

# TO ANTARCTICA WITH AUNTIE

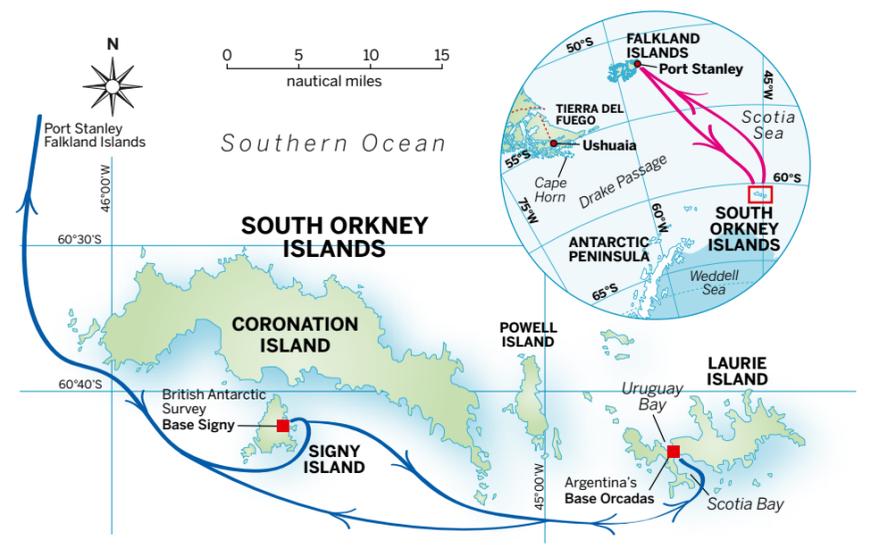


▲ Above All smiles from the BBC team and presenter Neil Oliver (second right) on their arrival at Stanley... before they learned of the passage to come (left)

# WITH AUNTIE

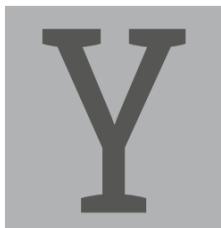
Skip Novak was accustomed to panicked requests for last-minute transport to the high latitudes aboard his 54-footer *Pelagic*. When one came from the BBC and TV presenter Neil Oliver, he was intrigued. When he learnt the destination was the remote South Orkney Islands in search of a pioneering Scottish scientist, he could not resist

■ The forecast predicted a bumpy ride south in a fresh south-westerly. Only the cameraman had any sailing experience – he was a veteran of Lake Windermere in the Lake District ■



Main photo: Hamish Laird/expeditionssail.com. Above: S Novak

## SOUTH ORKNEY ISLANDS



You don't go to the South Orkney Islands for a sun-soaked cruise. In fact, you don't go at all without good reason. This Southern Hemisphere archipelago has a reputation for miserable weather, pack ice in summer and tricky sailing while groping around in mist. It is considered sub-Antarctic in climate – in the so-called 'banana belt' by those on Antarctic bases – but at 60° 30'S, below the demarcating 60°S line, it is in Antarctic Treaty territory.

It is also well below the usual trade routes; neither on the way to South Georgia from the Falklands nor en route to the Antarctic Peninsula proper. Consequently, this small archipelago has seen very little yacht traffic over the years. As I said, you need a damn good reason to go there.

Ours was the BBC. Film companies are notorious for their last-minute planning and the BBC regional production units are no exception. *Pelagic*, the original and smaller vessel of our two-boat expedition fleet, has long been on standby for 11th-hour transport south. The call is always the same: 'We finally have our budget and must go this season!' This time it came from BBC Scotland for *The Last Explorers*, a documentary on the Scottish hero of polar exploration William Speirs Bruce.

Not one to be put off by rain, snow, mist and ice, I jumped at the chance to take *Pelagic* to this remote corner of the Southern Ocean. After a painful extraction of health and safety guarantees about our seaworthiness, the lawyers finally approved us a week before our departure date. While this was to be a three-week return trip from Stanley, it scheduled only eight days of onsite filming – a tall order to make a 50-minute documentary.

The week before our departure Chris Elliot, former captain of the British Antarctic Survey's research vessel *James Clark Ross*, warned me (from the comfort of a cottage in the Pyrenees) that if a southerly wind persisted we would be lucky to land on the south coast owing to pack ice. For the first time I had doubts about the viability of the project.

