

AUSTRAL VOYAGER



THIS PAGE: A pause to enjoy the splendour of South Georgia's Spenceley Glacier, named after the late George Spenceley, on the second of Duncan Carse's famous survey expeditions. The skyline to the north is filled by the giants of the Allardyce Range. On the left, Mt Paget (2934m) is the highest peak on the island, first climbed by the British Joint Services expedition in 1965. Both Crag Jones and Skip Novak have made rare repeat ascents. In the centre is Mt Rootes, first climbed by a services expedition in the 1990s, with Mt Nordenskjöld on the right, first climbed by Crag Jones and Dave Willets in 2011.

South Georgia, one of the world's most remote islands, is renowned as the destination of the James Caird voyage in 1916. After landing on the south coast, Ernest Shackleton's team made the first recorded crossing of the island's wild interior to reach the whaling station at Stromness. Veteran British mountaineer **Stephen Venables** organised his seventh expedition to South Georgia in 2016, and his team made several first ascents including Mount Baume and Starbuck Peak. The latter is possibly the hardest technical climb yet achieved on the island, which Venables had been wanting to climb for twenty-seven years

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY | **STEPHEN VENABLES**



WITH OUR CRAMPONS CRUNCHING UP MUSHROOMS OF PATAGONIA-STYLE RIME, THE SUN WAS SETTING OVER THE EDGE OF THE SOUTHERN OCEAN, A THOUSAND MILES FROM THE NEAREST CITY IN SOUTH AMERICA. IT FELT VERY PRECIOUS.

South Georgia is a very long way away from anywhere, and it's very hard to get to. If it hadn't been for Julian Freeman-Attwood's suggestion in 1989 that we organise an expedition to this very remote island, 750 miles from the nearest airstrip, I probably would never even have contemplated the idea.

Lacking a private yacht, we needed the blessing of the military, who had been in charge since Argentinian 'scrap metal merchants' landed illegally seven years earlier as a prelude to the Falklands War. So, cheered on by Julian, I pulled strings at the Ministry of Defence, grateful for the generosity of influential top brass prepared to vouch for us, and in October 1989 we delivered thirty-six barrels of food, gas, and a bundle of skis to *HMS Endurance* just before she sailed from Portsmouth on her annual southern patrol. A month later, we flew down with the RAF and joined *Endurance* in the Falklands for the final 800 mile crossing to South Georgia.

Captain, officers and crew were incredibly hospitable to the eccentric collection of civilians code-named SOMEX (the Southern Ocean Mountaineering Expedition) billeted on their already crowded ship.

Lindsay Griffin, *Climb's* mountaineering editor, resplendent in pink and turquoise fleece, had dreamed for years of coming south. Julian, an earthy tweed-clad throwback to the nineteenth century, just loves going to whacky new places. Kees t' Hooft, a charmingly vague Dutch cameraman from Clapham, had agreed to film us for an ITV documentary to pay the bills. Research chemist Brian Davison had already done time on the mainland with the British Antarctic Survey but had never called at South Georgia. Having had past job applications rejected repeatedly by BAS, I enjoyed a smug glow of triumph as the sea air cooled perceptibly and, after years of dreaming,

I finally crossed the Antarctic Convergence.

Once on the island, I was enthralled by the novelty of it all, in particular the constant interplay of decay and renewal.

Grey whale bones, speckled with orange lichen, littered the beach beside a rusting hulk where blue-eyed shags nested in the tussock grass colonising her bows. Giant petrels, the yellow-eyed vultures of the south, squabbled over the placenta of a new born elephant seal pup. Over all this, there's the passive-aggressive whimper of the fur seals; the keening wail of the light-mantled sooty albatrosses nesting in the tussock; and the massed trumpeting of the three hundred thousand or so king penguins. We passed the latter as we tramped round St Andrew's Bay on our way to Royal Bay, where the 'Endurance Airways' helicopter pilot had kindly dropped eighteen barrels of food and fuel to see us well into 1990.

And then there was the weather. We chose initially to explore the Salvesen Range at the southern end of the island. Tents imploded as the katabatic gusts came screaming at us from every direction and our load-carrying was abandoned.

