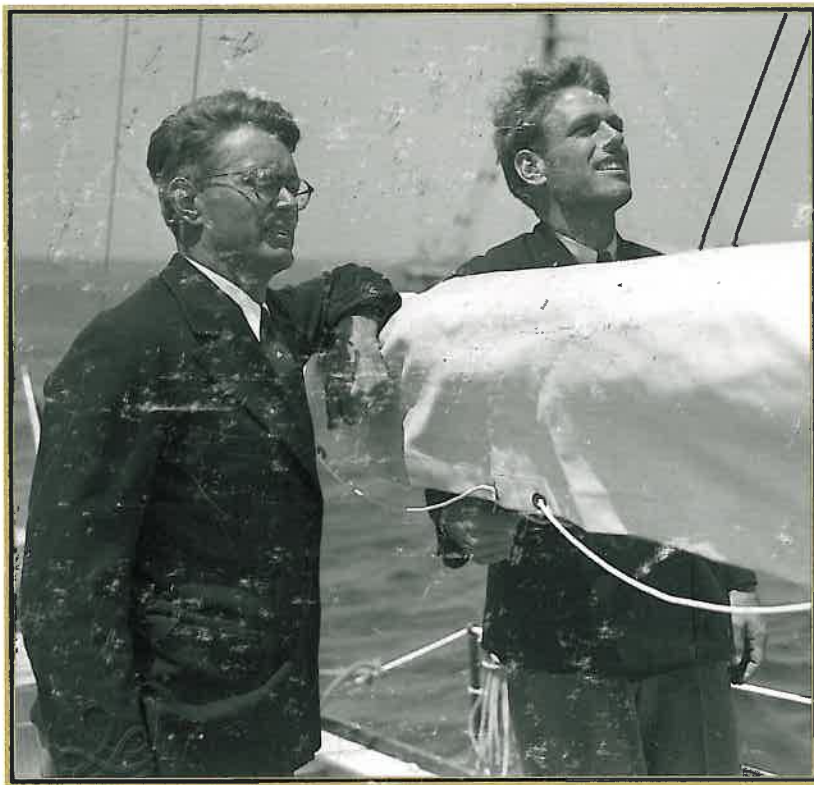


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On Shackleton's Trail

Pelagic Australis in South Georgia

By Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station

Ernest Shackleton's epic open boat voyage in the *James Caird* from Elephant Island in the Antarctic to South Georgia in the early southern winter of 1916 is mainly responsible for the island's recognition in modern times. When I mention I am going there on our annual trips, I'm now less likely to hear "Do you mean south of Atlanta?" In any event, for a sailor, it is a far-flung destination, 1,000 miles downwind east of Cape Horn.

Several hard core adventurers in the last 15 years have attempted (with varying success) to replicate this voyage, actually building a *James Caird* and sailing from Elephant Island to South Georgia with a view to then crossing overland by foot to the whaling stations, as did Shackleton with Frank Worsely and Tom Crean in the presence of the "fourth man."

Lesser robust and ambitious types can now take a selection of cruise ships to the island to see the places where Shackleton landed on the rugged south coast. You can actually walk the last day of his trek from Fortuna Bay to Stromness Bay as part of the cruise's elective itinerary, followed by a visit to his grave at Grytviken – he died there in 1922 from a heart attack while on a subsequent expedition. Via cruise ship is the soft touch vicarious Shackleton experience. On *Pelagic Australis* we fall somewhere between that and the *Caird* replicas, tending to the former!

In November 2006 we were joined by friend Kim Lundgren and his team of son Tor, mountain guides Dave Hahn (has guided Everest nine times!), and John Race, and filmmaker Skye Fitzgerald. Kim had owned the well-known 80-foot Frers-designed *Metolius*, built by Royal Huisman in 1992, and had campaigned her for 12 years worldwide. He had been to the Antarctic in 1995 but later failed to get to South Georgia. An expert skier, he sold the boat in 2004 and took up mountaineering as an alternative passion later in life (the opposite of Bill Tilman!). One of his dreams was to sail to South Georgia and attempt the Shackleton



Traverse, as the route is now known. *Pelagic Australis* was the delivery vehicle and mobile base camp.

***Pelagic Australis*, Cumberland Bay; Skip Novak and friends; (next page) lead guide Dave Hahn and the expedition get underway**

Stanley in the Falkland Islands is the jumping-off point. It is the administrative base for South Georgia, in spite of the island along with the volcanic South Sandwich chain further southeast being officially a stand-alone UK overseas territory. Hived off the Falkland Islands Dependencies after the 1982 war with Argentina to divide and confuse any future sovereignty claims by Argentina, the island and its offshore waters have proved to be a rich repository of sea life – selling fishing licenses is the main revenue earner and still dwarfs the fledgling tourist industry.

