

PEOPLE

Sailor's adventures led him to the Med

COLIN MORRISON and WAYNE HARRINGTON revisit veteran sailor Geoff Steer for the second chapter of his adventures aboard 'Sovica', this on a sailing adventure from Albany to the Mediterranean.



Colin Morrison: Geoff, after completing your circumnavigation of Australia in 1970, what possessed you to embark on another epic journey across an ocean to the Mediterranean, 10 years later?

Geoff Steer: Well I had such a good time on the last big voyage I thought I'd do it again!

CM: This voyage is remarkable in many ways. Firstly, you had to plan and organise the trip across the Indian Ocean, a distance of thousands of miles passing through Third World countries and pirate-infested waters. It's a trip beyond most yachties, so what navigation improvements did you have on board for this trip, compared to your last voyage?

GS: Luckily, technology had evolved and that allowed me to obtain a GPS system for Sovica which we used every day. However, I still backed up with my trusty sextant, just to keep my hand in.

Wayne Harrington: Would you do it all again in this modern era?

GS: Definitely. It was thrilling and exciting. I was very pleased and happy to have Jack Dekker sail with me.

WH: Even though you were great mates, there must have been times when Sovica was not big enough.

GS: There were times when we got on each other's nerves a bit, but generally, we got on very well.

WH: A challenge and adventure like this must also have tightened that friendship.

GS: Yes, very much so. But unfortunately, Jack is no longer with us.

WH: When you say you would do it again, is it even conceivable now for a young man with a boat of that size to embark on such an adventure in the modern world?

GS: No, I don't think so.

WH: Were there challenges with customs at different times?

GS: Yes, with Customs and Police there was sometimes a hell of a lot of fuss, but that eased a lot once we got into the Mediterranean. With a lot of the Customs, you had to have a pass to go ashore. But to get a pass, you had to go ashore! And then they wanted money – \$10 for a pass for us to go through the gate and walk into town. But that wasn't rigorously applied. In one place, the young man on the gate had an automatic rifle, and we never had any money at that stage, so we weren't able to get a pass. So it turned out that a couple of cigarettes were offered and that did the job.



■ Just another day at the Salomons in the Chagos Archipeligo.

WH: Getting through the Suez Canal must have been a unique experience.

