



# VOYAGES



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# Shipwreck in Tierra del Fuego

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**Ascent of Hovgaard Island: Dropped off on the Penola Strait side, we skied up and over the top, then back down to the anchorage on the west side.**

It is rare to leave the Antarctic Peninsula earlier than need be. No matter how much time you allow for a cruise in that splendid and awe-inspiring environment, it's never enough, and the return across the Drake Passage is done with regret, if not trepidation.

In February 2017, my Swiss-Italian charter guests, on their sixth cruise with *Pelagic Australis*, were somewhat disappointed with the adverse weather conditions. We had planned an eight-day ski mountaineering trip on Anvers Island but, due to miserable drizzly weather with continuous low cloud, enthusiasm for what would be a major undertaking had ebbed, evolving into doing short day trips from the boat. I always blame the comfort of *Pelagic Australis* for these easily made decisions to forego the camping. The bad weather continued unabated, so we sailed farther south, searching for the edge of the polar high, but without much luck.

The highlight of this foray in search of better weather for our skiers was a skin up to the summit of Andresen Island and a fast ski down, all astride the Antarctic Circle, followed by a less than relaxing night at anchor amongst rocks off the abandoned British Antarctic Survey station on Detaille Island. The next day the team needed no convincing to head back north, rather than my proposed offshore passage around Adelaide Island and into Marguerite Bay. The thought of a rolling sea had put the alpinists off their lunch. Instead, we motored through brash ice and bergs on what turned out to be the only blue-sky day





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we had, spending a marvelous evening in the Fish Islands in Crystal Sound, after having reconnoitered the ice-bound anchorage with our drone or unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). This has become more than a toy, and is now standard equipment for serious polar sailing. Without the UAV, we would have probably given the attempt to find shelter there a miss and kept on going.

Dull gray weather persisted, but we mustered some limited enthusiasm for a few more day ski trips in the Penola Strait. Luckily, all but one of the team had been on the Antarctic Peninsula before, some twice, and knew what it could be like, so they were resigned to the decision to head back to Tierra del Fuego early, not least of all to beat a major depression that would be approaching the western Drake Passage in three days' time. Seasickness is always an issue for non-sailing mountaineers, so there were no dissenters with this plan. Motor sailing it was, and we were “pedal to the metal.”

To burn off the charter time remaining, I had proposed a four-day visit to the infrequently visited Argentine coast east of the entrance to the Beagle

Channel. After the 50 shades of gray in the south, the lush beech forests would be easy on the eye, and we could stretch our legs across the spongy, boggy terrain that the locals call *la turba*. Bushes on the margins of this solid sea of sphagnum moss are peppered with ripening calafate and manzanita berries well worth picking for the crumble, a good antidote to any bad memories of “mal de mer.”

Just after setting off from the peninsula, we received an email from Roxanna Diaz of Ushuaia Logistics, our fixer at the “end of the earth,” explaining that a 10-meter Belgian yacht with a solo sailor on board had been blown ashore in Bahia Aguirre — exactly where we planned to make our first stop. His EPIRB alarm put in motion a rescue by the Argentine Navy on February 18, and he was taken to Ushuaia. There he signed a document with the prefecture, agreeing that he was responsible for removing his boat from the beach at Bahia Aguirre. Easier said than done, but we decided that we would try to lend a hand.



**Motoring north through Crystal Sound on the only clear, sunny day we had in two weeks.**

Bahia Aguirre is 80 miles from Ushuaia. There are no roads anywhere near the bay, only the vestiges of a



The abandoned estancia buildings at Bahia Aguirre gave Alex shelter during his ordeal.

**“A southerly buster caught him out and, in a jiffy, he dragged and was on the beach.”**

horse trail leading to an abandoned estancia. On horseback, it is two days' riding to the head of the road; on foot, it takes five days. I know, as I walked this route in 1993 and it was arduous trekking. Roxanna Diaz took charge of the coordination from the outset.

One of my colleagues and an old hand in the area, Olivier Pauffin de Saint Morel (aka "Popof"), set out on his 14-meter *Kekilistrion* with the shipwrecked Belgian skipper and took him back to Bahia Aguirre. His yacht was now high and dry, and there was some concern that fishermen would pilfer her contents. Another friend of ours who was ahead of us on the return from the Antarctic, Igor Bely on *Kotic II*, dipped in and tried but could not pull the yacht off. She had walked herself further up the beach in the surf, and the keel was now well buried in the sand. Our arrival would coincide with a higher tide, so of course we were more than willing to have a go.

