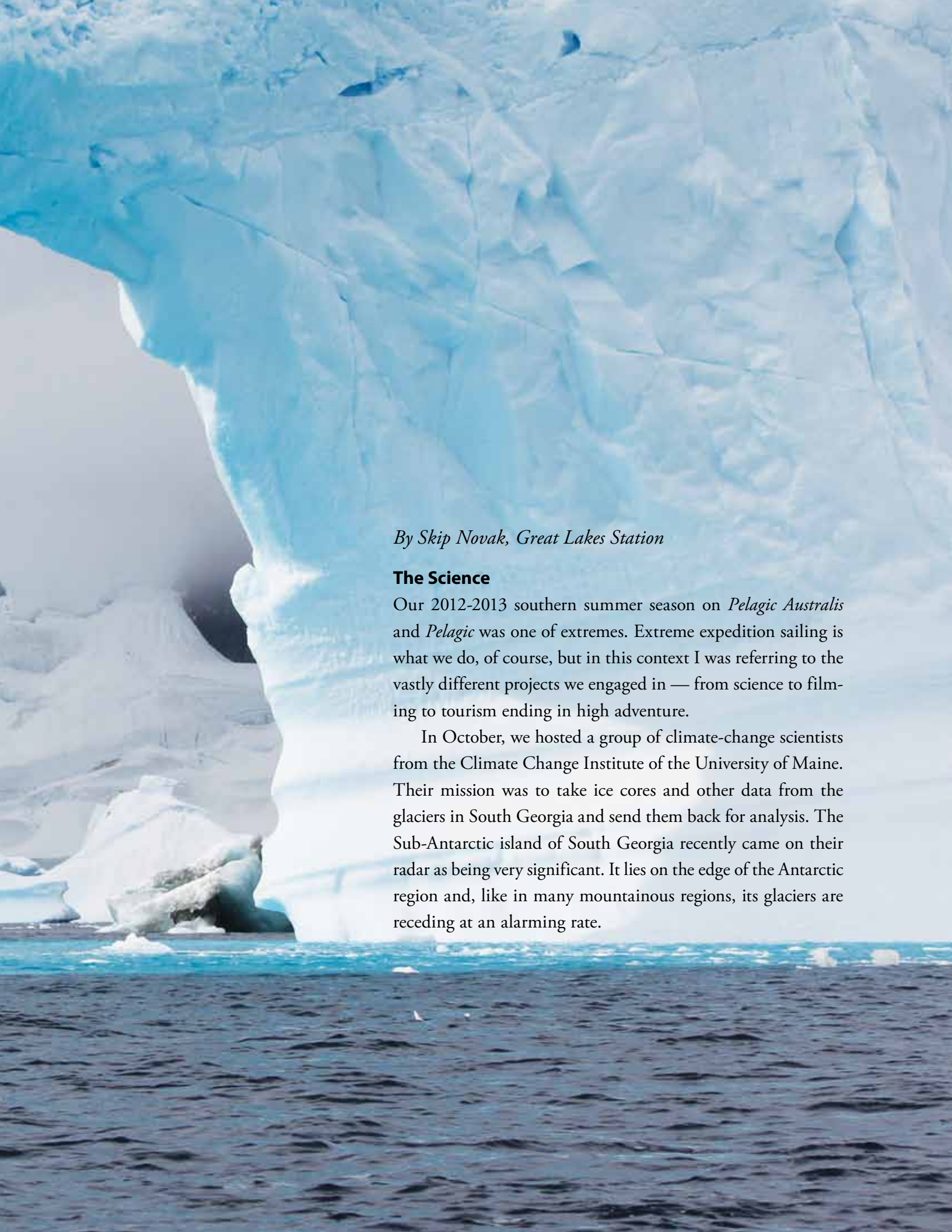


A photograph of an Antarctic scene. In the foreground, two penguins are swimming in dark blue water. The middle ground is filled with large, white and blue icebergs of various shapes. The background shows a hazy, snow-covered landscape under a pale sky. The text 'From ICE CORES to SUMMITS' is overlaid on the upper half of the image in a black serif font.

From  
ICE CORES  
to SUMMITS



*By Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station*

### **The Science**

Our 2012-2013 southern summer season on *Pelagic Australis* and *Pelagic* was one of extremes. Extreme expedition sailing is what we do, of course, but in this context I was referring to the vastly different projects we engaged in — from science to filming to tourism ending in high adventure.

