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First Footsteps in Tierra del Fuego



We climbed an island to the summit, the kids racing ahead hand in hand, declaring it Lara and Luca's Mountain, as a first ascent. It was true, in a way. Everywhere you go in the channels of Tierra del Fuego, it feels like first footsteps.





ADVENTUREBOBS (previous page, top) Skip with his children, Lara and Luca, in the Beagle Channel;
(bottom) Elena Novak puts on a Christmas lunch, complete with a traditional decorated *canelo*
tree; (this page) investigating a glacier on *Pelagic*

Six Weeks in the Beagle Channel

By Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station

In October, 2008, *Pelagic Australis* was again out and about early season on the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia. The well-oiled team of skipper Stewart Richardson, and mates Jessica Hay and Chris Harris, supported a British expedition on a Shackleton Traverse of the island led by myself and British mountaineer Stephen Venables. This was our third consecutive traverse of the island during the last three seasons. After Ernest Shackleton and four others landed on the south side of the island in the open boat *James Caird*, Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean made the desperate bid to cross the unsurveyed island to reach the whaling stations on the north coast. That was in May of 1916, and the story of the shipwrecked *Endurance*, a summer on the drift ice of the Weddell Sea, and the subsequent historic boat journey and rescue of all expedition members before the onset of their second winter is a survival classic, and has become a focus for sailors and climbers.

From December to March, *Pelagic Australis* went on to complete four trips to the Antarctic Peninsula, two of which had scuba diving as a theme—the last a late season trip (cruise ships departed, no other yachts, and woolly early winter weather threatening) to specifically observe leopard seals hunting penguin chicks as they fledged into the sea. Apparently, it pays to dive the same site for several days, as these top predators get amazingly familiar and up close to divers—who have nerves of steel!

While *Pelagic Australis* was doing her thing on the peninsula, I had the pleasure of sailing my original 54-foot *Pelagic* for six weeks in the Beagle Channel. In early December we supported a BBC documentary entitled *The Three Dogs*, where we hosted Sir Robin Knox Johnston, the polar explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, and senior foreign affairs correspondent, John Simpson, from the BBC. This was a three-part series, and our brief was to take the “Three Dogs” down the Beagle Channel and out around Cape Horn, with Robin in charge. John Simpson had taken the other two for a tour of Afghanistan, and Ranulph was scheduled to take them on an ice walk in Baffin Island later in February. We spent a very active week filming from 0330 every morning until losing the light near midnight, with not much sleep in between, but it

was a real joy being on *Pelagic* again and realizing how, for expedition cruising, small is beautiful. The bigger the boat, the less creative you can be from a navigational perspective.

The theme of the film was Robin leading the other two non-sailors around the sailor’s Everest: Cape Horn. Robin was the first person to sail singlehanded nonstop around the world in the Golden Globe Race in 1968 on *Suhali*. He also rounded the Horn in the *Whitbread* in 1978, skippering the maxi *Condor*, and most recently singlehanded again in the *Velux Five Oceans Race*, on an *Open 60*—at the age of 65! I was included in the production as a “Fourth Dog,” running the boat and providing the local knowl-

edge. The build up to the suspense of rounding Cape Horn was a trip west up the Beagle where we visited the fjords and had glacial ice in our whisky (we were well supplied with the best by the Three Dogs). We also had an *asado* (full lamb BBQ) in a secluded anchorage, where the producer plied the Three Dogs with drink to loosen their tongues while they sat on a log in front of the lamb carcass dripping away. The most memorable moment for me was listening to rem-

inisces about the course of their extraordinary lives, their politics, the tribulations of the BBC (edited out), and—of course—the problems of the youth of today. Naturally a camera was rolling during this entire hour-long exercise, and it was interesting to see how John Simpson, the consummate professional on film, vino in veritas, was able to keep the ball rolling, and how he managed to get Ran Fiennes, a man of few words, to spill his beans.

Our last meal was *centolla* (king crab), traded for a few liters of wine with a local Chilean fishing boat steaming up channel on her way to Punta Arenas at the end of the winter crab season. We departed for the open sea from Isla Chair, a nook-and-canny anchorage at the head of Baia Cook, a wide reach that gives access to the Beagle Channel underneath the Darwin Range, surveyed from the HMS *Endeavour* in 1768. The forecast was 40 knots from the west—not too severe, and good for the film, but I warned everyone there would be a horrendous sea running. John and Ran were visibly apprehensive as expected—it was a foregone conclusion that Ran would be seasick. The producer was, of



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course, over the moon about the whole situation!

Seal, a 56-footer owned by Hamish and Kate Laird, was also in support “off the boat” filming. Before he built his own boat in 2002, Hamish was a long standing *Pelagic* buccaneer from the early days. We knew each other’s methods and capabilities well, so we had a good vibe in jockeying the two boats close to get those spectacular shots—without creating a disaster.

Sure enough, Simpson and I had to put in the fourth reef (half underwater on the lee rail) as the wind and swell hit hard (producer by now ecstatic). One of the delights of this voyage for me was the synergy Robin and I had about any and all aspects of boathandling in these tricky conditions, something I was apprehensive about as we had never sailed together before. Although Robin was provisionally the skipper, I was in practice in charge, and I could imagine how this situation could easily go “pear shaped.” But we barely exchanged any dialogue about what to do—a nod or hand signal, always acknowledged by both of us as “a go,” was enough to put in motion the next maneuver. Although Robin is considered by some as an old fuddy duddy (not true!), I had to check my age (gulp!), and came to the conclusion that this implicit understanding was a generational thing.