Although "expedition" is probably the most overused and abused cliché going in adventure travel these days, sailing to South Georgia is the real thing, with any number of unplanned variables that can appear into the mix. For a start there is only one flight in and out of the Falklands from Chile per week. So trips are logically planned in multiples of seven days, beginning

and ending on Saturday. It is 750 miles from Stanley to first shelter on the northwest tip of the island, not a great distance until you have to get back, which is generally against a strong headwind. Some say it is easier on the body and the boat to keep going east, downwind to Cape Town! On a sailing yacht a fixed itinerary once on the island is impossible; flexibility is the key.

Directly in the storm track of a continuous succession of low-pressure systems that are squeezed out of the Drake Passage, the island's weather is infamous for generally high winds, short windows of fine weather in which to move along the coast and even more violent katabatic winds inshore, sometimes even on otherwise fine days. It is a real sailor's destination, dream, or nightmare depending on your ambitions and levels of comfort.

After the usual costly provisioning exercise in Stanley (most things are flown in from Chile or the UK), we cast off the commercial jetty, which is a monumental floating barge cum warehouse left over from the war. There is not a hint of a marina or any yacht services whatsoever in the Falklands, and the inner harbour is prone to high winds with little shelter. It is no exaggeration to say that many times it is a relief to leave port and put to a stormy sea!

It is almost a sure bet to slide downwind for three or four days to make the island. Years ago, there seemed to be very few icebergs along the way. Lately, though, we have encountered "fields" of bergs halfway from Stanley. A spring trip implies a fair amount of nighttime darkness, unlike later in the high summer, so a very alert deck watch is paramount. This year was no exception, but generally the weather was light from behind, so we motored safely through, keeping everyone's interest up.

Since the island bends in a soft arc from southeast to northwest, the first point of landfall is usually Bird Island off the northwest corner. This outlier, separated from the mainland by a very narrow tidal channel, is now a tightly controlled restricted area occupied by the British Antarctic Survey field station, hundreds of thousands of Macaroni penguins, likewise fur seals, and one of the largest concentrations (although declining) of Great Wandering Albatross in the world.

Bird Sound was true to its name. Albatross and petrels peppered the sky while penguins and fur seals made the water boil. Sitting astride the Antarctic Convergence, an area rich in nutrients, marine, and avi fauna, the island of South Georgia is an ecological pyramid with the shrimp-like krill as its base and food for all, from penguins, albatross, petrels, and seals to the few remaining leviathans at the apex. Indeed, the significant human history of South Georgia can be distilled into a simple life-and-death story of whales and men.

Although sighted by a London merchant ship a century before, Captain James Cook is credited with the first survey and landing in 1775 in the name of his king. Greed soon followed, and within 45 years the fur seal population, taken for its skins, had been decimated and the business became unprofitable. With Norwegian expertise and Argentine capital, inshore industrial whaling was founded here in the early 1900's and the top of the food chain's fate was sealed by the 1950's, largely as a result of the post-World War II economy's insatiable demand for blubber oil for fat in margarines. Commercial fishing, now strictly managed, continues, and all the while the Argentine government lays geographic and historical claim to the territory along with Las Malvinas (the Falklands). It is a little-known fact that the Falklands War of 1982 was precipitated by an illegal occupation of South Georgia.

The intention was for our team to attempt and hopefully accomplish the Shackleton Traverse as soon as possible so we could, in effect, enjoy the rest of the holiday with the pressure off. Although a few teams make the traverse every year now, many still fail, principally due to the ferocious weather that can spring up once on the mountain.

Although tentage is the norm, parties have to be ready to dig snow caves if things turn from bad to worse. What seems like a stroll on a fine day can turn into desperate exercise in survival very quickly.

Upon arrival at the island the weather was still untenable for the attempt, but a forecast had a light southerly flow for two to three days predicted in 48 hours. We took first shelter in Elsehul Bay, just past Bird Sound, one of the few more or less all-





(above) Kim and Tor, ski-trekking Fortuna Bay; (below) the Carrs' whaling museum, and Prion Island albatrosses; (next page) heavy on the ice!

weather anchorages on the island. The female fur seals had not yet arrived en mass (predicted for November 25 to 27) so it was easy to stretch our legs ashore, navigating between the bulls who were distributed about every five to seven meters or so, marking their territory for the arrival of their harems.

