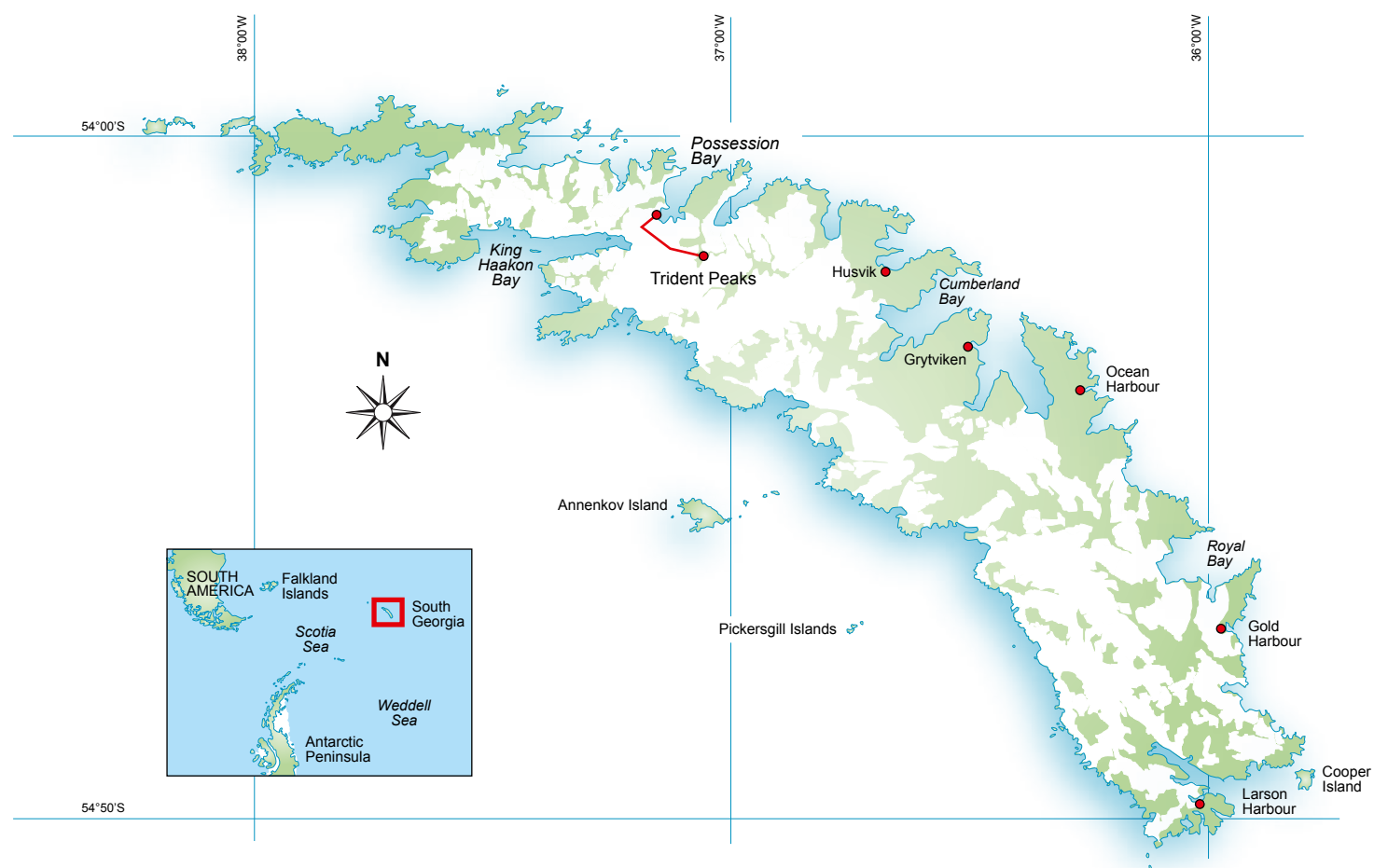


Southern winter

A winter voyage to climb in South Georgia had seemed a great idea to Skip Novak on *Pelagic Australis*. But now ice was accumulating on deck