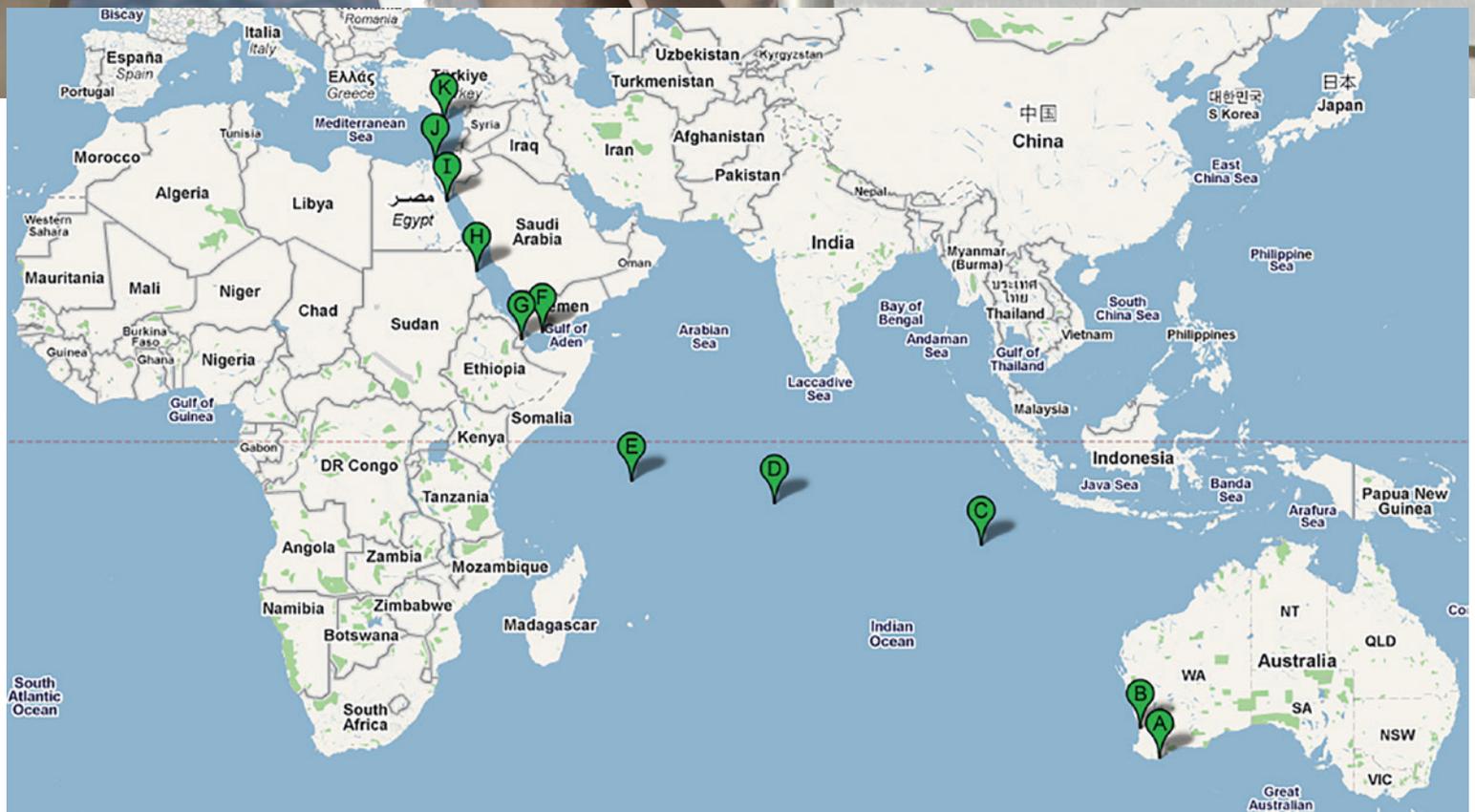
GS: We were preparing to go through

the canal and, of course, you couldn't just wander off through the canal. You

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■ Geoff Steer ponders some amazing adventures at sea with friends and family aboard his sturdy little yacht, Sovica.



Albany to Fremantle 17th - 23rd April, 1990

Sovica is ready for our planned sail to Geraldton. The aim was to leave the boat in Geraldton until June – a good departure point and weather-wise. We left Princess Royal Sailing Club at 6pm with crew Terry Bridge, Jack Dekker and David Booth. It was Terry's 40th rounding of the Leeuwin (a remarkable achievement).

However we encountered gale force N-NW winds and finished up 'hove to' in appalling conditions, west of Rottnest on the evening of the 22nd. Decided to head for Fremantle and the Royal Perth Annex. Sovica was left in a pen at the Boat Lifters until June.

Fremantle to Cocos Island 14th - 28th June, 1990

Returned to Fremantle on June 6th to set Sovica up for the big voyage. With Customs Clearance completed, Jack and I said our farewells setting sail into freshening south westerly winds with 2 reefs and #5 jib. After 4 days we were west of Carnarvon and then soon into the south east trade winds. No ships, very few birds – our routine became: sleep, eat and read.

After thirteen and a half days we arrived at a lovely anchorage at Direction Island in Cocos. This called for celebratory drinks and a good sleep.

The following day we were able to get transport to West Island with the Quarantine guy. Arriving there we went to the Cocos Club, showered and had dinner. Slept in a bed in the quarters, which was delightful. Then we toured the island by bicycle.

We had to get stores from West Island via Home Island to Direction Island. Cash was very difficult, had to use travellers cheques. We finished up spending a week at Cocos Islands and it was a delightful stopover but time to leave.

Found 2 fat maggots on the deck but don't know where they came from!!

Cocos to Salomons 6th - 17th July, 1990

Hot sunny weather with light S E winds. Settled quickly into routine. Jack does 3 hour watches at night, me 2 hours. Jack sleeps well during the day. Me not so much.

Weather pleasant, decks dry, no oilies and fore hatch open. Number 3 jib poled out and triple reefed main. Could have more sail up but boat is balanced and saves changing down sails at night.

Reading fills the day but night watches I find difficult – nothing to see. Although I did see a thong floating by! Many mental calculations as to arrival time. Much studying of charts for approaches and anchorages.

Sighted Salomon Island, 12 NM away at 1415 on the 17th of July and anchored on sand spit between Takamaka and Touquet Islands. Five other yachts in this beautiful tropical lagoon. Spent 8 days here.

Gary and Sandra on Lysistrata recognised Sovica from when they were in Albany. We had a great day with them catching crayfish on the reef. Also lots of communal meals. On our last day a US naval vessel anchored outside the passage and launched Z boats. They left a large box of goodies on the beach to be divided amongst the yachts - fresh fruit, vegetables, cheese, butter, eggs and milk. Much appreciated by all.

Salomons to Seychelles 26th July - 4th of August, 1990

Left Salomon's at 1100 with Seychelles bearing 272 degrees - 1101 Nautical Miles.

However, log reads: rain squalls rough and rotten. Not high winds but very rough sea and continuous black rain squalls. Very wet with everything soggy and am feeling very uneasy.

Three more days of rain. We motored and discovered the stern gland is leaking badly. I am bad tempered and frustrated. There are a million things I'd rather be doing! But maybe cruising the Mediterranean will make this all worthwhile. Then the weather improves.

Good trade wind sailing and everything is drying out. August 4th sighted Mahe Island. Too late to get in before dark so we 'hove to' all night in light wind. Next day contacted Port Control and anchored at Victoria light tower. We were given permission to anchor in the Yacht Basin (Port Victoria) but not to go ashore until granted Practique, the next day. Eventually granted Practique- immigration, customs, health and much signing of forms then went ashore to the Yacht Club for mail, cold beers and showers.



■ A hitch-hiker joined the crew for a day in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

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weren't allowed to do that. You had to have a pilot from their company. They were very strict on whether the boat was seaworthy, and so they sent an engineer to check that the engine was working and reverse gear was working and so on. But also, of course, you're supposed to go through in convoys. And we were told to tack onto the end of this northbound convoy, but of course we couldn't keep up with them and we dropped further and further behind. So we finished up going through the canal on our own, virtually with the pilot. You sort of looped along that side of the canal, and the ships were going past, but it didn't matter. But they were scared of blockages to the canal, and we've seen what happens when that occurs in more recent times.

WH: Was it a little bit daunting being in a smaller craft compared to the big freighters all around you?

GS: Not really. There was plenty of space for both. There were no problems in that regard. It was daunting going through the Red Sea, because that's when this Kuwaiti thing was on, and there were warships going through the Red Sea at that time – a big American aircraft carrier and so on. We called them up on channel 16 but never got a reply.

WH: Being that long at sea, you must have also encountered some strange sights.

GS: There was that business of little birds landing on the boat. Another would be flying around – sometimes for a whole day – whilst this other one fluttered around the boat. We gave them water and bread and that sort of thing. But that wasn't their problem. Meanwhile, this other one was keeping watch. Eventually the one on the boat flew off and joined the other one. That took up one whole day. One exciting thing was when I saw a thong float past. Little things like that for us broke the monotony on those long legs. There were certain parts where it was a shipping route and there would be some activity, but you'd cross that shipping route very quickly, and from there on you were on your own again.

WH: When crossing the equator and places like that, did you encounter the doldrums at all?

GS: Yes, there were areas where there

was very little wind, and so we were motoring a fair bit. And then we were running out of fuel. At one point we called up a ship, and they said to come over and they'd give us some fuel. But we had no fuel and there was wind, so they had to come over to us. Then they wanted us to come alongside, but of course we couldn't because the mast would have been smashing up against the side of the ship. They threw some 20-litre drums of fuel overboard, and we fished them out. But, unfortunately, it was bunker oil and we couldn't put it in the engine. I don't think it would ever have started again if we used it. There was another occasion when we didn't want to go too close to the Horn of Africa because of what we were being told about pirates and things, so we went right around which meant another two or three days. I wanted to let Lorna know that we were going to be late in to Aden, but of course we couldn't transmit anything. Channel 16 was only ship-to-ship, and there was a ship going by. I called him up and asked, "Would you send us a telegram, please?" and they did. They sent off this telegram and Lorna got the message telling her that we were going to be a few days late in Aden. It was good on those occasions to be able to talk to other boats, especially in the Red Sea, where you could call them up – especially in the nighttime – as ask, "Can you see us? We're a small yacht on your port bow. Are you aware of that?" And sometimes they'd say no, sometimes they'd say yes.

WH: Was it ever a concerning time for those left here at home? Presumably there were big chunks of time in between communications?

WH: Yes, of course. Sometimes, on the long passages of maybe two or three weeks. But I don't think Lorna was ever really too worried because I think she had confidence in us and the boat. As soon as we got somewhere, the first thing we did was contact home.

WH: And that in itself wouldn't have been the easiest thing to do in a far-flung place?

GS: It would certainly be a lot easier now. If there was a yacht club, you could use a telephone there.

WH: Speaking of yacht clubs, when you did your circumnavigation of Australia, they were always very hospitable. Is that true in the international sense as well?



■ Jack Dekker and Geoff Steer happily docked at their final destination – Cyprus.

GS: No, not always. We went into one place in Sardinia, and I'd arranged with a friend in London to get this pilot book of the Mediterranean sent out to us when we were in the Mediterranean. And I asked that he send it care of the yacht club so I could go in there and pick it up from the office. But when we got there, this fellow said, "You can't tie up here. Piss off." It was very serious, and we argued and argued, and eventually he said, "Alright, you

can have an hour to get up to the office and do your business." And he was back in the hour making sure we were leaving. That was most unusual, even in Greece. You were almost always welcomed really, when you tied up at the quay.

WH: It must have been quite a thrill to be tying up in a country that would have looked so different from home.

GS: Yes, and the information you got

from charts and books was always very helpful, of course. Some of those little Greek towns had a quay, but there were always too many boats. So the plan was that you sail into the quay, tie your bowline on the quay and drop a stern line out there, so you didn't take up all that quay space. The next fellow would then come along and he dropped a stern anchor out there and tied up to your stern. And for them to get ashore, they had to walk over us and the boat in front. And sometimes

you were three or four deep. And one time there was, I thought it was gonna be start of the Third World War. You were entitled to tie up to the stern of the boat in front, but these Germans came in and there was a Dutch boat. The Germans went up to give them a bowline, which is the custom, but the Dutchmen said, "Germans piss off". There was a hell of a lot of shouting, so it was quite good fun to be witness to all of that.

WH: It must have been a relief to arrive in the Mediterranean after a long and challenging time at sea?

GS: It was very boring at times, these long ocean passages. During the Middle East leg we were very conscious of being robbed. But of course, that wasn't the case once we got to France. The end result of it all was that we finished up in France and we cruised the canals. That was very, very nice. It was beautiful, and it made all the troubles of getting there in the boat worthwhile.

CM: After you successfully arrived in Cyprus, what were your plans from then on?

GS: Well, certainly not keeping on sailing around the world! I had thought I wanted to sail across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans but this voyage made me realise this was enough for me, and certainly Sovica was not the boat for such a voyage. So I decided to cruise the Mediterranean with family and friends which we did for a number of months and had a marvellous time.

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Raine & Horne

Phoned home - everything fine. Port Victoria is a lovely little town, touristy and unsophisticated. The French Red at the Yacht Club was very pleasant. While here plenty of yacht jobs needed doing. The outboard, satnav, stern gland and echo sounder needed fixing. We were kept busy!

Jack left for 3 weeks R and R so we can't leave here until 3rd or 4th.

Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands with Mahe, La Digue and Praslin the most populated. Did some yacht maintenance then decided to go to La Digue about 50 NM away. Andrew from yacht Ruthean helped me sail the 5 hour passage. Got a clearance then had to report to Police Station at La Digue. The Government interference in day-to-day affairs is preposterous.

After a few days of sightseeing, we got a clearance from the Police Station and sailed to Cote Dor on Praslin island and spent a few days here.

Back at Victoria I enjoyed socialising with some fellow yachties. Then spent some time house keeping. Received a letter from Jack stating he would be back on Sept 2nd so we could leave on the 4th. Provisioned the boat with vegies and water then went to dinner at Yacht Club. Phoned home - time to leave.

Seychelles to Aden

4th - 21st September, 1990

After leaving Victoria we had good runs - 130, 145 and 142 NM days with 20 knots from the East. Crossed the equator on the third night at 0330.

The wind increased from the SW and Sovica is handling the conditions well- I think it's too rough for pirates! Then light and fluky winds are upon us and it's unbearably hot. 34 NM from Aden we motor on our last fuel. Stern gland leaking again and requires 32 pumps every quarter hour. However everything lasted, with 2 gallons of fuel to spare.

Customs at Aden were rather hilarious but brief. Welcome showers at the Seaman's Institute then beer and lunch at the Crescent Hotel - faded Colonial Grandeur.

Omer A Hamza (a specialist in marine visitors) drove us around for bits and pieces. My opinion of Aden - it's a dump with rocky hills and no gardens or greenery. Omer took our clothes to the laundry. Packed the stern gland and gladly left on Monday, 24th September.