In any event we had a good overnight run into the Horn, but the wind dropped for the actual transit which was slightly anticlimactic. This lull, however, did make the landing on Horn Island a breeze, and we spent a lovely afternoon in the sun, in between weather systems that are never far apart, strolling around, hosted by the Chilean naval family who are the guardians of the light-

WILD MEN (previous page) South Georgia; (this page, top) BBC film crew; (bottom, l-r) Skip, sailing legend Sir Robin Knox Johnston, BBC senior correspondent John Simpson, and polar explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes

house, chapel, and monument. The film finished with the four of us smoking Havanas and—of course—totting on Simpson’s whisky sitting underneath the steel albatross sculpture.

Immediately following our BBC adventure I spent a month family cruising with my wife, Elena, and children Lara, age six and a half, and Luca, age five, again on *Pelagic*. The BBC crowd departed on December 16 and the family moved on board the next day. We got off to an inauspicious start when moving the boat off the dock in Ushuaia amongst a tangle of shore lines from boats rafted five deep—it is getting crowded down there! A line caught in the prop necessitated a dive with a sharp knife, but the shaft had pulled slightly out of the coupling, so we were delayed a day while I struggled to shift it back into position from the bilge (all heavy tools out, hands bloodied) with no luck. We departed the next day, with a plan to dry the stern at Caleta Olla down the Beagle, hoping the shaft would hold.

This was the first cruise with the kids where they could really engage with life on board. A vegetable crate perched on a dinghy floorboard spanning the cockpit served as a pedestal so they could steer down the channel. They each

had a pilot berth abreast the main salon that they kitted out with their “stuff,” and these berths, complete with curtains, doubled as an *ad hoc* theater where they would put on nightly performances. Even though Luca calls himself a sailorman, the male genes surfaced and his main focus became driving the Zodiac with the 25-hp outboard. In him I saw myself, 50 years ago, driving our family dinghy (then a 5-hp Johnson) with unbridled enthusiasm in Belmont Harbor in Chicago. Luca could shift gears, drive to and from the shore, landing just right alongside—but luckily could not pull the starter cord! His penchant for climbing the rig and hanging from ropes is Sterling Hayden in the making.





The Beagle Channel is a great place to have a real adventure with small children, without the dramas of going offshore. We picked berries and made jam, built fires on the beach and had *asados*, took ambitious treks inland and roasted hot dogs, looked for Yaghan Indian arrow- and spearheads on the beaches, baked bread and cakes.

The Beagle Channel environs are a great place to have a real adventure with small children, without the dramas of going offshore and all that that implies. Instead we picked berries and made jam, built fires on the beach and had *asados*, took ambitious treks inland and roasted hot dogs, looked for Yaghan Indian arrow- and spearheads on the beaches (found some), baked bread and cakes, had the time and quietude to teach them how to play chess (and lose cheerfully!). I found my old flower press I had made over 20 years ago while waiting out a storm, and it was back in action. Every day the saloon table was covered in flowers, bits of driftwood, shells, rocks, and various discoveries.


Christmas was spent in Caleta Eugenio, just east of Puerto Williams. In the forest we chopped down a small *canelo* tree, an evergreen broadleaf that is the traditional Christmas tree of Tierra del Fuego. Decorated with paper angels and stars, mussel and limpet shells, popcorn stringers and even bit of kelp, it lasted a week on the engine box down below—while freshening it up on deck during the nights. Christmas dinner was on the beach, BBQ'ing steaks over the fire—magic! Although I could not expect the kids to believe that Santa could squeeze himself down the four-inch flue of the Reflex diesel heater, they were however amused by the footprints left on the companionway stairs and the mug of hot chocolate left on the table the next morning. They are savvy enough to humor old Dad in all of this.

I hadn't been to Estancia Yendegaia in years. Yendegaia Bay is a broad fjord just west of the Argentine border with Chile. Formerly privately owned by the Serka family, and run as a third-generation cattle property of some 40,000 hectares of flood plain, mountains, and glacier, being there was, and still is, a true adven-

ture experience. Twenty years ago we visited regularly, dropping anchor in front of the ramshackle *estancia* buildings. Manned by a handful of Chilean cowboys, the kind who can do everything from the saddle, we rode out with them in the back country in return for some produce, wine, and cigarettes, always in short supply as they were left virtually alone for 11 months of the year by their absentee owner in Punta Arenas. Wild horses (for knacker) and cattle were brought to market by a naval vessel twice a year.

In the mid-nineties the property was acquired by an amalgam of environmental groups in order to save the remaining forest from a Chilean and American logging consortium. The intention was to return the property to its natural state, now recognized as an impossibility, and the direction of the *estancia* is currently in limbo. A single Chilean caretaker and his Belgium partner (she arrived on a boat, fell in love with Jose, and left her Belgium partner to go solo) are all that is left, so they welcome the yachts to rent horses for a rough six-hour ride to the snout of the Serka Glacier. Well, we managed three hours with the kids up front on the

sheepskin saddles, swam several rivers, all the time with a pack of 20 farm dogs in tow. For a break we stopped near a wetland and fished for rainbow trout with a hand line. This was a real McCoy adventure and the spirit had not changed in two decades. It is well off any tourist path by land or sea.

I will never forget weeks later while in Seno Espana (shaft sorted on the beach in Caleta Olla—the joys of a lifting keel brought to the fore), my favorite fjord, eight miles long with islands, shallows, and plenty of current—the lifting keel and rudder a necessity. We climbed an island to the summit, the kids racing ahead hand in hand declaring it Lara and Luca's Mountain, as a first ascent. It was true, in a way. Everywhere you go in the channels of Tierra del Fuego, it feels like first footsteps. 



WORK & PLAY (previous page) *Pelagic Australis* headed for a South Georgia traverse; (this page) Novak family Christmas, the Beagle Channel