Naïvely, perhaps, we chose to put our mountain base on the Ross Pass. It was a logical access point to the glacial hinterland 600 metres above sea level, but also the most prominent wind funnel on the entire island. To limit the blast, we dug into a scoop at the side of the glacier, excavating a large ice palace which became home for twenty-three days. It was secure and comfortable and we read lots of good books. But, hunkered down in our dugout, we developed an unhealthy trench

mentality, reluctant to put our heads above the parapet, exaggerating the menace outside.

Despite that timidity, we climbed some nice peaks during short breaks, and then, just as the food was about to run out, we got a full two day weather window. Lindsay and Julian made the first ascent of a fine peak called Mt Kling, with Julian leading the headwall of rotten rock overlaid by sugar – the only bit of real technical climbing achieved in nearly three months on the island.

Meanwhile, Brian and I skied thirteen miles south, stopped to pitch the tent for afternoon tea, before continuing on foot to the previously untouched summit of Mt Carse. It seemed a waste to be with one of Britain's finest mountaineers on a snow plod. But what a plod it was! Just to be there, at the end of a long, long day, crampons crunching up mushrooms of Patagonia-style rime, with the sun setting over the furthest edge of the Southern Ocean, a thousand miles from the nearest city in South America, felt very precious.

Sailing home on *RFA Diligence* in February 1990, I thought how lucky we had been, and assumed that was that: our expedition had been a unique, never to be repeated, experience. But ten years later, out of the blue, I was invited to go back. It was Shackleton that did it. Or, to be more precise, the growing resurgence of interest in his 1914-16 Imperial Antarctic Expedition – an ill-judged failure which transmuted into one of the greatest survival stories of all time. It began, and culminated triumphantly, on South Georgia. The epic tale was ripe for the giant screen, and I was to join Conrad Anker and Reinhold Messner

repeating the Edwardian hero's legendary 1916 trek across the mountains for the IMAX film Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure.

It was a gregarious outing, with some seriously experienced people like Brian Hall, Paul Ramsden and Nick Lewis running the show, while we three – 'The Climbers' – tramped in the hallowed footsteps of Shackleton, Crean and Worsley, tracing their masterpiece of intuitive route-finding over thirty miles of what was, back in 1916, a totally unknown, unmapped glacial wilderness. We took about the same time as Shackleton's team - 36 hours - but in our case spread over three days, with the luxury of being able to stop and pitch a tent at night. Like Shackleton, Crean and Worsley, we travelled in the austral autumn – May in their case, April in ours – but unlike them we found the Crean glacier a hideous maze of open crevasses. Nowadays, the isotherm is much higher than it was in 1916, and by late summer the comforting snow blanket has gone. Leaping one humongous crevasse, Reinhold Messner landed badly, fracturing a metatarsal. As he continued uncomplaining for the next two days, limping stoically on his broken foot, shuffling à cheval between chasms when required, we began to understand something of the iron will behind the legend.

Since 2000 the so-called 'Shackleton Traverse' has become quite a popular jaunt for seriously adventurous Antarctic travellers. In my case, it has provided hugely enjoyable work on three further visits to the island, going in spring when the crevasses are still nicely bridged. Skip Novak, with whom I've led these trips, is a serious international yachtsman who also loves to go climbing. He's built two yachts – *Pelagic* and her reassuringly chunky sister *Pelagic Australis* for this express purpose. The four or five day passage can be irksome, particularly the return to the Falklands when you tend to be hammering into

the wind. But on a good day, with a fair wind on the beam, dolphins dancing in the bow spume and albatrosses circling overhead, it is a wonderful way to travel to your mountains, always in the safe hands of outstanding skippers and crews.

The Shackleton Traverse crosses the north-western end of the island and takes in some fine country, but after my second crossing in 2008 I yearned to get back to the wilder end of the island. So, in 2010, I found a team willing to finance a *Pelagic Australis* trip and ski from our old 1989 starting point in Royal Bay, continuing past Mt Carse, all the way down to the southern tip of the island. Alan Scowcroft and Ian Searle were seriously good skiers; Ian Calder, a distinguished retired anaesthetist, was more of a survival skier and mountaineering novice, but he rose splendidly to the occasion, towing his pulk by day, and in the tent at night regaling us with large tracts of H.W. Tilman's incomparable prose that he'd committed to memory. Unlike the static trench warfare of my first trip, on this occasion we were mobile, skiing with shelter and supplies in our pulks and, despite some mixed weather, we were able to travel every day.

