

# Idyll Daze on the Clarence River

By Richard Cortis VK2XRC

Some time on a cold winter evening in 2005 my wife said she wanted to go somewhere different for our Christmas-New Year break. OK. But you make some suggestions. What about a houseboat on a river somewhere up north? OK. Where do you have in mind? "I'll have a look" she said.



An hour later I am presented with the website of Clarence Riverboats. OK. But you have to book it. So she did.

Presented with the booking I thought I had better get my gear into shape and work out how I was going to play amateur radio on my holiday. I decided that it had to be light weight, portable and simple to erect. At the planning stage I did not know much about the houseboat apart from the brochure pictures from the internet. I assumed that the houseboat would have a decent 12 volt battery because that is how they run the lights and the TV etc. The fridge is gas. So I did not take a battery.

The antenna was a major consideration. It had to be simple to transport and erect and be frequency agile so that I could change bands without a lot of kerfuffle. I had one of those ten metre extendable fiberglass rod/tower things from a previous dream and I thought it would be a good start. However, a vertical whip has to have a ground plane to drive against so I drew on experience playing with marine radios on ocean racing yachts which told me I only needed about 150mm of copper plate in the water. So I scouted around and found a discarded, corroded, and bent piece of 40mm diameter copper pipe, hacked off 250mm (for good measure) and attached some wire with an ugly looking soldered joint. I ended up having to use the old Scope soldering iron augmented with a reasonable propane burner to get the solder to flow. Also, the corrosion pits were a bit deeper than I first thought. I do not think the RF (at HF) cared about the look of the joint. In the racing yachts we had nice hydrodynamic dynaplates. On the houseboat we were going to have an ugly piece of copper pipe about the same surface area as the dynaplate. And a bit cheaper too!

Being a belt and braces type (you only have to look at my figure to see why) I decided that a second antenna was in order. I had recently purchased an Outbacker antenna for another dream and I thought I should bring it along and

and give it a go. The Outbacker is intended for mobile use and has a large and stiff mounting spring with a half inch diameter bolt to connect it to the support structure. Band tuning is with a jumper lead into banana sockets on

the antenna and fine tuning is achieved with a stub at the top. You have to bend the spring to get to the stub which means the support structure has to be up to it. I guess that is why the half inch bolt is there. I welded up a stainless steel angle bracket and welded a half inch stainless steel nut to it to accept the antenna. I bolted the bracket to a metre length of pine floor board I found on the Council cleanup. I drilled and tapped some studs to allow connection of the recommended heavy earth strap and then drilled some holes for some U-Bolts to allow attachment to a rail. I also drilled some holes in the timber and inserted some Venetian blind cord to tie the bottom of the timber to the rail. I tried out the Outbacker using the manufactured bracket attached to the temporary fence panel on a nearby construction site. I did get some strange looks from passers-by. Indications were that it tuned satisfactorily on all installed bands.

Now for the tuner. I have an EAT300 from years ago but it was a bit of a hassle because I wanted to play radio propped up in bed and I also wanted to tune the antenna at the feed point. Using the EAT300 would mean putting down my beer and getting out of bed. So I just rationalized. We were going on a holiday to have fun and it was costing a heap. I have always lusted after one of those auto tuners. So I wrote away and ordered one of those SG-237 auto tuners. I will be able to use it for years and years I told myself. The rig I intended to use was a Yaesu FT817 which is only capable of about five watts. The IC706 was a bit big to take to bed with a beer. So I needed some power. I bought a small HF amplifier from a member of our local Waverley Amateur Radio Club. The intent was to set the amplifier up next to the tuner and run co-ax and a light power cable down to the FT-817 in the cabin.



At this stage, the system is starting to come together. All I have to do is to connect it up to the battery to make it work. So I set out with some relatively heavy (I thought) figure eight cable and put connectors on for the amplifier, the tuner (it needs a bit of twelve volts when it is tuning), the FT-817 and a spare connector just in case. It is hard to guess how long a cable to take so I made it a bit longer anyway. I put big (battery terminal size) alligator clips on

the other end with a 35 amp fuse in each line just in case the cable got crushed and shorted. I also took some other cables with alligator clips so we could charge mobile phones and (particularly) so my wife could use her DVD player and her twelve volt hairdryer. It is only fair that she is allowed some toys too.

As a shakedown test, I set the gear up in the back yard and made a few contacts. I was satisfied that the system worked. I packed the lot up and it all (apart from the telescopic mast) fitted in a slightly larger than usual shopping bag from the hardware store. I turned it around so I could not see the advertising on the bag. I added a multimeter and a few basic tools.

The Clarence River flows through Grafton and Maclean and enters the sea at Iluka and Yamba, one on each side of the opening. We hired the boat from Brushwood, a one pub village about twenty kilometers out of Grafton. We drove from home in Sydney to Taree the first day and talked to Noel VK2ZNS on the local repeater. On hols, we try to only drive about four hours a day so we have time to look at places we would not ordinarily see. It was nice to talk to Noel because I had not spoken to him since he left Sydney quite a few years earlier. He said he tries to answer all calls on the local repeater so that travelers at least get an answer. Most appreciated Noel. The next day we drove to Grafton where we discovered that the whole town was locked and deserted. Only one pub was open. Eerie. Walking down the street felt like the day after the neutron bomb. It was 35 degrees and it seems the whole place goes to the coast where it is several degrees cooler. Anyway, the supermarket was open and we were able to purchase supplies and some liquid ammunition for the trip.

After breakfast and another visit to the supermarket, we went out to the base at Brushwood and made our acquaintance with **Idyll Daze**, our home for the next week. When we got on the boat, I discovered that it was aluminium so the slightly heavy copper pipe with the ugly soldering was not required. Eager to get going, we dumped all our gear and necessary supplies on board and set off on our little odyssey. I did not put the antenna up before we left for several reasons. Firstly, there were overhanging trees at the base.



Secondly, we had to go under a low bridge close to the base, and thirdly, I was too impatient and I wanted to go then and there. So we set out.

We headed downstream and anchored for lunch. Then I set up the antennae and had a swim. The ten metre telescopic mast was set up in the corner of the rail on the upper deck. I used Venetian blind cord to tie the mast to the rail and to tie the tuner to the mast. The ground side of the tuner was attached to the rail with the large (battery terminal size) alligator clip I attached at home. The radiating element of the antenna is a piece of copper power wire attached at the top and wound a few times around the mast to stop it sagging away. The top of the mast is VERY bendy. Some insulating tape was also useful.

The Outbacker antenna was set up on the rail on the opposite side. The stainless steel bracket I manufactured and attached to a plank worked perfectly. I just bolted it on with the U-bolts as intended and it stayed there the whole trip. I did not connect the outbacker initially.

As planned, I put the amplifier on the deck and attached it to the tuner and the power cable. This was the "Oh (expletive deleted)" stage. In the back yard, I set everything up next to the antenna and made it go. However, on the houseboat, I wanted to operate propped up in bed in the cabin. But the power cable went upstairs to the sundeck. So I demonstrated that the system was operable and went downstairs to check if the beer was cold enough.

Later, we moved on down the river and anchored for the evening in an idyllic looking place. The beer turned out to be cold enough. As darkness was gathering, we made some dinner and watched the lightning in a thunderstorm on a nearby hill. The storm looked like it was passing us by. A couple of minutes later it was on us just as the dinner hit the table. In a matter of five seconds the wind turned from five knots from the north east to fifty knots from the south east. The wind hit us on the side and blew the clock off the wall and the food off our plates. My wife saved the special bottle of wine. We were driven across the river very fast as though we did not have an anchor down. The motor had not enough power to stand the boat into the wind so we just went sideways in the maelstrom. Luckily, we were driven into the entrance of an inlet called the Broadwater.