On 22 January I flew into Mount Pleasant airport in the Falkland Islands via Santiago. The film crew of five had arrived from the UK earlier that morning on the direct 'air bridge' from the UK via Ascension Island. We all met at the FIPAS main jetty, a precarious floating military contraption left over after the 1982 war with Argentina.

Colin Murray's mouth fell open in shock-horror at the size of our ship – 54ft. As director, he was responsible for this gig. He began to relax after we stowed the usual mountain of filming and personal equipment, seeing it was possible after all, then

### WILLIAM SPEIRS BRUCE



Britain's overlooked polar explorer, William Speirs Bruce dropped medical studies in Edinburgh to join his first scientific expedition to the Falklands in 1892. Several Arctic voyages later, he went south again in 1902 as leader of the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition. The Royal Geographic Society was livid – it wanted the publicity for its own polar ship.



▶ **Right from top:** safety officer Jim McNeil washes his boots for biosecurity; safety first before the passage; *Pelagic* in Scotia Bay



All photos: S Novak

became anxious about seasickness as the boat bobbed gently to the harbour swell. The next day we were due to depart and the forecast predicted a bumpy ride in a fresh south-westerly. Only the cameraman had any sailing experience – he was a veteran of Lake Windermere in the Lake District.

William Speirs Bruce led the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition from 1902 to 1904. It was the first purely scientific expedition to the Antarctic; a voyage free of the exploration hubris that formed a large part of every previous expedition south and of many that followed. Articulating his story was Scottish travel presenter Neil Oliver. (When I Googled him,



south-westerly forward of the beam, but, boy, it was fast. We made landfall on Coronation Island four days later, weaving through an obstacle course of bergy bits and growlers, marvelling at the tabular bergs, illuminated in the low sunlight, that barricaded the southern horizon.

The first landfall in the Antarctic is always spectacular, but some of the crew were still glad to lay off into flatter water under the south coast.

There are two installations on the South Orkneys: Base Signy of the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) on Signy Island, an outlier under the belly of the main Coronation Island; and the Argentine Base Orcadas further east on Laurie Island. It was clear the film would focus on Base Orcadas, where Bruce had wintered and set up his shore station to conduct his observations. It was equally clear the protocol was to check in first with Base Signy. Base Commander Matt Jobson was expecting us, having been alerted through the BAS's HQ in Cambridge. No pack ice and good visibility made it easy to navigate into the anchorage near the base.

We spent a pleasant three days at this compact and very professionally run research station. We were happily received by Matt and his team: bird biologist Derren Fox, entomologist Roger Worland, who had been studying one austral insect for the last 25 years, technician Joe Corner, just in from a year on Bird Island, South Georgia, and Ed McGough, recently

▲ **Above:** surrounded by fur seals on lonely Laurie Island, the Argentine Base Orcadas is barely above sea level. **Left:** *Pelagic* hosts a dinner, Skip Novak far right

I read that his trademark shoulder-length black locks were insured for £1 million. Could I cut off a few inches while he was seasick and auction them on eBay? I wondered.)

Joined by cameraman Alastair McCormick, soundman Jamie Flynn, safety officer Jim McNeill and *Pelagic* crew Chris Harris, we cast off on 23 January and passed through a placid Berkeley Sound into the open sea.

Within six hours the yankee had been furled to just short of its clew patch and we were down to three reefs and our storm staysail (always rigged and ready) and that's pretty much how we stayed for the next four days. It was bumpy with that

## SOUTH ORKNEY ISLANDS



returned from a winter at ice station Halley on the shelf in the Weddell Sea. Three Italian scientists were also visiting for summer to study permafrost.

You might find it hard to understand why people in their twenties would want to spend, in some cases, three summers and two winters in the Antarctic. Some people see it as a cop out from society. Personally, I can think of no better way to begin the rest of your life than by having time to reflect and get your priorities right. In other circumstances, it's improbable – a gamble at best – because of all the distractions aimed at young people today.

Besides meals together (the Italians were seasick when it was our turn on *Pelagic*), the endless cups of tea and the natter, the high point of our stay was a walk over the island's spine then down a dry glacier to a chinstrap penguin colony, where Neil helped Derren net a few for the camera. One of Derren's jobs was to catch over 200 chinstrap chicks before they fledged, so he could weigh them for their database.

The weather held fine for our visit and afforded us a good look at a mountainous landscape usually blanketed by low cloud. Nor were we entirely alone on the island. Not far from Base Signy was an extensive tented camp – the expedition of an American ham radio operator, supported by New Zealand motorvessel *Braveheart*. For some reason, the BAS personnel did not fraternise with this expedition, so nor did we.

