



# THE EMPTY OCEAN

SOPHIE O'NEILL AND CHRIS KOBUSCH TOOK ON A 4,300-MILE  
DOUBLE-HANDED CROSSING OF THE SOUTH ATLANTIC IN WINTER



Clockwise from top: heavy snow at Port Stanley prior to departure; loading provisions for the passage; casting off from the Falklands at the break of dawn, and it's still snowing; Pelagic Australis is built and equipped for serious expedition yachting



'The noise of the wind whistling through the rig rarely abated'

There was a crunching sound underfoot as we loaded *Pelagic Australis* with provisions for the voyage ahead. Snow flurries had covered the deck with a layer of white, reminding us that we were setting out in deep winter. Monitoring the weather closely over the past week we had tracked a train of deep depressions that were wrapped around Cape Horn and funnelling across the furthest southern boundaries of the South Atlantic. A shiver of adrenaline ran through my body.

We were days away from casting off our lines from the Falkland Islands. We'd be taking the expedition yacht *Pelagic Australis* across a wintry ocean, during a time of year we knew few sailing boats would venture out. Where hours of darkness would preside over light. What's more, it would be just the two of us on board, my partner Chris and I. For the first time ever, I had a taste of fear mixed with a rush of excitement for the unknown.

This hadn't been the intended plan. After 11 months in the high latitudes we were supposed to fly home in April after a busy season. Covid thwarted our plans, and worldwide travel restrictions left both us and *Pelagic Australis* sitting tight in the Falkland Islands four months after our last Antarctic expedition. But we couldn't leave *Pelagic Australis* there: moorings are few and far between, and besides, she had become a part of us. So it was time to take her home, to Cape Town, South Africa.

We had been searching for a third crew member who'd be prepared to fly to the Falklands during this challenging time – a big ask. Yet our friend Nikki Henderson, the youngest ever Clipper Race skipper, and runner-up in the last race – offered to help with the passage. Delighted, we set about furiously putting arrangements in place to get Nikki out to join us in Port Stanley.

This was no small feat. The RAF operates the only flights into the Falklands, and our initial request to the government to bring in an additional crew member was rejected. Hurdles had to be leapt, endless amounts of forms filled in. Finally Nikki was granted permission, only for her flight to be cancelled. We immediately made



Unable to fly in additional crew due to the pandemic, partners Sophie O'Neill and Chris Kobusch made the voyage from the Falklands to Cape Town double-handed

arrangements for her to catch the next one a week later.

With much excitement, Nikki boarded the plane and took off. Relief swept over us all, but it was to be short-lived: whilst refuelling in Dakar, they announced that the flight was being cancelled and returning to its UK base. Chris and I were stunned into silence but realised that we couldn't wait any longer. We called our boss, Skip Novak, and he said: "Maybe you guys need to consider sailing *Pelagic Australis* back on your own?"

He followed up with his advice: "Play it safe, keep low sails, head further north, hove-to when fatigued". So, after a long walk to discuss it with clear heads we made the call. "Skip, we'll do it."

#### FALKLANDS FAREWELL

The day before our departure on 22 July an endless stream of people came to the boat in Port Stanley to wish us farewell and a safe passage. It seems the departure of *Pelagic Australis* was quite an event; there are so few yachts in these regions, and the Falkland Islands so remote, that slipping out of the harbour would never have gone unnoticed.

After the last well-wisher had left, Chris and I sat in



Heavily reefed, *Pelagic Australis* makes steady but roly progress in the big South Atlantic seas



From top: Kobusch checks mainsail track cars; meals on laps keeps dishes secure; O'Neill practises taking sun sights for position in case the electronics should fail

## 'The air warmed us for the first time in nearly a year'

knots. We reduced sail area and eased the pressure off us all: after all, it was our first night at sea and we wanted to go easy on *Pelagic Australis*. But the conditions set the tone for the voyage, and the noise of the wind whistling through the rig was a sound that rarely abated. For the first eight days we headed roughly north-east, to get out of the 'Furious Fifties' and storm through the 'Roaring Forties' as fast as we could.

