



Main picture: Skip stretching his legs on an ice cliff above the Penola Straits on his day off from the usual ski mountaineering forays

SAILING TO CLIMB

RECIPIENT OF THE TILMAN MEDAL SKIP NOVAK ARGUES SAILING SHOULD HAVE AN OBJECTIVE

I have always thought that voyaging under sail is more gratifying when it has an underlying purpose. Floating about somewhat ad hoc across oceans from one paradise to the next has never been my cup of tea, although this is classic cruising as we know it.

I realise that cruising as a means to kick back and relax has its place in the world, especially if you need a clean break from a full-on hectic working life. The desire to 'cast off' is even more understandable for people who have been lifelong weekend sailors wishing one day to 'live it'.

I must admit to having overdosed on a life at sea. Although I love being on the ocean, my preoccupations now are always for making that landfall; at first to smell it, then on principle to march up to the highest piece of ground. This is *de rigueur* for any day trip ashore on the *Pelagics* – one charter guest accused me of running a boot camp – and of course it applies equally to a multi-day expedition. ➤



“SOME BOATS CARRY THE BIBLE, WE CARRY TILMAN, A CONTINUOUS SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND ENTERTAINMENT”

Photo op on an outlier of the Trident Range which we climbed in 2013, South Georgia

Above: *Pelagic Australis* under full sail in the Bay of Isles, South Georgia.

Above right: mobile base camp picking up the group in Stromness Harbour after a successful Shackleton Traverse

It has all become somewhat of an obsession. Possibly this could have something to do with a 25-year-old mind trapped inside a 64-year-old body all the while never forgetting the TR (time remaining) factor.

Sailing to climb is one of our main focuses on the *Pelagics*. The concept satisfies on a personal level. Luckily there are many likeminded souls who have joined us in high latitudes over the years – more than enough to make a business out of it. The niche that we have helped to create has been facilitating access to mountaineering objectives that can only be reached by small vessels.

For climbers, exploratory mountaineering implies quality that is underpinned by a high level of uncertainty, and where rescue is inherently problematic. Sea voyages certainly add value to this dynamic, but can also add more obstacles to overcome. And that’s the way we like it.

First exploration

I made my first voyage to high latitudes in 1983 when I was asked to prepare and skipper the 61ft Sparkman & Stephens ex-ocean racer *War Baby* for Warren Brown from Bermuda. It was the chance of a lifetime and I took it, breaking the cycle of seasonal ocean racing in Europe.

Starting and ending in Lymington, during four months away we touched down in the Scilly Isles, tipped our way around the whisky coast of Scotland, visited the Orkneys, Shetlands and Fair Isle before running up the west coast of Norway from Bergen to Hammerfest. Then it was on to what was billed as the icing on the cake: Bear Island and Spitsbergen, before returning to the UK via the Faroe Isles.

Although one of Warren’s goals was to “get people ashore”, early on it was apparent with this whistlestop tour there was little time to roam around in the hills. No sooner had we tied up or dropped the hook than Warren looked around and often announced: “We’re leaving now!” This became the repeated catchphrase by the crew, which we still use to this day with fond remembrance.

Although frustrating from a climber’s perspective – completely equipped and the equipment never seeing the light of day – it was a voyage of discovery that whetted

my appetite. More so, after I read Bill Tilman’s *Triumph and Tribulation* about his 1974 cruise to Spitsbergen, which we had on board in the ‘Arctic library’.

Tilman is iconic in the sailing to climb genre, inarguably its pioneer. His was an extraordinary life impossible to repeat in this day and age. After surviving two world wars in active service – the first in the trenches and the second with Italian and Albanian partisans – he did a ten-year stint of farming in Kenya where he met Eric Shipton, another farmer, but already a seasoned mountaineer.

Recognising Tilman’s toughness and stoic nature, Shipton invited him on forays to climb new routes on Mt Kenya for recreation. Soon after that, the pair upped stakes – Tilman finishing his African experience by bicycling from Kenya to Cameroon and living on bananas – and spent the next 20 years in the greater ranges of the Himalayas, including leading the British Mount Everest reconnaissance expeditions in the Thirties and Fifties.

Their forte was ‘exploratory mountaineering’ and in addition to many first ascents, they covered an enormous amount of territory heretofore unseen by western eyes.

In 1954 Tilman, now in his 56th year, decided to take up sailing and, as one did at the time and still happens today, he bought himself a yacht with no prior sailing experience. She was aptly called *Mischief*, a well-used Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter of 45ft LOA. Shortly thereafter he and a pick-up crew set out for Patagonia . . . as one does.

