

# SKIP NOVAK

BEING IN THE MOMENT IN THE ANTARCTIC – RATHER THAN TRYING TO CAPTURE IT ON CAMERA – PROVED A RARE TREAT

Last December we were burgled in Cape Town, something everyone who lives in South Africa goes through at some point. My camera gear was passed out the window among other essentials, and I never got around to replacing it for our Antarctic charter with a film crew on *Vinson of Antarctica* that took place in February.

Nowadays, with the competition within the streaming services, wildlife production companies were down south in force and Port Stanley in the Falklands is now known as 'Little Bristol,' a legacy from the BBC Natural History Unit days of David Attenborough. When you work for one of these companies everyone has to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) so I can't tell you what we were filming and for whom. But it means that happy snaps were not to be encouraged and a miss-click of the shutter can get you into hot water later. Anyway, I thought to myself, after all these years of photographing everything that moves – wildlife, icebergs and every vista of Antarctic scenery – let's make an experiment and just look at all the attractions without a lens in the way.

Granted, I have closing in on 35 years experience in the high latitude expedition game, so all was 'in the can'. During various quarantines I'd whittled down my filing cabinet of transparencies to digitise, that content now on hard drives and in the cloud, hoping that cloud doesn't one day evaporate back into the atmosphere.

But being in Antarctica without a camera was an epiphany. I'd spent an enormous amount of time over the years photographing penguins and seals, and did spend time just watching them as they don't run away. Not so with whales, dolphins and birds on the wing. We all know what it's like when someone shouts "whale!". Chaos ensues as people fight to get out of the companionway, getting stuck two at a time like something out of a comedy sketch. Cameras are flying around loose from necks and everyone rushing up to the bow tripping over running rigging, then back to the stern, then the port side, then starboard, as these clever leviathans seem to love to playing hide and seek. The problem is the lens is always in the way of the action.

We had humpbacks alongside on

several occasions and without the preoccupation of a camera I noticed things I'd never seen before. Things like details of scratches and scars on dorsal fins, the number and size of barnacles on flippers and tail fins, then having the time to go eyeball to eyeball as they spy-hopped right up to the top of the lifelines. Also savouring the fishy smell of a whale's breath (not everyone's cup of tea) rather than agonising over the oil on the lens that ensues.

No matter how many times you've been in ice covered waters you can never be tired of seeing icebergs, and although the temptation is to shoot every novel shape and texture, without a camera I was more enthralled and contemplative. Ice avalanches, calving ice fronts and bergs capsizing are also things to capture if you are quick enough on the shutter, but by the time you hear the

cannon fire and then grab the camera, focus and shoot, most of the high drama is over. What joy just to watch!

Recording a life at sea, by whatever means, is a given, but I'm fascinated in the proliferation of videos and blog

posts from cruisers which has become almost addictive to a large part of the cruising public. The most popular clips made by cruising couples range from the evocative to the mundane, from the instructive to the frivolous; revenue being generated by advertising algorithms. What a clever way for people to finance a world cruise!

People who were not self-financed once got a sewing machine and fixed other cruiser's sails and boat covers along the way or, if you had a mechanical bent, engines, electrics and plumbing always needed mending to earn a crust. You might even have to graft ashore for months to make the booty to carry on. It seems with the advent of onboard communications, and internet in every gunk hole, this classic wandering with little structure is rapidly going by the board in lieu of recording and posting your every adventure on a regular basis.

And here is the rub: these folk are doing a job, not a cruise in the sense we might think. I can sympathise with them on the time taken to decide on a topic, film the sequences, make the edit and rush to get to an internet connection in time for the weekly feed. But cruising? The hell you say! And now I must get back online to buy that new set of camera equipment. ■

**'Let's just look without a lens in the way'**

