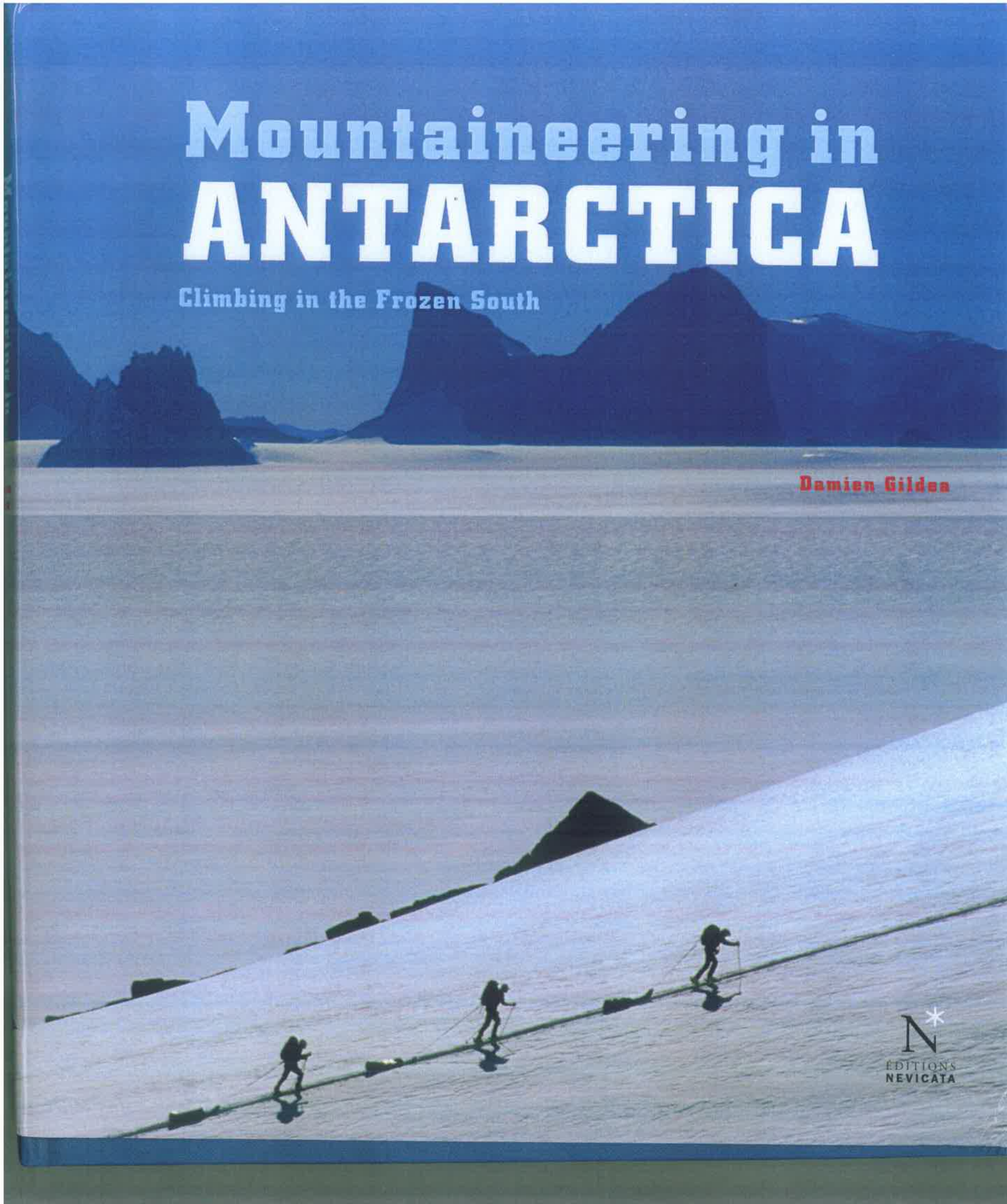


# Mountaineering in **ANTARCTICA**

Climbing in the Frozen South

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EDITIONS  
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# Skip Novak



## How did you first come to know of South Georgia and what inspired you to go there?

The inspiration in voyaging to South Georgia came from reading the Shackleton stories, well before it was fashionable to do so. That created the dream, which was brought closer to reality via my Whitbread Around the World yacht-racing career. Barreling through the Southern Ocean, occasionally coming close aboard to all those rugged sub-Antarctic islands was, for an amateur climber, a big draw for the future. The way forward was obvious; sailing to climb was the thing!

## When did you first visit the island and what were your first impressions?

My first visit to the island was in the winter of 1988, on our way to Cape Town after my first Antarctic season onboard the newly launched expedition vessel *Pelagic*. We had the run of the island, with no tour ships, no other yachts and little or no regulations to abide by. When the weather was foul (most of the time) we spent the days rummaging through the whaling stations and shooting reindeer for the pot. I was duly impressed and humbled during an outing when we had our tent flattened and destroyed while camped underneath Mount Senderens on the Philippi Glacier.

## Now that you have been there so many times, what do you like most about the island?

In spite of things having changed dramatically with regards visitor numbers on ships

and yachts, the mountaineering side today is as good as it ever was in the early days. A lot of that has to do with the fact that the island is so isolated, having no airstrip and therefore no easy and quick access possible. In any given year it is likely your expedition will be the only one on the island. This coupled with the fact there is no Search and Rescue facility of any kind, in the Alpine sense, gives the island the needed edge for a real adventure. When you venture into the high ground you are really left on your own, reliant on your own skills, fitness and judgement to make it back down again. And if there is a problem the drama doesn't end at the beach, as you have to sail back to Stanley to reach an ultimate safe haven.

## You made the fourth ascent of Mount Paget.

## Was this a long held objective, or just taking an opportunity?

My ascent of Mount Paget with a strong German team was part of a *Pelagic* charter, and I was lucky enough to be invited to participate in the climb. Many, but not all of my climbing expeditions were a consequence of finding people to mount a campaign, and planning the logistics for them, which by necessity meant chartering a sailing vessel. Voila! A niche was created.

## What would you describe as your most memorable experience on the island and your best climb on the island?

No doubt standing on the top of Paget on a windless sunny day, after having completed a new route, with the whole of the island stretched out below us, was my most memorable moment. But as on all summits the time aloft was fleeting. A deeper, more satisfying experience was our 2005 traverse from Larsen Harbour to Royal Bay with my three mates; Crag Jones, Julian Freeman-Atwood and Rich Howarth, South Georgia veterans all. With 16 days on the trot this adventure had all the elements and plenty of uncertainty. The first week was navigating by compass and dodgy GPS positions in a soupy whiteout, then there was the spectacular windless camp on the Spenceley Col where we failed on Mount Baume and succeeded on the

unclimbed peak that became Mount Pelagic, before arriving back at the camp in the teeth of a storm. After four days in a snow cave with food and gas running low, we bolted down the Spenceley, up and through the Ross Pass with black clouds licking our heels, making the beach at Royal Bay in a single day. *Pelagic* extracted the team in heavy surf the next afternoon.

## The island is a difficult place to climb and travel. Do you think there is a certain type of person who is attracted to South Georgia?

My experience having supported many climbing expeditions over the last 20 years is that the attractions for climbers, those who can afford to go, are obvious – plenty of unclimbed summits in a remote area – and this is true both for South Georgia and the Peninsula. But unless the expedition has deep experience of going remote with no back up, given the expansive nature of the terrain and the fact that the boat is an overly comfortable base camp, quite often little is accomplished!

## You have also sailed and climbed a lot on the Antarctic Peninsula. How do you compare and contrast the two places, from the points of view of both sailing and climbing?

