a large screen on Front Street, something that becomes a daily ritual.

Sure enough, among the fleet of yachts is a whale, the first of many spotted during the week.

Dinner is at one of the many restaurants, which range from casual to fine dining and we go to bed with Katy Perry’s *California Girls* reverberating through the marina.

Day two and we are pumped. With a strong wind warning the marina is a hive of activity with people up masts, sails flogging noisily and spinnakers being repacked. The race commenced in 16 knots and a building swell. We start badly, but good tactics see us catch up rapidly and soon we were cruising at 6.5 knots with one reef on a starboard tack, nicely heeled over. This is what racing is all about.

Bang!

An ominous silence follows the deafening crack as we look around dumbfounded, trying to work out what’s happened. We know it can’t be good.

Suddenly Jon yells, “I’ve got no steering!” It’s mayhem as we scramble to dump the sails, locate the emergency tiller and scream at the boats bearing down on us. There’s no response from race officials on the radio so we’re on

Blustery weather during Race 3.



our own. Turns out we were calling on the wrong channel for our division.

The mood is sombre as we battle the swell back to the marina. Melancholy prevails as we watch the Sunsail mechanic climb into the aft locker to investigate. A pin has dislodged from the steering mechanism, it's easily fixed and we'll be racing again tomorrow.

It's disappointing to be sidelined, but there are plenty of things to do.

Off-water fun

The boys opt for a jet boat ride, while I find a spot in the sun out of the wind to read and watch ducks paddling inquisitively next to a remote control sailboat. Our package included accommodation on the Jeanneau, but Sunsail graciously let us camp on an unchartered catamaran.

The boys returned drenched and shivering, but not vigorously when I ask them if they've had a good time. "He's a nutter," says hubby, referring to the jet boat driver, who says it's the roughest weather he's seen in a while – so rough he couldn't do multiple 360s.

We catch the bus to Catseye Beach and fossick on the exposed reef at low tide finding weird sponges, delicate anemones and striped sea worms. There's windsurfing, sailing and kayaking available from the beach, but only at high tide, so we head for go-kart racing where the boys battle it out on the track.

Back at the marina we watch the race fleet cross the finish line from the balcony of the Hamilton Island Yacht Club. One yacht trails its spinnaker from the masthead like a giant flag, testament to the windy conditions. By chance we met that skipper and his wife five months later while cruising in Sydney's Cowan Creek.

Wind gusts up to 38 knots are recorded overnight and the race committee takes its time making a decision if day three's racing will go ahead.

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“...before the tension is broken when an exaggerated Kiwi accent declared, ‘but I lose my hair in over 10 knots bro.’”



IMAGE COURTESY ANDREA FRANCOLINI

Fleet sailing past Hamilton Island golf course.

HIRW Race Week offers a variety of weather conditions.

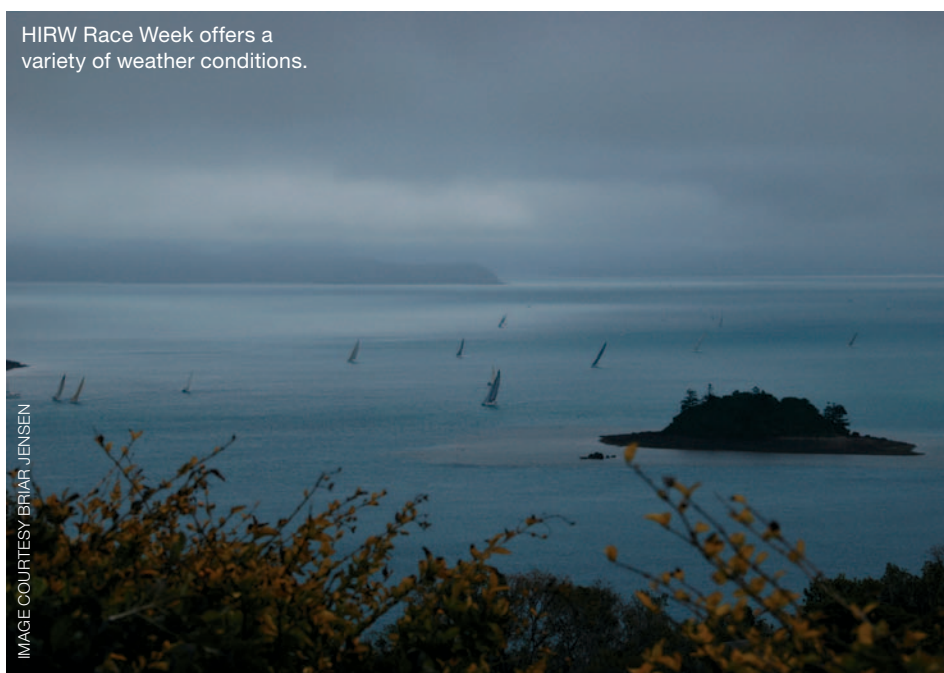


IMAGE COURTESY BRIAR JENSEN

Radio banter is rife with vitriolic comments about the committee's lack of courage, before the tension is broken when an exaggerated Kiwi accent declared, “but I lose my hair in over 10 knots bro.”