It was one of the best ski tours I have ever done, and the final steep descent into Drygalski Fjord made a fantastic grand climax. But earlier, on the fourth day, I couldn't help glancing up at the fine summit of Mt Baume (named after the Geneva watchmaker and mountaineer who had been here with the mapmaker Duncan Carse in the 1960s). Baume's eponymous summit was still untouched, as was Starbuck Peak, named after a famous American whaling dynasty (and the fictional First Mate in *Moby Dick*), which I had first seen silhouetted against the setting sun from the summit of Mt Carse. Twenty years on, Starbuck looked even more dramatic.

And as we skied below the west face, I kept glancing up at a beguiling snow ramp rising

diagonally across a wall of blank rock. I would clearly have to return again to the Salvesen Range.

I put together a suitably alluring prospectus, and in August 2014 six of us plus our 'support team' arrived off the coast, with Skip eyeing ruefully the carapace of ice shrouding his floating life's investment, which now looked like the doomed vessel in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. I had persuaded him that late winter would be good: there should be good snow cover on the glaciers, right down to the beach.

Alas, persistent south-westerlies stopped us landing at my chosen beach on the south coast and our attempts from the less convenient Drygalski Fjord fizzled out in the face of bitter, blasting spindrift. So we offered our clients the unclimbed Trident peaks instead, which we had often skied past on the more accessible Shackleton Traverse. They proved a magnificent consolation prize, climbed on three successive days, with the central summit, now named Poseidon, giving some beautiful mixed climbing for Skip, myself, Nick Putnam, David McMeeking, Mark Dravers and the famous Chilean climber Rodrigo Jordan (the first person to climb Everest from east, south and north).

All those Salvesen summits, though, were still unclimbed. So we drummed up another team for 2016 and last September, after a blissfully easy four day passage from the Falklands we anchored in perfect conditions at my favoured bay, Trollhull, with just one easy glacier pass between us and Starbuck Peak. That afternoon, we got all the gear and sixteen days supplies landed on the beach, stowed safely where no four-ton bull elephant seal might accidentally or intentionally crush it. At dawn the next day we waved goodbye to *Pelagic Australis* and set off, towing our heavy pulks.

Soon we were navigating by compass in a white-out, and by mid afternoon we were pitching camp in falling snow.

THIS PAGE: A perfect late winter afternoon in September 2014, descending from the first ascent of the central Trident summit, now named Poseidon, with a bonus peaklet snatched on the way down. The following day we climbed the south summit, the sea goddess Thalassa. The day after that, in a whiteout, we climbed the northern summit, seen here on the left, and named after another sea goddess, Tethys. The Crean Glacier, crossed by Tom Crean, Ernest Shackleton and Frank Worsley in 1916 lies hidden beneath the cloud inversion.

FACING PAGE: A blustery morning in April 2000 as Venables follows Reinhold Messner and Conrad Anker in Shackleton's steps across the Fortuna Glacier, heading for Breakwind Ridge. In 1916 Shackleton, Crean and Worsley negotiated all this section of their epic traverse at night.

The wind blew from the northwest for the next four days, burying the tents in snow the consistency of concrete: this was the authentic South Georgia experience.

One of our party, Crag Jones, actually knew the island better than me and Skip, and had probably done more first ascents here than anyone. The other three, who were new to South Georgia, took the incarceration with admirable good humour. Sharing the other tent with Jones and Skip Novak was the hardcore Scottish winter climber and ace alpinist Simon Richardson – our secret weapon.

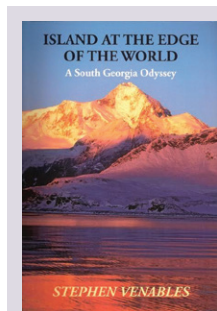
Each night, Novak telephoned Skipper Dave for a weather forecast, and by the fourth night we were promised a spell of settled high pressure over the island. Sure enough, we woke to blue skies and a stunning view of Starbuck plastered white. After the chore of digging out the tents and packing, a quick descent and a three hour climb got us to a new camp right beneath the north ridge. While the old men pitched the new camp, the youngsters, Simon and Henry, skied up to climb a subsidiary little summit and recce the approaches to my ramp.