A ski pole or paddle is a must for everyone to carry on shore. Although gentle in the water (you can snorkel with them), these seals are by nature very aggressive on land – and never more so than at this season. If they charge, and they can charge on fore- and hind flippers for short distances almost faster than you can run, a slight touch on the snout usually stops them and turns them away, but this game is not for the fainthearted. It takes some experience guessing their mood and gauging safe distances to stroll through unimpeded. Take note that by December, when pupping and mating are in full swing, this beach would be impossible to land on. We climbed to higher ground on the western headland marking the bay, balancing on tussock grass roots, being careful not to disturb the Grey Headed Albatross on their nests. A berg had

wandered into the bay and stuck on the shallow middle ground. Offshore it was still howling – the sobriquet Wild Island is pretty accurate.

On day three we were able to easily motorsail back through Bird Sound and down the south coast for 35 miles to King Haakon Bay. Shackleton with the *James Caird* came ashore here, not by design but because that's where they made landfall in desperation. It is a long rectangular bay, open to the west and no place to linger. We made a short stop near Cape Rosa where the *Caird* first landed – a defile in the cliff face they named Cape Cove. They spent several nights in this tiny natural boat harbor, recouping by eating the albatross chicks, before sailing further into the bay and landing at a bluff they named Peggoty. Not far from the snout of the glacier, this is where they started their famous trek. We anchored *Pelagic Australis* behind some rocky outcrops just off the beach and spent the evening



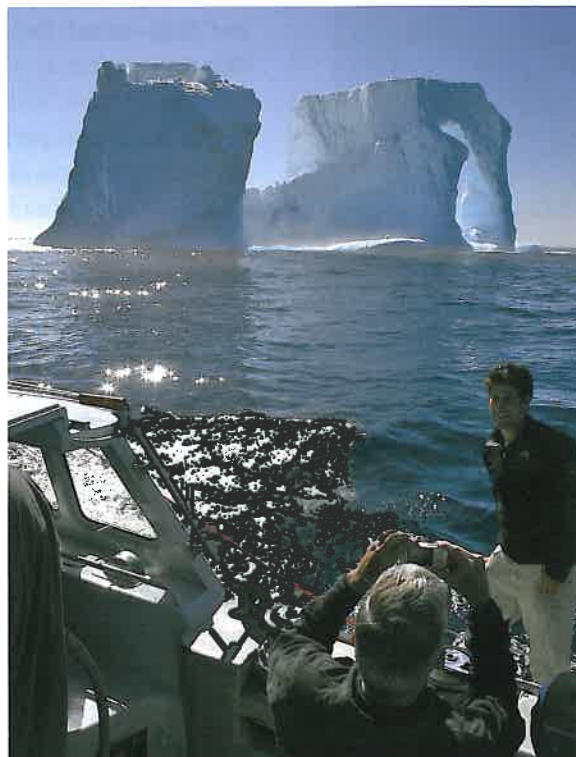


making final preparations before a planned 0600 departure.

Lately, the trend is for mountaineering trips to leave earlier and earlier for the island, forsaking warmer summer temperatures (average temperature 7 degrees Celsius in January) for even a late September/October arrival. Then, on an average year, the winter snowfall is right down to the water, making travel on skis to the high ground relatively easy. Also, because of colder conditions, the skiing and sled pulling is easier on a harder, frozen surface. Although we were a bit late in this optimum scenario, last winter had a big dump. It took only a half hour of trekking, carrying skis and sleds on our back, before we could get on them. Roped up in two teams of three, over the next five hours we "skinned" uphill to the first camp just below the Trident Ridge, navigating with GPS in almost zero visibility. We settled down to a comfortable evening and a warm sleeping bag – unlike Shackleton, Worsely, and Crean, who had the good sense and moral purpose to just keep on moving. They did the job in 36 hours where we would take, by design, a

leisurely three days and two nights out.

The second day was better than the first because the visibility came and went and we had superb views down and across the Crean Glacier and offshore along the north coast. Eleven hours on the trot saw us at our second camp (with sore feet) below the Breakwind Ridge, which overlooks Fortuna Bay. Kim unfurled the Explorers Club flag no. 69 for a photo op.



It was from there that Shackleton and his men heard the morning whistle at the whaling station at Stromness (still some hours away) and knew that they had arrived. On a crystal clear day three, we climbed to the Breakwind Gap, a notch in the ridge, and then skied nearly all the way to the beach in Fortuna Bay – the icing on the cake. Insofar as exotic ski locations go, there are not many places in the world where you can ski down from an alpine pass and slalom through the penguins and seals.

