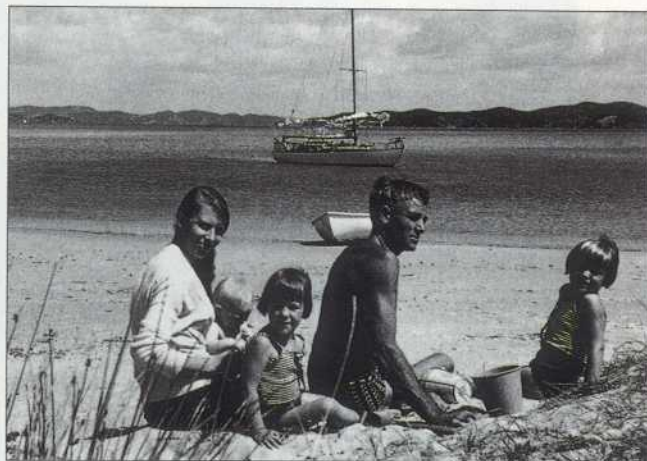


KIDS

in the crew



Taking a young family to sea in a small yacht isn't everyone's cup of tea. Blue-water sailing can make brewing a cuppa a major exercise, let alone washing nappies. This story tells of 2 families who spent 2 years living on home-built yachts. The first sailed in the '60s, the second almost 30 years later.

TEXT AND PHOTOS: ROB GREENAWAY

My birth, in the Bay of Islands on Tuesday, September 7, 1965 was recorded by my father in the log of *Aries* – a 33ft-kauri yacht he put together in the backyard over 4 years of late nights.

He wrote in the log of visiting the hospital to see my mother, who by then had been in labour for almost 24 hours. Then he picked up my older sisters, Clio and Kristen, from a sitter and sailed back to Opuia. It was rough trip. They all got wet. Kristen was sick.

"Kristen brought up the rest of her lunch when we got up to the house," he wrote. "Was a lot better after but went without tea. Two very tired girls.

"We have a son in the family now. Have just rung the annexe to learn the wonderful news. Was told he is bawling lustily and they are well. Sure will fly that bunting on the yacht tomorrow."

Bringing up a family aboard a small yacht was considered a reasonably odd thing to do in the '60s. It could even get you onto the cover of the *Northern Advocate*. The media term for my family's

lifestyle was "water gypsies", although they'd taken up temporary residence in a bach for the winter.

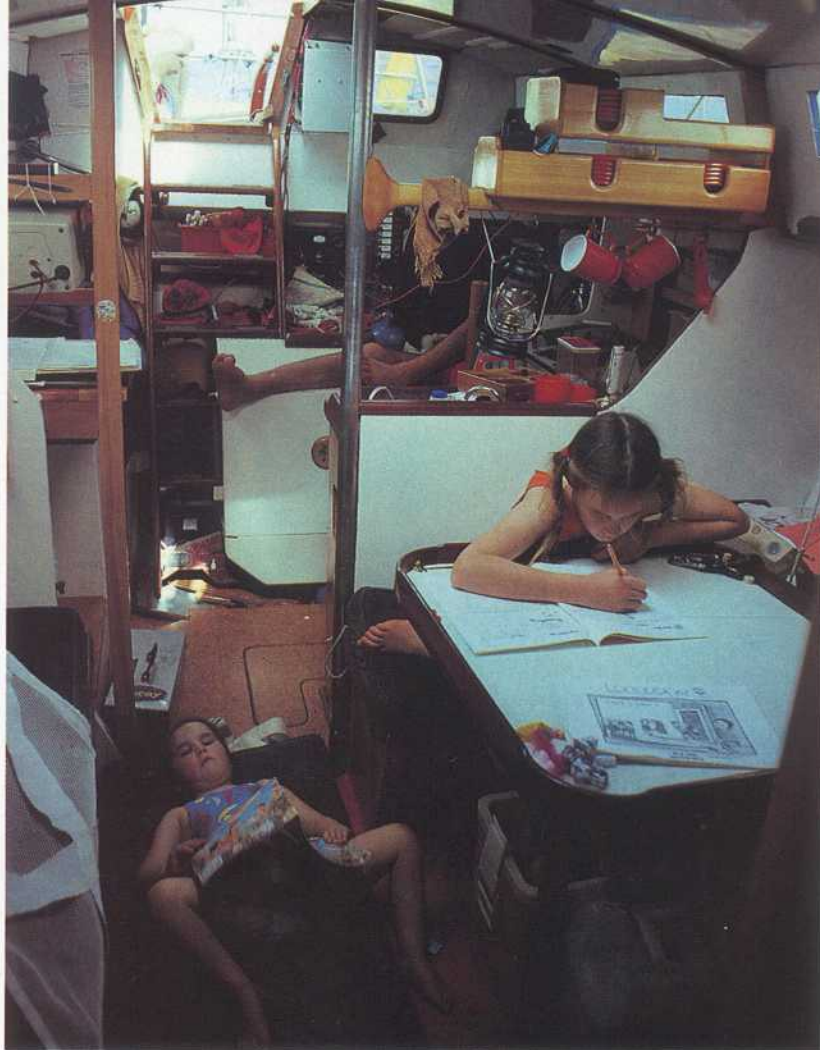
I was too young to call it *our* lifestyle. For most of the voyage, I was described as "the baby". The yacht's log records my existence in short paragraphs like: "Forgot the baby was in the opposite bunk and piled him high with blankets and nappies etc. Lesley came down and nearly died when she saw what had happened. Could have been a fatality, but he hadn't even woken up – must have managed to get some air."