Shortly after dawn the next morning five of us assembled on the east side of Starbuck and watched the sixth – secret weapon Richardson – disappear over a little notch on the North Ridge. It was a brilliant opening move, getting us straight on to the West Face ramp and, after six years wondering, I was thrilled to find solid climbable snow and ice sticking to it. The problem was how to climb the vertical headwall above. In the absence of any discernible weakness, Simon just kept working round the mountain, with the rest of us following obediently, admiring the eclectic selection of pegs, bulldogs, ice screws, slings and hexes assembled at each improbable belay. One dramatic ‘Traverse of the Gods’ was protected with a backrope. A pitch later, we crossed a notch onto the South Ridge and then continued to spiral round onto the East Face.

It was now mid-afternoon. Simon was out of sight above and Skip was muttering gloomily about it nearly being his bedtime. But at last there was a shout, and Skip and Crag set off up the only weakness in the entire headwall. Henry followed and I came last, marvelling at Simon’s lead of a classic shuffle up fathomless sugar that was stuck to some of the most unhelpful rock any of us had ever seen, ending with a body-belay standing in a hole just beneath a fantastically pointy precarious summit, on which we each took turns to stand. A snow bollard got us safely back down to the final belay, from where we reversed our upward spiral, abseiling and down-climbing into the darkness, back to our skis and eventually our beds at around midnight.



THERE WAS THE MOST AWESOME 2,500 METRE DROP STRAIGHT DOWN TO THE SOUTHERN OCEAN ON THE SEAWARD SIDE: STANDING ON THE SUMMIT OF STARBUCK WAS ONE OF THE GREAT MOMENTS OF MY LIFE



Island at the Edge of the World: A South Georgia Odyssey by Stephen Venables is out now and available from stephenvenables.org

