

# Rock Collecting on Svalbard

*by Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station*

**Y**ou are never too old to learn — again. When taking *Vinson of Antarctica*, our brand-new Pelagic 77 expedition vessel, out of the River Hamble and into Southampton Water on a sea trial in March 2021, I had to think quickly on my feet and figure out the direction of those black triangles on west and east cardinal marks. I hadn't sailed in UK waters in decades.

I had a further shock on the maiden voyage while steaming up the English Channel, through the Dover Straits at night, and into the North Sea: traffic separation schemes, buoys lit and unlit, wind farms and oil rigs to dodge, endless “heads-ups” advisories, Sécuritéés, and general chatter on the VHF channels. The Admiralty paper chart of the southern North Sea was indecipherable due to the amount of information on a scale of 1:750,000.

For inshore sailors accustomed to the importance of attention spans when on watch, I have to draw a comparison. It is a pleasure leaving Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, my usual stomping ground. There is a shoal to clear when you are abeam of the Pembroke Light House, and that's it. Then it's onward to South Georgia through the Southern Ocean with your feet up on the pilot house console, a Tintin adventure in one hand, and a "cuppa" in the other.

The reader will be thinking, "Surely this guy must know about this basic navigational stuff." I do, sort of, but much has been lost to memory due to lack of use while sailing in the far south environs for the last 35 years. Rest assured I got back in the frame quickly and became comfortably competent by the time we sailed by the East Goodwin Lightvessel at the southern end of the North Sea.

It might appear to be cavalier to take a vessel straight out of the builder's box and then head for Svalbard a few months later. This was our first project with *Vinson* and the culmination of seven months of negotiation with the German government's Department of Natural Resources, officially the *Bundesanstalt für Geowissenschaften und Rohstoffe*. We were supporting a team of geologists in their long-term study of the geophysical structures of the arctic basin. This season was Svalbard's turn in a three-year cycle between arctic Canada and Siberia. Measuring "strike and dip" of geological strata was fundamental, as was

the collection of samples for content and age analysis. This "rock collection" turned out to be over 1.5 tons of rocks in bags nestled in the forepeak, destined for the laboratory in Hanover to be sliced, ground up, and isotopes coaxed out — not bad going, our crew was told, after 30 days in the field.

We happily went from the sea-trial stage in the UK straight into a demanding polar environment with no showstoppers, a testament to our design and project management team and to KM Yachts in the Netherlands, the builder. We did generate 130 items on the first of several "snag lists," some warranty, but most modifications to be made when *Vinson* returned to the builder that September — all par for the course for a new custom-build and not in any way excessive.

In July 2021, COVID-19 was still in force. The big question was whether we could enter Norway at all. This became clear after we presented ourselves in Tromsø, where we had to be tested for COVID in order to get permission to proceed north. Likewise, the German team, which was scheduled to meet us in Longyearbyen, didn't know whether they would be allowed into Oslo until the day they checked in at the airport. Unlike the UK, which had published dates for opening up, Norway would do so only when COVID data gave a green light. We were all working with this uncertainty right up to the day — acceptable for small-scale projects like ours, but it blew

First mate Jose briefing the team on deck operations in Longyearbyen.



“When we passed 80 degrees in the fog along the north coast of Spitsbergen, all our instrumentation went down — a total blackout. No speed, no wind, no GPS, but more to the point, no radar or sounder. It was as if the clever young programmers of these increasingly complex integrated navigational suites thought no one would be going that far north or south, so why bother extending the algorithm beyond that convenient arbitrary figure.”



Karsten, team leader, on the daily debrief.

Daily Rhythms



All things Latino on *Vinson*.



Cod hot spot for Jose, Joanna, and Guillermo. It doesn't come any fresher.



Jose and skipper Kenneth, serving the catch of the day.

the arctic cruise-ship sector right out of the water for the season, much to our advantage.