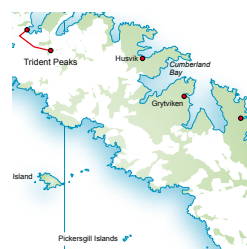
SOUTH GEORGIA



No matter how well you think you have prepared for a voyage, there are always things that slip through the net. Usually they are minor items that didn't make the final hitlist as preoccupied minds were concentrating on the big picture. On this occasion, halfway to South Georgia from the Falklands Islands, and having crossed the Polar Front, we were lacking an armoury of wooden mallets and rubber hammers. We only had one. And a 50kg bag of rock salt would not have gone amiss either.

Southern winter, 19 August, and we were sailing on a broad reach in 30 knots true, an established south-westerly airstream sweeping up from the Antarctic. What appeared to be a stationary high well away to the west was blocking the usual depressions marching through this part of the Southern Ocean – ideal sailing conditions for us really, and the temperatures hovering between 4° and 7° of frost would not have otherwise been an issue. But even a light sea spray coming over the beam was causing substantial accumulation of ice on deck and up to three metres on the rig.

It was soon apparent that our choice of a very conservative sail plan – three reefs in the mainsail and our storm staysail – was the right one. Well, choices from that point on were moot, as the furling drum on the staysail was already the size of a frozen beach ball and the main halyard and reef lines were caked in centimetres of rime. Even with buckets of brine – if we'd had that 50kg of rock salt, which we didn't – it would have been a mission to keep the running gear clear.



We were committed, but confident in the GRIB files that we would see less wind as we approached the island, not more, and the sail plan, frozen in place, was good for more or less 50 knots of breeze.

For the second time that afternoon, now with the winter sun set and a moonless night in the offing, I armed myself with my coveted rubber hammer, wisely slung around my neck with a sail tie. I ventured onto the foredeck more or less on all fours, for another session in anger management, taking it out on what must have been a ton of ice decorating the pulpit, lifelines, furlers, sails and rigging.

It was not a crisis by any means and the audience in the doghouse amused themselves at my expense (they would all have some outdoor fun later), but it was noteworthy how quickly the ice grew even in this off the wind condition.

We had many blunt instruments on board – winch handles, axes, crowbars, metal pipes and more – but I was holding these back to mitigate any damage to the fabric of the boat by the overzealous. By the time I cleared the pulpit and started working aft on lifelines and rigging, the pulpit had already been seeded with another layer of the white stuff.

There is no doubt that a few of us who knew better were contemplating what it would have been like in an upwind, head sea condition.

The British climber Stephen Venables and I hatched the idea of this mid-winter climbing trip while on a previous voyage to the Antarctic Peninsula in 2013. We had co-led two Shackleton Traverses in previous seasons, so were keen to do some climbing elsewhere on

All photos: S Novak



▲ Clockwise from above: it was extraordinary how quickly ice accumulated on sails, guardwires, running and standing rigging; butchering the mutton on arrival in South Georgia; freeing the windlass



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▲ Above: the best place to be was inside the pilothouse of *Pelagic Australis*

the island and we worked under the presumption that if October was a good month, well then August and September would be even better.

This theory was conveniently backed up by former South Georgia resident Tim Carr of *Curllew* fame who, with his wife, Pauline, had spent 14 years on the island. Likewise, SG lifer Pat Lurcock, perennial harbour master during the winter fisheries season, also claimed that August into September was the time to be there. The difference, though, was that they were based on the island so did not face the hurdle of actually getting there at this time of year.

Annually, our first trip of the season to South Georgia is early October during the very beginning of spring. Temperatures are on the rise, but snow cover is usually still fast on the shore, making forays by ski and sled into the interior relatively soft starts. Colder than high summer, skiing and pulling conditions are optimum and generally the weather is more stable, with the tracks of the big lows often moving north of the island, resulting in less wind speed and longer periods of calm, sometimes measured in days rather than hours as is the case in high summer.

