



AQUIJO AROUND THE HORN

Skip Novak sets a measured pace as he helps guide the world's largest ketch for a Christmas cruise around Cape Horn and Tierra Del Fuego

PHOTOS SKIP NOVAK / GERHARD VELDSMAN



ABOVE RIGHT: Skip Novak in his element if not on his normal type of vessel



Gerhard Veldsman

option for a variety of reasons, so Gerhard and I, as we say in South Africa, 'made a plan'. We scheduled a 14-day cruise beginning on 23 December in Ushuaia and ending on 5 January in Puerto Natales, including transits of the Beagle Channel, Brecknock Channel, Cockburn Channel and the Straits of Magellan. Rounding Cape Horn at Christmas would be a priority.

Aquijo sailed down from Punta del Este in Uruguay and it was a tight turnaround when the guest party boarded on the commercial jetty. Things went smoothly in Ushuaia, but it is no secret that port costs there are always astronomical, leaving a bad aftertaste. We entered Chile at Puerto Williams late that same afternoon, having swapped the Argentine pilot for Marcello the Chilean counterpart.

South American Super Yacht Support (SASYS), with which EYOS collaborates for all things Chilean, delivered fresh provisions that evening and next morning we were off down the Beagle Channel east about and anchored in Porto Toro at the east end of Isla Navarino for a walk ashore.

This most southern settlement (in the world!) is a fishing village but was then deserted as the king crab (centolla) commercial fishery had closed on 1 December. So no centolla to buy, but we were armed with a trap, which we put to good