By the time we arrived on February 24, a week had elapsed since the boat went ashore. The "bahia" in Bahia Aguirre is a slight misnomer. It is an enormous rectangle, five miles long and fully exposed from the southeast to the southwest. Puerto Español, a small cove in the northwestern corner, gives some protection from a southerly but is

not evident to a newcomer. The puzzle of why the Belgian skipper anchored on the open main beach would later be revealed.

We brought *Pelagic Australis* within a few hundred meters of the wreck. But rather than risk a big surf landing with the inflatable, we made contact, backed off, and anchored in our usual spot in Puerto Español. That afternoon, we trekked two hours around to the estancia, crossing the main river that empties a broad valley. At some point in the recent past, this was a working cattle farm. In 1993, I had spent two nights there with a French friend while on a two-week trek across the "toe" of Tierra del Fuego, and again the following year on a solo trek. Absentee-owned, four rough-hewn cowboys were in residence. Their job was to roam around the hinterland on horseback and muster wild cattle into a manageable herd, killing any bulls in the process, then drive them out to the head of the road to the west. This was a hard life, even for Argentine cowboys, as they were essentially marooned for 11 months of the year in a very remote area. They had a radio, but it never worked while I was there. They were provisioned once a year with the basics, then left to their own devices eating off the hoof, wing, and fin. Visitors by yacht were rare. The cowboys are long gone, and the buildings have fallen into disrepair.



The Swiss were put to work digging out the keel and rudder to ease the snatch off the beach. The tow line is already attached.



Gianni and Romolo, hitting the rum bottle in the shack during a violent squall.

Approaching the dilapidated farm buildings, we had to give a wide berth to a lone bull who pawed the ground while huffing and snorting. A herd of wild black horses galloped across our path on their way down to the beach, their long manes flying in the wind. These are the only remaining residents. In this big-sky expanse of semi-tamed wilderness, once occupied but no more, the mood was melancholy.

And so was the 42-year old Belgian skipper, Alex Van Cauwenbergh, understandably so. He explained that after a hard,



Alex carries the last load of personal effects from his shelter in the abandoned estancia before *Mira* is pulled off.

year-long delivery from Europe in his yacht *Mira* during which most everything on board broke or came adrift, he finally made it down the Argentine coast, headed for Ushuaia. At some point during a storm, a line got caught in the propeller, so he sailed into the open anchorage in Bahia Aguirre and dropped anchor in front of the estancia, admittedly exhausted. A southerly buster caught him out and, in a jiffy, he dragged and was on the beach. This was not the first shipwreck on this coast when a southerly kicks in. In 2010, a Polish yacht came ashore not far away, in Bahia Sloggett, with the loss of two crew members. They were



**Re-launching the dinghy off the beach was wet work. We lost count of the trips in and out while ferrying *Mira's* gear out to *Pelagic Australis*.**



**We winched *Mira* in after we pulled her off the beach, and brought her alongside.**



**Alex gives the thumbs up. Notice the heavy list to port.**



**Skip and Alex with *Mira* alongside in Ushuaia at the Club Afasyn. Job done.**

blown off the deck in 100-knot winds while grounded after dragging their anchor. Luckily, Alex landed on a sloping sandy beach, avoiding some nasty rocks only 100 meters away.

Since rejoining the yacht, he had, during low tides, removed from the boat all loose equipment, all movable lead ballast, and a fair part of the fixed interior. All of it was now piled up in a disorganized heap on the beach above the high-water mark. A cockpit hatch had come adrift during the grounding, so everything was saturated with diesel-contaminated bilge water — a right mess. Alex was sleeping in the abandoned farm building, where there was a functioning wood-burning stove.

We made a rescue plan, sketched in the sand with stick and finger. We would get close enough with *Pelagic Australis* to get lines ashore and try to pull him off with brute force. The higher of the two tides the next day was predicted for the pre-dawn hours. We would call him on his hand-held VHF at 0500. After trekking back, my Swiss guests feeling better after the Drake Passage and having smelled solid ground, we settled down to our dinner at anchor. Our thoughts were with Alex, cooking his own meal by candlelight.