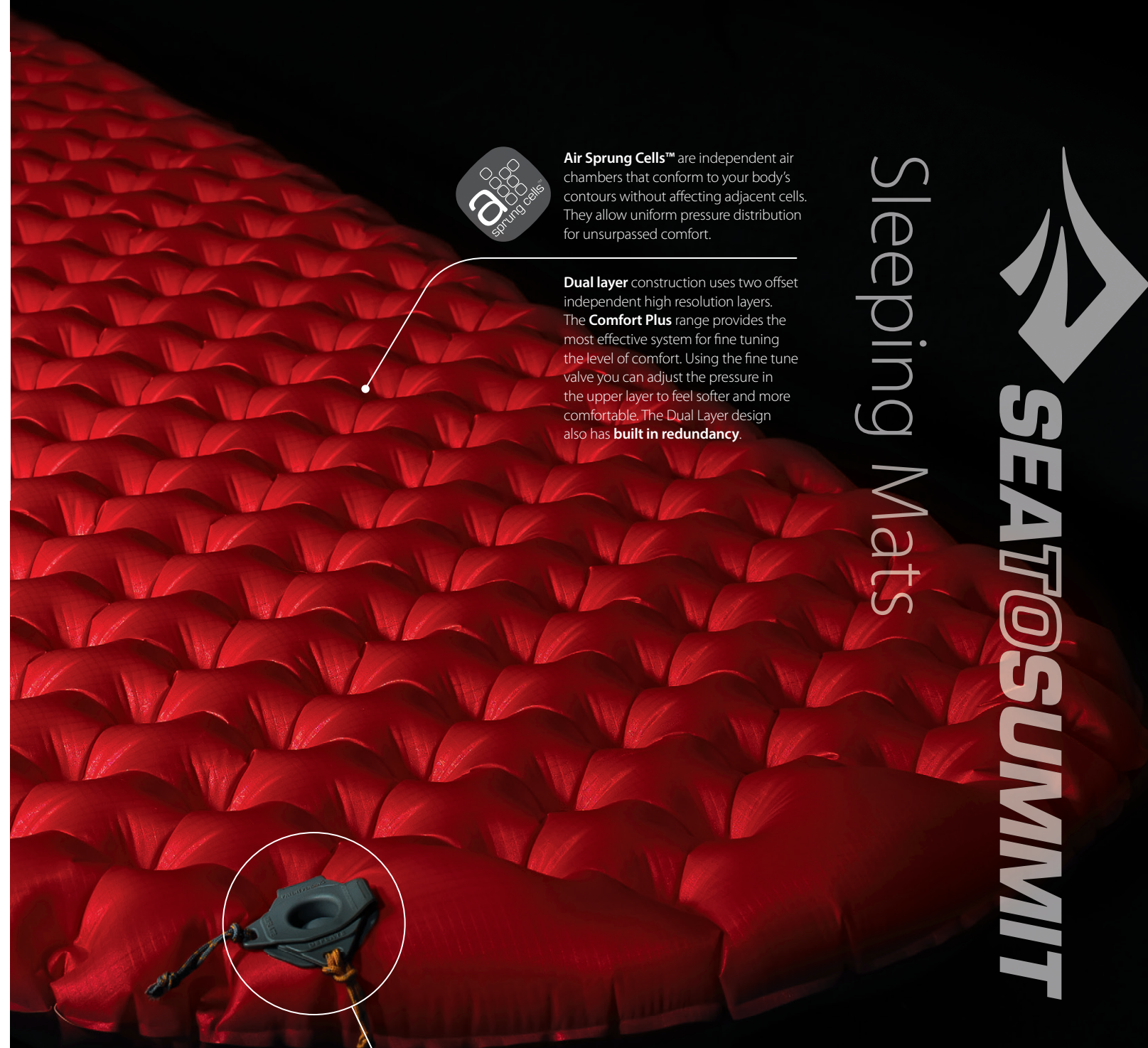
Standing on the summit of Starbuck, looking across at the snowy dome of Carse, where I had stood almost 27 years earlier and first wondered about this improbable pinnacle, was one of the great moments of my life. Even better was the realisation that, blessed with an extraordinary sustained spell of high pressure, our show could go on. By way of relaxation, the next afternoon Simon, Henry and I skied round to two unclimbed snow domes.

We then spent a day moving camp to one of the highest cols on the island. From there, Henry and David made the first ski ascent and descent of Mt Pelagic. Skip and Crag had made the first ascent eleven years earlier as consolation for a failed attempt on Mt Baume – the peak which four of us now set off to try again. We knew it would be a long day, so we set off at 11.00 p.m.

In the dark, Crag led us up several pitches of excellent mixed climbing, failing to recognise any of it from his previous attempt, until, at daybreak, he found a single forlorn bleached abseil sling at the 2005 highpoint. It was a clever route, weaving sneakily up a safe buttress just to the side of some very dangerous seracs, to get onto a big upper snow-ice face. Here we toiled laboriously in the hot sun, with Simon leading the way, emerging finally beneath a typically vertiginous South Georgian summit nipple climbed via a spectacular ice tube. Again, it was a one-at-a-time summit, with the most awesome 2,500 metre drop straight down to the ocean on the seaward side. Then the race was on to get back to the rock buttress before nightfall. We just achieved this, but the final six abseils were all done in pitch darkness and we had been on the go continuously for twenty-seven hours when we finally rejoined Henry and David back at camp.

The weather forecast was now finally looking less promising, so it was time to quit while we were ahead. For me it was another trip down memory lane, trundling enjoyably north, over the Ross Pass and down on to a Ross Glacier transformed almost out of recognition since I had first seen it in 1989: it now looked virtually impassable in its lower reaches. But Skip Novak had a cunning plan to continue north, up the subsidiary Webb and Cook Glaciers to St Andrew’s Bay.

The plan worked, but one route-finding mistake cost us a day’s delay, tent-bound in ferocious winds, eking out the last scraps of food. In my tent, breakfast on day sixteen was a single biscuit. In Novak’s tent they had conserved rations more judiciously and feasted royally on porridge and pesto. Then, in glorious sunshine, we packed the pulks for the final time and skied down to the beach, where the penguins watched indifferently as the support team welcomed us with hugs and champagne.