After dropping us off in King Haakon Bay, base camp *Pelagic Australis* had sailed around the north tip of the island and was now on

standby in Fortuna Bay. Skipper Stewart Richardson and mates Jess Hay and Lawrence Lagnado were on the beach in the Zodiac to greet us with biscuits and tea – a nice touch Shackleton would have appreciated. They also took our sleds and some other heavy gear back on board, leaving us with light loads to complete the last section around the bay and back up and over the ridge separating Fortuna from Stromness Bay. By late afternoon, after another superb ski descent overlooking blue sea, we were safely back on board and tucking into a roast leg of Falkland Island mutton, cured on the backstay for the last ten days. It had been a textbook operation of sailing-to-climb.

That same evening we made the jetty at King Edward Point in Cumberland Bay. Across the cove lies the ruined Norwegian whaling station of Grytviken, a few years ago a tangle of scrap metal and wood, but still recognizable and a fascination for anyone who loves outsize steam-driven machinery (it has been cleaned up and now the entire base is part of the museum). In the early part of the century, the Norwegians had only to harvest the whales in this bay. As the years and carnage went by with stocks depleting, the hunters moved further offshore until pelagic whaling from self-sufficient factory ships was the result.

King Edward Point (KEP) is the base for the island and home to a handful of British Antarctic Survey scientists whose rotating young commander is acting magistrate, judge, and jailer. The long-serving harbourmaster, Pat Lurcock, a veteran since 1991, controls licenses and the movements of the fishing fleet and also clears in yachts and tour ships. His wife, Sarah, has the role of post mistress, a task that has become unenviable as this season over 5,000 tourist landings were projected – and they all want stamps (you do the math). This is a great revenue-earner for the government struggling to make ends meet, and there is nothing so supporting to issues of British sovereignty as postage stamps on postcards – the politics can appear to be as simple as all that.

These British civil servants come and go via ship to Stanley as the season demands (there is no airstrip on the island, one of its greatest attributes), but two residents, Tim and Pauline Carr were considered perennial up to their final departure this October (they were awarded the CCA's Blue Water Medal in 1991). Arriving on their engineless 28-foot Falmouth Quay Punt *Curlew* in 1993, they have rarely been off the island, and had in recent years developed the fledgling whaling museum into the focal point for the visiting cruise ship tourists. Their celebrated book, *Antarctic Oasis*, is the story of their love affair with South Georgia and is the definitive text of the island.

The Poncet family, based in the Falklands, is even more deeply rooted in the island's modern folklore. Jerome and Sally (Blue Water Medal, 1992) have been sailing these southern waters for the last 30 years, originally aboard their 15-meter schooner-rigged *Damien II*. Combining Sally's interests in wildlife with

Jerome's skills as a bold navigator who doesn't mind a few dents and groundings in his hull (some say he has nine lives and has used up 20 of them), they have accomplished some real exploration during their small-scale scientific studies. Going to places both here and the Antarctic Peninsula, including a winter-over, they are inarguably the experts of the area, bar none. Since 1999 Sally has been monitoring tourist impacts on the more popular wildlife sites and advising the government on a management plan to limit the potential damage.

Gone are the days when the only yacht visiting that year (like our first trip in 1988) can show up on the island unannounced and roam at will. For many years, Jerome and Sally had the island almost to themselves and were pioneers of the present genre of high-latitude sailors. The whaling stations' facilities could be used, materials could be "requisitioned" at will, and there was plenty of leftover diesel fuel to fill your tanks. Three children were raised amongst the penguins and seals. Some years ago, while in Stanley, a friend of mine was getting a tour of *Damien II* by Dion, at 22 the oldest son, who ran the old boat. She casually asked him where he had been born, expecting France, maybe Stanley as the answer. "Right here on this table," was the

reply. In winter, on South Georgia.

Now, with the increased publicity bringing more yachts and, more significantly, thousands of ship-borne tourists, permissions have to be lodged formerly in advance and controls in access to certain areas have had to be put in place. Jerome now runs a larger vessel, *Golden Fleece*, and has been instrumental in supporting

Made it: At trip's end, the traverse team—Skye, Tim, Tor, John, Dave and Skip—unfurl the Explorers Club flag

the BBC wildlife unit and National Geographic, among others; ironically, he has done more to encourage tourism than he ever imagined. Now he's an advocate of limited control but a pirate at heart – he still reminisces about his recipe for seal liver pate.

After a heavy round of socializing at King Edward Point, *de rigueur* on any trip to the island, we sailed south along the north-east coast for Larsen Harbour, visiting various wildlife sites along the way. A final day's ski mountaineering on the extreme southern tip of the island, based from this spectacular steep-sided fjord, was a dramatic ending to our all-too-brief stay on South Georgia. We left the boat at 0100 and "skinned" up in the predawn darkness and on to the Philippi Glacier – just in time to see the morning sun hitting the tops of the Salvesson Range: pyramids of rock and ice in orange and pink. All those unclimbed summits to dream about. . . and so little time. 