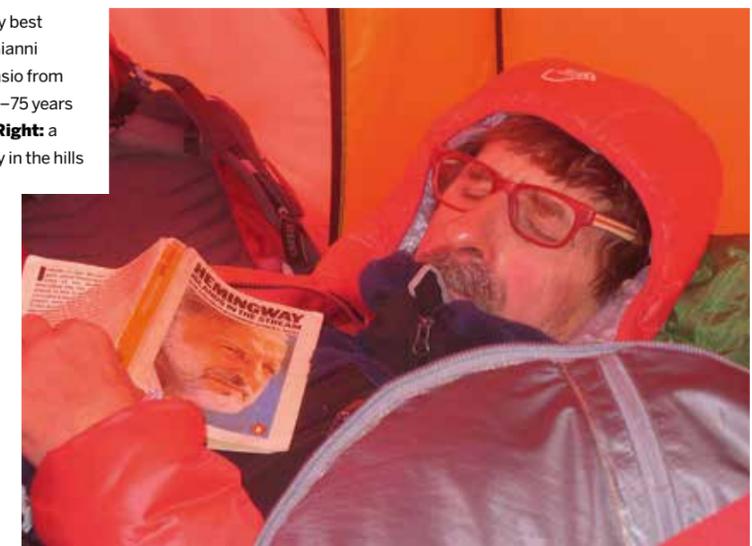
Mischief in Patagonia is the first of his eight highly literate, immensely amusing yet provocative sailing books that covered his maritime adventures over 22 years.

Both the climbing and sailing compendiums are carried on the *Pelagics*, providing a continuous source of inspiration and entertainment. Some boats carry the Bible, we carry Tilman. Sadly Tilman, when 79, was lost at sea serving as a crew on *En Avant*, a converted sailing barge, somewhere between Rio and the Falkland Islands in 1977 while on their way to climb Smith Island in the Antarctica. A fitting end for him, not so for the young skipper and the rest of his crew.

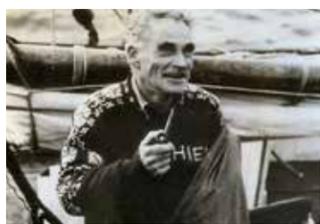
Having caught the bug from that first voyage north,



Left: my best client, Gianni Caverzasio from Lugano –75 years young. **Right:** a hard day in the hills



The Tilman Medal



This year Skip Novak was awarded the Royal Cruising Club's (RCC) Tilman Medal. This is one of sailing's foremost awards, given to the most adventurous cruising endeavours, and is named after Major H. W. (Bill) Tilman, born in 1898.

Tilman fought with distinction in World Wars I and II, earning a Military Medal with bar and a Distinguished Service Order. He carried out expeditions on Everest, and climbed Kilimanjaro alone and many other mountains in days when specialist equipment and experience were scarce.

Tilman took up sailing at 55 and, in search of new mountains to climb, made voyages to Greenland, Africa, Chile and Antarctica in pilot cutters *Mischief*, *Sea Breeze* and *Baroque*.



Diego Zanesco on the summit of Mt Scott above the Lemaire Channel, Antarctica

“IT’S WHAT WE CALL THE ‘REAL ADVENTURE’, WILD COUNTRY THAT IS AN INEXHAUSTIBLE SELECTION OF UNCLIMED ROUTES”

and with someone to emulate I set out on my own boat, the 54ft *Pelagic* in 1987 for our first southern sailing to climb season. Like Tilman, much was left to chance.

After a few mishaps on the delivery south, we had six weeks on the Antarctic Peninsula climbing and ski mountaineering, filming it all for Italian television to pay the bills. This was immediately followed by another expedition to South Georgia as part of the delivery to Cape Town. One expedition led to another and almost three decades later I have not lost my enthusiasm for the next one. And there is always the next one.

Exploratory mountaineering

Discounting ‘tourist peaks’ – and Everest along with the Seven Summits are included in that category – what we do by sea to access the mountains is not materially different from exploratory mountaineering in the Greater

Ranges. Arriving by air to Kathmandu in Nepal is similar to arriving by air into Stanley in the Falklands or into Ushuaia on the Beagle Channel as staging points for South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula respectively.

By sea the obstacles are similar in number, but different in character – no porters, mule men or yak men to negotiate with or the terrain to deal with on the trek into base camp, or landslides, bridges down or unseasonal deep snow. The boat itself is a potential for problems though, owing to possible mechanical or rigging failures either before departure or en route.

Seasickness seems to be unavoidable for most people at one time or another. In place of the terrain, the sea – in our case the Drake Passage – can strike anxiety, if not fear, into most sailors and sometimes terror into the landlubbers along for the ride. And a bad ice year in the Antarctic can prevent our landing at all.

The difference and obvious advantage in the approach by sea, however, is like the tortoise who carries his home on his back, the vessel is in fact the team's mobile base camp, which can roam more or less at will targeting multiple objectives.

