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Sailing by Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station to Climb





Sailing by a tabular glacier.
Above: Stephen Venables
on the summit of Mt. Baume—one
person at a time up there (2016).



“It doesn’t take a “sailing to climb” expedition like the one I just finished in October to realize how the raw forces of nature can lay waste to well-made plans. It can happen to any of us who go avoyaging once we quit the land.”

Granted, sailing through the Southern Ocean to South Georgia does raise the bar of vulnerability, no doubt about it. And once you are there, what can be accomplished in the mountains is a gamble in the truest sense of the word. If totted up, our mountaineering failures over three decades far outweigh the successes. Note that we are not masochists. The successes when they came were sweet and well appreciated. Sometimes, though, at the height of the storm on land or sea, you do wonder.

The well-known British mountaineer Stephen Venables and I have been leading groups to South Georgia and the Antarctic peninsula for the last ten years, using *Pelagic Australis*, my 22.5-meter, South African Shipyards-built aluminum expedition vessel, as a mobile base camp. Often, we have a group of five or six invitation-only experienced mountaineers, being supported by three voyage crew who spend the time while we are in the hills doing the coastal tour. It is a formula that has become a desirable routine—time off the boat for us and more space on board for them.

The uncertainty of this game of chance in the hills is part of the attraction, but sometimes that uncertainty becomes the dominant theme rather than a prelude to achieving the objective. And years of effort are in this mix. In 2014, we had concocted a plan to start from the windward southwest coast, but that year it blew so hard we never got going and eventually defaulted to a Plan B in the north part of the island—climbing and naming the three peaks of the Trident Massif which lies astride the Shackleton traverse, a nice consolation prize, in fact.

In 2016, we did complete the 65-kilometer ski traverse from the wild southern tip of the island, starting in Trollhul Bay and ending at St. Andrews Bay on the northwest coast's central section, which is home to the largest king penguin rookery in the world. That year, we cherry-picked and climbed two major virgin summits along the sled route in a rare prolonged spell of high pressure. We were out for 16 days, which included six days stormbound in glacier camps.

High adventure continued right through the final stages of getting back to the beach for the pick-up by *Pelagic Australis*. Getting up, onto, and down the Ross Pass is considered the crux of this seldom-attempted traverse. A low-slung col of 500 meters separating the Allardyce Range to the northwest and the Salvesen Range to the southeast, it is a natural venturi that cuts the island's mountainous spine in half, square on to the prevailing westerlies. While the entire island is in the clear, the Ross seen from the northeast coast is usually cloud-bound, black, and threatening. Because this stretch of glacier is infamous for putting people on their hands and knees into extremis, it must only be attempted in settled weather, and even then, it is a gamble not to get caught out.



“What unfolded in 2018 was a proper thrashing, dished out by the island weather, and we are now once again truly humbled.”





Clockwise from left:
The author and Stephen Venables high up on the ascent of Mount Baume, South Georgia (2016); *Pelagic Australis* at Grytviken alongside *Pelagic*, which was about to start a Shackleton traverse with descendants of the Antarctic explorer Tom Crean (2016); Rough landing conditions at Trollhul Bay (2016). In 2018, it was flat as a millpond.





Sailing through the very narrow Bird Sound, with Edd Hewett piloting and Kirsten Neuschafer as a second pair of eyes.

In any event, you have to descend the Ross Glacier on the eastern downside, but unlike in 2005, when I did this route for the first time starting from the protection of Larsen Harbour, we went straight down to the beach into Little Moltke Harbour in Royal Bay for the pick-up. This was no longer tenable or safe in 2016 due to crevassing, seracs, and glacial recession. The whole landscape had changed dramatically in those 11 years. Instead, we opted for an ascent of the Webb Glacier, striking north off the Ross which connects to the Cook Glacier that leads into St. Andrews Bay—to our knowledge a ski and sled route never before attempted.

