

SSAA Two Islands Race 2011, Report from Avanti

I had marked all the SSAA races for this season on the calendar in my office. So I knew The Two Islands Race was coming up, but I'd been busy with work and was starting to make excuses to myself as to why I wouldn't be able to sail.

My wife Kerrie kept saying to me "just take the time out and go, you know you always love it when you go sailing" Did she really have my happiness at heart or was she really just trying to get rid of me?

So on Thursday morning I said, "I'm doing it" and sent my entry through (sorry about the late entry Peter)

Due to work commitments I couldn't make the race briefing, not a good start (thanks Peter for emailing the radio instructions to me).

On Friday I started preparing Avanti, top up water and fuel; clean the hull, stock up on junk food and check the radio. No signal! Find that the White Cocky's have chewed the mast head aerial off. After much cursing I replace the aerial. Make another radio call and Marine Rescue Sydney reply. Good I'm right to go.

Saturday morning up early, my son Zac tinnies me over to Avanti.

Leave my mooring at 6.00am and out of Port Hacking into 15kn head wind, lumpy seas and showers. I go down stairs to make a cup of tea, but a combination of nerves and the lumpy seas have me retreating to the cockpit for fresh air. Why am I doing this?

Nearing the Harbour I'm feeling better have had breakfast and better still I haven't seen any whales.

Check in with the radio vessel Torquil.

Rollercoaster motors over and tells me they can't sail due to instrument problems, bummer. Voodoo Spirit, Torquil and First Light are on the starting line with me.

We start at 10.00hr in a light northerly, which goes ENE soon after, slowly working out of the harbour I see Big Bird coming in and starting late.

Voodoo Spirit is first out followed by Torquil, First Light, Big Bird (who has past me even after starting late) and finally me.

The fleet settles into a soldier's leg up the coast in a light ENE breeze. The sun's out and it's a pleasant sail.

I can't believe how quickly Voodoo Spirit becomes a spec on the horizon.

Off Broken Bay we pass the Pittwater feet racing south under spinnakers.

The breeze goes to the north and we all start tacking up the coast.

Finally Avanti's magic number is reached, 11kn of breeze over the deck and she starts to go.

Voodoo Spirit is gone and I don't see them again in the race, Big Bird is next well in the distance, I sneak past First Light and start to chase Torquil.

I'm trying to put the auto helm on for 10 minutes every hour so I can rest and eat and make a cuppa.

Late in the afternoon off Terrigal I see a whale, why did I have to see a whale just before dark? Now I'm going to be imagining colliding with a whale all night.

It'll be dark in half an hour, so I start preparing for the night. Put a torch up on deck another spare at the nav station, get some food and drinks organised, put on another jumper and sea boots, then tidy up on deck.

After dark the 8kn breeze slowly dies, until at 2030hrs the fleets becalmed.

I think Big Bird is near Bird Island (that's kind of fitting because I figure they spent the next few hours hanging out with their birdie friends), Torquil is around Norah Head, I'm off Norah Head and First Light is just south.

Every now and then I set my watch alarm for 10 minutes and try to get comfortable laying on deck on my foam-sleeping mat, the problem is my jacket pockets are filled with PLB, mobile phone, hand held VHF, Leatherman, tape, string etc and along with my PFD, I have something sticking into my ribs which ever way I lay.

As the night wears on we get light patches of breeze from the north. I spend hours slowing making ground towards Norah Head light, only to tack back to sea into the current and drift south again. A niggling problem I'm having is that for some reason when my boat speed drops below 1kn (which is happening a lot) the auto helm switches off, so I have to steer most of the time.

Then I see a masthead light coming past close in to shore, as the lighthouse illuminates the sail plan I realise its First Light coming through.

Back in last place again I decide to go down stairs and heat up a pre made vege curry, I get it going on the meth stove and go back on deck, the breeze shifts a little to the right so I tack and hand steer for a while. What's that funny burning smell? Must be something on shore...Oh no the curry....not to worry I wasn't really that hungry anyway.

The other problem I'm having at this stage is that I can't get that stupid remix of the clap clap song out of my head, ear worms must be the scourge of solo sailors.

The 0010hr radio sked's coming up so I go down stairs and fix my position at 00hr. Right on time Peter calls and all yachts except Voodoo Spirit respond.

The race committee have an on air meeting and put forward a proposal to the fleet that the race be shortened to sail directly to the finish after rounding Bird Island. Peter contacts Voodoo Spirit by txt. All competitors agree to shorten course. We also learn that Voodoo Spirit has rounded Bird Island and is near Broken Bay. The shortened course gives me a chance to finish the race as by this stage I was certain I wouldn't be able to finish the whole course, as I had to work on Monday.

Finally at 0200hr I'm at Bird Island, First Light rounds the island in front of me.

I can see Big Bird ahead of Torquil heading south.

The breeze fills from the west as the fleet starts to head south. As I near The Entrance the breeze swings to the SW and builds to 15kn.

In front First Light slows and as I sail alongside I can see them changing headsails.

I follow my plan (which I have written down and sticky taped to the nav station) to head to sea and get in the current, the rest of the boats stay in close.

0400hr time for the next radio sked, I don't hear Voodoo Spirit (they were probably finished by then ?) Big Bird is next then me, First Light and Torquil.

At this stage my boat speeds good, but I'm not. I've hit the wall finding it hard to stay awake and concentrate. I switch the auto helm on and have a nana nap. Wake up still not feeling good so make a coffee and turn the music up loud, even my favourite punk compilation can't keep me awake. Bring on sunrise.

Sun rise and I'm off Broken Bay well out to sea still on starboard tack. Torquil leads First Light in close.

My second wind has kicked in I'm awake again. The sailing conditions are ideal for Avanti 20kn on the nose, so I decide to go for it, no sleep till Brooklyn (the finish)

Only problem now is the clap clap songs back in my head with a vengeance.

I tack towards Long Reef and realise I've got a bit of a lead on Torquil and First Light, Big Bird is near Manly.

The 08.00hr radio sked's coming up and the breeze increases to 25kn southerly, I need to reef but don't have time so I twist the sails off and go down stairs for the sked. Back on deck again and the breeze is back to 20kn, looks like the sked saved me reefing (how goods that).

As I approach the Heads to my horror I realise that a pod of whales has blockaded the entrance. Bunches of people are watching them from boats and North Head.

What these spectators don't understand is the Whales mission in life is to patrol the oceans trying to smash the keels of unsuspecting yachts. I tack away, then the whales see Big Bird sailing back after finishing and decide to go and attack her, leaving the path clear for me to tack back and sail to the finish at 09.28hr. As I head home I see First Light finish just ahead of Torquil.

I motor sail 3 hours back to my mooring and tie up. I see my kids sailing out for their dinghy race. Needing a rest I go down stairs, put my head down for a 15-minute snooze and wake up 3 hours later. As I get back to Cronulla Sailing Club our dinghy fleets coming in, I have a beer with the guys and we swap sailing stories. What a great weekend.

Thanks to the SSAA committee for organising the race, to the crew of Torquil for doing the radio skeds and the fleet for some excellent close racing.

John Davies - Avanti