

A DIFFERENT TACK

Nancy Knudsen and Ted Nobbs were once part of the Sydney rat race, but sailing around the world for years helped them determine what truly floated their boat. ROSEMARIE MILSOM finds the adventurous couple living the good life in Dungog.

Nancy Knudsen was a stereotypical corporate high-flyer. The former actor and Brisbane television presenter turned successful businesswoman had the smart suits, designer heels, racy luxury car, personal trainer and inner-Sydney office. From daybreak to well after dark, often six days a week, she rushed from one appointment to the next, body tense, head full of details. She was perpetually tired.

Knudsen started boutique travel company Sydney Express in 1976 as a way of supporting her two children after her first marriage crumbled. In 1984 she founded Aircruising Australia, which she floated on the Sydney Stock Exchange two years later (for many years Knudsen was the only Australian female chair of a public company). Thanks to her canny decision to join forces with former ABC journalist Bill Peach, who became the well-known and respected face of Aircruising Australia, as well as burgeoning interest in domestic travel, the business went from strength to strength.

"It all came about because at Sydney Express I was asked to organise tours of outback mining and investment possibilities for clients of the stock exchange," Knudsen recalls. "The tour manager kept saying I needed to go on one of the trips, but I was always too busy. Finally, I did, and I came back so knocked out by the landscape . . . ooooh . . . Kakadu, Longreach, the Kimberley, the Simpson Desert, Karratha, Broome. It was extraordinary.

"I had travelled a lot and I was convinced it was unique. I knew I couldn't be wrong." Many people said there wasn't a market for expensive, flight-only tours of Australia. They were wrong. The packages became so popular Knudsen bought her own plane, an F27 Fokker Friendship, which seated 40. She sold seven plane loads in its first season.

The two businesses and her two children, son Simon and daughter Cassandra, filled her life, but an invitation from friends to go sailing one weekend changed everything.

"It was instant love," writes Knudsen in her recently published travel memoir *Shooting Stars and Flying Fish* (Allen & Unwin). "On the water, out on the ocean, I felt like a child of the universe . . . From then on, whenever time allowed, I entered every sailing race I could."

Through sailing, which became an essential escape from the relentless busyness of her life on land, Knudsen also met her second husband, architect and experienced racing sailor Ted Nobbs. "I was attracted to him immediately," she writes. "He never seemed to feel the need to prove himself, and that took confidence of a very real kind. Compared to the competitive blue suits or the self-applauding sailing jackets that I was used to, his lack of macho bravado was stunning . . . He seemed genuinely thrilled by any success I had."

One lazy afternoon in 1996, while the couple sheltered from the searing January heat in the



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cockpit of their small sailing boat in Broken Bay, just north of Sydney, a playful, wistful conversation led to the beginning of a life-changing journey.

How the couple ended up on 40 picturesque acres just outside Dungog via Cape York, Darwin, Cocos Keeling, the Maldives, India, Oman, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Israel, Turkey, the Suez and Panama canals, the Mediterranean, The Galapagos, The Marquesas, Tahiti, Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu, Bundaberg and Sydney, is a meaningful lesson in throwing caution to the wind.

The relaxed, genial woman curled up on a comfy cane lounge on a brisk, ashen-sky afternoon recounting that 1996 conversation no longer recognises her former self. The accessories of Nancy Knudsen's Sydney life have long gone. There is no black Porsche, 6am

SEA AND LAND: Nancy Knudsen aboard the couple's beloved Blackwattle. Opposite page, Nancy and husband Ted Nobbs on their Dungog property. **MAIN PICTURE:** PETER STOOP

personal training sessions or frantic schedule.

The couple have been living in a small, two-bedroom "shed" they built on the Dungog property they bought in 2009 after returning from what ended up being a five-year overseas adventure. Two weeks ago they received council approval for a new ecofriendly house that Nobbs has designed for the site and the slab is ready to be poured. Knudsen, 70, has been learning to ride and they have installed fencing and a road, and have a new dog, a hyperactive Jack Russell named Charlie.

That day in Broken Bay triggered a gradual, but irreversible shift.

"I suggested to Ted that we live on the boat," Knudsen remembers. "There was a contentment that took over when we were on board and I wanted more of it. Ted thought I was joking, but said if I wanted to sail more I could take a year off work and go cruising with him."