Aden to Cyprus

24th Sept - 30th October, 1990

Left in light winds for Djibouti crossing the Red Sea shipping lane which kept us busy for an hour or two but then no more ships. Arrived Djibouti 1730 next day.

Showers and marvellous dinner at Club Nautique. Left 0900 on 28th, flat broke with as much fuel and water as we can carry as 660NM to Port Sudan. Entered Straits of Bab el Mandeb.

Passed Perim Island at 1200 hours. The next 5 days were windless and suffocatingly hot and humid. One day we anchored at Zubair Island an absolute desolate ex-volcanic island. Another day we called up a passing ship - the MV Merion Star and they stopped and dropped off 4x2 litre cans of fuel. We found 2 days later it was crude oil!

After 8 days we anchored at 1000 hrs, Friday October 5th in Port Sudan harbour. Horrendous bureaucracy, no money and immigration want US\$10 per person. Found bank where Lorna had sent money but couldn't get it out! Taken to Police Station - guards are young teenagers with guns. Finally got my money in \$US dollars. Cannot wait to leave this horrible country.

4 days later we are anchored at Hurghada. The officialdom much more civilised. Off to the Sheraton for the night. Spent 3 days touring and provisioning.

Sunday 21st of October we started the last leg of the Red Sea to Suez, a distance of 200NM. Winds were light so we motored. Shipping everywhere. Fortunately only took us 3 days mostly motor sailing.

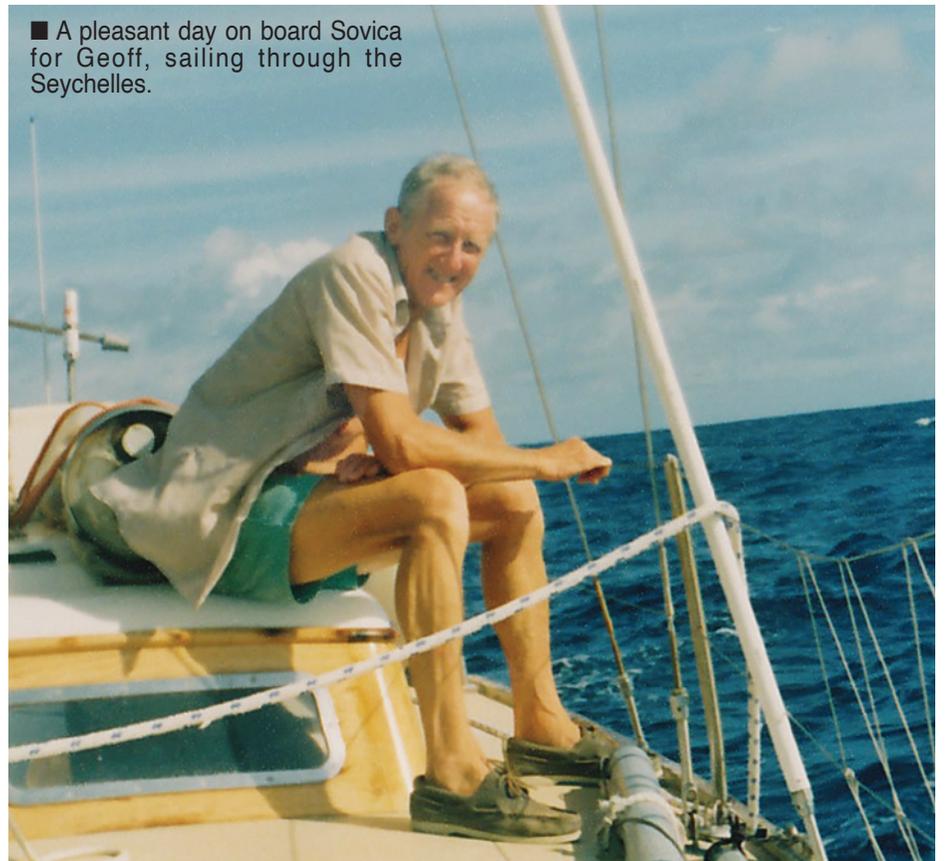
On constant alert for oil fields and ships. We motored into Port Suez and were met by Mr Ibrahim, a ships agent, who arranged anchorage temporarily to a floating dock. The next day we moored at the Yacht Club, had showers, shopped and had lunch in town.

One day we went to Cairo by taxi. The cost for day 6am to 6pm was US\$400. Went to Tutankhamen Exhibition. Saw the pyramids and Sphinx. Our last day in Suez was relaxed with lunch at Red Sea Hotel with Ibrahim as our guest before we readied ourselves for the pilot at 2am.

Our last leg to Cyprus was motoring until SE set in and gradually freshened. Then 3 reefs in the main and #5 jib.

We entered Sheraton Marina at Limassol, Cyprus at 10am October 30th.

■ A pleasant day on board Sovica for Geoff, sailing through the Seychelles.



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Finally I put Sovica as deck cargo on a ship bound for Fremantle.

WH: But you and Sovica had some more adventures in Europe before she came home?

GS: Yes, at the end of the next European summer, it was a great idea to take go over, get on board Sovica where it was still moored at the Sheraton Hotel in Cyprus, and take off around the Turkish and Greek Islands. And eventually the plan turned into the fact that we would go into France and spend time in the inland waters of France. And that was, of course, a wonderful idea.

WH: Who did you have with you?

GS: Lots and lots of people from Albany at various times. People would come over and stay a day or two or three or four on board the boat with us.

WH: Who were some of those characters?

WH: Greg Padden came over. He was a great fellow, Greg, because you'd go into a little port and he'd tie up, go for a walk along the quay and be talking to everybody. "Hello girls, would you like to come down for a drink?" and all that sort of thing. It was marvellous because we had visitors. Rodney and Chris Adams, Ron and Pat Kerruish. Our neighbours Dale and Karen Baker came and stayed with us. The only problem was Sovica was really too deep for some of the canals, and I realised that we were not going to be able to go all around. So when we got to France, I decided that we could get more out of touring around if we had a purpose-built canal boat. So I looked around and found one that was for sale that was ideal, much roomier. It was really a houseboat, but very convenient for travelling around because it had a much shallower draught. We did that for several years. We would leave it there for the northern winter and come back home.

WH: That sound luxurious, doesn't it?

GS: It does. And it was!

WH: That chapter of your journeying through rural France must have been idyllic.

GS: The whole world was a different place. Very rural, very nice, small villages. The people were very nice and there was no fuss or bother with tying up here, there or wherever you wanted to. It was very free and easy.

WH: It must have been very satisfying to be able to use your knowledge of boats and of sailing and share that with friends who wouldn't ordinarily get to enjoy that type of experience?

WH: Yes, and of course, our family were able to come over at various times, too. My daughter Alison used to run the boat on her own. She'd take a horde of friends, and a lot of people who were touring Europe used to come and catch up with us and spend a few days on board.

WH: What do you make of the development of Albany and its ongoing role as a maritime place and destination?

GS: I'm definitely very supportive of Albany playing that role, but it's not going to ever be a big shipping centre.

WH: Your family actually has a very long maritime history, doesn't it?

GS: Well, I've got a painting of a ship that my great-grandfather used to skipper. The ship was involved in the tea trade from Europe to India and China and those places.

WH: Like the Dutch East India Company?

GS: Yes, he was the master of a ship called the Scotia. His son Henry was named Henry Scotia Steer. So my great-grandfather was a master of a seagoing ship and my grandfather was a master of a seagoing ship, but it never went on from there.

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WH: So your father was not a sailor?

GS: No.

WH: It skipped a generation and landed it with you, though. That's fascinating. And what would you say that your grandfather and great-grandfather would be pretty proud to know that you too were able to sail from one hemisphere to the other in your own little boat?

GS: I think so, yes. The painting of the Scotia came down through the family and had recently got to the stage where I was the oldest in the family left. No one wanted it, but I did. I took the painting to Ross Shardlow (see *Southerly Magazine* #70, October 2024) to say, "What can be done to make sure this painting is preserved?" And he said, "Oh, what a wonderful painting," and went on and on. He took photos of it and took it up to friends in Perth to see what they thought of it. The upshot of it was, rather than try to restore it, the advice was just leave it as it was. Anyway, he wrote the history of it, and wrote the history of the owners of the painting and all this sort of thing. He did a hell of a lot of work on it. And, you know, by the time he was finished, he refused to take a penny for it.

WH: I gather you would have learned a lot from Ross about your ancestors that you wouldn't have ordinarily ever learned about?

GS: Oh yes, very much so. **S**



■ Geoff Steer's great-grandfather was the master of the Scotia, a barque built in the 1800s.

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