In October, we hosted a group of climate-change scientists from the Climate Change Institute of the University of Maine. Their mission was to take ice cores and other data from the glaciers in South Georgia and send them back for analysis. The Sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia recently came on their radar as being very significant. It lies on the edge of the Antarctic region and, like in many mountainous regions, its glaciers are receding at an alarming rate.

I bear witness to this as in 2002 three of us crossed the middle of the Neumayeur Glacier on the way to climb a mountain called the Three Brothers (we climbed the eldest and ignored the siblings). The ice front that stretches over the sea was well over a kilometer away to the east. Today that route is open water.

Dr. Paul Mayewski led this team of five researchers and a journalist for the three-week project. A prolific campaigner in the field of climate change, Paul has led over 50 expeditions worldwide (and I mean where there is ice!) to take core samples and analyze the results for a better understanding of where we have been and where we are going with respect to global warming, among other phenomena. His most recent book, "A Journey Into Climate," summarizes his life of adventure underpinned by science – or it could be the other way around. When you read about some of the extreme environments he has worked in (but also stunningly beautiful), you really have to want to go there.

Based on the results, and the urgency to do more work on these peripheral, glaciated environments, he plans to get major funding to return to the island with a supply ship and big drilling equipment for deep coring at altitude.



**That distinctive logo!**

### Tourism

Two back-to-back tourist cruises on *Pelagic Australis* followed with the simple, but hugely enjoyable agenda of taking in the wildlife, the floating ice and historic points of interest on South Georgia in November/December, and then the Antarctic Peninsula in January. The key is having enough time to relax with a fully flexible schedule. If certainty is required, best embark on a cruise ship, but even that is not 100 percent sure at times. Not for the first time, this season a medium cruise ship had her pilothouse windows blown out by a rogue



**Skip, Toby and Rob on the summit of Mt. Scott with Kodak Valley below**



**Mincke whale needing a 'bottom job'**

**“In 2002 three of us crossed the middle of the Neumayer Glacier on the way to climb a mountain called the Three Brothers (we climbed the eldest and ignored the siblings). The ice front that stretches over the sea was well over a kilometer away to the east. Today that route is open water.”**



**Humpback whale leaving his finger print - every tail is personalised**

head sea in the Drake Passage. The captain and several bridge personnel were injured by shards of glass and the bridge was flooded. Were they pushing too hard in order to keep to a schedule? Maybe . . .

## Filming

In January on board *Pelagic*, we were joined at Cape Horn by the editorial team of the celebrated U.K. magazine, *Yachting World*, for a video shoot of "Skip Novak's Storm Sailing Techniques." The first part appeared in the October 2013 issue and runs for a year in 12 installments. These are online instructional videos hopefully to get the subscriber's blood pressure up, and content is fleshed out by a hard-copy article in the magazine. Topics include heavy-weather reefing, storm sails, heaving to, streaming drogues, anchoring in heavy weather and other related remote cruising subjects such as sounding anchorages, dinghy handling and aspects of fitting out.

These will seem facile and fundamental to CCA members, many of whom already subscribe to belt-and-braces vessels and simple systems for world cruising. Rather, the series is directed to what is a proliferation of inexperienced people possibly embarking on a cruise with a "performance package" and too much gadgetry — it is all about getting back to basic tried-and-tested techniques, relearning them in some cases.

To accomplish this feat of filming 12 installments in only eight days at Cape Horn, we needed wind every day. This was an optimistic and risky proposition, not because of the notoriously bad reputation

of the Cape Horn area, but rather the real possibility of having several days of calm and settled conditions which does happen after the systems blow through the Drake Passage. However, January is the windiest month in those environs so we took the punt, which worked out beyond our expectations. We were continually blown about in 40 knots-plus, 55 knots in one anchorage two days running and a wild ride around the Horn in typically big seas.

## The Adventure

Without a break to gather my wits or check the email (well, the social stuff), I stepped "up" from the deck on *Pelagic* to *Pelagic Australis* on



**Descending from Mt. Scott, the best day's skiing**



***Pelagic Australis* posing in front of the glacier we skied down from the summit of Mt. Scott, on the right**

Feb. 1, and we left two days later for Antarctica. This was a 30-day sailing for a ski-and-climb expedition led by me and the British climber, Stephen Venables. Our seven team members were a mix: From the U.K., Dr. Rob Davis, Nick Putnam, David McMeeking and Toby Fountaine; from the U.S., Dr. Tony Bell; from Australia, Dr. John Hollot; and from Chile, Rodrigo Jordan. All were accomplished off-piste skiers with expedition experience.

