



'What are you doing in April next year? Take a look at this'. Thus read Jerry's e-mail. It was May 2006.

I already knew about Skip Novak and *Pelagic Australis*, his expedition sailboat in Tierra del Fuego. I knew about it 'cause that's where Cape Horn is! As time goes by one realizes that some things in life just pass you by unless you do something about it. To go to Cape Horn was one such thing.

In June 2006 Jerry, his wife Anita and I decided it was time. We shook hands at Seal Point light house at Cape St Francis and I kissed goodbye to the not insubstantial deposit for the trip. There was now no turning back. Two days later I turned 50. I had just bought myself the ultimate mid-life birthday present!

Our adventure began in Punta Arenas, Chile, when we joined *Pelagic Australis* on a bright Sunday afternoon. The storm force westerlies that greeted us the previous day when our plane had landed had all but gone. By sundowner time it was flat calm and a full moon was sitting low in the west.

Earlier we were welcomed onboard by the three young Brits who run the boat. All three were in

their mid to late twenties. There was Stewart the captain, his partner Jess and first mate Lawrence. With the briefings on safety and general ship's procedures out of the way we settled in on what was to be our home for the next two weeks.

We were a mixed bunch on board. The three of us, who were old friends, two Americans, a Polish chap and Con from Pretoria.

The following day we headed south down the Strait of Magellan. During the night the wind had started to pipe up and at times the 50-odd tons of boat was heeling well over in the breeze. I thought 'Oh, Oh' while tossing and turning in my bunk, unable to sleep.

We set sail on a nice beam reach, the wind out of the west; one reef and yankee up front. We were soon down to a second reef with the yankee furled to be replaced by the staysail. By now the water was getting distinctly white and things became a

little bumpy and wet.

But the beauty of sailing a 23 metre boat was its long legs and we pushed south at a brisk 9 to 10 knots. We left the Strait and crossed over into Canal Magdalena and our first anchorage, Puerto Hope (S54 07 40, W71 00 45). All day as we were heading south, the Strait had become progressively narrower and by afternoon we found ourselves sailing amongst green rolling hills. The Canal Magdalena is not more than about two miles wide. At Puerto Hope we were well and truly tucked away amongst the hills with thick green forests coming right down to the water's edge.

After securing everything we scaled the hill right next to the boat. From the top we saw a group of whales enter our anchorage. In the clear green water

Caleta del Noto, Seno Pia

Passport to C

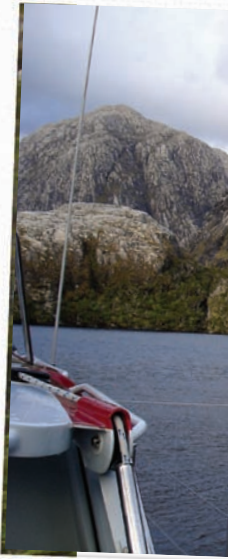




Cabo de Hornos



Canal Beagle



*Not just any old rock,
Author Frans Loots on the right*



*Cabo de Hornos from the
south, south west*

Cape Horn

By Frans Loots





Passport to Cape Horn



Puerto King, Canal Cockburn



Mooring Tierra del Fuego style

we saw them sounding and swimming with their calves and even though we were high up the hill we could hear them blowing.

Here and at Puerto King, our next anchorage to the west in Canal Cockburn, we got our first taste of anchoring Tierra del Fuego-style. The typical anchorage is usually a little indent amongst the rocks within a tiny bay almost always sheltered from the howling winds outside in the canals. At Puerto King (S54 24 80, W71 15 05) the opening of the bay into the Canal Cockburn is only some 500 metres wide.

The captain then tucks this massive 23 metre boat in amongst some rocks which form what I can only describe as Hagar the Horrible's version of a marina berth. I doubt whether the hole he tucked us into could have been more than 40 by 20 metres. First, Stewart would take the boat into his chosen corner bow first to check the bottom with the echo sounder for any obstructions. Then he would back out again. Earlier the rubberduck would have been hoisted off the deck and swung over the side up forward, hanging just millimetres clear of the water, ready to be let go of.