The anchor caught when we had less than a foot of water under the keel. As the wind abated, we discovered that the dinghy was swamped and the oars

were gone in the dark. We collected the steak and put it through the griller to treat whatever they picked up off the floor and warm it up a bit. We never did find the salad. As the wind dropped to about fifteen knots, we sat down to what was left of dinner. My wife produced the two remaining wine glasses and what was left of that good bottle of wine. Then she asked "Are we having fun yet dear?" The wind was calm an hour later and we actually had a good nights sleep. Welcome to the Clarence River.

Next morning we motored further downstream to Maclean. We arranged for a replacement pair of oars. Then I spent an hour scouring the town trying to find some suitable power cable and some connectors. My wife was not amused because she does not like that kind of shop and really just wanted to have a cup of coffee and a cake in one of the lovely coffee shops in town. We did, but I wanted to get the cable before we got too settled. All satisfied. Later, we motored a few kilometers downstream and anchored in a lovely inlet, had some lunch and a swim. The water was thirty degrees Celsius. I thought



everyone took an inside/outside thermometer with them on holidays? Don't you? It was lovely and we spent a couple of hours in the water. I actually played some radio in the afternoon and dropped in on Col's Net. In the evening, I played a bit more radio. The setup worked beautifully on 40 metres. However, with the amplifier on high power there was a big voltage drop and associated distortion. I dropped the power a bit and lost the distortion. I tried all the HF bands and they seemed to tune quite well. However, most of my contacts were on 40 metres for no reason other than I felt like it. The next day we set off downstream to Iluka and spent a couple of pleasant evenings anchored in the little harbour. The locals seemed to spend the daylight hours of New Years Eve with vigorous exertion water skiing around the place so it was no surprise that they all seemed to be in bed by 10PM. At this stage I must apologize to all the contacts I made because I have misplaced (lost) my log notes. One contact was a guy in Victoria who said he had a friend who owned a yacht and was presently anchored in Iluka but he could not remember the name of the boat. I looked out the window and suggested the name of the boat anchored next to us. That was it! What a co-incidence. Next morning I joined the yachties net on twenty metres and said hullo. We had an eyeball from boat to boat but time and particularly the very swift tide were against us making closer contact. We wanted to see Yamba (just across the river) and then move upstream with the tide rather than against it.

We spent a pleasant day in a little backwater channel between Yamba and Maclean. However, I did have one little emergency when my wife casually asked if my antenna would fit under the 11KV power lines just ahead. Very quick stop and an about turn. As I went up to the top deck I found what had made a noise I had heard a bit earlier. I thought at the time that it was the wind blowing a chair over on the sundeck upstairs. The sound was a bit like a billiard ball rolling down the stairs. What actually made the sound was the extendable antenna mast un-extending itself with a bit of help from the wind. Apparently, one of the lower sections loosened and dropped and, as it hit the deck like a billiard ball on the stair, the next section was loosened and dropped too, and so on till there were only two sections standing. Well, at least I would not have collected the 11KV power line. But we were very very careful after that little episode.

We went on upstream the next day and had lunch and dinner in Maclean before moving out onto the river to anchor over night. After Maclean we moved further upstream to the historic little town of Ulmarra which has a nice pub with properly cold beer. Our last night was spent in a quiet little channel with yet another wild thunderstorm but this time the anchor held.

I did not use the Outbacker antenna a lot because I wanted to tune around a bit and the outbacker is best suited to use where people want to work a particular part of a band. At the time of this trip, the weather was about thirty five degrees Celsius every day so I was particularly disinclined to stand in the sun adjusting the antenna. But I was impressed. I just have to find part of the old Falcon that is stiff enough not to buckle when I bend the support spring. I always need a project.

Although I did not play a lot of radio games, we did have a good holiday. In answer to the question at dinner on the first night, the answer was yes.

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