

# SALVESEN RANGE EXPEDITION 2018

This was a ski mountaineering expedition led by Skip Novak and Stephen Venables, based on a five weeks charter aboard *Pelagic Australis*. Building on the success of the similar 2016 expedition we hoped to make further first ascents in the Salvesen Range. Difficult weather made that impossible. Nevertheless, we managed to repeat the ski traverse from Trolhull to St Andrew's Bay, while members of the boat party made other excursions ashore along the north coast.

## **Pelagic Australis Crew**

Edd Hewett (skipper) UK  
Charlotte Bainbridge UK  
Kirsten Neuschaefer South Africa

## **Ski Traverse Team**

Kirsty Maguire UK  
Skip Novak USA  
Stephen Reid UK  
Charles Sherwood UK  
Stephen Venables UK

## **Boat Party**

Jennifer Coombs UK  
Kin Man Chung Hong Kong  
Colin Knowles UK  
Jonas Lam France



The team with the Governor, Mr Nigel Phillips CBE, and Emma Phillips at Government House

## VOYAGE OUT

8 September

Team boarded *Pelagic Australis* at Stanley.

9 September

Sorting and stowing camping and climbing gear. Preparing food rations for ski traverse.

10 September – 14 September

Sea passage to South Georgia, mainly in agreeable north-westerlies, sailing most of the time.

## WAITING FOR THE WEATHER

14 September

Willis Islands sighted at dawn. We motored through Bird Sound to Right Whale Bay, then continued to KEP, for a briefing with Paula the Government Officer, before tying up at Grytviken just after dark.

15 September

A welcome 'faff' day during bad weather at Grytviken, sorting gear, adjusting skis and visiting the museum. Stephen Reid, the last minute recruit to the team, endeared himself by cooking an excellent cottage pie and then producing a large box of Kendal fudge and even larger bottle of Cragganmore single malt.

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16 September

Most of the team skied round the back of Mt Hodges, while the two Stephens, Kirsty and Charles skied and climbed to the central summit of Narval Peak, before descending in some very unflattering breakable crust.

17 September

With no helpful weather promised in the immediate future, we decided to continue with easily accessible day trips, motoring to Cobblers Cove and spending a dank afternoon walking round the cove to the gentoo colony.

18 September

With a huge swell outside the cove, *Pelagic Australis* remained at anchor. The Traverse Team enjoyed a beautiful afternoon ski up and down the bowl below O'Connor Peak, while others walked through the tussock to see whether the Macaroni penguins had arrived at the colony just north of Cobblers. They hadn't.

19 September

A beautiful day, but with a big easterly blow forecast to arrive in the evening. While the crew motored back round to Cumberland East Bay, the rest of us made our way across by land to the Sörling Valley hut, some of us climbing various summits of Black Peak on the way. The ice glaze was so hard that we had to swap skins for crampons on the ascent, and the ski descent required a steady nerve. In the evening *Pelagic Australis* tied up at King Edward Point to avoid the being pinched at Grytviken.



Kirsty Maguire on the ridge of Black Peak, above Ocean Harbour

20 September

We woke to find the whole of King Edward Cove filled with ice, driven in by the promised easterly. Kirsten joined the Traverse Team for a very blustery ski up to the Maiviken hut and back.

21 September

Foul weather, fit only for another museum visit and a most welcome tour of the BAS premises, followed by an even more welcome invitation to the bar that evening.

22 September

*Pelagic Australis* remained locked into King Edward Cove. In improving weather, most of the team skied up to Echo Pass. Stephen V continued down to Harpon Bay and back with Paula and James, who were making the most of fine snow conditions on their free day.



All dressed up for the 200 metres walk to the KEP bar



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## MOVING SOUTH

23 September

With perfect timing, the ice began to break up just as we got a more promising forecast for continuing south to start the Salvesen Traverse. We left the KEP jetty at 10.00 am and by 6.00 pm we were anchored in the incomparable Larsen Harbour, with just enough daylight left for a quick zodiac tour to see the Weddell seals and their newborn pups.

24 September

A rare day of clockwork perfection. We motored easily round Cape Disappointment, enjoying the magnificent gothic scenery and arrived in Trolhull to find a dead calm and perfect beach landing. By early afternoon all the gear for the Traverse was cached securely ashore.



