

Victoria's Gippsland Lakes are 10 times the size of Sydney Harbour and, as **ZOE CURTIS** discovers, you don't have to be a sailing master to explore them

AT 4pm on a Saturday we're between the devil and the deep blue sea. It's just over an hour since my "first mate" and I waved an enthusiastic farewell to the Riviera Nautic team at their Metung jetty and headed off to explore the Gippsland Lakes, our home for the next three days.

At 10 times the size of Sydney Harbour, there's a lot of open water ahead of us, but for our first dip Riviera Nautic owner Cam Johns has suggested we steer the 32ft yacht he's trusted us with to the nearby Barrier Landing, a sandspit that fronts the Lakes system on one side and the Ninety Mile Beach on the other.

Despite having never stood at the helm of a yacht, we're unexpectedly confident. Riviera Nautic specialises in boating adventure holidays for everyone from experts to novices (no boating licence required) and, after a three-hour hands-on lesson, we're raring to give our new-found skills a workout.

As self-appointed "captain", I navigate while my first mate (pictured) steers us towards the "Barrier", as the locals call it, to find a berth for the evening. But it's a long weekend and this jetty in a remote part of Victoria is busier than Bourke St on Christmas Eve.

With all berths full, our only option is a beach mooring and the last remaining patch of vacant sand is between two cruisers, which this captain estimates are worth at least six figures. Each.

No matter, Cam's clear instruction rings in our ears and as long as we keep things slow and steady, it should be a cinch. Right?

Wrong. With a gentle thud our keel hits sand way before it's meant to and even we novices can work out that instead of a beach landing we're just beached.

Cam's reassurance that a grounding is no big deal and that Riviera Nautic's rescue boat is on call 24/7 means little when, to the dozens of boaties sipping G&Ts on their own luxury vessels nearby, we've suddenly become *those people* who have hired a boat with no idea how to even park the bloody thing.

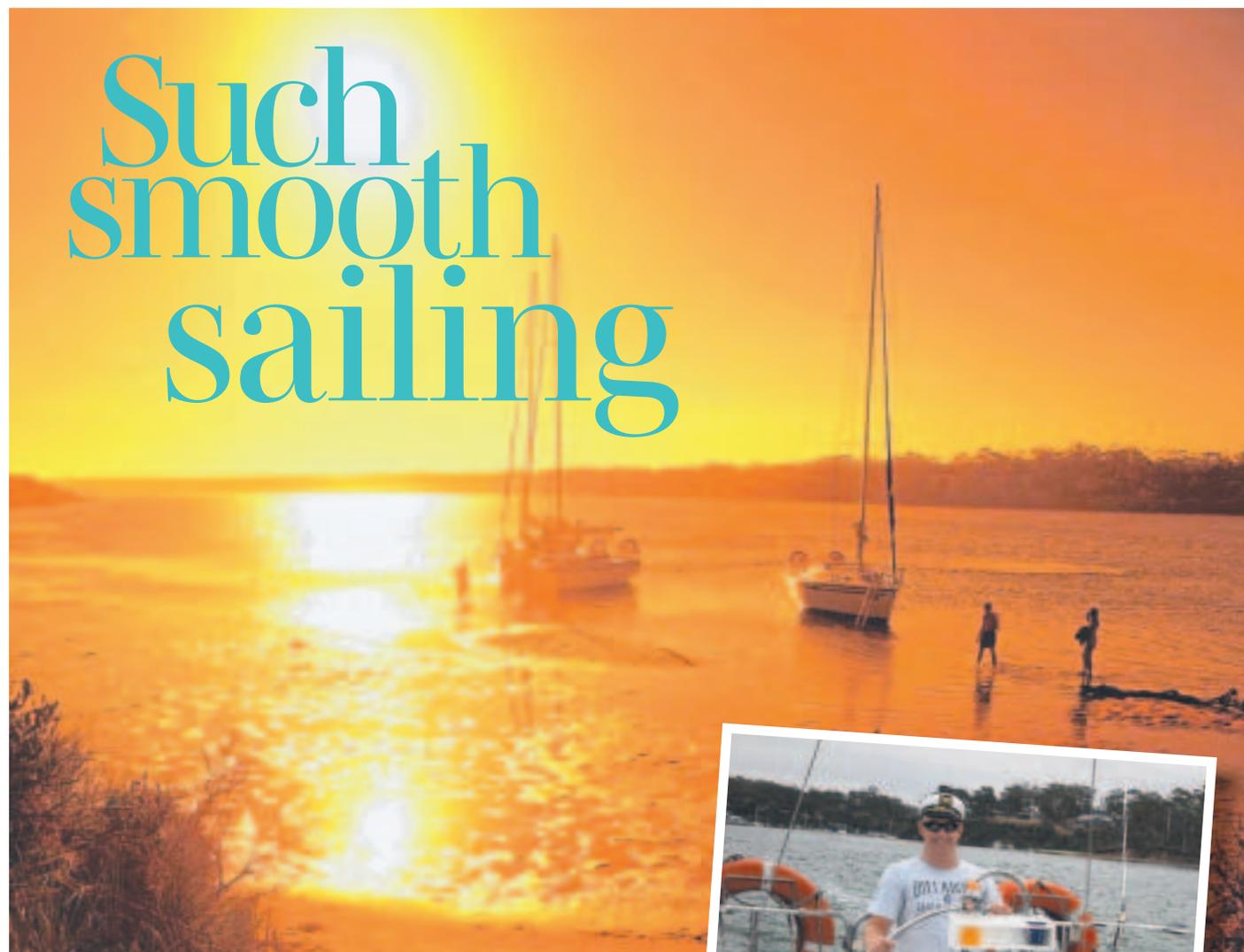
Embarrassment aside, Cam's right. While this incident is a big deal to us, a rescue boat is all part of Riviera Nautic's service and by 5pm, the devilish grounding is (almost) forgotten and it's just us and the deep blue sea. As we watch a bevy of black swans float past, we wonder what the poor people are doing.

It's a thought Cam and wife Sascha have had many times since they traded in their busy corporate lifestyles 2½ years ago for the quieter pace of Metung.

Not that they didn't feel pressure in taking over the reins of Riviera Nautic's long-time owners Fred and Jenny Herbert who, over 26 years, had seen their business become one of Australia's most highly awarded tourism operators but the Johns were thrilled in November when their own hard work was rewarded with a Victorian Tourism award for best unique accommodation.

Back at our yacht, the serenity is broken by claps of

Such smooth sailing



THE DEAL

RIVIERA NAUTIC
185 Metung Rd,
Metung.
Ph: 5156 2243

GETTING THERE
Metung is a 3½-hour drive east of Melbourne

STAYING THERE
Riviera Nautic charts three 32-36ft cruisers (sleeping up to 10) and nine 28-36ft yachts (up to eight). From \$1089 for two-night weekend hire. It includes fuel and a free night on board before the charter starts. Day boats also available.

ONLINE
rivieranautic.com.au
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thunder and we prepare to bunker down for the night. Though our vessel can technically sleep seven, it would be most comfortable for four and when cabin-bound thanks to a storm it's the perfect space for two.

Extensive research has been unable to confirm my suspicion the same person who designed our yacht is the same mastermind behind space-saving mecca IKEA but surely it must be so. Though tiny, the kitchen is fully functional and the bathroom is equally space efficient with a toilet, shower and vanity fitting in an area the size of an average hall cupboard. There's a double bedroom at either end of the cabin and in the main living space a central table is flanked by comfy bench couches. With pizzas in the oven and a deck of cards at our disposal, we're as cosy as two peas in a pod.

The morning brings clear skies and our next challenge — reversing out of our berth without the aid of a rescue boat. Thankfully today the sailing gods are smiling on us and, as my first mate successfully motors away from the Barrier and I trail my hand in the water, Melbourne's peak hour couldn't be further from our minds.

The Gippsland Lakes are the largest navigable inland waterway in Australia and, unlike the reef-ridden Whitsundays, boast no ocean swells and a sandy, soft lake floor, making them also the safest. That means we have two national parks, three rivers and dozens of deserted beaches at our disposal, not to mention Riviera Nautic's own boat drive-through coffee shop (just radio through your order 10 minutes before pick-up). We decide to stop for lunch at the sheltered, tree-lined banks of Box's Creek before cruising to Duck Arm, near

Paynesville, for our final night. As we motor through Bancroft Bay, a seal plays in the shallows and as we round the south side of Raymond Island a dolphin fin catches our eye. A family of kangaroos watch as we secure Duck Arm's last floating mooring and then, as we jump off the back of the boat for a late afternoon swim, we're distracted by a trio of pelicans above. As we sit on our deck with a glass of wine in one hand (me) and a fishing rod in the other (him), we again agree the city feels worlds away.

The morning brings bacon and eggs and enough of a breeze for the first mate to suggest we may actually raise our sail on our final day.

Despite the confidence my rank of Captain implies, I'm far more comfortable motoring along but as we cruise into the grand expanse of Lake King, the five-knot winds tempt us and in a flurry our sailing lesson of three days earlier comes to the fore.

Within minutes the first mate has the halyard in hand, the sail is up, the motor is off and we're officially sailing. It's exhilarating, challenging and rewarding and, as we slowly but surely sail towards Riviera Nautic's jetty, it's enough to make my excited first mate ask when registrations close for next year's Sydney to Hobart. It's an excellent opportunity to tell him I don't like the cut of his jib.