It was like the good old days again; a time when visitors looked forward to meeting scientists at these stations and vice versa. Polar camaraderie was in force and base personnel took the time to yarn. When they waved goodbye at the landing, it was with regret not relief – at least we liked to think so.

This is not always the case at more accessible bases on the peninsula. Visiting yachts and tour ships are so numerous they are seen as a nuisance. In this season, more than 50 yachts visited Port Lockroy, the de facto visitors' centre complete with a British post office, paraphernalia for sale (mainly to cruise ship tourists) and a seasonal staff of four. They stuck on 80,000 stamps last season!

So we left and sailed 40 miles east to Base Orcadas on Laurie Island. This massive Argentine installation lies on a dead-flat isthmus of shingle and beach lying only a few metres above sea level. Viewed from a glacier above, it is a precarious ribbon of land that connects the two halves of the island. Scotia

▲ Above: scientist Derren Fox nets one of 200 chinstrap penguin chicks, before Neil Oliver lends a hand to record its weight for the database. Below: BBC presenter Neil Oliver, whose long black locks are allegedly insured for £1 million



Bay to the south is the preferred anchorage for supply ships and provides an easy dinghy landing on fine gravel. Uruguay Bay to the north would offer shelter in a howling southerly, but looked foreboding. The steep beach of medium and large boulders would have made a tricky landing even on a fine day.

This station was quite different; tidy enough, but somewhat melancholic, with crumbling infrastructure and peeling orange paint throughout. It was staffed almost exclusively by Argentine military, but they were more than hospitable and clearly chuffed that this was a fiercely Scottish project.

During the history of exploration, the British establishment, in particular Sir Clements Markham, president of the Royal Geographic Society, had a say in every expedition. Owing to a well-documented enmity between Bruce and Markham, the British government barely acknowledged Bruce's expedition. They refused to support it and it was eventually funded by Scottish donors. No wonder that when Bruce was finished in 1904, he ceded the station to the Argentine government! In so doing, he set up Argentina's historical claim (alongside their



▲ Above: the BBC team get to work telling William Speirs Bruce's story in the ruins of his base, Ormond House. It barely warranted the term 'house' for the Scottish party in 1902-1904 (right). Below: on passage back to Stanley



## GEARED FOR POLAR SAILING

Decades after her DIY construction in Southampton in 1986-87, *Pelagic* is still going strong. In 2003, I launched *Pelagic Australis* (built in Durban), which is on her ninth successive season in high latitudes. We work both boats nine months of the year, often with minimal time between charters and projects. It is an intense game with no room for error.

To say we are out on a limb is an understatement. Our bases of operation in Stanley, Ushuaia and Puerto Williams have no marinas, no yacht services nor dealer support. We survive by keeping our over-specified systems simple and relying on durability rather than sophistication.

*Pelagic* was built with basic systems largely due to cost considerations, but during our first season in Tierra del Fuego, Antarctica and South Georgia, we realised the dangers of elaboration for its own sake. What we installed had to work all the time, and if it didn't we had to be able to repair it on the spot.

**Some of the key equipment fitted on both boats includes:**

**Lifting keel and rudder:** essential for flexibility, operating in uncharted waters and safety in accessing shallow anchorages in view of ice.

**All manual sail control systems:** even on the 74ft *Pelagic Australis*. It keeps us fit!

**Dacron/polyester sails:** we are happy to sacrifice the performance of high-tech sails for cost, longevity and ease of repair. All seams are quadruple-stitched and those on the mainsail (fully battened) are covered in sticky back plastic.

**Four reefs in the main:** sailmakers don't like it, but the fourth reef is our trysail, ready to deploy in five minutes.

**Roller-furled staysail:** it is our storm jib, always at the ready, and is often set in over 40 knots of wind. Fancy hanking on a storm sail in a storm? Nor do we.

**Rigging:** 1/19th stainless steel wire seems archaic, but it's cheap, lasts ten years and offers early warnings of failure.

**Electronics:** good, basic and reliable. We have always used Raymarine.

**Propeller:** fixed, plus one spare. **Interior:** must be watertight and drip-free. We also ship a Reflex stove heater of the sort used on Danish fishing boats.

With this gear fitted, there are few other basics you need to operate safely, comfortably and habitually in remote areas. Quoting Dr Johnson, climber-cum-sailor Bill Tilman once famously explained: 'Conveniences are never missed where they were never enjoyed.'