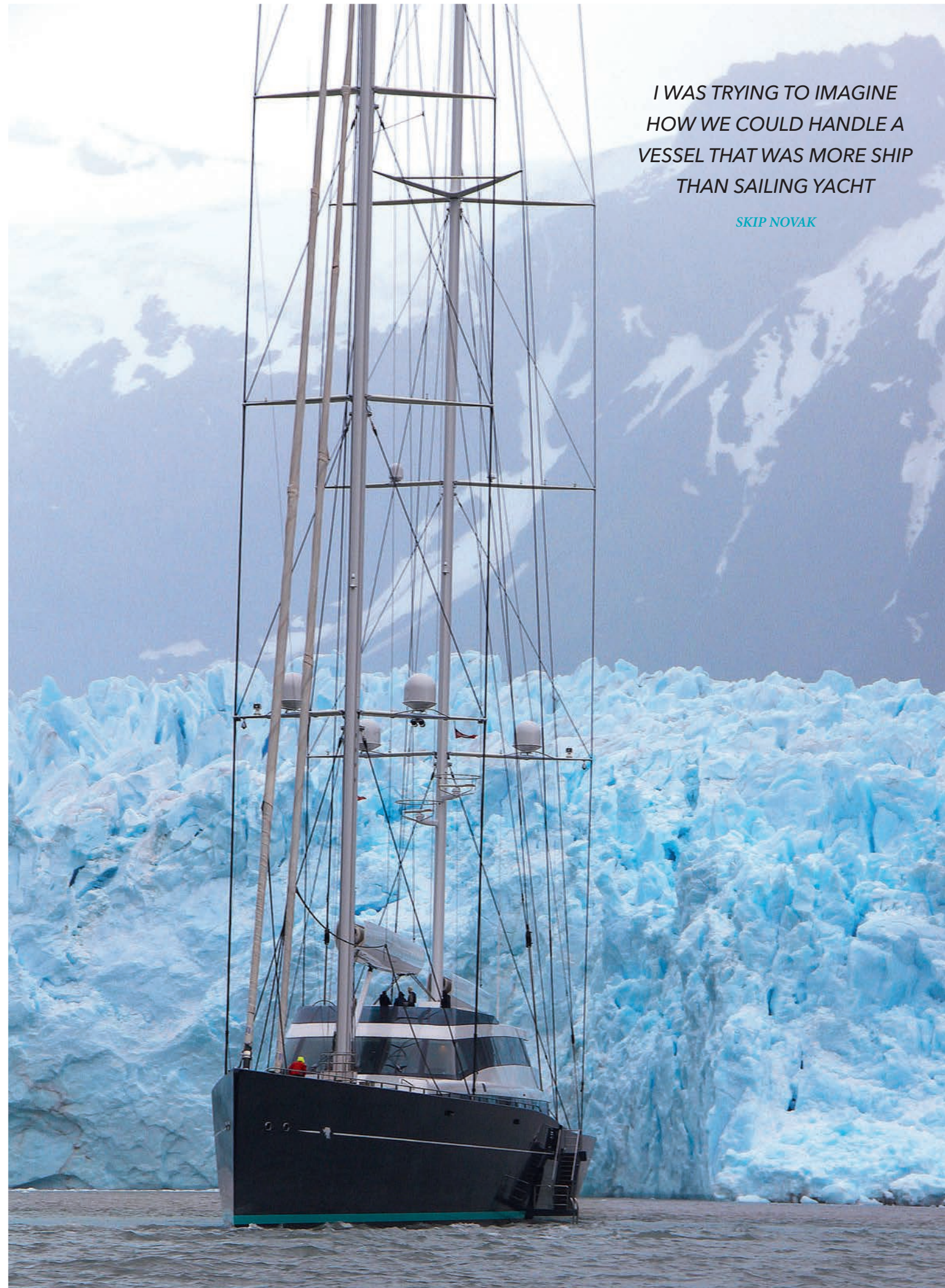
Stuart Pearce

When asked to help guide the 86m/282ft ketch *Aquijo* for a cruise in Tierra del Fuego and a Cape Horn rounding I was very sceptical. Accustomed to sheltering in small coves with my expedition yachts *Pelagic* and *Pelagic Australis*, with four lines tied securely to trees and rocks to get ultimate protection against frequent ferocious wind conditions, I was trying to imagine how we could handle this with a vessel that was more ship than sailing yacht. Instead it would have to be a single anchor down, and with two anchors down a risk of a twist and a tangle if the wind changed suddenly.

Working for the superyacht consultancy EYOS (Expeditions/Yachts/Operations/Specialists), I was so convinced that this was not a good idea that I tried to convince the South African captain Gerhard Veldsman that, counterintuitively, it would be better and safer to do a dedicated cruise to South Georgia. There most, if not all, anchorages are open to the sea along the lee north-east coast. Even in the strongest katabatic winds there is not a lot that can happen other than being blown out of your anchorage. In Tierra del Fuego you are for the most part boxed in by land on most sides and while swinging on a hook the wind can come out of any direction unannounced.

In any event I was voted down on the South Georgia

RIGHT: *Aquijo* is the world's largest Bermudan-rigged ketch



I WAS TRYING TO IMAGINE HOW WE COULD HANDLE A VESSEL THAT WAS MORE SHIP THAN SAILING YACHT

SKIP NOVAK

Gerhard Veldsman

CAUTIOUSLY, WE ROLLED OUT THE STAYSAIL AND THAT WAS ENOUGH TO SPEED AROUND THE HORN

SKIP NOVAK

use that night in Bahia Orange north-west of Cape Horn. The crew hauled her up at daybreak and we had more than enough centolla for our Christmas lunch.

It was predicted to blow a steady 40 knots for the Cape Horn rounding, so, cautiously, we rolled out the staysail and that was enough to quickly slide underneath the scenic Isla Hermite at speed and round the Horn by midday. And it was a proper rounding; under sail, blowing a Force 8, with all 25 of us on the fly bridge sipping champagne!

The idea was to try and land on Cape Horn Island but the westerly was bending around the land streaming long shore. We dropped an anchor well out, managed to get a Zodiac in to recce the landing on the rocky beach, but although the landing was tenable the side platform on *Aquijo* was awash and unsafe. Here was an example of the bigger the vessel, the more distance you need to be away from the land to be safe – but this renders you more vulnerable for safe tender ops in wind and chop. Unfortunately we had to scrub the landing and high-tailed it north back into the entrance of the Beagle Channel and passed by Puerto Williams.

Our next stop was a short 40 miles west to Bahia Yendegaia, which is a long fjord on the north side of the channel at the eastern end of the Darwin Mountain Range. We were hoping for a stroll around the abandoned estancia that was settled by a Croatian family at the turn of the 20th century. The 40,000 hectares of glacial outwash plain,

RIGHT: in fairer weather and good shelter it was possible to get ashore in the Zodiacs



Skip Novak

braided rivers and high mountains covered in beech forest has now reverted back to the government after a spell of protection from logging for wood chips being purchased by an environmental coalition.

It is now an extension of the Darwin National Park of Tierra del Fuego. Sadly, we were again thwarted from landing. Usually this corner of the fjord in front of the estancia where we always anchor is a calm spot (as I tried to convince Gerhard!) – well, not that day and again we had trouble using the side platform in strong winds and chop.

Fair weather

So, as expected, wind conditions were an issue for a vessel of this size, but luckily for us the remainder of the cruise was a benign spell of fine weather. We spent a full day, a night and part of the next day in Seno Pia exploring the eastern arm up to the head of the icefall and then anchoring in the west arm for the night. It is a tight spot but the calm weather held, giving us time and space to have an asado (barbecue) on an island in the fjord with the whole mutton carcass that had been curing in the open air hung from a padeye on the foremast.

We had everyone barring an anchor watch ashore for the four hours of slow cooking over a few drinks sitting on the rocks while watching the ice calve off the glacier across the



Skip Novak

ABOVE: boarding the tender was unsafe with *Aquijo*'s side platform awash



Skip Novak

ABOVE: a fine catch of centolla, or king crab



Skip Novak

ABOVE: Patagonian seas can be a challenge, even for an 86m superyacht



WE TOOK THE STRAITS OF MAGELLAN IN ONE HIT, PARTLY UNDER FULL SAIL, ONLY SLOWING TO OBSERVE THE HUMPBACK WHALES FEEDING

SKIP NOVAK

LEFT: Aquijo noses in towards the glacier at the head of the Seno Pio fjord

marvelling at the scenery and pleased with our efforts we were visited by a drone, I suppose an easier, but less satisfying way to take a picture of the *Aquijo* far below us.

Marcello really came into his own next day piloting us through the narrow tidal link of Canal Gabriel that leads into Seno Almirantazgo, which is the wide reach that bounds the northern side of the Darwin Range.

Here the glaciers have receded far inland, leaving terminal moraines beyond which only shallow-draughted tenders can venture. We spent a day and night in Bahía Ainsworth for tender cruising, walks ashore and visiting an elephant seal colony on an islet.

Time was marching on and because we had spent more time in fewer places, we were obliged to take the Straits of Magellan in one hit, partly under full sail, only slowing down to observe the humpback whales feeding midway up the Straits in the Coloane Marine National Park.

Our last anchorage was in Bahía Welcome in Canal Smyth before Marcello and Gerhard threaded the needle through the narrow channel of Canal Kirke leading to the windy Puerto Natales.

In summary, we had several outstanding days, but these were achieved by concentrating on fewer stops and not trying to move every day. A proper landing, if it is worth landing at all with things to do on shore, deserves a full day, a night there to relax and reflect and a slow start the next day before moving on. This rhythm is often not typical to superyacht cruising where the pace can be relentless, but I feel our schedule and what we achieved was well appreciated by both the guests and the crew.

Although we were blessed with good, settled weather for the latter part of the cruise this will not always be the case in this region. It must be made clear that to take these super/mega yachts into the channels of Patagonia will always remain a challenge.

Aquijo facts

Aquijo is the largest Bermudan rigged ketch ever launched. Designed by Bill Tripp for distance bluewater cruising with good sailing performance, her twin carbon masts set 3,247m² of upwind sail area. Her steel hull and aluminium superstructure was built at Oceanco and finished at Vitters. Range under engine at 13 knots is 3,200 nautical miles and she has accommodation for 30 in total.

Full details and pictures of the boat here: yachtingworld.com/extraordinary-boats/aquijo

bay – magic! The next morning we had a long hike picking manzanita berries (little apples) along the way. Through thick bush we walked to the snout of a retreating glacier and then back along a pristine beach with ice block sculptures stranded by the outgoing tide. We made a berry crumble for the desert that evening – we were not hunters but at least we were gatherers.

Dropping the hook

The next day we entered the famous Seno Garibaldi, the longest fjord that strikes north into the Darwin Range and put the bow close to a sea lion colony on the shore. There is no place to shelter in Garibaldi so we carried on west, anchoring for the night in an open bay called Puerto Engano.

From this point, going west and into the Brecknock Channel there is no shelter worth entertaining so we rounded Cape Brecknock, the western end of Tierra del Fuego, just on dark and doubled back to the north-east into the wide Cockburn Channel and put a hook down at first light in Bahía Escandalo in Seno Martinez – a good open anchorage for *Aquijo* with plenty of swinging room.

I took the younger members of the guest party on a typically wet hike through the woods and up to a glacial lake at 300m that gave a fine view down to the yacht. While



RIGHT: crystal clear ice from the mouth of a retreating glacier



ABOVE: asado, or barbecue, on an island in the fjord of Seno Pia. Mutton carcass had been cured in the open air, hung from a padeye on Aquijo's foremast

Skip Novak