A hidden moon cloaked us in darkness for the first week until electrical streaks of lightning appeared, illuminating every detail inside the pilothouse while our faces flashed an instantaneous white. The crack of thunder overhead kept the off watch person wide awake.

Prior to skippering *Pelagic Australis* my partner, Chris, had raced around the world as a Clipper skipper. His yacht *Qingdao* had been struck by lightning off Brisbane, Australia, with the damage destroying their windvane, hitting their instruments and generator starter motor, even shooting down into the depth sounder. He was understandably anxious that lightning should not strike twice. Every time the lightning storms set in, he shut down the entire boat's systems, so in between the flashes we were truly in black out mode. For the first time ever Chris confided to me: "Of all the times I've cast off, this is the first time I have a strange feeling in my stomach."

I confessed I'd felt it too, and was thankful he'd shared his concerns.

It was during this first week that our main communications system went down. We were unable to download grib files and from then on relied on text messages from the handheld satellite phone to give us an outline of any weather systems coming our way. Before we had always spent a great deal of time reading weather files so it was strange to not have detailed information. However, it made us much more aware of the clouds and conditions around us instead, monitoring them more closely than ever before.

One eye was always on the barometer. At one point we watched it drop from 1005mb to 994mb in four hours, going from an eerie silence to the wind whipping up to 46 knots all around us. I'd committed myself to bettering my knowledge of celestial navigation and so endeavoured to take sights the whole way across the South Atlantic. Even if I was off watch, Chris woke me up by putting the sextant in my hand, standing by ready to take the time. It felt more real now, and with our communications systems down, should we genuinely ever need to navigate this way I enjoyed being prepared for it.

We made our way towards the lower latitudes in the 40s, relaxing into the trip more as each day passed, despite an endless gauntlet of squalls, both day and night. The air warmed us for the first time in nearly a year, and it felt great to finally be on deck without the cumbersome gloves that we'd worn for so long.

At 0600 one morning I awoke to the high pitched ▶



Home comforts: bread making in the galley

the saloon looking at the latest weather and ice reports. Normally before a voyage we both spend time carrying out a thorough pre-departure brief with the crew. This time, the brief was to each other. It felt strange to carry the weight of knowing that we'd be solely dependent on each other, in an ocean where there would be very few, if any, other vessels around, and in conditions that could be relentless for the next four weeks.

At 75ft and 60 tons *Pelagic Australis* is a large and heavy boat, if all went well then we could have a good, safe crossing, but if things went wrong, with just two people alone on such a big boat, that is operated entirely manually, we knew it could be brutal out there. Tension clenched my stomach, but I didn't share my worries with Chris. Instead, we reassured each other that *Pelagic Australis* is built to go places, and has weathered many great storms.

"Chris, there are three of us here, it's you, me and *Pelagic Australis* too," I reminded him. After living on board for 11 months, *Pelagic Australis* wasn't just a boat to us, it was our companion. We knew it would work hard to look after us, and we would do the same in return.

At the break of dawn we fired up the engine and slipped lines to make our way out through the Narrows. Looking back we quietly bade our own goodbyes to Stanley, which had been our safe haven over those strange past few months. In William Sound we hoisted the mainsail. *Pelagic Australis* creaked and groaned as if standing tall after a long period of sitting down. I looked aloft and marvelled at its beautiful rig. Very quickly we pulled into a sprint out of William Sound, the island at 52° south disappearing behind us.

That night icy cold Southern Ocean winds built to 35 knots and the sea state grew until we were surfing at 12



Double checking position with chart against GPS

ringing of an alarm telling us the propeller shaft was overheating. *Pelagic Australis* has a fixed propeller and the shaft spins: in the colder water further south it stayed cool enough to not overheat. We switched on the shaft pump but not long after the alarm sounded again; the pump had failed. If it continued to over-heat it could damage the seal and start leaking. We put the shaft brake on, but with each great surf over a wave the boat accelerated and the shaft spun, screeching on its clamp. The sound was ear piercing and excruciating.