Gradually, a plan took shape. What began as a one-year escape quickly grew into a 3½-year itinerary. They would say goodbye to the inner-city grind, pack away their corporate lives and sail around the world. Fanciful? Yes. Scary? Yes. Achievable? "Thank goodness I didn't realise how enormous the learning curve was," Knudsen says with a laugh.

Neither had cruising experience or special mechanical, engineering or electrical know-how. While Nobbs had countless hours of racing behind him, including 10 Sydney to Hobarts, he'd never had to drop anchor. "It's not as easy as it looks," Knudsen says. ▶

"It's an important skill and one of the most dangerous procedures when you're cruising. When you're close to land, you're incredibly vulnerable. If the anchor gives way, you're going to be on the rocks."

In her book she describes a traumatic night eight months into their trip when they almost lost their yacht after anchoring in a sand spit at Addu Atoll in the Maldives. During the night a wind and tide change forced them on to a reef. As Knudsen set off a flare, it hit her in the chest. It was a chaotic, frightening incident.

Unlike dramatic events that happen in movies in carefully edited fast-forward scenes, overhauling your life and setting sail doesn't happen overnight. Six years passed between that chat in Broken Bay and the "gentle and sunny" afternoon when loved-ones, including Knudsen's adult children, farewelled the couple and their long-keeled cutter-rigged sloop at the Royal Prince Alfred Yacht Club at Newport. The couple named their yacht Blackwattle after the bay near the small Glebe apartment they moved into after selling their maintenance-heavy Paddington terrace and preparing for their trip.

A breast cancer scare, the death of Knudsen's mother, refitting Blackwattle and the process of divesting themselves of cars, jobs, memberships, registrations and subscriptions meant "life" kept getting in the way of their dream. By the time they departed, Knudsen says, "we'd gotten rid of everything except that which we needed. There was nothing extraneous, just the task in front of us."

Before the explosion in blogging, Knudsen created a website and arranged for a student to update her almost daily accounts of their adventure. A lifelong lover of writing – at 17 she wrote a play that was performed at her high school – and reading, she kept family, friends and those in the worldwide cruising community up to date with details of their often amusing, sometimes scary, but constantly inspiring journey.

The former actor, who had appeared in *Rip Tide*, *Wake in Fright* and *Homicide*, relished the opportunity to be creative again.

Buoyed by the positive feedback from online followers, the more than 200,000 words Knudsen ended up with were "delicately" whittled down to 75,000 with the assistance of publishing consultant and Australian Society of Authors mentor Diana Giese. *Shooting Stars and Flying Fish: Swapping the Boardroom for the Seven Seas* was born.

"It's everyone's fantasy," Giese says of Knudsen's journey. "We all have moments when we'd like nothing more than to leave the hectic pace behind and head off on an adventure. As soon as I read Nancy's account, I felt readers would connect with her."

Knudsen is a talented writer and her finely tuned observations of the seascape, the



countries she and Nobbs visit, and the many colourful characters they meet, elevate her memoir above many titles in an overpopulated genre. She deftly avoids clichés when other writers would be tempted to rely on them.

Leaving Cocos Keeling to cross the Indian Ocean for the Maldives: "It's a flat-sky brittle day, the water outside the lagoon slate-coloured, hard-looking, like melted granite. The sun is a limp thing, trying lamely to break through the barricade of clouds. . . . Trepidation is there – we must not make any mistakes out in that watery desert."

And later, when they reach more populated Egyptian waters, they "start to see many dive boats in the distance, zipping across the flat sea, pausing, zipping on again, like mechanical white mice on a flat blue land".

Their path westwards takes them to some of the world's most isolated and stunning destinations. The beauty of cruising, Knudsen writes, is that you "arrive as sailors, not as tourists". What does she mean by this? "When

you arrive by boat, you meet people at the grocery shop level," she explains. "Your house might be sitting on the water, but you are living like the locals once you step ashore. There's no concierge desk, no one between you and the people in that community."