■ South Georgia is arguably one of the most inaccessible of sailing destinations given its harsh climate ■

Then, too, we are more or less alone on the island well before the cruise ships arrive. However, it must never be forgotten that South Georgia is arguably one of the most inaccessible of sailing destinations, given its position and climate, which can only be described as harsh. It has no airstrip and there is no organised SAR facility whatsoever. You really are on your own, where self-rescue is the only rescue.

Who was crazy enough to join us for such a venture? Well, four of our team from 2013. Joined by another four, who would stay with the vessel while we camped ashore for 12-14 days – an ideal scenario to manage all expectations.

On day four out of Port Stanley in the Falklands we made landfall on the north-western tip of the island with the

breeze on the way down, enjoying a spectacular sunrise over the spine of the island. Motoring down the coast, the job at hand was chipping out and melting back with buckets of hot seawater – which included painstakingly removing three centimetres of ice on the entire deck – a task not as satisfying as easily knocking curtains off the lifelines and sheets!

By nightfall, we dropped anchor in a safe bolt hole in front of the abandoned whaling station at Husvik in Stromness Bay. The atmosphere was, to say the least, sombre near this Norwegian ghost town as we took a walk ashore, step-plugging in deep snow to a raised vantage point as the light fell. The cabin lights on *Pelagic Australis* soon were illuminated, beckoning us back on board for a celebratory bottle or two of red with the

leg of mutton off the backstay. We had arrived on the island.

The following day we wasted no time in making our way further south. The plan was to disembark six of us for up to two weeks at Trollhul Bay on the south-west coast. From there we would ski two days inland to a plateau with a half dozen unclimbed summits to choose from. While we were away, the eight left on board would tour the north coast, making ski and snowshoe day trips, led by our Arctic survival expert Thomas Geipel.

It is uncanny and defies explanation that, while working your way up or down the coast of South Georgia, typically after rounding each headland, the wind changes 180°, so a slog into short chop is inevitable at some point. One thing was clear, though, the farther we moved south, the darker the clouds became over the high ground.

We made it to Moltke Harbour in Royal Bay by early evening and skipper Dave Roberts wisely decided to take shelter, a relative term at Moltke as it is very open with strong winds usually funnelling down Whale Valley, what we call a 'blower bay'. Good holding in sand and mud is usually the case, but for reasons I won't go into, we had immense problems getting stuck in.

This was then compounded by a failed windlass motor. So there we were, in the dark, putting Skip Novak's *Storm Sailing Techniques, Part 10* into action with all hands manually pulling in 80m of anchor chain with chain hooks and the coffee grinder in gusts of 60 knots. A jovial bunch we had and they did not lose time reminding me of my own sage advice to readers, even producing a copy of *Yachting World* to rub it in! A man of lesser character could have had a sense of humour failure...

The next day, moving further south still, it was becoming apparent that our original plan for the mountains, concocted from the comfort of Venables's kitchen in Bath a year ago, was looking suspect. What had been a steady and optimum wind direction for the passage across from the Falklands began to backfire on our climbing plans.