Trolhull

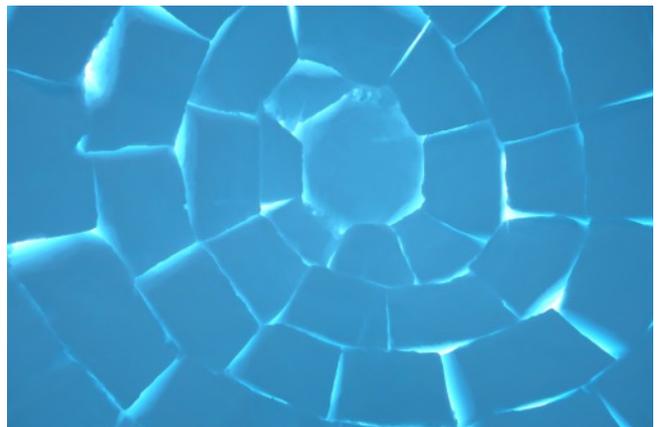
## THE SALVESEN TRAVERSE

25 September

With a reasonable weather forecast, Charles, Kirsty, Skip and the two Stephens set off first thing in the morning from Trolhull. The pulks were unpleasantly heavy and we did two ferries on the first steep climb, before continuing more easily across the upper Graae Glacier. For Skip and Stephen there was a nice moment of nostalgia crossing to the Harmer Glacier and seeing Starbuck Peak, which had given such a good climb in 2016.

26 September

Strong southerly wind with heavy snowfall and almost zero visibility. We stayed put at Camp 1, amusing ourselves by building an excellent IgLoo.



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27 September

The weather looked no better at dawn. However, by midday it had improved, so we struck camp and set off for the Starbuck Col, pulks dragging horribly in the deep unconsolidated powder. Camp 2 was just over the Starbuck Col, at the start of the descent to the Novosilski Glacier.



28 September

A moderately fine day, but with the snow still unconsolidated it took us all morning just to travel 4 kilometres, at which rate we were unlikely cross the Spencely Col before nightfall. By way of a compromise, Charles and Stephen R climbed 200 metres towards the col to cache some of the gear and supplies, while the other three of us made Camp 3.

Heavy going and a windy Camp 3 on the Novosilski Glacier



29 September

With a brisk westerly blowing and much stronger northerlies forecast, we stayed put at Camp 3. In the morning Stephen R built the first of several magnificent pulk-roofed lavatories. In the afternoon we built a large wall around the camp to protect it from the promised northerlies.

30 September

Another day at Camp 3. Down here it was reasonably quiet, but the Spenceley Col would have been very unpleasant indeed. It was now becoming obvious that we were unlikely to have a

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chance to climb any peaks, and just completing the traverse was going to be quite enough of a challenge.

1 October

With an improved weather forecast, we continued to the Spenceley Col (1250 metres), collecting our cache on the way. The warmer northerlies had, thank God, consolidated the snow and we now had a nice firm pulk-friendly surface. Nevertheless we were soon treated to the now familiar whiteout conditions and had to use compass and GPS to navigate past Mt Baume to the Spenceley Col, where we were greeted with full-on South Georgia conditions. The descent of the upper Spenceley Glacier was an ungainly affair, groping in whiteout conditions and blasting wind. So we stopped in mid afternoon to make Camp 4 at around 1000 metres. It was a trying business, first building a snow wall, then erecting a tent in the comparative shelter of its lee side, before all five of us piled in, sopping wet, for afternoon tea. Attempts to pitch the second tent were quickly abandoned, and all five of us spent a cosy night crammed into Novak's abode.



2 October

Novak is normally loth to start too early. However, on this morning he was up bright and early at 5.30 am, urging the three guests to get up too and clear out of his tent as quickly as possible. So, after a perfunctory cup of tea, we went to confront the still wild conditions outside and pitched the second tent. By evening the wind had dropped and that night we saw stars for the first time in a while.

3 October

We woke to a perfect dawn and got away at 8.15 am. Despite all the recent snowfall, the surface was packed firm, and we enjoyed a glorious descent down the Spenceley. And, at last, a view!



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However, with wind building again on the Ross Pass we decided to play it safe, stop early, and camp on the nunatak ridge separating the Spenceley from the Brøgger Glacier.

4 October

The race was now on to get down to St Andrew's Bay and set sail for Stanley with enough time to catch flights home. The wind on the Ross Pass was mercifully light, but thick cloud persisted on the far side, making the Ross Glacier descent very irksome. Travelling on compass bearings, it took until late afternoon to reach somewhere in the vicinity of the Ross-Webb junction, where we stopped to make Camp 6.



