

SKIP NOVAK

SKIP LOOKS FORWARD TO VISITING THE ISOLATED MARION ISLAND, AFTER SNEAKING GLIMPSES OF THE REMOTE SPOT WHILE RACING PAST IT

While my high latitude colleagues are languishing in various ports in South America, either blocked by port authorities or dead in the water for all practical purposes due to lockdowns or simply lack of demand, I find myself flat out here in Cape Town. Why? A simple case of being in the right place at the right time, with the right contacts.

Out of the 52 companies in the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO), which includes expedition ships, superyachts, air operators and vessels like *Pelagic Australis*, I have been the only one in operation, at least for the first half of the season.

Pelagic Australis arrived from Marion Island mid-November after a fortuitous 70-day charter supporting a science team. Marion is a South African outlier, 1,200 nautical miles south-east from Cape Agulhas. At 46° South it is well above the polar front, but is still considered a sub-Antarctic island, with all the wildlife you would expect in albatross, penguins, seals and many other species of burrowing birds. The South Africans maintain a meteorological station and support a marine biology contingent of 10 people. It is a very isolated piece of real estate, and much more remote and off the beaten track than even South Georgia.

No tourists are allowed and the permits to land are hard to come by. I have sailed by Marion (actually one of two islands known as the Prince Edward Islands) a few times during Whitbread Round the World Races, as it is more or less on the route to New Zealand, also taking in the Possession Islands, Kerguelen Island and Heard Island. If truth be known, and I don't mind admitting this decades later, I often cooked up navigational justifications to alter course slightly just to get a closer look at these wild places.

I don't think it would have changed the race results much. You will never get one of the Volvo or Ocean Race skippers trying this on now!

Pelagic's skipper Chris Kobusch was joined by Dion Poncet and Juliette Hennequin, friends from the Falklands

who lent a much-needed hand. Dion is a master at tricky surf landings and also driving inflatables around marine mammals, from many years doing the same for the BBC films we have all enjoyed.

The mission was to deliver 11 scientists down to the base who were supposed to go in March on the SA *Agulhas*, the South African ice-breaker, but got caught out like the rest of us with the COVID lockdown.

This project frankly saved my business, but to pull this off was three months in the planning during a severe lockdown in South Africa involving problems with visas, work permits, quarantine and COVID testing, and then clearing the port. It was touch and go right to the send-off as so many things bureaucratic could have scuppered us.

Pelagic Australis departed Cape Town on 16 September with 14 people coming on board straight out of quarantine, plus two and a half tonnes of cargo. A six day sleigh ride in the Roaring 40s

brought them to the lee side of the island.

The reports back to base were the anchorages were rocky and poor, constant swell was running and 60-knot katabatic winds poured off the extinct volcano almost every night. No country for old men... They arrived back in Cape Town on 17 November, ahead of the return schedule.

It is not easy for me to relate this adventure second-hand, having missed the voyage myself and I remain envious.

The good news is I'll be going down in April to recover some of the team who have been left on the island. This is finally realising my dream to see Marion, after those glimpses through the mist back in the Whitbread days.

Meanwhile the Cape Town story lives on. In January I am doing the first of two back-to-back trips down to Gough Island, in the Tristan da Cunha group, 1500 miles south-west of Cape Town. We are supporting a mice eradication project there sponsored by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).

Again, quarantines and COVID testing are required by both teams, specifically in order to protect the current staff on Gough who man the meteorological station. None of this is easy and adds layer upon layer of complications... so we soldier on. ■

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