



ALBATROSS MISSION

SKIP NOVAK'S FINAL ADVENTURE ON *PELAGIC AUSTRALIS* WAS A MISSION TO SAVE THE ALBATROSS

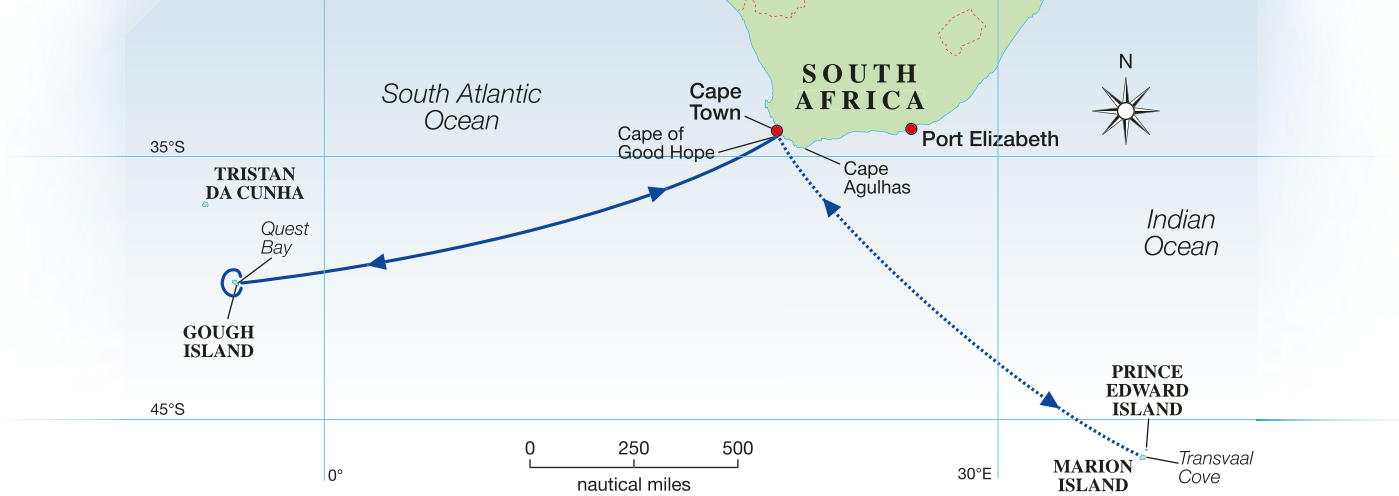


Left: wing and wing running hard downwind. Fourth reef prevents roll and makes it easy to re-hoist

I let go the lines at the pontoon in Cape Town and watched *Pelagic Australis* motor out of the basin, breathing a monumental sigh of relief. She was bound for Marion Island, 1,400 miles to the south-east of Cape Agulhas, a tiny sub-antarctic particle in the southern Indian Ocean. It was September 2020 and the success of this voyage would save the Pelagic Expeditions charter business from pandemic-induced bankruptcy, but getting to this point had not been easy.



It had been a cliffhanger right up to the moment of departure. For Marion, a strict 14-day quarantine and testing of the team to protect researchers and base personnel already on the island was fundamental, in addition to a quagmire of permit applications. Now it was up to crew Chris Kobusch, Dion Poncet and Juliette Hennequin to get film and research teams down to the island, offload three tonnes of kit and then stand by helping them film for the next six weeks. Their ▶



was the easy part, dealing with the relative simplicity of a cathartic ocean.

“To be truly challenging, a voyage – like life – must rest on a firm foundation of financial unrest. Otherwise you are doomed to a routine traverse.” I’ve often quoted that one from Sterling Hayden as I find it highly amusing and spot on, but it is even more relevant when you have extracted yourself from a financial pickle, such as we often find ourselves in the yacht charter business, with the risk magnified beyond all proportion during Covid.

Why wasn’t I on board, you may ask? This was a trip of a lifetime and having sailed by Marion five times on around the world races, it would have been a privilege to have stepped ashore. In short, I couldn’t quarantine and prepare the boat at the same time. This needed to be a two team operation. But later, as we prepared for that venture to Marion, the possibility of a double delivery taking researchers and cargo to Gough Island arose.

