



# SKIP NOVAK

FAILURE TO REACH A PLANNED GOAL IS A STRONG LIKELIHOOD IN ADVENTURE SAILING, SO WE MIGHT AS WELL EMBRACE THE FACT WE MAY NOT GET THERE

**I**t doesn't require a sailing-to-climb expedition like the one I finished in October to realise how the raw forces of nature can lay waste to well made plans. The same can happen on a planned weekend crossing of the English Channel where dinner in St Malo had to be cancelled due to a raging south-westerly in the Western Approaches.

Granted, voyaging to South Georgia through the Southern Ocean does raise the bar of vulnerability, no doubt about it. And once you are there, what can be accomplished in the mountains is a gamble in the truest sense of the word. If totted up, our mountaineering failures over three decades far outweigh the successes.

But we are not masochists, and the successes, when they came, were sweet and well appreciated. The uncertainty of this game of chance is part of the attraction, but sometimes that uncertainty becomes the theme rather than a prelude.

This season's objective was to repeat our stunning success of 2016 with the same 65km ski traverse from the southern tip of the wild south-west coast of the island starting in Trollhul Bay and ending at St Andrews Bay on the north-west coast central section.

In 2016, we cherry-picked two fine targets of major virgin summits in a rare spell of high pressure. We were out for 16 days including six days stormbound in glacier camps. Looking back, this was the icing on the many layered cake of previous battles lost with the island.

The optimism that expedition engendered (and we always filed the struggles and failures somewhere in the back of the memory bank) led us to believe we could do the same again, as there are many more summits to de-flower in what must be one of the world's most remote exploratory mountaineering environments. There is no one to call for a search and rescue on South Georgia.

In any event, this time the island's weather punished us handsomely and we are now humbled once again.

We had five weeks in hand from leaving to returning to

Port Stanley and we got off to a good start, arriving on the island after a four-day passage. No chance to land at Trollhul Bay though, due to strong winds onshore.

So we waited on the north coast for five days, making day ski trips before retreating to the base at King Edward Point. Here, the small contingent of eight overwintering British Antarctic Survey staff and two government harbour masters who control the fishing fleet in the maritime zone offered to give us the west facing jetty for what would be a major easterly storm on the rise, making the north coast unnavigable.

That storm lasted a full four days and, to top it off, King Edward Cove, facing south-east, was big enough to accommodate all the brash ice in Cumberland Bay discharging off the Nordenskjold glacier. We couldn't move if we wanted to, and were trapped by the ice under pressure from the wind.

When the storm force winds abated down to variable and the pressure on the ice lessened, we escaped incarceration and made a beeline for the south-west coast, southabout, as Trollhul, usually prone to heavy swell, would be as flat as it gets in the lee of that easterly storm.

Five of us were put ashore with ten days of supplies, camping and climbing gear, all carried in sleds. The traverse took 12 days, which says something in itself, and we accomplished nothing in mountaineering terms other than a journey in very arduous conditions of heavy snowfall, high winds and little or no visibility. It was hard work pulling the sleds in the deep snow and few rewarding views were had in amongst otherwise white-out conditions day after day.

And how lucky we are to be able to play this game of Russian roulette on land and sea, where success is never guaranteed, where patience wins out.

One must take the long view of the overall experience of attempt and failure as not time wasted but time to be cherished. There is a surfeit of canned and packaged adventure travel today where assured gratification is by contract. Not so when the quest has failure always looming large.

So next time that dinner in St Malo has to be cancelled, hunker down in the marina on the English side of the Channel and enjoy just being there with the wind blowing in the rigging. ■

## 'VOYAGING THROUGH THE SOUTHERN OCEAN RAISES THE BAR'