The boat is turned around and the duck is cast off with the mate and one other person onboard. The captain now starts to back up stern first into his spot. At the given time the anchor is lowered and the boat goes astern right up, as close as possible, to the shore. As the shore closes in, the duck crew approaches the stern of the boat where they are handed the end of a stern line. While the captain holds the boat steady against the anchor the first stern line is run ashore and secured to a tree. The procedure is repeated with the second stern line. The

boat is then positioned fore and aft with the two stern lines and anchor. Two bow ropes are then taken ashore as well and the boat is locked into position to protect it against any change in wind direction. In Puerto King I guess the stern was about ten metres from the shore and the clearance port and starboard maybe ten and five-odd metres respectively.

Remember the boat is 23 metres long, weighs over 50 tons, and has no bow thruster! Yet the captain puts it there first time every time. And spare a thought for the guys in the rubber duck. They must land on the rocks, or sometimes 'beach'. The poor rope handler in the bow must jump out, hoping the water is shallow enough not to run into his boots. Then he must find a strong enough tree. The undergrowth is slippery and wet and full of moss. He takes off his gloves to tie some knots. So his fingers are half frozen by the wet ropes. By the time he gets back to *Pelagic Australis* they feel a bit like ice lollies.

Cruising in Tierra del Fuego is not all just sailing. Most of the time you are tucked into the anchorage by about 04h00 and the mate would get a party ready to go ashore for a good hike or climb. We took as much climbing gear as sailing stuff with us. Stepping ashore I always got the feeling that I was walking where no man had walked before. Footpaths don't exist, and the walks are all one way – straight up!

So within minutes of stepping ashore you find yourself high above the anchorage with the canals stretching out into the distance. The views are stunning – ice capped mountains, green, tree covered hills and some barren rock surfaces; a myriad

waterways and islands and mountain peaks as far as the eye can see. Back on board there would be a hot shower waiting. The folk who remained on board would have been hanging out in the pilothouse or sitting in the saloon right aft.

Sundowners were pleasant affairs, you simply take your beer out of the bilge underneath your feet. It would be perfectly chilled. Wine for the dinner table gets placed in the cockpit and come dinner time is just the right temperature. Our dinners would be fresh beef or lamb, or a stew with lots of veggies and a salad. We dined in style with wine and all the trimmings. Being a crew from different parts of the globe there were many stories to swap.

We left Puerto King and continued west along Canal Cockburn towards the Pacific. The wind was blowing from the east so we had a nice run in an area where we should have been beating. Where Canal Cockburn enters the Pacific we turned south and then east to enter Canal Brecknock. Our luck held and the wind followed us around enabling us to run and reach all the way. Just as well because it was blowing a steady 25 knots and freezing cold.

We were now into much narrower canals and small islands with rocks strewn around everywhere. The snow line on the hills and mountains around us was creeping a lot further down than on the mountains further north. The trees also had a distinct 45-degree lean to the east and it looked like they had been plastered to the hills.

I kept thinking how the navigators of old must have piloted in these waters – not for them the luxuries of chartplotters and radar. I am sure that they must have got horribly





lost and blown onto lee shores in dead-end canals. Even with *Pelagic Australis'* full house of electronic navigation aids plus Admiralty Charts and numerous pilot books, I had to often ask the captain to put his finger down on the chart to show me exactly where we were amongst the thousands of islands and rocks.

In Seno Occasion (S54 32 70, W71 54 55) at the western end of Canal Brecknock, high rock faces rose straight out of the water. The rock is barren, the shapes are dramatic and the snow-covered peaks are right on top of you. Again the anchorage is a little indent amongst the rocks. Anchor down, four lines ashore and a hill to climb right in your own back yard.

After climbing the hill next to the boat, we found ourselves at a large lake, the overflow of which formed a waterfall into the anchorage. Later we were to run several trips to the bottom of the waterfall to replenish our water tanks. No need for watermakers on board in the land of a thousand waterfalls.