Our primary objective was an attempt on Mt. Francais, 2,850 meters high, on Anvers Island, which would require a week camping on the glacier. Mt. Francais is the highest summit on the peninsula (if you conveniently ignore Mt. Jackson at 3,180 meters at the base of the peninsula, arguably out of the maritime sector). We sailed across the Drake uneventfully (always welcome) and late on Feb. 7, arrived at Port Lockroy, Weincke Island. Here, at the abandoned British Antarctic Survey station from the '50s, since renovated, there is a tourist visitor's center managed by the U.K. Antarctic Heritage Trust. Immediately going ashore the following morning, we got the "postcard thing" out of the way, as you never know what can happen downstream – carpe diem!

That afternoon on Weincke Island, in view of a gear, fitness and ability test, we made an enjoyable ascent on ski and crampons of Mt. Jabet (only the lower south summit as we were late for dinner on board). The next day, after sorting out kit, we disembarked our camping and ski gear at Access Point on the south coast of Anvers Island, then went back to Port Lockroy with a view to an early start on Feb. 10.

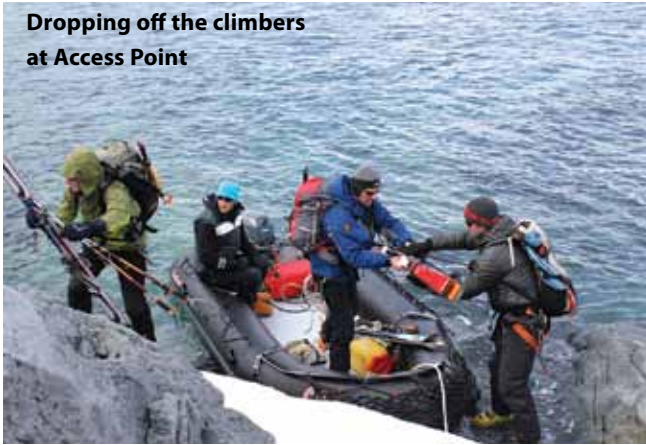
**Stephen Venables pulling across the flat expanse of the Marr Ice Piedmont, Anvers Island, on the way to Mt. Francais**



**The ad hoc marker flag that marked the way off the Menelaus Ridge during the storm**



**Dropping off the climbers  
at Access Point**



**Breaking camp after Mt.  
Francais. The mitten is a  
splint for a broken tent pole**

As planned, at 06:00 we were back at Access Point ready with light rucksacks to go ashore. Six of us made the dinghy landing without incident, but due to a delay with one of the team feeling ill, Rob, a physician, and Stephen stayed behind with him until the decision was made to carry on. In the meantime, brash ice appeared out of nowhere with the tide and blocked the drop point. It wasn't until 11:00 that the other three landed, on the other side of Access Point, ice-free, but in big swell.

It was a strong pull with heavy pulks (sleds) on soft snow up the crevassed glacier to 250 meters. From there the impressive expanse of the Marr Ice Piedmont flattened out to the west and north and the going was easier. We made our first camp at 17:00. The next day was

long, but we managed to complete the rest of the 25-kilometer approach from the coast to the base of the massif on the west side of Mt. Francais and Mt. Agamemnon which forms the spine of the island. Our original idea was to establish a high camp on the Iliad Glacier on the north side of the Menelaus Ridge, the western rampart of Agamemnon. This ridge was the route we climbed last season, summitting Agamemnon, but save for one tyro ski racer from Cortina, stopped short of Francais due to the cold and time. This time, due to terrain and other issues, not least of all an inauspicious forecast, we had to scrub the Iliad plan that required an extra day of approach, retreating to the site of last year's base camp below the Menelaus Ridge to the south.

The reasonable weather we had been enjoying was due to end



**Kayaking – the best way to  
sneak up on the wildlife**



**Above: Celebration dinner after the ascent of Mt. Francais – just BEFORE the crevasse rescue**  
**Right: Rodrigo and Tony with the Shackleton Whisky AFTER the crevasse rescue**

late the next day according to our evening Sat. phone relay from *Pelagic Australis* at Port Lockroy — fresh northeasterlies were predicted, so it was tomorrow or never. Eight of us left the tents at 04:30, approaching the shoulder of the ridge with head torches, the route well-guarded in the shadow of the massif, but with morning's twilight clearly defining the summit crests towering over us to the southeast. Negotiating several crevasse bridges on a steepish snow, we arrived on the ridge by 06:30, then continued the long skin up to the summit of Agamemnon, luckily staying on our skis (unlike last year) all the way, albeit having to zigzag our way through a steep section of seracs under the summit.