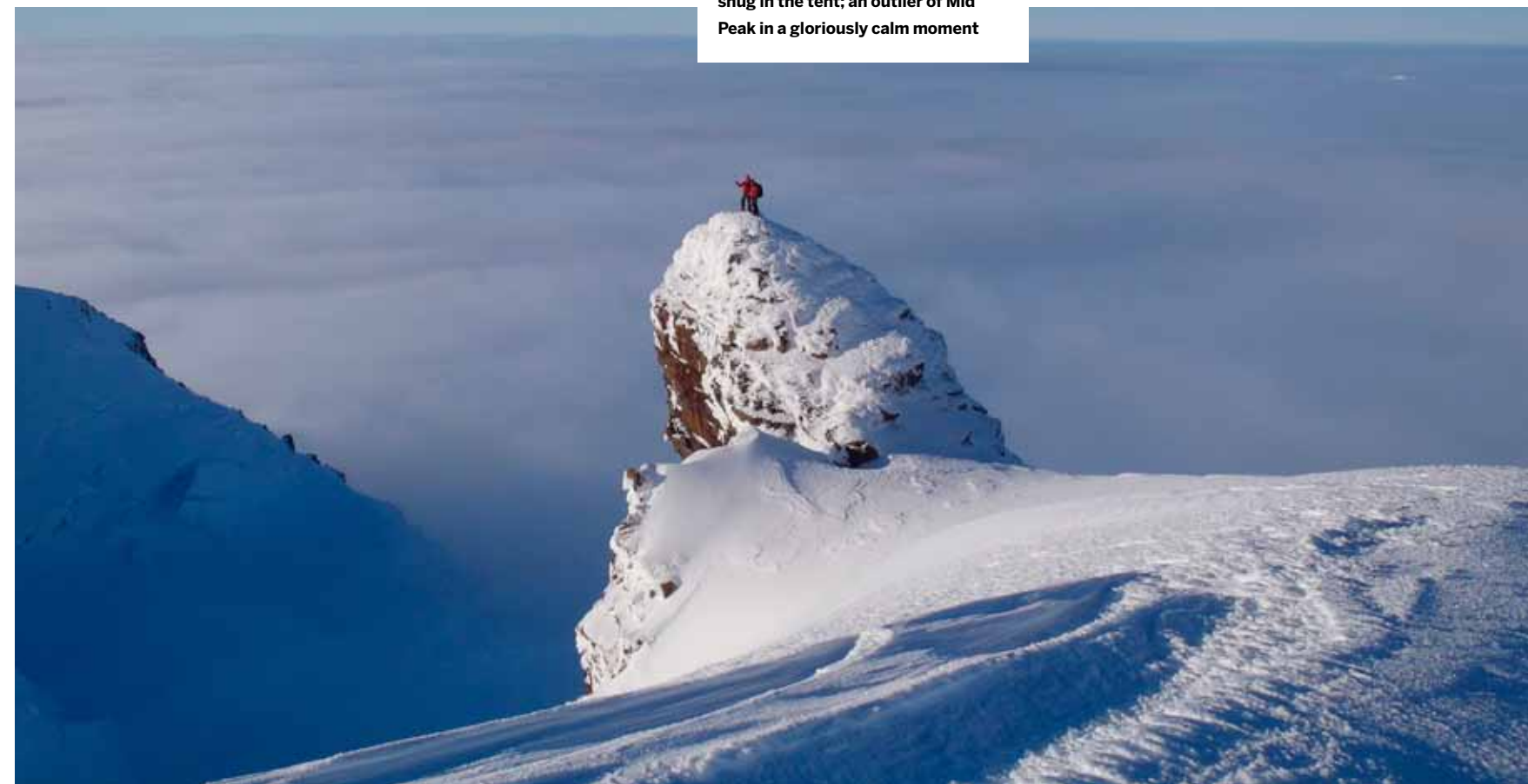
The stationary high to the west was now over the Falklands, squeezing the isobars to the east even more. ▶



▶ This photo: the climbing party makes its way up the Trident Mid Peak



◀ Clockwise from left: building a snow wall at Murray Camp after the Shackleton Gap; Rodrigo Jordan snug in the tent; an outlier of Mid Peak in a gloriously calm moment



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▲ Above: Skip and Rodrigo hanging out and hanging on

The strong south-west flow made nipping around the corner to land at Trollhul a non-starter as the bay is open to swell. We looked into Iris Bay on the south-east coast, but it was blowing a full gale down the glacier and getting across a shallow moraine into the inner bay to land was problematic with williwaws hammering us one after the other. Moreover, the glacier, steep with bare ice on the lower sections, looked decidedly uninviting.