Spending two nights in Seno Occasion enabled us to also climb some of the hills on the eastern shore of the fjord. Once more as we gained altitude the views down the fjord and east over the snow-capped mountains were spectacular. And always, there was the sense of security you get when looking down and seeing way in the distance, your boat at anchor. In Tierra del Fuego we could enjoy the very best of sailing with the very best of climbing and hiking.

Pelagic Australis is an aluminum boat specially conceived for high latitude expedition sailing. Its most eye-catching features are the French-style unpainted

aluminum hull and large enclosed pilothouse. On deck there are two large storage reels used to house the mooring ropes. Another two similar reels are built into the stern platform for the stern lines. Anchor gear and deck bollards are massive, to handle the strains imposed by the harsh environment in which the yacht operates. Less obvious is the retractable keel and rudder that allow the boat to go just about anywhere there is water.

Oh yes. Did I mention the fridge? On our journey two freshly slaughtered lamb carcasses were tied to the gantry aft that carries the radar and satcom dome. With temperatures near freezing, keeping meat is not a problem - and there are no flies. Everything else that needs to be kept cold is simply stored in the bilges - this is one boat fridge that will never let you down.

I found *Pelagic Australis* to be a real sailor's boat, nice to work on and with the prime focus on simplicity both on deck and down below. What also struck me was the way in which the captain and his crew involved all the charterers with the onboard activities. All of us were used for making sail, reefing, trimming and steering. Things like anchoring and running the mooring lines required all hands and the tasks were always completed in an orderly manner with hardly a word being said. Being an expedition sailboat meant we all got stuck in to assist with tasks in the galley and general chores like taking out the garbage.

There is a nice heating system onboard with radiators in the cabins and passage. Foul-weather gear is hung on dedicated hooks in the passage and with the radiators directly beneath them, it was nice to always

have dry and warm oilies.

Our journey was now west to east along the Canal Beagle following close along the 55th parallel. The passage down the Beagle was a highlight for me. The canal is never more than a mile or two wide, and the depth varies between 150 and 300 metres. Snow-capped mountains, waterfalls and glaciers are all around.

We spent three nights anchored in Seno Pia, a fjord eight miles long with two arms leading off it, both with spectacular glaciers. The fjord is entered via a shallow and rather narrow bar and once inside we were soon amongst small bits of ice, but were able to motor close to the face of the glacier where it entered the fjord. One night was spent anchored in Caleta del Note (S54 56 45, W69 04 35), a cove in the western arm of the fjord and we had two nights in Caleta Beaulieu (S54 47 85, W69 37 65) in the eastern arm.

Whilst anchored here, the 'Seffricans' on board decided to treat the crew to a good old braai on the beach. Jerry, Lawrence and I got a fire going and when the coals were ready Con came ashore to braai the fillets for us. In true braai style lots of beers were consumed while staring at the coals, discussing the merits of the fire and telling dirty jokes. And the beers were kept cold on blocks of ice being blown ashore by the gentle breeze.

Thirty miles east we pulled into Caleta Olla (S54 56 45, W64 04 35) for another two-night stay. The anchorage was our largest to date, square shaped, some 200 x 200 metres. A short hike up the low ridge which separates the anchorage from the Canal Beagle allowed me a wonderful view



down the canal to the west. A breeze of about 25 knots was blowing up whitecaps, the skies were clear and the sun was out. The mountain peaks to the south were covered in snow. Down below me a huge condor was working the updraft along the rocky shoreline. It was freezing cold.

I was dressed in thermals, fleece, a climbing windbreaker, gloves and a beanie. My hands were numb from the cold after taking off my gloves to take a picture. That evening I said in an e-mail to my family at home "We are now deep into the Beagle. It is the most beautiful place Dad has ever seen".

Inside the anchorage it was flat calm. After dinner I called the Americans up on deck to show them the Southern Cross for their first time. Come morning there were patches of thin ice on the deck. We were

now on 55 deg south and the Horn is on 56. Along the canals it was 130 miles sailing to Cabo de Hornos.

We had a 60 mile sail to get out of the Beagle, then south across Bahia Nassau to anchor in Caleta Martial (S55 49 28, W67 17 62) in the north-east corner of Isla Herschel. We were anchored 10 miles from Cabo de Hornos!

The enclosed pilothouse had seating for five people. During foul weather this was a popular place to hang out. One had an excellent view from up there. It was also where the chart table, pilot books and chartplotter were kept. By parking off in the pilothouse you could also share in the jokes being told outside in the cockpit. Lastly, sitting in the pilothouse meant you were right next to the galley – and on *Pelagic* that was always a good spot to be. First in line to receive whatever was being produced.

The saloon aft had the galley leading off to port, the heating system on the centreline and the communication centre to starboard. Immediately forward of the saloon was the massive engine room where we could hang wet clothes to dry. A feature of the saloon is the comprehensive library that runs the full width of the boat. The titles covered a range of topics from Scott and Shackleton, to Antarctica, the history of the region, its wildlife and people. I was told that the library is the owner's pride and joy and that one of the first things he does when he gets to his boat after a long absence is to re-sort and classify all the books again. During our cruise Shackleton was a hot topic and his books were first to disappear into the cabins

and to be discussed after dinner over a glass of red wine.

On Thursday 12 April we upped anchor and set off for Cabo de Hornos. Clear skies and a flat calm met us as we motored south passing Isla Herschel and Isla Deceit, then west to pass to the north of Isla Hornos. We turned south and did the classic rounding of Cabo de Hornos – west to east. By 11h30 ship's time, the most famous of the Capes was bearing due north.

The flat calm that persisted made the rounding feel like it was not quite the real thing. Where were the high seas and the grey skies that gave the Cape its notoriety? The plus side was that it did give us the rare opportunity to go ashore at the Horn. Interestingly, the lighthouse is not at the Cape itself but is perched on the south east corner of the island.

Lawrence roughly landed us with the rubberduck in a boulder strewn cove at the foot of a steep hill. Stewart and Jess remained onboard and stood off while we trekked up the steep hill to the lighthouse. It is manned by a Chilean Naval official who lives on the island with his wife and children. A friendly and courteous gentleman, he was more than happy to stamp our passports to mark what was for us a very special day.

The island also has the Monumento Cabo de Hornos – a large sculpture made up of steel plates to form the silhouette of an albatross in full flight. Visiting the monument and lighthouse and to be able to look west and then south from this famous landmark on such a calm day with clear

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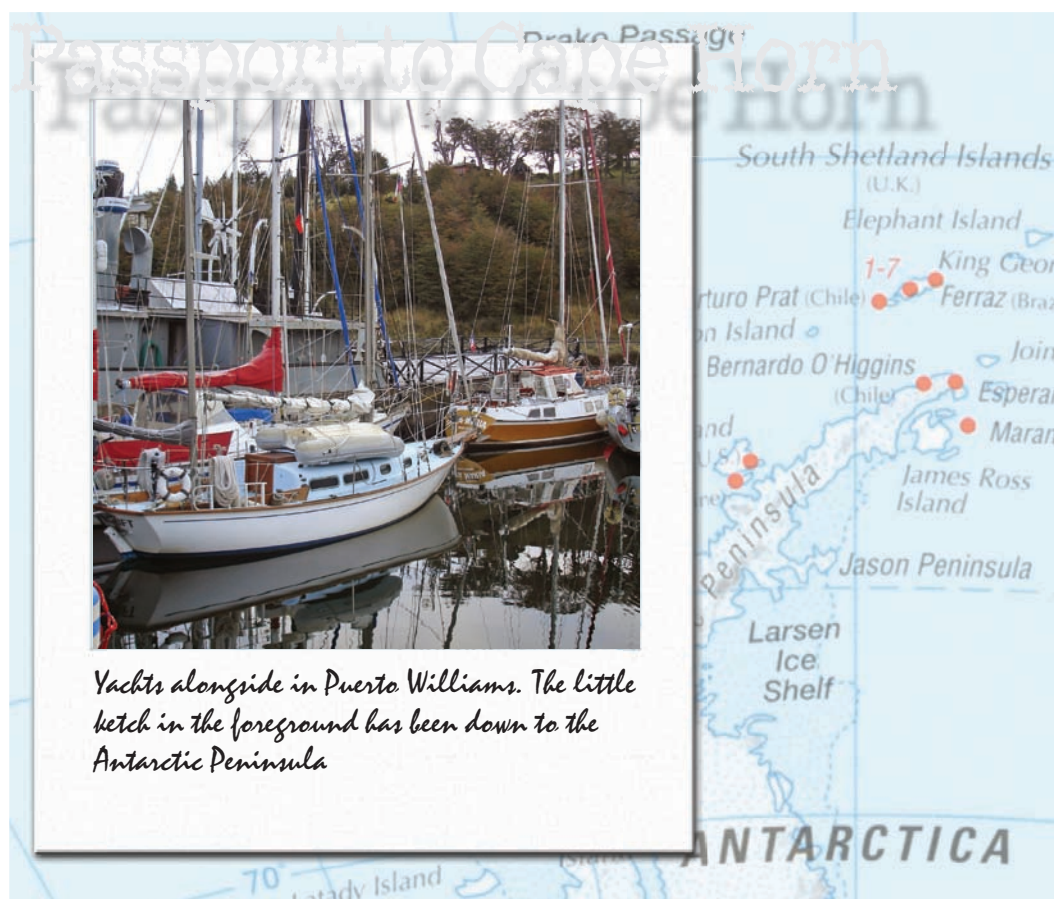
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*Yachts alongside in Puerto Williams. The little
ketch in the foreground has been down to the
Antarctic Peninsula*