By 13:00 we were on the top with the weather still holding, but a change of sky to the north prompted us to dispense with any premature celebrations. We wasted no time in descending the 250 meters to the col between Agamemnon and Francais. Two of our group elected to stay in the col, while six of us, dropping gear and going “light,” continued to the summit of Francais, which looked a long way away, but only took an hour and a half. With weather now clearly threatening, we spent 10 minutes on the top gazing down into the channels and out across the peninsular plateau — too short a respite for any deep reflection, but that could be done back at base,



which was a long way away. A marvelous ski off the summit back down to the expansive col was followed by a painful slog back up to the shoulder of Agamemnon gaining our descent route down the Menelaus Ridge.

A long ski down this broad shoulder was made more challenging by increasing winds with spindrift on our right flank, and by the time we found our red flag marker above the camp, it was a full-blown “hoolly,” visibility nil. A quick descent over the edge and in the lee, the wind dropped and visibility cleared, giving us the treat of a superb ski down to the camp in soft snow. The timing had been perfect as

it happened by chance, and for me, it was a great way to celebrate my 60th year. I had admired Mt. Francais for the last 25 years, but due to one thing and another, I had never climbed it.

Needless-to say, the next two days were spent tent-bound as the storm passed through. Digging out, building snow walls, cooking and eating was the form. Boredom combined with bursting bowels prompted Stephen to spend three hours building an igloo (that became more like a teepee) for a loo, as our snow latrine was totally unusable in the howling winds. No sooner had he finished the job than the wind started to abate — but it proved to be a popular destination, with a queue as you would find at any Disney World attraction.

Anticipating a lull before the southwesterly cold front, we scuttled down to the beach in one long day, navigating by GPS and compass in a milky soup, testing the patience of the man in front being kept on course by the third man on the rope. We arrived at Access Point late at 21:00 on Feb. 16, with the wind earlier having flicked into the south – too late for the pick up, as the swell was already on the rise, making a dinghy extraction untenable. Two more days at the beach camp were spent resting, eating and strolling around the rocks, before our lift-off by mobile base camp *Pelagic Australis* on the morning of Feb.18, when the swell eased. A happy ending to a very satisfying adventure.

But as we were soon to realize, the adventure wasn't over. Never one to waste good weather in the far south, after we motored further south through the picturesque Lemaire Channel, aka “Kodak Valley,” a glorious calm afternoon signaled me to gather the troops, get geared up and ski over the top of Hovgaard Island from the Penola Straits



“We were just about to get stuck in when the skipper of the third yacht, *Spirit of Sydney*, jumped below to ask urgent help as one of the crew from *Santa Maria Australis* had fallen down a crevasse near the top of the island.”





side, to the anchorage on the west side between Hovgaard and Pleneau Island. This might be construed as over-ambitious bravado, just down from our big tour, but the team needed no persuasion in spite of blisters, sun-burned lips and the welcome lethargy that sets in after what the French would describe as “un grand effort.”

We quickly skinned up to the summit snow dome at 350 meters. After watching the sun skid below the southern horizon, we had a marvelous ski down to the beach, *Pelagic Australis* having moored alongside two other yachts -- a three-fanged spider suspended between a web of mooring lines anchored to the slabby rocks on shore. A group of sailors from the German yacht, *Santa Maria Australis*, were clambering around the granite and we waved to them as we skied past.

Below we were greeted by gin and tonics and delicious smells coming from the galley as skipper Magnus, mate Edd and crew Laura and Bertie, pitched in to conjure up a celebration dinner worthy of our summit. By 21:00 we were well sated on the red, and Nick brought out a commemorative bottle of Mackinlay’s Rare Old Highland Malt Whisky from a replica wooden box, recently distilled and marketed when original bottles (full) were found from Shackleton’s Nimrod Expedition of 1907-1909, underneath their hut at Cape Royds in the Ross Sea. We were just about to get stuck in when the skipper of the third yacht, *Spirit of Sydney*, jumped below to ask urgent help as one of the crew from *Santa Maria Australis* had fallen down a crevasse near the top of the island.