After yet another "nose-mining" session in Tromsø (a painful 9 on a 1-10 scale), we sailed north through the Barents Sea, got a glimpse through the fog of Bear Island's south cape and its cliffs alive with guillemots, kittiwakes, gulls, and fulmars, and made it to Isfjord on Spitsbergen, the largest and only permanently populated island of the Svalbard archipelago, on July 5, well ahead of schedule. The 10 days spent in the port of Longyearbyen prepping and waiting for the geologists was like going back in time to 1983 when I first visited on the 61-foot sloop *War Baby*, skippered by Bermudian CCA member Warren Brown. Back then, there were few people in this frontier mining town and no tourism whatsoever. Now, there's a proliferation of cafés, restaurants, museums, and gift shops, but, because of the pandemic, they were largely empty

of trade but for the few locals who had hung in. We enjoyed roaming with abandon and going to restaurants without making reservations.

The last time I was in this region was 2004 with *Pelagic Australis*, and although cruise ships were certainly a feature, they were not excessive in number. Over 55,000 tourists visited in 2019, most arriving by ship, and we were told that if it weren't for the pandemic we would hardly ever be left alone in any of the fjords. Sadly, I'm afraid Svalbard has gone the way of the Antarctic Peninsula in terms of tourist pressure — overloaded and not sustainable, with more expedition ships under construction.

A strange thing happened on that 2004 cruise with friends from New Zealand. When we passed 80 degrees in the fog along the north coast of Spitsbergen, all our instrumentation



Demonstration of recovering the anchor chain in case of windless failure.

went down — a total blackout. No speed, no wind, no GPS, but more to the point, no radar or sounder. It was as if the clever young programmers of these increasingly complex integrated navigational suites thought no one would be going that far north or south, so why bother extending the algorithm beyond that convenient arbitrary figure. After many reboots and a few anxious Iridium calls to the navigation system's technical support (who were perplexed), the system came to life below 80 degrees just as miraculously as it had gone down. Strange but true. In those days, we were on paper charts, which were

mainly unsounded, but without the fundamentals of radar and a sounder, we were playing a risky game, sort of like Dutch Arctic explorer Willem Barentsz, who first sighted Spitsbergen in 1596, but became stranded in ice on Novaya Zemlya and died during the return voyage a year later.

On *Vinson*, the electronic chart plotter worked meticulously until about 79° 45', but the folio does end about there. So, it was no surprise when we were once again in the fog in relatively shallow, uncharted waters and back to 1983 techniques of taking transits, getting back bearings, and using the

fundamentals of radar for distance off. All this requires a level of concentration not found when using a chart plotter, at least in well-surveyed areas where you can bring a boat into a quay "blind."

Readers will be now reassured that I was not fazed by this transition into the past, nor was Kenneth, my understudy skipper and an RYA instructor. One wonders (and I am reminded of celestial navigation in the same context) that although you have to learn these first principles on paper at some point in your training, how often will you actually use them if the chart plotter works, which it seems to do all of the time?

Of course, the geologists were dumbfounded by the technical navigational banter as Kenneth and I continuously plotted our course. Likewise, I was at sea during their daily de-briefs, when they pored over colored maps on the salon table. And I did wonder why the German government, not a university, was more than adequately funding this multi-year programme of geological history. One immediately suspects mineral exploration followed by exploitation, but I was assured by Karsten, the team leader, that the purpose was purely to acquire knowledge of the earth's origins.

Many previous *Pelagic* projects hosted biological research in these polar areas, including censusing, tracking for feeding ranges, and DNA sampling, that did inform governments that manage fisheries competing with the wildlife. I can normally hold my own and grasp about 90 percent of what, say, two penguinologists (yes that is a bona fide term) are on about. They discuss practical outcomes that our sailing crew can easily engage with. Less so with the geologists, although they were a delightful and dedicated team.



A day's haul, labelled three times over.

Their principal area of interest was the north coast of Spitsbergen and the west and north coast of Nordauslandet, the big icecap island out to the east that is not always accessible due to pack ice, even late in the season. This summer we were early for sure, so while watching the daily ice reports to the east, we were nosing around in the deep fjords of north Spitsbergen in extremely settled weather. After breakfast, we'd drop the rock-hound team of four and two gun-bearing guides ashore, and they would roam the higher ground above the beaches and into the interior until just before dinner. Exhausted and laden with bags of sandstones, granites, and metamorphic specimens, they seemed to be on a roll.



Fuel depot at the abandoned research station, Kinnvika cove in Murchisonfjorden.



Catrin and Nikola chipping away for samples.



Joanna high above Hornbaekpollen.

“Chris and Misha, the two polar guides, had the hardest job though, as they did basically nothing all day but watch the others from a vantage point where they could see an approaching polar bear from all directions.”



