

Amy and Lara jump for joy at Cuverville Island.



**T**HE 54-FOOT STEEL EXPEDITION YACHT *PELAGIC* was chartered to the BBC for the entire four months of the Antarctic season to film the life cycle of the Gentoo penguin from haul-out in early November to fledging in early to mid-March. The location was specific to Port Lockroy, known to every yachtsman who has sailed to the Antarctic Peninsula. This was an urban penguin story combining the penguins with the human traffic at the base which serves as a visitors' center for the tour ships, complete with a British post office. "Penguin Post" is the name of the film released last fall and will be aired around the world during the coming year. Skip, his wife Elena, and family (Luca, age 10 and Lara, age 11) along with the producer's wife and two daughters (ages 12 and 14) did Stage 2 of 3 during their school holidays in December and January. This is Skip's sporadic blog from a reluctant and first time blogger ... with limited editing.

**December 20, 2013 - Port Lockroy, Antarctica**

The project has returned to Port Lockroy for Stage 2, but not before a struggle. It all began in Cape Town, when six hours before Elena, Lara, Luca and I were due to get in the taxi for the airport to fly to Buenos Aires, Nelson Mandela died after his long illness. Elena, who has worked on covering Mandela for the last seven years had to bail and stay behind organizing the ensuing media extravaganza on behalf of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), with heads of state arriving by the plane load.

Predated gentoo egg.



# FAMILY HOLIDAY

## Making a BBC Film in Antarctica

by Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station

First to hatch, Lucas's Captain.



Christmas tree from Puerto Williams.



Decorating Pelagic interior.

The three of us carried on of course, and I hatched a plan for Elena to join us on the Peninsula via cruise ship, departing Ushuaia today. Mandela was buried on the 15th, so she would have time to tie up loose ends, get a plane on the 18th and hopefully join us by Christmas Eve. But even this is not sure, read on . . .

After a night in Buenos Aires following our long flight, the three of us flew down to Ushuaia where Dave, the skipper and crew Bertie were waiting for us, *Pelagic* having been provisioned and fueled and more or less ready

**“ The only imperative job ashore, other than waiting around the port captain’s office and customs and immigration clearing in and then clearing out, was to cut down our Christmas tree. ”**

to go, after their week between their epic November trip on Stage 1. Film producer Andrew also sailed back, leaving his wife, Ruth, at the Port Lockroy base. Struggles continued in Ushuaia—never a relaxing place—we spent two days marching up and down the town doing last minute shopping getting materials for Christmas decorations, art supplies, sketching pencils, two bottles of gin and one of brandy (for flaming purposes only!), elastic for making wrist loops to prevent gloves and mittens from blowing away, a fishing pole (cheap Chinese model that fell apart immediately), Lara’s favorite Argentine biscuits, plastic water bottles, sick buckets ... all between darting off to Ramos Generales (locally famous general store/restaurant/bakery/wine bar/coffee shop) for an expensive coffee and to check emails before departure—you get the picture.

Bertie flew back to the UK on the 9th for R & R. I had to pressgang Dave back aboard to take Elena’s place—he was due for R & R in Port Stanley during the holidays and we checked options for getting him back once we hit the Peninsula, before Elena’s ship arrived.

Leaving the dock in Ushuaia is always a relief, except in this case when Dave and I miscommunicated and we made a balls-up of casting off and bent part of the pushpit, luckily not damaging the expensive yacht behind us—an inauspicious start. Nevertheless, we enjoyed a sail under jib down the Beagle Channel, while Andrew, his wife Emma plus Amy and Daisy, all nonsailors, got their gear stowed, were briefed on the plumbing in the head and all the dangers that could entail.

This would be a steep learning curve for them, crossing the Drake Passage on their first offshore sail.

Entering the creek at Puerto Williams, Chile was really the beginning of the expedition, as the town has nothing to offer in terms of retail, so no distractions. We could finally focus on getting the vessel ready for sea. The only imperative job ashore, other than waiting around the port captain’s office and customs and immigration clearing in and then clearing out, was to cut down our Christmas tree. We found a classic Tierra del Fuego version not far from the Micalvi Yacht Club: a Canelo (a winter bark) which found its way into the forepeak with much speculation on whether it would survive the Drake. So too the crew.

**On December 21 at 1800** we left Puerto Williams with a good forecast, feasting on centolla, the local king crab, on deck, a present from our friend and agent, Cocha. The four bedded down after dinner and, as expected, various levels of sea sickness manifested themselves as we left the protection of the archipelago near Cape Horn and picked up the Southern Ocean swell.



Dave, Pelagic skipper, as tour guide at Port Lockroy

I won’t go into detail about the crossing, but it was all about keeping the kids hydrated, passing sick buckets around and offering the usual comforting platitudes. The second day and night out was the worst, and then the weather did change and everyone slowly came to life, although mainly staying horizontal.

After a windless third day, having made an exceptionally fast crossing of 72 hours from Williams, we entered Boyd Straits and

turned east for Deception Island, the first shelter, in order to take a break, recoup and have a run on terra firma, the only sure cure for mal de mer. After a good breakfast, the first decent meal in a while for the minors, we blew up the Zodiac and ferried everyone ashore. Andrew filmed the kids sledding behind the ruins of the whaling station, meeting a few stray Gentoos and standing shrouded in steam in the warm water on the beach. Everyone felt a lot better about the situation. That evening we sailed south, or rather motored in a light southerly, as our goal was to get back to Port Lockroy ASAP because the first chicks would be hatching from this point forward. Ice reports further south from the other yachts, *Pelagic Australis* included, and cruise ships were not encouraging. Sea ice and brash ice still was blocking the primary channels and anchorages in the central Gerlache Straits area, with stable weather offering no chance for a flush out soon.

After a long day and night underway with little or no ice in the Bransfield Straits and northern Gerlache, we decided to spend the night at Cuverville Island. Getting to Lockroy would be a mission, as apparently it was still surrounded by brash ice. In fact the base had only had one landing in the previous two weeks, which would be a substantial loss of income for the Antarctic Heritage Trust. We were lucky though, as the anchorage at



Pelagic arrival in early November for Stage 1.



**“I kayaked around to Jougla Point, alternately with Lara and Luca in our two-man kayak and walked across the sea ice in Alice Creek to visit hauled out Weddell seals. Nearby on the shore, the first blue-eyed shag chicks have hatched during the last day or two and all the gentoos are sitting firm on their eggs.”**

Cuverville was open enough to spend a quiet night, after three hours ashore in sunny, calm conditions at the Gentoo colony, albeit sharing the landing with a cruise ship.

Next day we attempted to reach Lockroy via the Neumayer Channel from the north, enjoying twisting our way through unconsolidated brash ice, but were stopped not 2 miles from the station when it all closed up and got very sticky. So it was a back track to Waterboat Point dropping a hook off the Chilean base, Videla. Next morning we tried via the south end of the Neumayer, and got within less than a mile from the base, and same story—thick brash and no way to push through. Rather than shelter at an open anchorage miles way, we decided to plant *Pelagic* in the brash and spend the night there, on the chance that a change of tide or wind would open it all up. And that’s what indeed happened when we woke the following morning. We pushed our way into the inside cove not 20 meters from the boathouse at Lockroy, with five lines ashore—and here we sit in glorious sunshine, having remade contact with Ruth and the team of four who man, or should I say woman, the base for the summer season. The ice has moved back in and effectively we are trapped for the moment, but able to get ashore in the Zodiac.

Elena has boarded the cruise ship *Ushuaia* this afternoon . . . but I am wondering . . . if



the ice doesn’t move out and we can’t get back out nor she can get in . . . ??

### December 23

We have spent an incredible three days “trapped” by ice at Port Lockroy, with a tenuous link to the shore after the sea ice has closed in again with a fresh southerly on the afternoon of the 20th.

Port Lockroy is one of those places that are sometimes avoided when you want to get away from the almost daily—twice a day normally—cruise ship traffic, not to mention a default anchorage for the various yachts that



**From top: “Bobbing,” a favorite pastime. Luca and gentoos on way to nest. Second chick breaking out.**

are sailing in the central Gerlache area. Not so this time, as we had the rare experience of no traffic due to the brash ice pressing up against the base, preventing any landings by the cruise ship Zodiacs. The team at the base (Helen, Jane, Sarah and Christy) were most welcoming as they hadn’t had a cruise ship landing in weeks. Normally they are flat out lecturing the tourists, conducting tours through the museum and running the souvenir shop (good quality stuff) in addition to doing ongoing maintenance to the base. We couldn’t offer showers on board, dinner and drinks, re-provisioning nor a laundry service which they enjoy as part of the cruise ship visits. Only our company was mutually enjoyed and we spent the last three evenings together in the luxurious Nissan hut they are billeted in, cooking up delicious meals, playing cards and spinning yarns.

While I loosely monitored the cruise ship traffic to see who could accommodate a change of plan for Elena to transfer over and for Dave to somehow get out, there was plenty to do. While Andrew was back filming his Gentoos



**Lara with the GoPro.**

and Ruth was doing set ups for the children’s film, Lara, Luca and I kayaked in the open water that came and went, hoisted everyone to the top of the mast for a view (several times in Luca’s case and he finally summited), came to grips with a penguin survey (more on that later) and decorated the Christmas tree and most of the interior of the boat - all homemade

- so much so that for the adults it is a veritable obstacle course to get from the chart table to the galley, ducking and diving under various contraptions. All magical stuff!

Also on the 23rd I kayaked around to Jougla Point, alternately with Lara and Luca in our two man kayak, and walked across the



**Kayaking in the Penola Straits.**

National Geographic Explorer comes in close.



sigh of relief as the burden on child care could now fall on the mother, as it was in the old days and should be now. Well, I have to confess to doing pretty well. Their nails were cut, Lara had her second shower in two weeks, but I failed on Luca ... must be a boy thing. Elena spent part of Christmas Day reworking the kids clothing and equipment – a veritable chaos in the port side cabin and it was then revealed that we were missing a sock here, a slipper there, some beanies had worked themselves into the bilge, etc. But as Luca frustratingly said, “We had a system before she arrived!” And we did – a boys’ own (Lara included). I am heartily glad she is here, as I can now concentrate even more time on kayak trips, Zodiac tours (with Luca as chief driver) going up the mountain for sledding and preparing to camp out—the fun bits.

Leopard seal smiling for camera.



The cruise ships and other yachts have now started to arrive in earnest.. Almost every day there is a ship visiting in the morning and another in the evening. The girls at the museum and gift shop are now flat out and the relaxed days we spent with them are a thing of the past I’m afraid. Yesterday, our crew was invited on board the National Geographic Explorer, a Lindblad ship and arguably the premier polar ship of the genre.



Laras' study group

Captain Leif Skog, who has gathered an incredible amount of information that does not yet appear on the hydrographic charts, put the bow of his ship 30 meters from the rocks at Port Lockroy—most ships anchor a kilometer offshore. On the bridge, he explained his technique of dropping his anchor in deep water, putting the chain on the bottom, then overriding the chain and gently motoring against the cable tension with a bridge officer steering keeping the ship straight. He knows exactly where he can do this with 3D images of the bottom on an array of computer screens, all marked “not for navigation!” He explained this is a much safer way to keep a ship on station in this environment, and also more safe for the landings as the Zodiac trips are consequently shorter. Fascinating! On the kids' side, Lara, Luca, Amy and Daisy all had ice cream in the café on board - a highlight of the tour for them!



Always time for snow men.

sea ice in Alice Creek to visit hauled out Weddell seals. Nearby on the shore, the first blue-eyed shag chicks have hatched during the last day or two and all the gentoos are sitting firm on their eggs.

Only today has the ice retreated with a light northerly breeze, and one yacht has dared to enter, now anchored at Jougla Point. Dave is going over for a drink and to gather information on ice in the southern Neumayer, as the Ushuaia with Elena on board is due in tomorrow afternoon, in time for Christmas Eve, ice permitting.

Alas, our relative solitude will be shattered as a direct function of the retreat of the brash ice, and the ships will rush in.

**December 27**

Well, Elena did arrive, just in time for cocktails on Christmas Eve! The cruise ship *Ushuaia* was the first ship into Port Lockroy just as the ice was on the way out, hopefully for the last time. Finally united, I could breathe a



Lara and Skip changing chip and batteries in camera trap.

The Gentoo chicks are expected to hatch around New Year’s Day, a bit late due to the heavy snowfall on shore, which limited their nesting opportunities. Andrew, the filmmaker, is poised and ready to go, spending most of his time behind a camera concentrating on a few nest sites. “Blue Chip” wildlife filmmaking



Sarah taking the third census.

precariously close to a cliff edge above the sea. He has named them all and both he and Lara are keeping track of the number of eggs—Gentoos usually lay two, only visible during parent change overs, and coming up will be the number of predations by Skuas and Sheathbills and eventually the number of chicks who survive. This will be the emotional part and I hope we survive it without too many tears.

Yesterday Elena, Lara, Luca and I put on our climbing harnesses, motored around in the Zodiac to Damoy Point, and climbed up a steep slope across a few bridged crevasses to gain the shoulder above the old British Antarctic Survey (BAS) refuge at Dorian Cove. Lara and Luca sledged down spectacularly. I skied and Elena step plodded in deep snow—we only have one pair of skis. The refuge is now a historic monument, as it was a transit point for BAS personnel who were dropped by ship and later (sometimes months later due to bad weather) flown down in Twin Otters to the deep field logistic base of Rothera in Marguerite Bay. In 1988, on my first expedition with



but I am chomping at the bit to get outside and check the progress on the blue-eyed shag chicks at Jougla Point.

**January 2, 2014**

Actually I have been giving this blogging lark quite a lot of thought lately - only thought and no action as you might have noticed.