We, of course, rebounded from the main saloon cushions like coiled springs, but if the truth be known, it was quite an effort, or



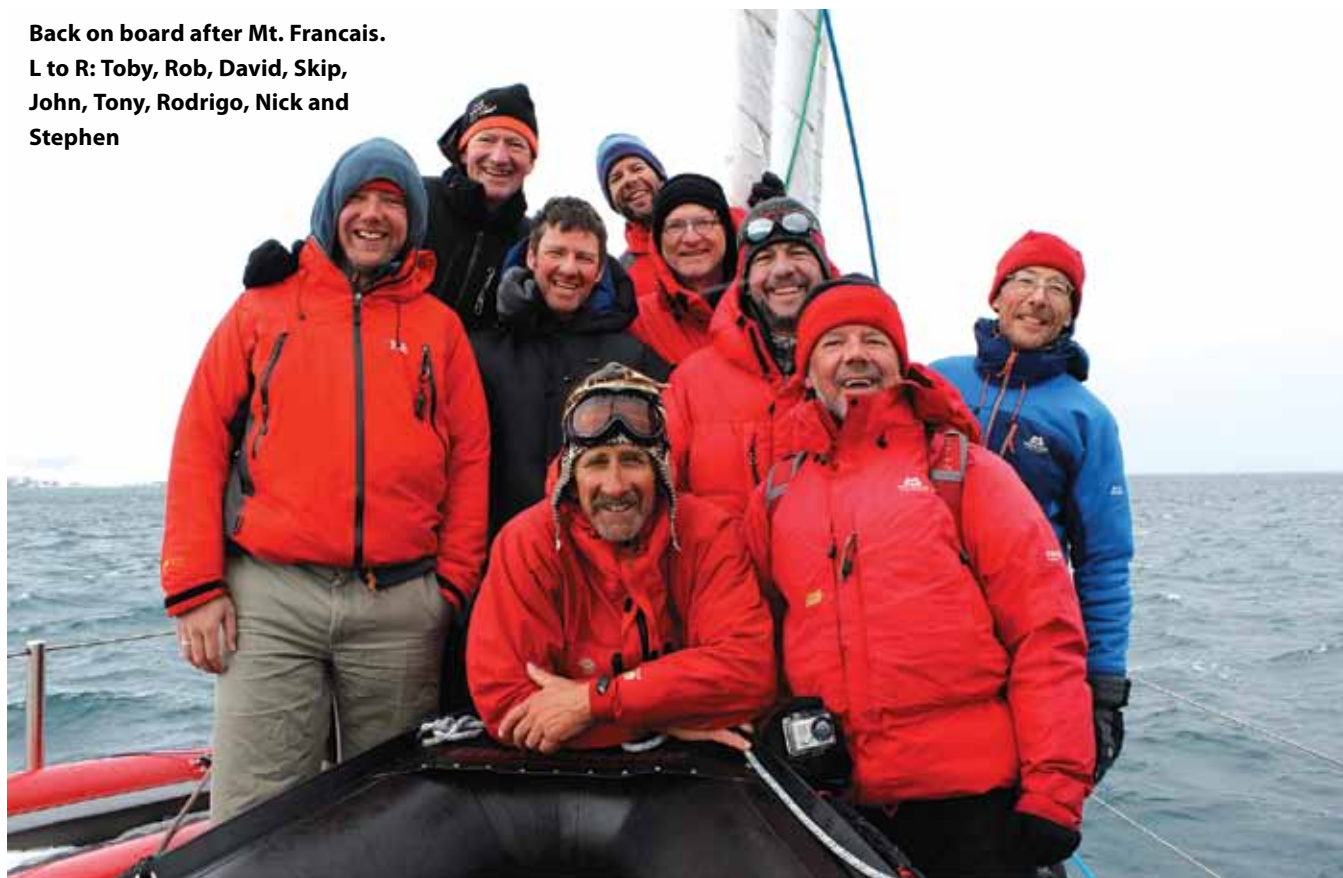
**Mobile Base Camp *Pelagic Australis* drops off the Mt. Scott team in spectacular conditions.**

circus, to gather our wits, all things considered. Stephen and I shared the port forward cabin and spent a frantic 10 minutes getting kitted up – “That’s my pair of inner boots, and by the way, you have the left one on your right foot.” You get the picture?