The next morning was windy and pitch black, so the plan was scrubbed. By mid-morning the wind had eased, so we reanchored in 10 meters about 150 meters from the beach and landed with the inflatable, all hands ashore. We had time to kill until the afternoon



“A cockpit hatch had come adrift during the grounding, so everything was saturated with diesel-contaminated bilge water — a right mess.”

high tide, so to keep busy and ease the operation to come, we spent the next four hours digging the keel, rudder, propeller, and much of the hull out of the sand. This was something the Swiss really got stuck into. Mountaineers are always handy with shovels, although the wet sand was heavier than snow for sure.

During one fierce rain squall, we all retreated into the farm building, built a fire, and put the kettle on. A rum bottle appeared. Alex was asked by one of the Swiss businessmen where exactly he was from in Belgium. He replied that he was a *citoyen du monde*, or citizen of the world. This did not go down well, and I thought to myself, yes, why stop there and not *d'universe*. A Bernard Moitessier moment if there ever was one. The squall passed, and we took up the shovels once again, finishing the job with a trench down below the waterline, which was now rising on the tide.

Meanwhile, skipper Dave Roberts and crew Thomas Geipel and Kirsten Neuschäfer on board *Pelagic Australis* were preparing to run two of our floating shore lines into the beach with the inflatable. The plan was to attach one to the bow and the other to the stern, so when the bow line spun *Mira* 90 degrees, the stern line would also be loaded, and she could be dragged off on her side along a path of least resistance.

With the lines attached and rigged, we returned to *Pelagic Australis*, leaving Alex on board *Mira*. Still well short of the high tide, we gave it “full welly.” Our 55-ton displacement and 250 horsepower spun *Mira* around with a few snatches, and soon she was bumping along the outer sand bar with spray flying across her deck in the surf line. When she reached deep water, Alex gave us the thumbs-up, and we brought him alongside, then reset our anchor. And now the real work began in earnest as we embarked all the kit ashore with the inflatable straight onto the foredeck of *Pelagic Australis*. We lost count of the trips. Finally, stage one completed, we motored back to Puerto Español for the night. The rum and cigars came out after dinner in celebration.

Before we could put *Mira* in tow, she had to be emptied of sand that had accumulated on her port side over the week ashore, entering via a sprung cockpit hatch. It was impossible to remove all the sand, so the boat had a 10-degree list to port. Reloading Alex’s gear off our deck took us all morning. The interior furniture he had removed was now handy as dunnage to brace the various equipment to starboard to put *Mira* back in trim and ready for the tow.

We set off late on the afternoon of the 26th with *Mira* secured on the end of our nylon anchor rode, riding comfortably 130 meters astern. Once around the corner of the bay and heading west, it was an uneventful tow as we came onto a spell of calm. We steamed into and up the Beagle Channel at five knots. We docked in Ushuaia on the afternoon of February 27. Alex remained in Ushuaia, hosted by the Afasyn yacht club while rebuilding *Mira*, following which he intended to carry on up the west coast of Chile. Meanwhile, my Swiss mountaineer guests returned to the fastness of their Italian Alps, having enjoyed the added bonus of helping to rescue a sailor in need. 🐾



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skip Novak has participated in a number of ocean races, including four Whitbread Round the World Yacht Races (now the Volvo Ocean Race) since 1977. Wishing to combine sailing with his mountaineering skills, honed in New Zealand, the Alps, and on expeditions to East Africa, Sikkim, Nepal, Patagonia, South Georgia and Antarctica, he built the expedition yacht *Pelagic* in Southampton in 1987. He has since spent every season in Antarctic waters, where he runs Pelagic Expeditions. In 2003, Skip launched *Pelagic Australis*, a 23-meter, purpose-built vessel for high latitude sailing, to augment the charter operations of the original *Pelagic*. In 2015, Skip received the club’s prestigious Blue Water Medal for his lifetime of voyaging to high latitudes. In 2016, the Royal Cruising Club awarded him the Tilman Medal, named in honor of Bill Tilman, famous mountaineer and exploratory yachtsman, in recognition of his “sailing to climb” expeditions in high latitudes.