I have been having too much fun to blog. Then there is the consideration that the only time to blog is in the evening (can you imagine being below on a clear, stellar day in the Antarctic sitting at a damned computer?) and I have finally figured out that blogging after drinking a bottle of wine in the evening can only land me in embarrassing situations. Mark Twain said, "If you wish to inflict a heartless and malignant punishment upon a young person, pledge him to keep a journal for a year." I would agree, but striking out the word 'young' so this could conveniently apply to yours truly.

It's cloudy and windy today. Filming down below is the theme for the kid's channel,

Therefore I have decided I will not be telling you in any detail about the marvelous

**“Andrew, the filmmaker, is poised and ready to go, spending most of his time behind a camera concentrating on a few nest sites. “Blue Chip” wildlife filmmaking is all about patience – sitting for hours, days and sometimes weeks and months on end, waiting for key moments to unfold.”**



Kayak, best way to observe wildlife.

is all about patience - sitting there for hours, days and sometimes weeks and months on end, waiting for key moments to unfold. It was very unlike the alligator/croc/snake wrestling variety of films that proliferate on television today.

Lara and Luca's penguin study is going well and takes up an hour a day monitoring two specific sites. Lara has four penguins in front of the base, all named after her best friends in Cape Town. Luca has gone for volume with 17 Gentoos, some perched



Above: Luca and his dinner, Beagle Channel. Below: Ice pilot Lara.



Above: Lara aloft.  
Below: Uplifted on the Fram.

New Year's Eve party we had on the swish motor yacht Hanse Explorer that was parked in the sea ice, celebrating with my old sailing mate and *Pelagic* veteran Peter Isler, and also Graham "Grum" Charles, one of the Expedition Leaders on board and also a two time *Pelagic* veteran.

True to *Pelagic* form our crew danced until 0300 and closed the bar, but I won't elaborate any more on that.

And our night under canvas on top of Damoy Point, with a view over the southern Neumayer Channel, sparkling with brash ice and the mighty massif of Francais towering over us to the west on Anvers Island. Of course it is hard to imagine if you hadn't been there.

**“When Luca said, 'I want to sail back with you Dad,' and Lara said, 'But I don't want to go on a cruise ship, I want to go back on Pelagic,' it was about the highest accolade achievable.”**

### January 6

Finally we were liberated from our main commitment filming penguins at Port Lockroy, and able to sail south for three days in search of leopard seals, Adelie penguins and “come what may.” The weather was spectacularly clear and there was plenty of ice still to make things interesting.

After all this a sudden reality set in, in view of the weather prognosis, that we would unlikely make our flights out of Ushuaia back on the mainland on the 15th. A rapid Plan B was put in motion where Elena, Lara, Luca and Andrew's family Emma, Daisy and Amy would jump the cruise ship Fram on the 10th for a painless voyage back across the Drake Passage. Of course this can be seen by sailing purists as a “cop out,” a slavishness to urban responsibilities. Lara and Luca were at least very sad and of two minds about the whole thing - to be abandoning Dad to his own devices (pass the bottle), and not taking it on the nose. It was very admirable of them. When Luca said “I want to sail back with you Dad,” and Lara said, “But I don't want to go on a cruise ship, I want to go back on *Pelagic*”, it was about the highest accolade achievable. Elena and I sailing back together might even have been good for our marriage (a clip right out of the Simpson's), but in view of flight changes (not possible for another week), school issues and Elena's work, we, for once, thought clearly of the consequences. I waved them goodbye at Fram's landing stage and then they were sucked upstairs into the bowels of this impressive polar tour vessel. The image was right out of the film “ET.”

### January 10

Ruth moved back on board. She and Andrew are onshore most of the day hovering over penguin nests attempting to get “five star” shots. The chicks are pretty much all hatched and predation from Skuas is beginning in earnest. Me? I am left to my own desires – puttering around doing odd jobs, collecting ice for our water supply, baking bread, visiting the girls at the base and occasionally adjusting our five shore lines (I was out at midnight in a raging gale re-attaching a wire sling to a rock, so it's not all beer and skittles).

Other than keeping *Pelagic* on station, there is little urgency to deal with. Antarctic bliss.

I am due out on the Fram on the 19th when Dave comes back in. Bertie arrives on *Pelagic* Australis the first week of February to carry on with Stage 3 of the “Penguin Post.”

Check my blog at [http://www.pelagic.co.uk/logs&blogs\\_over.asp](http://www.pelagic.co.uk/logs&blogs_over.asp) I will let you know how things are going, but, as always, don't count on it! For those of you who live vicariously via blogs, come down and experience the real thing. ☺

## 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).*

*In April 2014 Skip was awarded the Ocean Cruising Club's Geoff Pack Memorial Award for having exposed millions of ordinary people and sailors around the world to extreme adventure sailing through writing in books, magazines and newspapers plus appearance in film and video.*

*In March, 2015 the CCA will honor Skip with The Blue Water Medal.*