And therein lies one of our biggest dangers in mountaineering by sea: the risk of not even getting started owing to the relative comfort of the yacht. It is one thing to leave a big tent at a base camp at 4,000m and strike out for higher ground to sleep in a small tent, yet another to leave the comfort of a yacht with a warm, dry berth, meals and drink endlessly laid on.

Excuses are easy to come by: bad weather getting worse, good weather soon to be getting bad, too many crevasses to get started and simply the immensity and remoteness of maritime polar regions, once that concept starts to sink in to your psyche. We have observed that the chances of success in the mountains are inversely proportional to the comfort of the mobile base camp – and that's us!

One of the few

Going back almost three decades, we were one of the very few yachts chartering in places such as Antarctica, Patagonia and South Georgia and still fewer offered the platform and logistical expertise for not only mountaineers, but also kayakers, cold water divers and other adventurers with clear-cut goals in mind.

Hoist by our own petard in publicising this business, we have recently experienced a minor explosion in the genre and in any given season there could be half a dozen sailing to climb expeditions at any one time in any of these venues. Still, when compared with relatively accessible mountain ranges around the world, the high latitudes both north and south are able to maintain their remoteness because of the logistical challenges of getting that mobile base camp to the coast.

It is what we call the ‘real adventure’. Wild country that in one man's lifetime is an inexhaustible selection of unclimbed routes on the big classic peaks and many virgin summits still, both named and unnamed. ■

A memorable expedition

One among many expeditions that stands out as a classic was the British American South Georgia Ski Traverse in January 2005. On board *Pelagic* the climbing contingent of Crag Jones, Rich Haworth, Julian Attwood and I were supported by three sailing crew for a five-week junket.

Setting out from Stanley in the Falkland Islands, we ran downwind for five days through the Southern Ocean, dodging tabular icebergs en route, making directly for Larsen Harbour, a deep, dramatic fjord at the southern extremity of the island.

The objective was to cherry-pick unclimbed summits in the Salvesen Range (they still are to this day) along the traverse before descending the Ross Glacier for the pick up in Royal Bay.

We were on skis and skins pulling sleds loaded with food, fuel, tentage and climbing gear. One Iridium phone and one VHF radio was our communication package and would be useful for the pick up – but a placebo for a rescue up high. It was clear that if we had an accident we would have to self-rescue back to the shore. This fact engenders a

conservative approach, with no heroics. We spent two days ferrying gut-wrenching loads from the head of the fjord up steep snow and ice to the level of the Philippi Glacier, which offered easier pulling terrain. On day three we waved goodbye to skipper Dion Poncet and crew Jeromine and Laurent Pasteur, skiing up with the last load.

Dion, one of the most experienced South Georgia hands, gave us confidence that we would be picked up, barring any major mechanical failure of *Pelagic*. If for some reason they didn't show, it meant a long trek to Cumberland Bay where the island's logistic base is located.

Using out-of-date maps from the original South Georgia surveys in the 1950s with compass – and a GPS to tell us where we had been not where we were going – was challenging in the often misty conditions. We only briefly caught sight of distant features while skirting the odd crevasse. Four camps later and we had arrived at the nexus of six unclimbed mountains and a few unnamed. We set immediately to work.

During the following week we were more than busy, including a failed attempt on Mt Baume (our principal target), a consolation prize in climbing an unnamed peak nearby (subsequently

named Mt Pelagic), and surviving a four-day storm in a snow cave.

On day 12 we dug and chipped ourselves out in very cold conditions and made a dash down the Spenceley Glacier, up over the Ross Pass and to the coast in one long day, having to recover ditched gear the day after, as the snow had run out high on the lateral moraine.

It had been an elegant traverse of a section of the island that had been barely travelled and we enjoyed many a challenge. Of course, our primary climbing objectives were not realised, which always leaves things undone.

In the winter season of 2014 Stephen Venables and I returned with a commercial group to repeat this route. Well, we never got started owing to extremely bad weather and were forced to retreat to the north central section of the island to attempt and successfully climb the lesser three peaks of the Trident Range. After some toing and froing in correspondence with the Antarctic Place names Committee, they are now Poseidon, Thalassa and Tethys. See yachtingworld.com/features.

How had things changed in ten years? Glacial recession surely, but not much else on the ground, other than a new map issued based on satellite surveys, which was very welcome. But when Rodrigo Jordan (below with Skip) pulled out his iPad and dropped a pin on a GPS-synched Google Earth image to show the way to our next waypoint Venables, a traditionalist, scoffed quite rightly: “Exploration is really dead!”

Well, I will still be carrying my magnetic compass in my jacket pocket when Venables, Jones and I return to South Georgia this September, to try to climb Mt Baume – yet again.



Below: Julian Attwood above Larsen Harbour, first day of our traverse