The default was to launch from Larsen Harbour, a good anchorage right at the southern tip of the island and an initial glacial approach that both Venables and I were familiar with. After a day's preparation on board we began ferrying loads ashore, a long dinghy ride to the snout of the glacier. Still blowing a strong gale at sea, the conditions were dramatically magnified in the fjord, with katabatic winds making

■ We set out into the headwind with gusts strong enough to knock us off our feet ■

easier terrain into the interior. The slope was also becoming wind-slabbed with the added risk of avalanche.

The next day relentless strong winds made moving impossible. With a five-day forecast of more of the same, we

made the decision to throw in the towel with deference to the shore team on board, as they too had their agenda.

We stopped at Gold Harbour to sample the wildlife – a spectacular, inedible menu of king penguins, gentoo penguins, fur and elephant seals, South Georgia pintails and predatory skuas and giant petrels. A day later from Ocean Harbour the climbing team summited on Black Peak on the Szielasko Glacier, while the shore team skied and snowshoed across the Barff Peninsula to Cumberland East Bay.

On a glorious day out, windless with a deep blue sky and crunchy snow underfoot and ski, we all reconvened in Sandebugten, before docking at Grytviken where we officially checked in. More skiing and climbing followed for the next few days in and around Grytviken.

After toasting Shackleton at his grave site, it was on to Plan B for the climbers. We had eight days, so we hatched a scheme to ski from Possession Bay up the Murray and Briggs Glaciers and attempt to climb the three unclimbed and unnamed peaks of the Trident Range just south of the famous Shackleton Traverse.

Anchoring in the bottom of the bay, not far from where Captain Cook first landed on the island in 1775, we claimed our own bit of territory by caching our equipment near an erratic boulder on the edge of a moraine. Working in high winds was made more difficult by a tricky kelp-bound dinghy landing. Nothing seemed to be going easy for us!

Next day was equally savage. Spindrift cascaded down from the Shackleton Gap, a broad, low-slung col separating Possession Bay from King Haakon Bay where Shackleton's *James Caird* landed in 1916. We were running out of available

days, so we had to get started. Getting kitted up at 0700 in -8°C in a gale took some willpower and we set out against the headwind with gusts strong enough to knock us off our feet. Five hours later we were on the Murray Glacier out of the main airstream, built a snow wall shoulder high and managed to erect the two three-man tents, before finally settling down for the night.

The next day all toil and pain was forgotten. We emerged after breakfast welcomed by a spectacularly settled day with gentle winds. It was a joy to be on skis pulling the pulks on an easy hard-packed surface. We camped that night at the head of the Briggs Glacier, well-positioned under the Trident Massif – if only the weather would hold we would get something accomplished.

And we did. In three successive days, we climbed all three peaks of the Trident and, in keeping with Neptune, named them after the Greek goddesses Thalassa, Thetis and Tethys.

Optimism soared and we planned to carry on across the Kohl Plateau and find a new way onto the Konig Glacier that leads to Fortuna Bay, an elegant traverse. But the gods (and goddesses) had other ideas and we woke up to a rain storm – in winter, at 850m, something I didn't think possible. We stayed hunkered down for the day, and this apparent anomaly was explained by Dave on our evening radio sched. The GRIB file showed a massive north-east airstream bringing relatively warm air down from the South Atlantic and this was going to persist for the next few days.

We called it a day and the boat came up to meet us. Capitalising on the north-easter, a dream scenario for a quick return, we left bound for Stanley. Things rarely work out as planned on South Georgia. **YW**



▲ Above: Duncan having a snooze with a friend on an iceberg. ◀ Below left: Stephen Davis's award-winning shot of king penguins



▲ Above: toasting Shackleton at his monument in Grytviken. ▼ Below: Duncan adds to the cairn above Ocean Harbour on the east side of the island