This exploratory gambit had a sting in the tale while in view of the beach—we mistakenly skied down the true left bank of the Cook, thinking we would be back on board for afternoon tea, right into a cul-de-sac with a drop off at the end. At the same time, the weather changed for the worse. We had to stay put, stormbound yet again for two days, camped in convoluted moraine debris, hanging on in horrendous katabatic winds. By this time, we were getting a bit stretched. The last meal was raisins mixed with oats, mixed with dregs of pesto, and that was that. When the wind abated so we could move safely, we regretfully had to re-ascend 300 meters to the col and try the true right bank, which was luckily the key. It was a spectacular finish on the edge, and those virgin summits de-flowered were the icing on the many-layered cake of previous battles lost with the island.



Gale at King Edward Point.

The optimism that successful expedition engendered (and we quickly file the struggles and painful moments somewhere in the back of the memory bank) led us to believe we could do the same again this season. There are many more unclimbed summits still, in what must be one of the world's most remote, and committing, exploratory mountaineering environments. There is no one to call for a search and rescue on South Georgia, and no airstrip. In the late winter month of September, we were again the only vessel on the island. In spite of what could be considered unattractive caveats, of course we had to return and



The junction of the Ross and Webb glaciers—when we found it. Below: Stephen Venables on the delectable descent from the Cook Glacier down into St. Andrews Bay.



have another go. What unfolded in 2018 was a proper thrashing, dished out by the island weather, and we are now once again truly humbled.

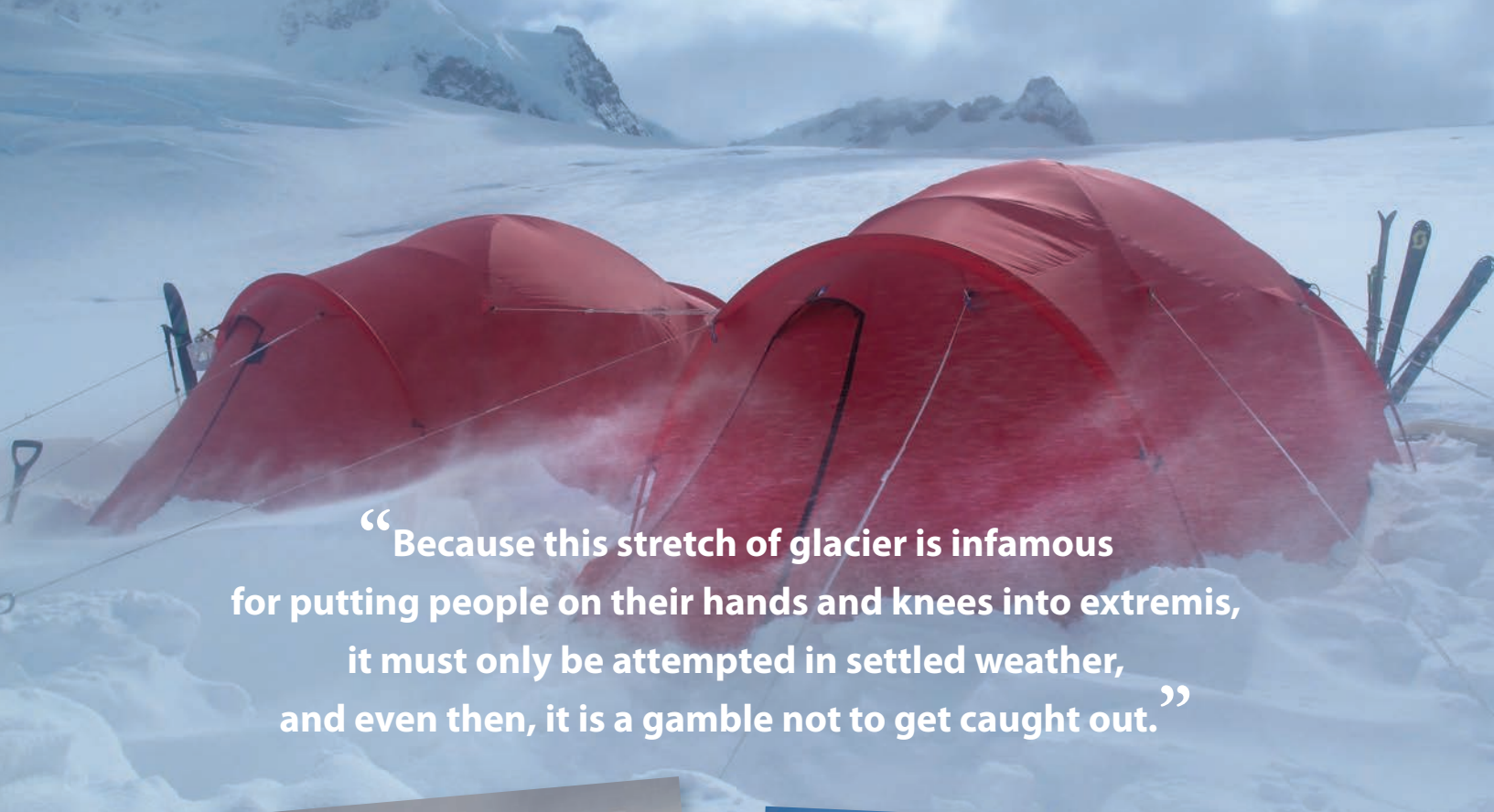
We had five weeks in hand from Port Stanley and the return. We got off to a good start, arriving on the island after a four-day downwind passage with some fine sailing. In 2016, we sailed directly into Trollhul Bay in fine weather, though with a swell still running on this very lee shore, and in spite of difficult landing conditions, we were off the next day for the traverse. No chance this year, as it was blowing hard onshore, so we defaulted to go north about the island, making landfall on the Willis Islands, through Bird Sound and down the coast to King Edward Cove, where the South Georgia government has its administrative base. This includes the British Antarctic Survey's fish biology lab that studies the catch and advises the government on licensing for Patagonian toothfish, mackerel ice