We eventually get the go-ahead and start at 11am. It's blowing 20 knots and there's a two metre swell on the around-the-islands race. We botch the start again and our son experiences his first round-up at the helm, but we do 10 knots downwind and finish a respectable 14th place.

When racing is cancelled for the cruising division next day my son and I head off to a Matt Moran Master Class where we learned how to cook spanner crab with squid ink mayo, while Matt sets off the smoke alarm and regales us with Master Chef anecdotes.

Well-oiled machine

Through years of fine tuning, Race Week is incredibly well organised and caters to all guests, including sailors, non sailors, cruisers, the well-heeled and budget conscious.

It is a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere. There is plenty of shore-side action for partners or non-sailors, from fashion parades to jewellery launches, art classes to wine tastings, spa treatments to golf clinics.

There's a Kids Fun Zone every afternoon too.

Some exclusive events are invitation only and some have hefty price tags, but there are plenty of free activities like the nightly bands on Front Street and various fashion parades. At the Henri Lloyd parade bronzed-faced yachties

HISTORY

This year Audi Hamilton Island Race Week (17-24 August 2013) celebrates its 30th anniversary, having been conceived by David Hutchen in 1983. The island celebrates a decade of ownership by yachtsman Robert Oatley. A special 'First Fleeters' division has been created for boats that competed in the inaugural race in 1984.

See www.sunsail.com.au, www.hamiltonisland.com.au and www.hamiltonislandraceweek.com.au which details other charter options.

with sunburnt legs take to the stage (somewhat self consciously) alongside the professional models, to the hilarity and good-natured heckling of the crowd.

On the midweek lay day there is Audi racing on the airfield and aerobatic displays overhead, a Moët and Chandon lunch at qualia and beachside shenanigans at the Pool Party where we rub shoulders with sports stars, musicians and TV personalities.

With racing for our division commencing at 10 or 11am, we have time for breakfast one morning at Wild Life, the 'all-Aussie' animal park, where we get cosy with a koala over our cornflakes.

With so much to see and do on the island my son and I abscond from racing for a day and hire an electric golf cart. We zoom around, well 20km/h, all over the island finding answers to the 'buggy challenge', which earns us discount dinner vouchers.

We end up at Target Sports, a shooting range where our son gets to try out a .44 Magnum, while I look on nervously and leap out of my skin at the racket.

All puffed out

The final day of racing dawns overcast and grey. It has rained overnight but now there's not a breath of wind. Yachts from all divisions mill impatiently about the start area waiting to hear if racing will proceed.

Dent Island disappears in cloud and an eerie sea mist descends on the fleet.

Bored crews pump up the music, maxi yachts douse each other with water hoses and the Kiwis on Team Vodafone Sailing, an Orma 60 trimaran, wakeboard behind their boat, yes it is that fast even in no wind.

'Gone with the wind' jokes ring true as the race is cancelled due to a lack of breeze.

It's code flag 'sausage': back to base for a barbecue.

We placed a disappointing 34th in our division of 39, but it's been heaps of fun and we happily drown our sorrows as a Blackmores' rep hands out samples of pain relief cream.

It's sad to see the Front Street stage and stalls being dismantled next morning, but we're lucky to be

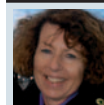
staying on for a few days at the island's Reef View Hotel. We had bookings for Whitehaven Beach and Fantasea Reefworld to look forward to.

So, if you can't bring your own yacht to Audi Hamilton Island Race Week, don't despair. You can have just as much fun on a charter vessel, without the worry of race repairs.

The writer was a guest of Hamilton Island Enterprises and Sunsail.

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cruisinghelmsman Briar Jensen



Briar is a freelance travel writer and together with her husband owns a Bavaria 36, Cocktail III, (after upsizing from a Noelex 25, then 30) which they keep at Kuring-gai Motor Yacht Club in Sydney's Cowan Creek. Briar has sailed with Jesse Martin in Papua New Guinea and in the inaugural Great Lagoon Regatta in New Caledonia. You can follow her blog at www.briarstravelbeat.com.au and on Facebook.

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