Chris, lead polar guide, discusses weapons training with Guillermo and Jose.

“In fact the bear did show up just after we fixed that camera trap. We had a lucky escape as the bear surfaced right next to the boat when we got back on board. Then he swam ashore and went right to the camera trap to check things out, but luckily left it in place.”

Chris and Misha, the two polar guides, had the hardest job though, as they did basically nothing all day but watch the others from a vantage point where they could see an approaching polar bear from all directions. Armed with Remington tactical pump shotguns with slugs, plus flare pistols with reporting shot, they had an unenviable job. Separated from each other on the wings, there was no sitting down, no earphones playing music, no nothing except watching — right by the book — for eight to 10 hours a day, while the scientists happily chipped away with their hammers and discussed their finds. I’d imagine observing this dynamic would make a science student think again before contemplating dropping out of university and taking a real job.

Meanwhile, the *Vinson* crew of three had ample time to investigate and sort out various minor problems on board, mainly dealing with the systems in the engine room. Those working 10 hours ashore in a cold climate expect hot showers and a functioning heating system when they return — that’s why we have two independent heating systems on board!

This was the routine for 30 straight days, with the sea ice retreating as we advanced into the fjords on the north coast of Nordauslandet, ticking *off* the geologists’ target areas of interest. On some days we would make three or four stops for quick sample-taking along a line of strata, island to island or headland to headland. Other times they would spend 10 hours on one small location, obviously agonizing over a probable geophysical conundrum.

Although our ultimate goal was to continue along the north coast of Nordauslandet and possibly circumnavigate that island, our *ultima thule* was Nordkapp at 80° 32’ N. On August 7, while the rock team investigated the spectacularly colourful boulders on Chermisideøya Island, Joanna and I climbed to the top to get a clear view out to the east. The sea ice was extensive and packed against the shore still. If we had more weeks in hand, we would have seen this clear out. Our schedule was two weeks premature, a calculation difficult to predict in any given year, and this uncertainty was corroborated by looking back over 20 years of historical ice charts. Some years the entire north coast is open at this time, others not at all until the fall freeze-up.



Credit: Kenneth Perdigon.

I have to admit that we were a motorboat on this voyage. It happens often in the high arctic, where the weather stays stable for weeks on end — or even a month, which was what happened to us. This was fortuitous for the scientists as they never lost a day of work ashore due to the weather. But the crew was hankering to get some sail up, which happened for a few hours on the way back to Longyearbyen while ghosting alongside Moffen

Island in a fog. There was just enough wind to put up full sail as we closed on what is essentially a small spit of sand where the largest colony of walrus makes its breeding grounds.

At once, a maelstrom erupted around the boat as hundreds of walrus spy hopped, following us for a mile before disappearing below the surface as quickly as they appeared.

*Those few unforgettable magical hours under sail (and the thought that if we had been under engine we might not have had that welcome), reinforced my choice of sail over power on these expeditions. You can make a case for power, but for me, it is sail every time. ✧*



*Pelagic at rest in Hornbaekpollen, Woodfjorden.*



Jose and Skip changing a camera trap for a collaborator from Oxford University. The camera was damaged by a polar bear.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skip Novak is perhaps best known for his participation in four Whitbread Round the World Yacht Races since 1977. But he is also a mountaineer, and, wishing to combine his mountaineering with sailing, he built the expedition yacht *Pelagic* in Southampton, England, in 1987. He has since spent every season in Antarctic waters. In 2002-03, Skip managed the construction in South Africa of his new *Pelagic Australis*, a 23-meter, purpose-built expedition vessel for high-latitude sailing in order to augment the charter operations of the original *Pelagic*. Launched in September of 2003, she is the flag ship of Pelagic Expeditions.

In March 2015, Skip was awarded the club's prestigious Blue Water Medal in recognition of his many years of voyaging to high latitudes. In January 2016, the Royal Cruising Club awarded Skip the Tilman Medal, named after Bill Tilman, famous mountaineer and exploratory yachtsman, for a lifetime of leading sailing-to-climb expeditions in high latitudes.

Skip sits on the panel of experts that vets expeditions to South Georgia on behalf of the South Georgia government. From 2012 to 2017, he served on the executive committee of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators.