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Around
CAPE HORN
and
TIERRA DEL FUEGO
on a
SUPERYACHT

by Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station

Photographs by Skip Novak and Gerhard Veldsman





When asked to help guide the 86-meter *Aquijo*, the world's largest ketch, for a cruise in Tierra del Fuego and a Cape Horn rounding, I was very skeptical. Accustomed to sheltering in small coves with my expedition sailboats, *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 of lines to shore, it would have to be a single anchor down, or two anchors down, with 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 this was not a good idea that I tried to persuade the South African captain, Gerhard Veldsman, that, counterintuitively, it would be better and safer to do a dedicated cruise to South Georgia. Most, if not all, anchorages there are open to the sea along the lee northeast coast. Even in the strongest katabatic winds, not a lot 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.

For a variety of reasons I was voted down on the South Georgia option, so Gerhard and I, as we say in South Africa, "made a plan." We scheduled a 14-day cruise, beginning on

December 23 in Ushuaia and ending on January 5 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 turn-around 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, his Chilean counterpart. South American Super Yacht Support (SASYS), which EYOS collaborates with for all things Chilean, delivered fresh provisions that evening. We were off the next morning, east-about down the Beagle Channel, 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 deserted at the time as the *centolla* (king crab) fishery had closed December 1. No *centolla* to buy, but we were armed with a trap, which we put to good use that night in Bahia Orange, northwest of Cape Horn. The crew hauled her up at daybreak, and we had more than enough *centolla* for our Christmas lunch.

Above top: A fine catch of *centolla*, or king crab. Above bottom: Boarding the tender was unsafe with *Aquijo's* side platform awash.



Patagonian seas can be a challenge, even for an 86-meter superyacht.

It was predicted to blow a steady 40 knots for the Cape Horn rounding. We cautiously rolled out the staysail, which was enough to slide quickly 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 along the shore. We dropped an anchor well out and managed to get a Zodiac in to recce the landing on the rocky beach. 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, which renders you more vulnerable for safe tender ops in wind and chop. Unfortunately, we had to scrub the landing and hightailed it north, back into the entrance of the Beagle Channel, passing by Puerto Williams.

Our next stop was a short 40 miles west to Bahía Yendegai, 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*, which was settled by a Croatian family at the turn of the 20th century. The 40,000 hectares of glacial outwash plain, braided rivers, and high mountains covered in beech forest has now reverted to the government, after a spell of

protection by an environmental coalition to spare the land from logging to produce wood chips. It is now an extension of the Darwin National Park of Tierra del Fuego. Sadly, we were again thwarted from landing. This corner of the fjord in front of the *estancia*, where we always anchor, is usually a calm spot (or so I tried to convince Gerhard!) but not that day, and we again had trouble using the side platform in strong winds and chop.

As expected, wind conditions were an issue for a vessel of this size, but luckily for us, we had a benign spell of fine weather for the remainder of the cruise. 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 an icefall, 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, where we roasted a whole mutton carcass that had been curing in the open air, hung from a pad-eye on the foremast. Everyone—except an anchor watch—spent the four hours of slow cooking ashore over a few drinks, sitting on the rocks while watching the ice calve off the glacier across the bay—magic! The next morning, we had a long hike, picking *manzanita* berries (little apples) along the way. We walked through thick bush to the snout of a retreating glacier, then back along a pristine beach with ice-block sculptures stranded by the outgoing tide. For dessert that evening, we made a berry crumble. We were not hunters, but at least we were gatherers.

Aquijo is the largest Bermudan-rigged ketch ever launched. Designed by Bill Tripp for long-distance bluewater cruising with good sailing performance, her twin carbon masts set 3,247 square meters of upwind sail area. With a steel hull and aluminum superstructure, her range under power at 13 knots is 3,200 nautical miles. She can accommodate 30 people in total.



Left: *Aquijo* noses in towards the glacier at the head of the Seno Pia fjord.

Above: Crested caracara in Bahia Ainsworth, north of the Beagle Channel.

Below: Bergy bit in Seno Pia fjord.





The next day we entered the famous Seno Garibaldi, a long 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 Puerto Engano, an open bay. From here, going west and into the Brecknock Channel, there is no shelter worth entertaining. We rounded Cape Brecknock, the western end of Tierra del Fuego, just on dark, doubled back to the northeast, into the wide Cockburn Channel, and put a hook down at first light in Bahía Escandalo in Seno Martínez, 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, up to a glacial lake at 300 meters, which gave a fine view down to the yacht far below us. While marveling at the scenery and pleased with our efforts, we were visited by a drone—an easier, but less satisfying way to take a picture of *Aquijo*.

Marcello really came into his own the next day, piloting us through the narrow tidal link of Canal Gabriel that leads into Seno Almirantazgo, a 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-drafted 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.

Rainbow after a squall at the head of Seno Pia fjord.

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 midway up the straits, in the Coloane Marine National Park, to observe humpback whales feeding. Our last anchorage was in Bahía Welcome in Canal Smyth, before Marcello and Gerhard threaded the needle through the narrow channel of Canal Kirke, which leads to the windy Puerto Natales.

We had several outstanding days, which we achieved by concentrating on fewer stops and not trying to move every day. A proper landing on shore deserves a full day, a night to relax and reflect, and a slow start the next day before moving on. This rhythm is not generally typical of superyacht cruising where the pace can be relentless, but I feel that our schedule and what we achieved was appreciated by both the guests and the crew. We were blessed with good, settled weather for the latter part of the cruise, which is not always the case in this region. Taking super/mega yachts into the channels of Patagonia will always be a challenge. 🦋

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Asado, or barbecue, on an island in the fjord of Seno Pia. A mutton carcass had been cured in the open air, hung from a pad-eye on *Aquijo's* foremast.



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 prestigious Blue Water Medal by the Cruising Club of America 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.