Active families all too often apply the handbrake as soon as the first child appears. We're told that taking a child on a big adventure is just plain irresponsible. But children are a bit like cats. Their survival instinct runs deep, and they are more resilient than we expect. It is also an indisputable fact that most accidents happen in the home, so perhaps a boat isn't such a bad idea.

I met 2 people with similar ideas in Wellington in 1990. Ken and Nikki McMillan needed an extra crew member to help get their 33ft yacht and their 3

Above: The summer of 1965-66 on Urupukapuka Island in the Bay of Islands. From left to right: Lesley, Rob, Clio, Jim and Kristen Greenaway. In the background, 'Aries', with the family washing in the rigging – all nappies.

Opposite: The McMillan family aboard 'Soundsgood' just off the west coast on the way north from Wellington to Hokianga in 1990. From left: Robbie, Anna, Ken, Nikki and Jody.



Above: Correspondence school at sea. Jody at the school desk, Anna taking it easy. The joys of a calm day in the Pacific.

Left: Anna and her Tupperware – the best insurance for containing the results of sea sickness.



children – Jody (8), Robbie (6) and Anna (3) – to Fiji. This was my golden opportunity to travel back in time and eavesdrop on my parents. I'd always wondered how on earth they had coped for 2 years with 3 preschool children – 2 in nappies – in a space no larger than a small bathroom.

It's not that uncommon, now, for families to take to the sea in tiny vessels, many of them built in the backyard. Ken and Nikki spent 4 years welding, painting and rigging to get their yacht, *Soundsgood*, into the water. It's a relatively cheap option when acquiring a vessel, and you know who to blame when things go wrong.

Very little went wrong, although 3 days out of Wellington, Ken's navigation skills were still evolving. Both he and Nikki had gained qualifications in blue-water navigation. They had built up experience by sailing across Cook Strait more than 40 times – and by taking the family on 2 cruises to the bottom of the South Island – but the sextant had us either sailing into Taupo or bobbing past the Auckland Museum.

"One more reading like this and we're going home," Ken grumbled after 3 days of being blasted north by a fierce southerly and a massive, rolling swell. Home didn't sound so bad at that stage. At least there I could find a way of thawing my feet.

Anna didn't mind either way. She had first asked, "Are we there yet?" soon after we hoisted the first set of sails. "There" was 14 days away in Suva harbour. She would be asking that question at sea for another 2 years.

The sextant began reading correctly and we found ourselves just where we expected to be, off Hokianga.

It's easy to get a little worried in such circumstances. The entire west coast of New Zealand offers few sheltered havens, yet the youngest members of the crew were not concerned. They were very seasick, but if mum and dad weren't worried, all was well.

After several years of sailing, Nikki knows this to be true. "We were worried from time to time," she says. "Very worried about reefs and navigation. But you have to hide those fears from the kids. You push them to the back of your mind and get on with it."

Seasickness was a fact of life on the passage north. Nikki was totally debilitated from time to time. Once I



Above: In the shade of the MPS (multi-purpose sail) closer to the warmth of Fiji. Nikki doing the wash in salt water on the foredeck. From the foreground: Robbie, Anna and Jody – all with safety harnesses which they wore whenever on deck.

dropped into the cabin to find her comatose, lying on her back in the galley with the beginnings of breakfast spread over her feet. Flour and rolled oats had burst from the opened cupboards and congealed into a sticky porridge around her sailing boots. “I just

enough of holding her Tupperware and, falling onto her back, vomited a volcano of Weetbix. A grainy and acidic fountain of food flowed into her eyes, over her hair and onto her sleeping bag. She didn’t enjoy it and told us so.

One week out of Wellington and the

For the children, it provided one of the best educations imaginable. A fast track in the university of life.

didn’t care,” she said, when she could smile about it, 2 years later.

Here’s something they’ll never tell you at a Tupperware party: a sealed Tupperware container is the best thing for seasickness. At least, it keeps the results under control, usually. Off Cape Egmont, Anna decided she’d had

weather still kept us cold and in constant, uncomfortable motion. No-one felt 100%, and the Tupperware was still passed, in chain fashion from child to child, to the cockpit, to the watchkeeper, and finally the contents made it into the sea.

It was, in fact, exactly how I remem-

bered almost every Christmas day between birth and university, when my family escaped the city and sailed for the Coromandel, regardless of the weather. We were often simply too sick or tired to be interested in presents (but that was seldom an issue because it’s almost impossible to wrap a fishing rod without ruining the surprise).

Fourteen days out of Wellington the *Soundsgood* made it to Fiji. Ken’s navigation put us just south of the island of Kadavu, right on target. Anna was told, yes, we were there yet.

Ken shouted with relief and he and Nikki hugged each other. It was the first time I’d seen them hug. The confines and inconvenience of a tiny boat can add stress to the most comfortable of relationships.

I flew home from Nadi and began collecting postcards from various island paradises as the McMillans cruised the South Pacific.

Ken, Nikki and I agreed – upon their return last year – that life at sea is definitely good for kids, although all 3 of the children say they’re quite happy to be back on terra firma, and aren’t too concerned if they have to stay.

“I can’t think of a better way of travelling with a family,” says Nikki. “It’s economic and the boat took us to the places where tourists don’t go. And if we had a particularly exhausting time ashore, we could return to the yacht to recharge our batteries within the privacy of our own home.”

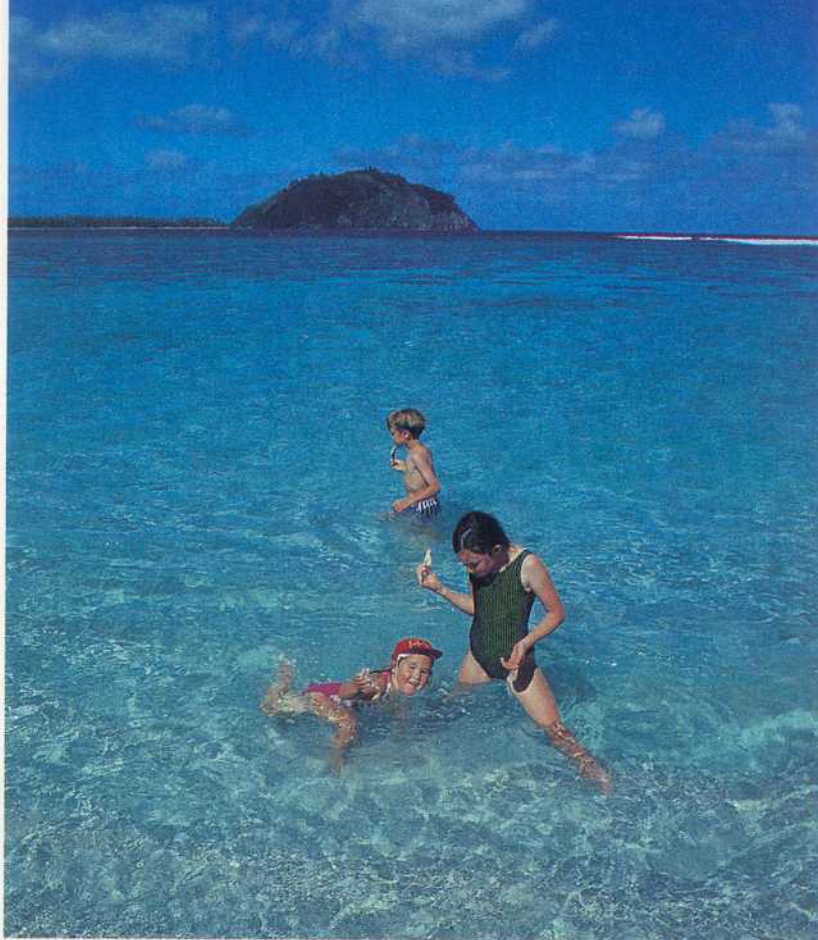
For the children, it provided one of the best educations imaginable. A fast track in the university of life, if you like.

As far as “real” schooling went, they took it with them. “Correspondence schooling is excellent,” reports Nikki. “But it was difficult being both a parent and a teacher.” According to the kids, doing school by correspondence was one of the highlights of the trip. Ken and Nikki made good teachers, until they reached Noumea.

Nikki describes a year of French schooling in Noumea as character building. “The kids went as casual students to learn French so they were immune to a lot of the excessive competition, discipline and their very formal schooling system.

“After a little bit of adjustment, they picked up the language pretty quickly.”

Rating well above education, health and safety were the key concerns. We



The rewards. Who says you can't eat and swim at the same time? Jody, Anna and Robbie taking the waters near Nabukenevu-i-bra, a village on the island of Kadavu, the most southern Fijian island.

carried a comprehensive first-aid kit, and everyone had hepatitis B shots. We also learnt to stitch wounds. A friend taught us how to sew together a gaping slash in the skin of a banana, after injecting it with anaesthetic. After a

what we achieved. "Just like the professionals," Ken said happily as the boat rolled and the boom gybed.

It swung out of the darkness, struck him mid-forehead and he collapsed in a silent heap, pulling us both onto the

'The children learnt not to take food for granted. They couldn't afford to be fussy. Fussy meant hungry.'

while, I felt able to assist any wounded banana I might meet. Human flesh, on the other hand, was a different matter.

On day 10, in a rising wind and in the dark of midnight stars, Captain Ken decided it was time to drop the MPS (Large Multi-Purpose Sail).

The result of this process – if you get it right – is a tidy pile of coloured nylon in the cockpit, and that's exactly

deck. All was quiet. I would have preferred a little screaming.

"Are you all right?" I asked. Ken mumbled for a while and then hummed himself a comforting little tune, and found a torch to shine on his wound. He had a nasty cut. There were streaks of blood. "Do you think it'll need stitches?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "But I hope

we've still got plenty of bananas." One sticking plaster later, all was well. But it illustrated the potential for disaster.

In 2 years of sailing, the family suffered only a few infected wounds (which were all easily treated with antibiotic powder) and a universal case of ciguatera – toxic fish poisoning – which can result in a vast array of aches and pains that pass away over a period of months, if they don't kill you first.

"We caught a huge red snapper," recounts Ken. "We all had some for dinner and by morning Jody and Nikki were complaining of a few aches. We didn't put 2 and 2 together, so the rest of us finished the fish for breakfast. There wasn't much else to eat."

It took 3 months for them all to recover. Large fish and reef fish are not to be trusted. Chances are they've eaten a lot of their neighbours and have concentrated a range of toxins within their systems.

Food, in fact, was a big issue aboard says Nikki.

"Mealtime became a very important part of each day. The children learnt not to take food for granted. The children couldn't afford to be fussy. Fussy meant hungry."

Nikki's memories of their sailing diet put my early sailing career in a brand new perspective.

At least the weevils I ate as a yachting child weren't poisonous, although the kerosene in the stew was reasonably unpalatable.

There are some remarkable coincidences between the voyage of the *Soundsgood* and my parents' cruise around the Bay of Islands in the *Aries*. Four years of building, 2 years of living aboard, and an ongoing habit of heading to sea at any opportunity.

And I'm sure the coincidences will continue. My father is now in his early 70s, Mum is a bit younger, and the pair of them still sail a 45ft yacht from their home in Whitianga.

My siblings and I survived our childhood and have all been blue-water cruising independently.

We weren't put off the sea – exactly the opposite. Kristen was part of an all-female crew who raced from Auckland to Japan a few years ago.

The *Aries* was sold in the early '70s when my father was told he had suffered a heart attack. It turned out to have been indigestion. **N**