BLAST FROM THE CAPE

Gough is an outlier of Tristan da Cunha in the south Atlantic, 1,200 miles south-west of Cape Town. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) was establishing a base of operations on Gough Island to eradicate an aggressive mice population that was preying on the albatross colonies. In March of 2020 they had half their team on the island and had to abort the project due to the onset of Covid; this was to be a second attempt. I would skipper the first trip down at the end of January, while skipper Chris Kobusch and mate Sophie O’Neill would do the second in late February.

Again, due to a 14-day quarantine before boarding, neither of us could do both. This required another monumental bureaucratic effort to pull off. In the middle of all this project planning, I began negotiations with Greenpeace to purchase *Pelagic Australis*. When it finally came my turn at sailing to Gough I was chomping on the bit to shove off and rest a tired mind and soul.

This voyage started out with a two week lockdown in a hotel room in Cape Town. After final testing we were bussed in negative pressure to *Pelagic Australis*, stepped straight on board and cast off.



Photos: Skip Novak

Skip’s daughter Lara working with crew mate Pascal Reira

Leaving Cape Town in any direction can be a shock to the system, with often a 4-5m swell greeting you when clearing the outer sea wall. That afternoon though, after we motored through the lee under Green Point, a honking south-easter filled, wind on the beam and a flat sea that gave us a cracking start.

By nightfall we were roaring along fully pressed with a second reef and full yankee and staysail; perhaps too much sail, but I was loving it, blowing away the cobwebs. We threaded our way between a few south-about tankers making heavy work of it against the south-east swell, creating some dramatic big ship imagery in the fading light of an African sunset.

Of the eight researchers we were delivering to Gough, there was only one experienced sailor. The rest all went down with varying degrees of seasickness. If anxiety does play a role in this unenviable condition, there was probably plenty of it around. For these landlubbers this was a rough and woolly start to their adventure, and if there was any other way to get to this remote island, possibly including a ‘HALO’ parachute drop, at that point they would have taken it.

I had put together a local Cape Town crew of Carl ‘jack of all trades’ Martin, 22-year-old Tor Bovim, an aspirant yachtsman who had all the right stuff, and my 18-year-old daughter, Lara. Lara



Lara stands a watch



Chris Kobusch at the helm in the South Atlantic

‘A honking south-easter filled, and we roared along’

was an old hand, having been on several Pelagic voyages since she was little. Upon graduating from high school she'd worked on board, starting in the bilges, making small change for her gap year travel. Having got her STCW (Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping) she was awarded a work contract for the voyage.

After that blow petered out late the next day, we all settled into a routine of mid-latitude sailing, running due west along the latitude of the Cape in variable conditions. The tactic was to get somewhere near north-

east of Gough, or even a bit further west, before dropping down south to hook ourselves in between the travelling low pressure systems running along on the edge of the Southern Ocean.

It was mighty pleasant. It was throwing a bucket of seawater over your head first thing in the morning (there were no other takers on this!), fishing lines run out and generally sailing in t-shirts weather. As things settled down the researchers came to life and we had ample time for them to explain their mission on Gough. ▶

Chris Kobusch/Seas & Summits



Snacks and crew chat time in the cosy salon



Pelagic Australis anchored off Quest Bay on Gough Island

Skip Novak



Skip Novak

The dramatic landscape of Gough Island is characterised by steep and rocky terrain to sea level

‘Having been to a few Atlantic outposts, I had never seen anything quite so dramatic as Gough’



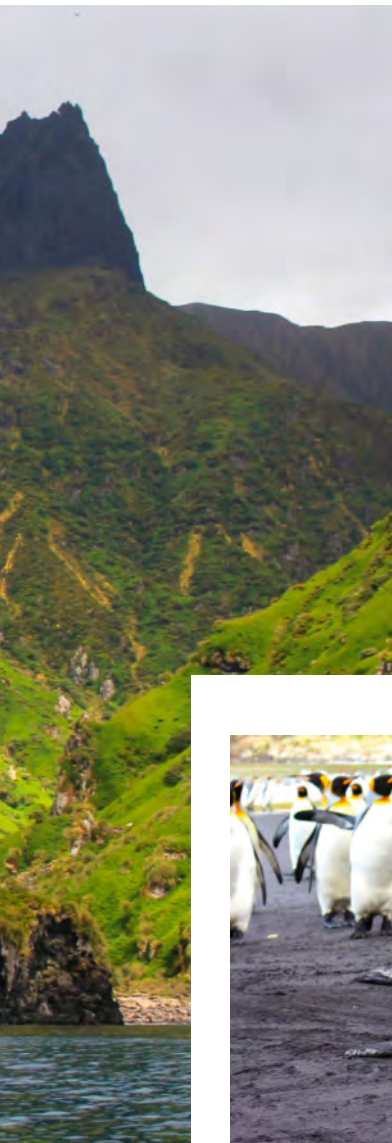
Skip Novak

Lara viewing the king penguin colony at Kildalkey Bay, Marion Island



Skip Novak

Father and daughter working on *Pelagic Australis*'s last charter



Skip Novak

Above: transferring 1.5 tonnes of birdseed from the tender ashore by crane on Gough; Below: female elephant seal and king penguins at Ship Cove, Marion



