



SKIP NOVAK

SUMMER WEATHER ON SOUTH GEORGIA BECAME SO PROBLEMATIC THAT WE DECIDED TO HEAD SOUTH IN WINTER INSTEAD, WITH SOME SUCCESS



Although we are in the business of providing uncertainty as one of the mainstays of the *Pelagic* experience, there are times when you do feel your head banging against a wall as the weather puts the kibosh on yet

another well-planned expedition. And, typically, the wall in question is the mountainous wall of South Georgia.

Located between 54° and 55°S, South Georgia is a sub-antarctic island that cuts through the Polar Front – an ecological boundary between the cold South Atlantic water and the really cold Antarctic water. It is perhaps the most problematic region to which we travel, especially if the goals are mountaineering. Some 750 miles from Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands to first shelter at the north-western tip of the island, it is not

that far to sail downwind going east. Getting back west is another matter of course, but the sailing is always accepted as a rough and tumble affair.

When we started voyaging to South Georgia back in the late 1980s the obvious time of year was late spring or high summer, which is November through February. The theory that holds

true in high latitude regions near Antarctica and the high Arctic is that the summer period will be the most settled, with high pressure having moved in. The ferocious weather we always encountered in summer was apparently the norm, so we soldiered on for several years supporting climbing expeditions, along with various colleagues doing the same.

However, the fact is that although South Georgia is a high latitude destination, it is not really high enough. With better weather analysis and some trial and error, we realised that the winter to early spring period was preferable. In the southern summer, depressions that pass through the Drake Passage tend to track south of the island. This means that the speed of the system is additive to the wind speed around the low. During early

winter until early spring, storm tracks move just far enough north to pass directly over or to the north of the island with some frequency. This results in either a dead spot under an elongated area of low pressure or, better still, a less intense easterly airflow as the low moves up and through.

During those early years in summer our failures in the mountains outnumbered the successes, and failure to even get started off the beach was not uncommon. In winter and early spring, not only is the weather somewhat kinder, but colder temperatures make for easier sled pulling with skis. Of course there are never any guarantees.

In August 2014 – mid-winter in the south – we set off on an expedition to South Georgia in sub-zero temperatures (down to -7°C at times). We experienced ice accumulation up to three metres off the deck on the sails and rigging from an almost imperceptible mist and our single plastic hammer had to be deployed every four to five hours up forward. Unfortunately, in spite of a deep winter itinerary, even a landing at the south end of the island was untenable because of gale-force south-west winds produced from a stationary high pressure out to the west.

This year we repeated the itinerary and the high pressure eventually cooperated. We managed to sail and motor in light winds directly to the south-west corner of the island and land at a seldom visited shelter called Trollhul. The next day we were off and up on the glaciated terrain just in time to get caught out in a five-day storm that kept us pinned down in relative comfort in our tents. Then a dream scenario unfolded. The high to the west moved over the island and stayed there for the next three weeks. We traversed 65 kilometers of glacier to St Andrews Bay on the north coast over the next 12 days, climbing two virgin summits on the way – Mt Starbuck and Mt. Baume. We were in a comfort zone that is rarely experienced on the island where technical climbing was feasible with little chance of getting caught in extremis. To top things off we sailed back to Stanley in three-and-a-half days flat – the all-time record. Dangerous complacency had set in on all fronts!

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