

# SKIP NOVAK

ASKING THE UNASKABLE QUESTION: WHEN IS IT TIME TO GIVE UP SAIL IN FAVOUR OF POWER?

After 30 days on charter in Svalbard with little or no wind, where the sailing vessel *Vinson of Antarctica* motored everywhere we had to go, the old question of sail versus power, at least for a working vessel, again loomed large. After an experience like that, discussing the pros and cons with both the crew and the charter clients becomes inevitable.

Several of my colleagues in the south have evolved (or devolved depending on how you look at it), from sail to power. For a working platform a motor vessel of the same length does have several advantages over sail. More internal volume is obvious, but things like more deck space and more cargo carrying capacity are all positives for film teams and science projects who always bring inordinate amounts of unwieldy equipment that can be difficult to accommodate and handle on a sailing vessel. When on site, usually along the coast and within an archipelago, there's no doubt a motor vessel trumps sail. Often it's either not possible due to ice, nor practical for detailed navigation, or just not worth the effort to make sail. You end up carrying around those poles in the air while tripping over running rigging lying idle on the deck... and you begin to wonder.

The caveat, though, is that for reasons of perception and aesthetics sail is 'environmentally friendly'. Wildlife films often now include the mode of transport in the 'how we made the film' add-on which lends itself to favour sail. And frankly, some motor driven support vessels can be downright smelly and ugly.

Fuel consumption aside, the major negative for anyone experimenting with a motorboat solution is that the ride offshore to get to these points of interest can be an horrendous experience, rolling your guts out along the way with not much else to do except survive on some level of, if not misery, then for sure boredom. We see this in Antarctic superyachting and megayachting, in that most owners and charter parties prefer to fly in and join the vessel there, rather than 'suffer the Drake Passage'. Pity they never get to see the albatross...

There is also a question of age. Not the boat's, but the owner's, which point to a

motorised pre-Valhalla. This seems to be a logical progression, in spite of all the push-button sail control systems on offer in mitigation of one's physical ability going south over time. It's hard to gainsay this ultimate solution in staying afloat by any means fair or foul, but it is a watershed decision and can be an agonising one for many: if and when to lower the sails for the last time and throw in the towel. When this takes place, the reaction among peers can be one of polite surprise, possibly empathy, maybe pity and, in the worst case, considered grounds for treason.

It's worth being philosophical about this choice of sail or power at any time in one's maritime career, whether that be your baptism in the sea, or for those final voyages. It requires serious thought and clear thinking.

By coincidence, while up north I was reading Joseph Conrad's memoir *Mirror of the Sea*, which contains his reflections on his career in the merchant navy. He mused on the comparisons between sail and steam during

that transition in the late 19th century. It was relevant then and is relevant today when he said: 'It (steam/power) is less personal and a more exact calling; less arduous, but also less gratifying in the lack of close communion between the artist and the medium of his art. It is, in short, less a matter of love.'

On our way back around the north coast of Spitsbergen the breeze filled enough for the first time in a month to put out full sail on a beam reach just as we were approaching Moffen Island, an outlier at 80° north. Thick-a-fog, in the half light of a waning arctic summer we ghosted along in

welcome silence close aboard what is nothing more than a sand spit with a lagoon well offshore in the

Arctic Ocean. We slipped along in 10m of water keeping distance off with the radar and all of a sudden we were surrounded by a melee of spy hopping walrus in their hundreds – an unforgettable moment and I thought how different it would have been if we'd been under engine.

So the question must be asked again: sail or power? I still say sail – every time. If that day comes when I don't want to hoist those rags at every opportunity, that's the day I will turn around and march my way inland. ■

## 'Age points to a motorised pre-Valhalla'