Five of us, three climbers, the strongest skier and one of the doctors, were landed with emergency gear including a sled for stretcher, and in the falling light, we skinned 250 meters up to where the skipper of the boat was signaling with a flashlight. I sobered up at about 150 meters.

**Back on board after Mt. Francais.**

**L to R: Toby, Rob, David, Skip, John, Tony, Rodrigo, Nick and Stephen**



On an otherwise unblemished surface, there was a hole, body size, where the Swedish gentleman had fallen through and fortunately came to rest upright 7 meters down on a solid floor of ice.

To make a long story short, it took the combined effort of six of us, using all our skills, to pull him out with a complicated pulley system (he weighed in at 90 kg). Suffering broken ribs, sprained hand and a badly lacerated chin, he could not help himself at all. I abseiled down to fit a harness on him and he was clearly in pain and going hypothermic, having been down there for three hours. I realized his facial injury was serious when the cup of tea I offered him from a thermos poured out from the bottom of his chin! We skied him down in the stretcher and, on board *Pelagic Australis*, the Docs flushed out his chin, stitched him up and dosed him with antibiotics. He completed his cruise on *Santa Maria Australis*, lying down and in pain. This all finished up at 02:00, and it was time to pass that bottle of whisky around.

Given the nature of crevasses (usually bottomless black holes), and the fact that you are often the only boat in an anchorage, he was very lucky indeed. The fact of wandering around on a glacier with no mountaineering equipment nor expertise was more than cavalier and we know this folly is often repeated by other yacht crews and passenger contingents on ships. This disregard for the nature of the

glaciated terrain, which is almost the entirety of the Antarctic, has become a major topic of discussion, education and mitigation, as every incident, especially a death, is a nail in the coffin for Antarctic tourism in any form. In 2005, an owner of an Oyster 60 died above Port Lockroy in very similar circumstances – 10 meters down a crevasse while talking a stroll with no equipment. It was surmised that pulling him out by brute force with a yacht rope around his chest was what actually killed him.

As always, with the main mountaineering objective behind us, and it must be admitted, the satisfaction of the rescue, all pressure came off, and we spent a spectacular week that remained mooching around the Penola Straits, with ski ascents of Mt. Scott, Mt. Demaria and Hovgaard Island, kayaking in the still of the early mornings within the archipelago, photographing icebergs, gawking at penguins and seals as they gawked at us, and strolling about aimlessly on shore soaking it all in.

There always has to be a focus to these trips and mountaineering certainly provides that. The camaraderie is an important by-product of the experience. The better you are organized, the better the outcome. The lazy days, though, are all part of it, time to wander on your own, reflect and dream without a schedule and structure. In the Antarctic, after the hard days, this is the icing on the cake. ☺

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Skip Novak was born in Chicago in 1952. He is best known for his participation in four Whitbread Round the World Yacht Races since 1977. In that year, at the age of 25, he navigated the British cutter Kings Legend to second place. Novel entries followed, skippering Alaska Eagle in 1981-1982, the first American entry; Simon LeBon's (rock group Duran Duran) Drum in 1985-1986 and Fazisi in 1989-1990, the first and last entry from the Soviet Union. "One Watch at a Time" chronicled the Drum campaign and "Fazisi – The Joint Venture" told the epic story of the Soviets, both written by Skip. His swansong from professional ocean racing was sailing over 50,000 miles on maxi multi-hulls over three years including co-skippering the 110-foot maxi cat Innovation Explorer in the millennium non-stop around the world event, The Race, in 2001.*

*A keen amateur mountaineer, having climbed internationally with several first ascents, he followed in the explorer-sailor Bill Tillman's wake when he built the expedition yacht Pelagic in Southampton in 1987 and has been south every season since.*



*He is frequently asked to comment on high-latitude adventuring and ocean sailing by radio, TV, internet and print media and is a regular contributor to many sailing magazines worldwide, including several stints as a columnist for the Daily Telegraph in London.*

*In 2002-2003, Skip project-managed the construction of the Pelagic Australis, partnered with fellow CCA member Rob Lansing*

*(GLS). She is a 23-meter purpose-built expedition vessel for high-latitude sailing and is the flagship for his company, Pelagic Expeditions.*

*Skip sits on the panel of experts that vets expeditions to South Georgia on behalf of the South Georgia government. He is also on the executive committee of IAATO (International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators).*