Skip Novak

HEAVY ARTILLERY

We were carrying 1.5 tonnes of bird seed in the forepeak, plus plenty of miscellaneous kit. The researchers' job was to catch and sequester two species of land bird, a bunting and a moorhen, and care for them throughout in the aftermath of a helicopter bombardment of the entire island with poison pellets. The bombardment was to start in May, supported by the South Africa ice breaker the SA *Agulhas*. The bunting and moorhen populations were fragile, numbering in the hundreds if that. But they were endemic to Gough, and only Gough.

If the RSPB is committed to anything, it is to stop losing species. If this advance team was successful in capturing and caring for enough of those two species, they would survive. The reality was that many burrowing petrels would be collateral damage in this exercise. But, because there were so many, their population would bounce back in even greater numbers within a season or two. I know this to be true from the successful rat eradication on South Georgia.

Then, about halfway to the island, the autopilot failed. After we made several attempts at sorting this out, it became obvious we had to hand steer. This was a blessing in disguise as it gave focus to our researchers who, by and

large, gladly took the helm on rotation, letting the crew run the rest of the show. Once again, it just goes to show people are happier when kept busy and in a routine.

In fine weather on day eight we raised the island and late that afternoon anchored on a rocky bottom in no shelter under the South African base. There is no easy landing here. Because the island is so small, swell wraps around the headlands, and it is seldom calm.

The eight RSPB researchers, having survived eight days of cabin fever, were almost walking on water anticipating the landing. We managed to get them all off safely that same afternoon, timing runs into a bouldery cliff face between the wave sets. The base crew cleared the area of aggressive fur seals by knocking rocks together, an old trick. Luckily, shores like these are often kelp bound which helps knock down swell, but can be a struggle for an outboard to plough through going in and out.

Once ashore, the researchers scampered up a dodgy wooden ladder and then had a 40-minute walk to the base, carrying day rucksacks. Their baggage, plus cargo, would be jibbed up on a crane which swings out over the cliff above a tiny inlet a few hundred metres to the north. Formerly, people were also brought up in this fashion in a cage, but looking at the whole operation; the rickety rusty crane, the 40m drop hard by a jagged cliff face and most likely a suspect maintenance schedule, and that 40 minute walk over difficult terrain to reach base began to look very attractive.

The offloading routine had Carl and Lara hoisting kit out of the forepeak with the gennaker halyard – boxes, cases and the 40kg sacks of birdseed which were loaded six at a time into gravel bags. Tor and I stayed in the inflatable tender receiving two gravel bags a time, let down on the halyard. We ran that into the inlet communicating with the crane driver via a VHF relay from another guy on shore. Big rollers were incoming, but miraculously they bounced off the back wall of the inlet, cancelling themselves out, and we could hook up the gravel bags with the dinghy almost stationary, although heaving up and down by a metre or two. This was exciting and satisfying work. By early afternoon we had offloaded the lot, and just in time as the swell was on the way up – only to be informed by base a case of beer had been left behind, along with someone's ukulele!

INHOSPITABLE

Those would have to wait because the wind had changed by the evening. During the night we lay side on and into the kelp line, snatching at the anchor. When raising it ►



early the next morning it caught badly and the windlass took to the load bending the shaft, but it was still operable, just. We motored around the corner into Quest Bay which is open, but was surprisingly flat and windless. This was the site of the original base established in the 1960s, and had a reasonable rocky beach landing.

After repairing the pilot motor, we spent the day dinghy cruising. It was obvious why this place was abandoned, being so remote and rugged that to access the rest of the island was untenable, especially to reach the bird colonies that proliferate at the southern end of the island. Despite having been to quite a few Atlantic outposts, I had never seen anything so dramatic as Gough: steep to from the shore, with rugged volcanic features, heavily vegetated and wet.