The Ross Pass



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5 October

A combination of thick cloud and ambiguities in the map caused us to spend another day at Camp 6. The Ross Glacier is shrinking so fast that it seems the altitude at the Ross-Webb junction is even lower than the 250 metres suggested on the most recent map. And, anecdotally, the whole topography seems to have altered in just two years since 2016. Given that topographical ambiguity and the poor visibility, we decided to spend the day in reconnaissance, rather than move camp and risk getting lost in a maze of crevasses. The ploy worked and by mid afternoon we had reconnoitred a viable route traversing round the hillside to the Webb Glacier, marked with wands and ready for the morning.



6 October

Ten days provisions had now been stretched to twelve. We still had ample reserves for another couple of nights, but the lure of a possible roast beef dinner aboard *Pelagic Australis* was a strong incentive to get moving at first light. Which we did. Like the landing at Trolhull, this was another clockwork perfect day. Dragging the pulks through some awkward terrain at the junction went smoothly, the sun shone and on the Webb Glacier we removed anoraks and overtrousers for the first time on the whole Traverse. By 1.00 pm we were at the top of the Webb Glacier. Descending the Cook Glacier by the route we had reced in 2016 was pure pleasure, and we finished with a glorious sunset glide down to St Andrew's Bay, with snow all the way to the beach and the much anticipated roast beef dinner ready for our return.



Champagne reception and immaculate sunrise at St Andrew's Bay



### EXCURSIONS BY THE BOAT PARTY

While the Ski Traverse Team was away, *Pelagic Australis* had been standing by on the north coast, ready to respond in the unlikely event of an emergency. The boat party made return visits to Cobblers Cove, Ocean Harbour and Grytviken. They also visited Royal Bay, Stromness Bay and the Bay of Isles. Despite the unsettled weather they had some good trips ashore, trekking in Whale Valley, climbing peaks around Grytviken and doing the final stage of the Shackleton Traverse from Fortuna Bay to Stromness, using snowshoes, skis and/or crampons as appropriate in the snowy and sometimes icy conditions.

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## RETURN VOYAGE

7 October – 12 October

We left St Andrew's Bay at around 11.00 am on 7th October. The weather remained very variable, with wind direction changing daily, but they were mainly gentle winds, giving us a fairly easy return



voyage, sailing at least half the distance. Approximately halfway back to the Falklands it was exciting to pass a huge tabular iceberg about one kilometre long. We tied up at Stanley at 3.00 am on 11th October, one day before our flight home.

## A FEW OBSERVATIONS

It was disappointing not to climb any major peaks. However, given the unsettled weather – unusually difficult even by South Georgia standards – we had a very enjoyable and successful expedition. Heavy snowfall and strong winds made completing the Salvesen Traverse a good achievement, even without any summits. The heavy pulks were hard work, particularly when the southerly wind dumped many centimetres of unconsolidated powder. It was a shame that the payload included several ropes and climbing gear we never touched. However, we were extremely thankful for the ample food and gas, and the proven Terra Firma tents with their heavy duty flysheets, snow valances and double poles.



For all of us – ski traverse team and boat party – it was wonderful to see South Georgia with snow right down to the beach. In the early spring it is a fantastic place for small teams to enjoy almost limitless possibilities for

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day ski tours in unique surroundings. With meticulous adherence to the environmental protocols the impact of small teams is virtually negligible.

For the Expeditions Advisory Board vetting prospective teams, safety is obviously another important consideration. Given the high proportion of very experienced people in a group like this – and the consistently cautious approach to every outing – the safety margin is actually very wide. Many of the routes we followed involve no glacier; even where we were on glaciers they tend to be quite benign compared, say, to those in the Alps. And the same seems to apply to snow conditions: the avalanche risk is less acute than in many mountain areas around the world.

As always, it was a huge pleasure and privilege to spend nearly a month exploring the island. It was heartwarming to see the hugely increased numbers of pintails, pipits and other ground nesting birds, whose numbers have increased so dramatically since the completion of the rat eradication programme. It was also a pleasure to visit anchorages totally devoid of any evidence of previous human visitation, and to leave them in the same state. We are most grateful to the government and BAS staff at King Edward Point for the warm welcome they gave us.



Skip Novak & Stephen Venables  
October 2018