South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula, although apparently similar with regards sailing to climb are in fact very different. Getting to the first shelter on the Peninsula from Cape Horn is a mere 450 nautical miles, across the wind in both directions. From Stanley to the first shelter on South Georgia is 750 miles, but the return is upwind, which not only means the total trip time must be substantially longer, but the prospect of a rough sea voyage can put many people with weak stomachs right off. With regards climbing, most interesting summits on the Peninsula are within easy reach of the shore, and there is superb boutique technical climbing right from the shore on towers, and in ice and snow couloirs. By contrast any climbing on South Georgia requires more of an expedition approach with long marches in by foot or on skis to access the big mountains. Coupled with often ferocious, tent-busting weather in the Southern Ocean storm track further north,

South Georgia is considered to be a much more challenging climbing environment.

**What advice would you give to those looking to sail in Antarctic waters?**

Sailing to climb in Antarctic waters is not to be underestimated and the sailing side is paramount to get right for a successful campaign in the mountains. Climbers need a reliable, safe, and mobile bolt-hole to use as a base camp, with a crew that understands their needs and desires. Many climbing expeditions have failed, or never got started, due to gear failures of the vessel, or a sailing crew lacking in confidence.

**You've already attempted one of the highest unclimbed peaks on the island – do you have future climbing objectives planned?**

To reveal any future climbing plans for a place like South Georgia would be a risky affair with my climbing mates – but of course, we have plans!

**How do you see the future of South Georgia over the next few decades, in terms of climbing and adventure activity?**

The good thing about South Georgia is that the future of the island with regards climbing and adventure activities is bright, for the few who can get there. The numbers will be self-regulating due to the cost of mounting a campaign by sea, plus the high risk factor and potential complications for Search and Rescue and evacuation. Regulations and permitting have recently been reviewed and updated, and because of the very few expeditions that actually get to the island annually, I believe little will change in terms of restrictions, at least once above the beach where the wildlife is concentrated and environmental considerations come into play. One significant factor recently implemented was to set a maximum size of 15 members on any one land-based expedition to avoid the 'Everest effect' and a minimum of four members for reasons of safety and self-rescue.

From north to south, these ascents include (all figures signify heights in metres):

- Peak 625 above the Brunonia Glacier
- Peak 620 above Cheapman Bay west of the Price Glacier
- Peak 980 summit at the head of the Crean Glacier
- Peak 1059 in the Wilckens Peaks
- Peak 922 between the Lucas and Morris Glaciers
- Mount Worsley (1104m) and another 1010m summit above the Murray Snowfield
- Stanley Peak (1263 m)
- Peak 861 on the Esmark Glacier, west of Mount Grant (1205 m)
- Two peaks – 1730 m and 1668 m – between Smillie Peak and Mount Spaaman
- Peak 1461 and two lower peaks – 985 m and 767 m – near the Spenceley Glacier
- Peak 707 and Peak 683 on the Novosilski Glacier
- Peak 1001 on the south side of the Novosilski Glacier
- Peak 1245, north of Starbuck Peak near the Risting Glacier, above Drygalski Fjord
- Peak 839 between the Jenkins and Philippi Glaciers
- The 920 m high middle peak of the Mount Sabatier (1145 m) Massif
- Peak 904 on the south side of the Philippi Glacier, northwest of Mount Normann (1238 m)

The survey journeys, done by manhauling sledges and backpacking, established two significant routes across the island: one from Cumberland West Bay up to Ice Fjord in the extreme northwest of the island, and the other from Cumberland East Bay down to Drygalski Fjord at the southeastern tip. Carse's maps would prove invaluable during the 1982 Falklands War, for they were not bettered for 50 years. This was tangible proof of excellence and achievement, clearly contradicting Carse's own image of his life.

Mount Paget is a massive feature, dominating an already impressive line of mountains on a mountainous island. Whilst not as steep and rocky as some other peaks on the island, Paget is far bigger



TYPICAL CONDITIONS on the unclimbed east ridge of Mount Paget.