Although Gough is UK territory and part of the Tristan group, fishing licenses are sold to South African ships. This

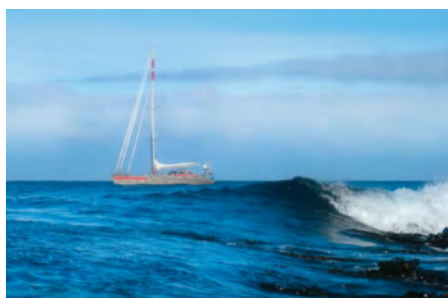
proved lucky for us when the SA *Edinburgh's* lobster boats came alongside and peppered our decks with rock lobsters and by-catch fish, in return for a few hundred rands.

Late the next day we circumnavigated the island before setting a course directly back to the Cape. I can assure anyone who is likely to pass by that there is not one obvious landing place on the whole island, save for Quest Bay with the wind in the westerly quadrant. It is steep-to all around, surf breaks everywhere, and, if you care about these things, it is illegal to go ashore anywhere without a permit. Getting one as a cruiser is nigh on impossible.

The delivery back to Cape Town was great sailing, running the first three days reef and/on wing with the mainsail down to the fourth reef trimmed amidships, our Pelagic tactic to make things easy and safe. With only the four of us, and a youthful crew – if not all in age then certainly in character – we took mid-ocean swims, caught



South African lobster fishermen trading some catch off Gough



Pelagic Australis has spent 18 years working in the Southern Ocean



Enjoying a swim in a benign South Atlantic on the return sail to Cape Town



Skip Novak

Above: kelp, rocks, swell and fur seals all need to be avoided when coming ashore by tender.

Left: t-shirt weather for Skip Novak at the helm of *Pelagic Australis*

fish and made sushi extravaganzas. In just over seven days we were tied up in the docks, ready to hand over to Chris and seven more researchers for voyage No2.

FAREWELL VOYAGE TO MARION

Finally, I was to get ashore at Marion. In April Chris, Sophie, myself and our youth squad had to return to the island to pick up three of the film team who had been left ashore at the base during the southern summer. We ran down the 1,400 miles in seven days, comfortably embedded in the roaring forties.

Our job on arrival was to recover equipment left on the beaches, which included dismantling a wooden storage hut along the coast and delivering that back to base. It sounds straightforward, but in fact took five days. Again, due to the size of the island and its shape, which is rounder than Gough, there was significant swell everywhere on every day. We had to move our anchor position many times as the fronts went through one after the other and, at 46° South with the onset of winter, it was getting chilly with snow already sticking to the high ground.

The cliffs above the eastern facing Transvaal Cove hosts the South African meteorological station, which has been in existence since the 1940s. Like so many of these remote pieces of real estate that originally claimed scientific research as a motive for occupation, the reality back then was a simple land grab. During World War II, bases established in terra australis had the convenient excuse of monitoring German activities in the South Atlantic. For Britain this ruse was only revealed when Foreign and Commonwealth Office files, still closed to the public, were discovered by historical researchers in 2010.

Although strikingly beautiful, Marion and its outlier

Prince Edward Island are not for the cruiser. It is even more off the beaten path on the way to nowhere. Gough is at least sort of on a logical route of a north/south passage of the Atlantic, if making for Cape Town, on the edge of the South Atlantic high at 40° South. Sailing by is hard to justify for Marion, and again a rigorous permitting process from the South African government is designed to keep you off the island.

We sailed into Cape Town on 21 April. Within three weeks Greenpeace had taken ownership of *Pelagic Australis*, after 18 years of adventures in the Southern Ocean under the Pelagic Expeditions brand. She has been re-christened as Greenpeace's *Witness*.

Looking back on a tumultuous year and a half, we managed to survive by grasping what could be construed as far-fetched projects, in both timing and location. Having good people on board and on shore was no less significant. All this underpins the value of small boats to get stuff done if you're willing to duck and dive through layers of bureaucracy, let alone Southern Ocean weather systems. In the 18 months after the start of the pandemic, I managed to set foot on four of the South Sandwich Islands, including Gough and Marion which were new territory for me – a fitting and satisfying end to a great Pelagic story. ■

NEXT FOR SKIP

After selling *Pelagic Australis*, Skip joined Vinson of Antarctica, the Pelagic 77 he brought to fruition from concept to launch, and in July of 2021 completed Vinson's first science expedition to Svalbard supporting German geologists.



Skip Novak