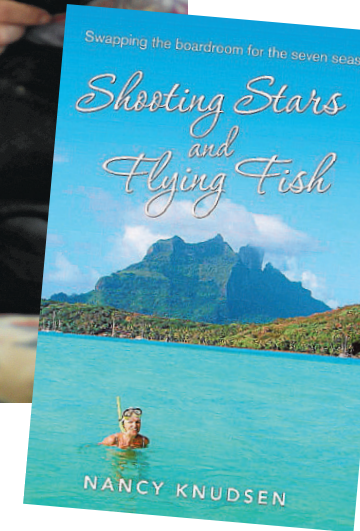
Knudsen is an open-hearted traveller and one of the strengths of *Shooting Stars* is her preparedness to reveal her inner journey. Naturally, there are the exotic locales and the logistics of getting from one port to the next, but hers isn't merely an account of distances covered. The clutter of her former life ebbs away and she finally has the space to reflect.

"I have difficulty remembering the person who left Sydney," Knudsen writes, as Blackwattle sails from Israel to Turkey. "I can remember the balance sheets and marketing plans and people issues that kept me awake at night. Now it's a soft touch on my sleeping shoulder – 'It's your watch'."

"I can remember the hated morning alarm; now it is likely to be the tinkling slap of a halyard against the mast. The desperate need



"I would end up thinking quite strange things – 'If I died now, it doesn't matter because I'm so much a part of this already. I'm so insignificant, I've blended in'. There was such harmony."



LIFE LESS ORDINARY: Nancy Knudsen's *Shooting Stars and Flying Fish*, published by Allen & Unwin.

have in everyday life because there are too many distractions."

Knudsen writes: "We meant only to go sailing – we didn't set out to reinvent ourselves." Philosophically and politically, the former high-flyer was transformed by her five-year journey, which included an unexpected pause in Turkey where Nobbs was offered a teaching position at the Bahcesehir Universitesi in Istanbul.

In her place is a radical, committed to a simpler, sustainable way of life. "I have to watch what I say now," she laughs. "Friends look at me as though I'm off my rocker."

The journey aboard Blackwattle taught her many lessons, but the most profound was "our interconnectedness". "We saw rubbish washed up on deserted atolls and it horrified me. We find it easier to put on blinkers and forget that we're all in this together.

HOME AND AWAY: Clockwise from top left, Ted and Nancy on an uninhabited island in the San Blas, Panama; Nancy relaxes at home in Dungog; Ted aboard Blackwattle; Nancy talks to the dolphins at sunset.

"I'm very saddened by where we are as a society," she continues. "We've lost touch with the natural world. We're immersed in this man-made environment that pollutes and adds to our unhappiness. There's nothing magical or harmonious about it."

Overpopulation, consumerism, environmental destruction – these are the issues that now concern Knudsen.

Once she stepped on to Australian soil in Bundaberg on her return, she was determined not to lose the contentment that came from life on Blackwattle. "I didn't have many material possessions and I was no longer being carried along by a crazy lifestyle. I wanted to hold on to that," she says.

The couple moored Blackwattle and lived on board for nine months. They also bought a "funny old campervan" and set off most weekends to towns within three hours' drive of Sydney, searching for a new home. They headed south and west, but it was a stay in Clarence Town ("We needed to find places with caravan parks, which became our temporary bases while we explored") in early 2009 that led them to Dungog.

"We thought it was beautiful and that was that," Knudsen says decisively.

During the two-year sojourn in Turkey, Knudsen wanted to feel useful again, to contribute, so she taught English and completed a graduate certificate in journalism. She also accepted a job offer as cruising editor of the largest sailing news website in the world, *Sail-World*, a "dream role" she still enjoys. From her laptop in Dungog, she edits a weekly paperless magazine that is delivered to 34,000 inboxes.

Nobbs is due in Istanbul for another teaching stint in September so the couple will return to their apartment in the cosmopolitan Beyoglu district, on the magnificent Istiklal Caddesi, or Independence Avenue as it is known in English, which is lined with galleries, cafes and boutiques.

And what of Blackwattle? Knudsen suppresses tears as she explains that she was sold a year ago. "I don't want to go there. . . . um. . . she's still there, alive in what we did." The couple plans to buy a "little, light boat" and moor it on Lake Macquarie.

And what of her and Nobbs's love affair with Turkey, which Knudsen describes in her book as "like floating on a warm buoyant sea, and each day [of living there] has been a repeated joy"?

That is another story she is itching to tell.