fish, Antarctic cod, and krill, in their maritime zone. The overwintering contingent numbers 12. Across the bay, the industrial archeological remains of the whaling station Grytviken, now a museum, has a jetty for yacht use where we watered up and assessed our situation.

Without an auspicious forecast, we waited on the north coast for five days, making day ski trips from various anchorages—enjoyable enough but as always, the pressure of the main objective was brought to bear. The clock was ticking. And then the forecast changed into a humdinger coming out of the east. This is a winter pattern, and it was predicted to be so strong and prolonged that the harbormaster offered us the jetty at King Edward Point, which would be in the lee. Most, if not all, of the northeast coast anchorages would be dodgy, if not dangerous, to shelter in and sailing along the coast basically unnavigable.

That storm lasted a full four days. A lot of snow fell, and to top it off, King Edward Cove, facing southeast, was big enough to accommodate all the brash ice in East Cumberland Bay, discharging off the Nordenskjold Glacier. We couldn't move if we wanted to, trapped by the ice under pressure from the wind.

When the storm-force winds abated down to variable and the pressure on the ice lessened, we escaped incarceration and made a beeline for the southwest coast, south about, as Trollhul, usually prone to heavy swell, would be as flat as it gets in the shadow of that easterly storm. Five of us were put ashore with ten days of supplies and camping and climbing gear, all carried in sleds. We waved goodbye to our support crew and did two



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relays of our gear up a steep slope to gain the Graae Glacier at 250 meters.

It was a good start ... that did not last long. Our first camp on the Harmer Glacier was a repeat of 2016. It snowed heavily, and over 48 hours we had 60 centimeters of snow, with more banked up around the tents. In 2016, we were stuck for four days in that same place. In these circumstances, there is an urgency to accommodate ablutions in some modicum of comfort. A simple snow latrine with a snow wall works in fine weather, but what was needed was a proper igloo—so we built one. My job was to be on the inside, and when Venables lowered the keystone in place but then refused to make a door so I could get out, I did question my popularity. In 2016, we did the same, though the construction was more of a teepee than an igloo, and subsequent googling of igloo-making before the



Clockwise from top: Camp Three on the Novosilski Glacier, where the team spent three days; King penguins, St. Andrews Glacier; Igloo building on the Harmer Glacier to make a palatious latrine (2016).

expedition stood us well. I liked the guy in his backyard in Chicago, making an igloo in double-quick time with only a foot of snow. We took 12 man-hours

Finally the weather cleared on day three so we could move—just. The nightly weather reports via sat phone from *Pelagic Australis* were not great, but not dramatic either, so we still held out some hope of climbing something. We struggled, making heavy work of pulling the sleds through deep powder snow up and over the second col. Usually new snowfall on the island consolidates quickly with a wind or temperature change, but this time it didn't. We were plowing a furrow rather than sliding on top of



The author having a chat with a young bull elephant seal, Trollhul Bay.

the surface. This persisted for the next four days and we made little progress. With snow continuing to fall and high winds rendering visibility nil to poor, it was quite obvious that climbing would be out for all those reasons, plus a high risk of avalanche on the upper slopes. By day five, the journey became a hard fight to get to the other end, as we were now past an obvious bail-out point into Iris Bay on the northeast coast, not a popular option in the first place. Every now and then, it cleared briefly to reveal all those target summits along the Salvesen: Mount Dow, Smoky Wall, Peak 2089 (as in 2089 meters)—it needs a name!—and Mount Fraser, an attractive stand-alone peak hard by the south coast. For the time being, they will remain inviolate.

Three more cols had to be crossed, among some desperate moments trying to erect tents in storm conditions. One night, all five of us spent the night in one of our three-man tents—nice and cozy, and guess who was the cook. I gave them a cup of soup each. Stephen Reid, a highly experienced mountaineer with many ascents in the Greater Ranges behind him, including four Greenland expeditions, admitted to me one evening as we were brewing up, that he was “now cured.” He was pining to get back to Cumbria to his partner, his cottage, and his horses.

Skipper Edd Hewett and the crew on board were now getting anxious for our return, to make the plane at Mount Pleasant Airport in the Falklands on the following Saturday. We were horribly late. The two nights in a maze of seracs and crevasses at the junction of the Ross and Webb glaciers (in nil visibility we were not sure exactly where we were) was finally the turning point, when we did a bold “up and over” a ridge, landed on the Webb in fine weather which continued down the Cook Glacier, and skied right through the king penguin rookery, staying on our skis all the way to the dinghy landing. We arrived at the beach under a dramatic South Georgia sunset of pink, red, and orange lenticular flying saucers.

The next morning, we were off straight away to Stanley, and arrived with a day to spare. How lucky we are to be able to play this game of Russian roulette on land and sea, where success is never guaranteed, where patience wins out, when one

takes the long view of the overall experience of attempt and failure not as time wasted but time cherished. There is a surfeit of canned and packaged adventure travel today, where assured gratification is by contract. Not so when the quest has failure always looming large.

So, when your weekend plans are snookered by foul weather, just stay put on the hook, enjoy being forestalled by nature, and just listen to the wind whistling in the rigging. ☺



About the Author

Skip Novak is perhaps best known for his participation in four Whitbread Round the World Yacht Races since 1977. But he is also a mountaineer, and, wishing to combine his mountaineering with sailing, he built the expedition yacht *Pelagic* in Southampton, England, in 1987. He has since spent every season in Antarctic waters. In 2002-03, Skip managed the construction in South Africa of his new *Pelagic Australis*, a 23-meter, purpose-built expedition vessel for high-latitude sailing in order to augment the charter operations of the original *Pelagic*. Launched in September of 2003, she is the flagship of Pelagic Expeditions.

In March 2015, Skip was awarded the prestigious Blue Water Medal by the Cruising Club of America in recognition of his many years of voyaging to high latitudes. In January 2016, the Royal Cruising Club awarded Skip the Tilman Medal, named after Bill Tilman, famous mountaineer and exploratory yachtsman, for a lifetime of leading sailing-to-climb expeditions in high latitudes.

Skip sits on the panel of experts that vets expeditions to South Georgia on behalf of the South Georgia government. From 2012 to 2017, he served on the executive committee of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators.