



MV Kangaroo at Smiths Creek in the Hawkesbury region, main; the interior's elegant simplicity, above; ABBA aboard the vessel, below; Halvorsen boat yard at Bobbin Head, below left; the boat's nameplate, bottom



CLASSIC CRUISING

On the one hand, it is the most perfect place to sleep — ever-so-gently rocked, floating, accompanied by the slightest creaking of wood. It's like being a baby again, back in a cot. But I am woken by a nightmare Nemo scenario; a hugely animated seagull screaming what sounds like "Mine! Mine!" slams full-pelt into the porthole next to my head, bolting me awake.

To be fair, this is partly due to my dawn-loving daughter climbing around the gleaming, golden deck of our stunning Halvorsen timber cruiser and feeding the gulls her breakfast. And really, this is the only bum note during a weekend on MV Kangaroo, the only classic Halvorsen boat, a 36ft standard cruiser, available for hire in Australia.

Incredibly, you don't need a boat licence to experience the joy of skippering this stripling of boating history around Pittwater, Cowan and the Hawkesbury River, north of Sydney. It's like handing the keys to one of Karl Benz's first, and also largely wooden, cars to someone who's not qualified to drive. It's possible thanks to a law that says you don't need a licence to skipper a vessel not capable of exceeding 10 knots (18km/h). Built in 1958, the Halvorsen dates back to a different, more analogue age of travel, so it has a chip's chance in a seagull storm of reaching that speed. Frankly, going that fast on Kangaroo would seem gauche; this is a holiday that moves at a slower pace.

The sense of history that seeps out of this beautiful craft — all sparkling old-school chrome in a sea of toffee-coloured timber — is only added to by its sheen of showbiz cred. Kangaroo has been a regular star on soap opera *Home and Away*, playing Alf Stewart's boat, *The Blaxland*. It has also featured in a *Bundaberg Rum* advertisement, complete with giant polar bear. Most excitingly, however, this boat hosted ABBA back in 1976. The Swedish super group not only took time out from turning Australians into *Dancing Queens* to cruise up Cowan Creek, they also filmed some unintentionally hilarious footage for the music video of one of their lesser-known songs, *Tropical Loveland*. My wife almost expires from excitement when I show her, via YouTube, that she's sitting right where Agnetha Faltskog once did, on one of the rear deck's two day beds.

The Halvorsen name carries its own celebrity, and Scandinavian style, in boating cir-

Hop around the Hawkesbury on a piece of sailing history

STEPHEN CORBY



cles. It dates back to 1887, when Halvor Andersen, a farmer, launched his first wooden craft near Arendal in the south of Norway. His son, Lars, carried the family business all the way to Sydney in 1925, where the brand became a byword for floating quality and style. From Lars's arrival through to 1976, the family enterprise built 1299 boats in shipyards in Sydney's Neutral Bay and Ryde.

IN THE KNOW

Charters of MV Kangaroo leave from the Princes Street Marina in Newport. The Halvorsen has seven berths for overnight stays and can carry up to 10 people during daylight hours. If you're not comfortable with self-driving, you can be delivered to a mooring spot for the night in the boat and picked up again the next day. As well as cooking facilities and two fridges, MV Kangaroo has an enclosed hot shower and an electric flush toilet. Visitors must bring their own bedding, pillows and towels. Hire rates start at \$1200 a day, midweek, and rise to \$5130 for six-night stay over New Year. Availability is extremely limited.

■ mv-kangaroo.com.au

After World War II, the company had a lease at the marina at Bobbin Head in Kuring-gai Chase National Park, from where it operated a substantial boat hire business. Halvorsen also built media magnate Frank Packer's 12m racing yacht *Gretel* in 1962; it became Australia's first challenger for the America's Cup. The company stopped bareboat chartering in 2002.

Knowing all this history, I climb aboard with a sense of disbelief — and fear. I have my boat licence and have been lucky to steer some giant pleasure palaces on Sydney Harbour, yet I feel far more intimidated by Kangaroo. Surely it should be on display in a giant glass case in the National Maritime Museum, not being crawled over by my children. After an extensive safety and instruction session, I'm delighted to learn I won't have to extract Kangaroo from its mooring. Niels Storaker, the salty sea dog giving the briefing, announces he will drive us into the middle of



Pittwater before I have to take over (I'm pretty sure he guffawed at the idea of me attempting it myself).

Once we're out in open water, Niels leaps into the second dinghy he's towed behind us, reminds us again that self-drive charter vessels are prohibited by law from travelling between sunset and sunrise, and we are on our own. Skippering a boat as spick and span as this is a joy, and it's easy. Because Kangaroo is essentially a water-going wombat when it comes to speed, nothing happens quickly. Turning the old-school wooden wheel makes you feel like Popeye, or Captain Jack Sparrow if you prefer. All I have to do is sit back and resist the urge to take up chewing tobacco.

Navigating the sea lanes is as simple as pretending you're driving in Europe by keeping to the right and giving way to everything bigger than you, that is, just about everything on the water that's not a duck. We find a spot to moor before sunset and settle in for a languorous evening.

Kangaroo has two smallish staterooms downstairs, one with a double bunk on the starboard side, quickly snapped up by the kids, and another in the nose with a bunk and a single. The dining table can be converted into a double berth, but by the time we consider this option we are too relaxed and comfortable to bother. The number of overnight passengers is limited to seven "in the interest of overall comfort and wear and tear on the old girl". There are a couple of fridges and some unexpected mod-cons such as USB charging points and an iPhone cable, which connects you to a multimedia unit should you want to sing sea shanties together. We cook a meal of elegant simplicity on the double-burner gas stove, and find the whole experience like a far classier version of caravanning, with Kuring-gai Chase National Park as a stunning backdrop.

After that wondrous night of sleep and sharp awakening, we row to the nearest beach in our dinghy. It's a spot unspoiled by humans, with a nearby waterfall tumbling into a ravine. There's time for a bracing swim and some sun lounging before setting sail slowly around Scotland Island, heading to the Princes Street Marina at Newport, where I have no intention of berthing the boat. Fortunately, part of the service involves Niels zipping out to meet us then putting on an exhibition of boat berthing that should be on YouTube. Once we are parked we are overcome by a powerful desire for the weekend not to end and, with Niels's blessing, we lie on the deck of Kangaroo for a farewell nap in the sun. It's a sleep that turns out to be blissfully free of seagulls.

Stephen Corby was a guest of MV Kangaroo.