Wanting to continue making forward progress we



All hands on deck for a double-handed Southern Ocean crossing

brought the canvas down to the fourth reef. The reins were pulled on, and *Pelagic Australis* drew back to a plod of just 5 knots, rolling heavily in the big swell under this sail setting. We set to work to replace the pump. Thankfully *Pelagic Australis* has spares for everything, all methodically arranged. Ironically, as we repaired the pump conditions eased to the best of the voyage so far, and we sailed in rolling waves with a pleasant interval between them and a steady breeze. Small fluffy clouds even lined themselves before us, looking like they were forming into the north-bound trade winds. We were reluctantly, and rather painfully, slow, but at least heading in the right direction.

But we knew never to get too comfortable, things could change out there so quickly. Just as we were leaving the 40s we received a weather text: 'Head further north now. Big low behind you. Developing.'

As the sun set that evening we saw behind us that the marching clouds had dispersed and instead there stood a towering cumulus. The sea seemed to loom from astern, waves began tumbling over one another, white horses colliding. Without hesitation we scrambled on deck to reef. Two big waves knocked *Pelagic Australis* onto her side, one pummelled into the cockpit and rushed inside the pilothouse. This was big, the reef had to happen now. Chris and I worked silently on deck, no words uttered between us over the screaming winds. We both deeply

resent shouting on boats and this manoeuvre felt almost balletic as we were lifted up by each great wave while the sails formed into their new shapes, like a dancer on stage.

That night the winds built to 50 knots and continued into the following day. A heavy grey covering hung over us and the winds blew wild across this open expanse of water. The wind speeds reached 58 knots and the waves roared, with just a few seconds between them as they surged into *Pelagic Australis* from all sides. We bounced, pitched and rolled as they tossed us around, and I pictured us as a Japanese piece of art with a tiny boat balanced on the top of a mighty curling wave, white spindrift flying from the top.

Up ahead a 700ft bulk carrier, the *Ionic Patris*, appeared on the radar, our first sighting of another vessel since we set off. As we were already sailing deep we radioed to ask if they would mind keeping clear. A voice came back: "How are you doing out there?" Those were the roughest conditions yet but knowing other seafarers were out there too brought a degree of comfort.

#### REACHING FOR HOME

In between the periods of stormy weather we raced along, often reaching or running before the wind with a poled out headsail, our favourite sail combination! *Pelagic Australis* has a stunning rig, and although it has the fuel capacity to motor great distances, the explorer yacht is happiest sailing. If you are under-canvassed, the yacht will most certainly let you know. For a number of days in the 30° latitudes we enjoyed some truly fine sailing with steady winds.

Finally, the end was in sight. *Pelagic Australis* had carried the two of us across the great ocean, with never a cross word said. We three had got on better than we could ever have imagined. But it was as we made our final approach to South Africa that we experienced the strongest blows, with 60-knot winds – thankfully without confused seas – and enjoyed our fastest surfs, hitting 17 knots some 400 miles off Cape Town!

As our last night at sea pummelled us with squalls, *Pelagic Australis* kept charging on. When Table Mountain rose before us the next morning we both silently stared at this new world ahead we were about to enter. The sight of land would normally appear as a safe haven but we had sheltered so far from the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, 22 days after we set off, we were moments away from stepping into the midst of it. The whole journey had been an emotional rollercoaster.

I thought back to my 12-year-old self, when I went sailing on the sea for the first time. Having only sailed on the Norfolk Broads before, I'd looked to my coach, Paul Whiteman, for reassurance as he held the transom of my Mirror dinghy. I whispered to him: "I haven't sailed one of these before." His hands let go and in his steady manner he replied, "It's just the same." ■



Sailor and photographer Sophie O'Neill is a Yachtmaster Instructor and was first mate on the 2017/18 Clipper Race, helping skipper Chris Kobusch take the *Qingdao* team to 3rd overall. She and Chris are also keen mountain climbers and skiers. Follow on Instagram @seas\_summits



Left: an albatross for company. Below: the gloves could finally come off on deck as *Pelagic Australis* sailed north-east into warmer weather



The end of the passage and *Pelagic Australis* motors into Cape Town's Table Bay Harbour