Sc

Drake Passage



Heading South to the Horn



The anchorage, Isla Hornos

Passport to Cape Horn

skies and a picture-perfect blue ocean was very special. More special than the actual rounding of Cabo de Hornos.

It must be stressed that cruising down the canals and choosing one's weather before sailing down to, and then rounding Cabo de Hornos, is not a true rounding of Cape Horn. It is perhaps more correct to refer to a cruise such as ours as visiting Cabo de Hornos. I have read that a true rounding of the Horn is one where your passage starts north of the 50th parallel and then proceeds non-stop south around the Cape and north again till the 50th parallel is crossed once more on the other side of the continent. This is referred to as 'doubling the Horn' and makes the sailor a true Cape Horner, making the passage where you take your weather as it comes.

After visiting Isla Hornos we headed north to Puerto Williams, first calling at Puerto Toro (S55 04 93, W67 04 33), a tiny fishing settlement on Isla Navarino. The village lays claim to being the southernmost village in the world and that it is here that the southernmost road in the world ends. We found it a most beautiful little hamlet with a single jetty at the end of its famous dirt road.

With our journey's end fast approaching I used the opportunity to trade my climbing boots for a Chilean flag with one of the fishing boat captains. After Puerto Toro it was a short sail round the corner to Puerto Williams where our cruise ended. But luck was with us once more. An easterly wind gave us a fetch and a broad reach to round off our journey.

At Puerto Williams we secured at the unofficial southernmost yacht club in the world. An old steamer, the *Micalvi*, had sunk

onto a riverbed and all the world wanderers tie up their yachts alongside. During our stay there was a fleet of about 10 yachts alongside, including a humble little Miura which we were told has twice sailed down to the Antarctic peninsula.

We were at journey's end. But when it came to leave the snow-capped mountains and icy green waters of Tierra del Fuego I got a distinct feeling that I will be back again one day.

Want to go, too? Is a cruise on the cards for you? All I can say is forget about the Caribbean. Beef up your boat, fit the four reels for your shorelines and get a heater, a good spray dodger and buy a bigger anchor. Then head for the Strait of Magellan and the Beagle. You will not regret it.

Good bedtime reading is 'Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego Nautical Guide' by Marolina Rolfa and Giorgio Ardrizzi, published by Publishen Editrice Incontri Nautici. It is a very comprehensive pilot for the region and it was the book used by our captain.

If not with your own boat, consider an expedition charter like *Pelagic Australis*. A number of boats offer cruises down there, but *Pelagic* and one other seem to be the leading brands. It wasn't cheap (not much change from R75,000) per person, but for me it was the perfect birthday gift. ♪

Footnote. I have provided the co-ordinates of all our anchorages so that they can be viewed on Google Earth.

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