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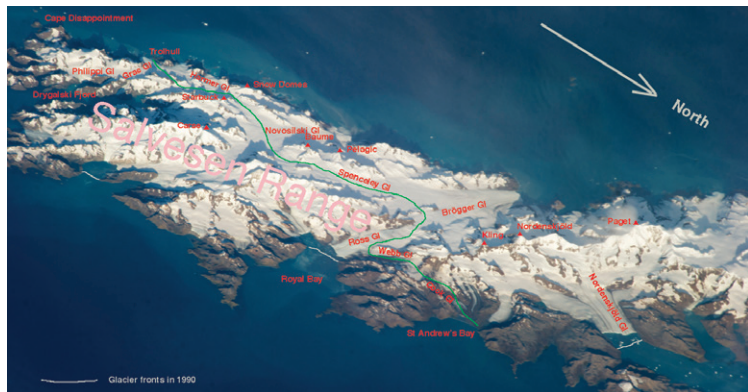
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PREVIOUS PAGE TOP: Starbuck Peak from the north, photographed in 2010, when Venables decided we would have to come back and investigate the obvious ledge encircling the west face.
PREVIOUS PAGE LOWER: Venables taking his turn on the one-at-a-time summit six years later. The next objective, Mt Baume, rises behind, on the right, with Mt Pelagic on the extreme left and Mt Paget in far distance.
THIS PAGE:
TOP LEFT & RIGHT: Pelagic Australis takes the Southern Ocean in her stride and arrives off South Georgia sheathed in frozen spray after crossing the Antarctic Convergence.
CENTRE LEFT: Novak, Jones and Richardson on the long haul up from the Novosilski Glacier to the camp below Mt Baume.
CENTRE RIGHT: Skip Novak on the upper slopes of Mt Baume, with the fine ski trundle of the Spenceley Glacier spread below.
LOWER LEFT: South Georgia from the air.

HISTORY

South Georgia has been sovereign British territory since 1775 when Captain Cook made the first recorded landing and named the island for King George III. The administrative centre at King Edward Point was set up to administer the whaling industry, after Anton Larsen set up the first shore whaling station at the adjoining cove of Grytviken in 1904. Hugely profitable at first, Grytviken was soon joined by further shore bases at Husvik, Stromness, Leith and the smaller Prince Olav Harbour, but by the mid twentieth century the industry was no longer viable, with the last base closing in 1964. KEP is run by government staff in conjunction with the British Antarctic Survey, the seasonal Grytviken Museum being run by additional staff. Their most important work is administering the South Georgia fishery and one of the world's largest Marine Protected Areas.

GETTING THERE

The only way to get to South Georgia is by boat and the nearest port of departure is Stanley, in the Falklands, about 750 miles from Grytviken. Nowadays all expeditions have to apply for a permit to the Government of South Georgia and the Sandwich Islands, paying £1,000 for the vetting process, plus £100 landing fee per expedition member. As there is no search and rescue infrastructure on the island permits are conditional on each expedition having a dedicated vessel standing by throughout the time ashore. Conservation is a big part of the government remit – with alien rats and reindeer now eradicated from the island and strenuous efforts to avoid non-indigenous plants – so expeditions have to follow clear environmental guidelines to avoid inadvertent introduction of alien species and avian pathogens, and cross-contamination between different beaches.

SOUTH GEORGIA'S GEOGRAPHY

The island is about 100 miles long and is entirely mountainous with over sixty named glaciers. The highest summit is Mt Paget at 2934 metres, first climbed by a British Joint Services expedition in 1965. Like the Antarctic Peninsula, South Georgia provides graphic evidence of recent climate change. Since we first went there in 1989 many of the glaciers have shrunk dramatically. The Ross Glacier, for instance, which was an easy walk or ski 30 years ago, has now become so shrivelled and broken that its lower reaches are now almost impassable. Other floating glacier tongues have also retreated radically in the last few years. There is now a whole new bay of open water at the site of the former tongue of the Twitcher Glacier. Ditto the even faster retreating Neumayer Glacier.



Plas y Brenin climbing coach Keith Ball finding the way on 'The Godfather-VIII'8. Beinn Bhan (Photo: Tim Neill)

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