

Recreating Shackleton's extraordinary voyage



The coastlines of the Southern Ocean are both stunning and treacherous

Martin Thomas and seven friends chartered a yacht to retrace Shackleton's legendary journey to South Georgia in 1916.

When Sir Ernest Shackleton and his 27 crew were forced to abandon *Endurance* when she was crushed by Antarctic pack ice, they escaped in three small boats to Elephant Island. From there, six of them sailed a 22-footer, *James Caird*, 800 miles across the Southern Ocean in winter to reach the island of South Georgia. Shackleton, Frank Worsley and Tom Crean then trekked across frozen mountains in the hope of finding the whaling station at Stromness Bay. With little food and no tent, they knew any delay meant certain death for both themselves and their shipmates.

To recreate those extraordinary events, we chartered *Pelagic Australis*, a 72ft aluminium sloop purpose-built for high latitude sailing, joining her in the Falkland Islands and taking five freezing days to reach South Georgia.

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On arrival we crept through Bird Sound and spent two days lying to anchor in Elsehuls Bay, battered by 50-knot williwaws and unable to get ashore through the surf. Shackleton and his crew, although beset with thirst and exhaustion, had to do similar to avoid being smashed by the same angry surf.

Eventually we landed and set out on skis, pulling pulks (small toboggans), led by the renowned expedition leader, Skip Novak.

We made it to the top of Murray Snowfield, arriving in a whiteout with gusts so vicious they blew most of us off our feet. Eight hours later we camped at Trident Ridge in bitter cold.

It was from here that Shackleton, Worsley and Crean took the daring

decision to save time by sliding down the ridge in the dark. Worsley later wrote: 'It was impossible to see whether it steepened or eased out onto the level. I straddled Sir Ernest, holding his shoulders. Crean did the same to me, and locked together we let go. I have never been more scared in my life...'



Pelagic Australis, a 72ft aluminium sloop purpose-built for high latitudes

PHOTO: SKIP NOVAK



PHOTO: MARTIN THOMAS

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Another long haul into the unforgiving mountains of South Georgia

We lowered our ten pulks down the steep slope on ropes. Then, somehow, despite having crampons, I slipped and fell down the icy precipice plunging 150 heart-stopping metres. Thankfully, only my pride was hurt.

Now on skis and roped together for fear of crevices, we hauled ourselves onto Crean Glacier. Lunch consisted of nuts and raisins rinsed down with a quick cup of tea as it was too cold to stop any longer. We camped overnight on the exposed glacier and the following day crossed Breakwind Ridge through a fierce wind volleying an assault of snow, ice, small stones and shale.

On the far side we lowered our pulks once more into the lee of Breakwind Ridge. Here Shackleton asked his companions to listen out for a whistle. Worsley recalled: 'At seven, through the still morning, came the welcome sound of the turn-to whistles of the whaling station, the first sound we had

heard of civilisation for 18 months'.

The oil in the Primus was finished and they threw it away to lighten their load. Everyone who has descended Breakwind Ridge since that day, ourselves included, has cast an eye around for that stove but it has never been found.

A storm was coming in so we hurried down a series of gullies to the beach on Fortuna Bay and secured our tents with small boulders. The storm battered us for 36 hours. When it passed, we struck camp, and crossed the final ridge. Once down into Stromness Bay, we found a barrel containing a bottle of champagne left by the crew of *Pelagic Australis*.

By contrast, Worsley, on arrival at the same bay 95 years earlier, described himself and his three friends thus: 'Ragged, filthy and evil-smelling, hair and beards long and matted, no bath nor change of clothing for seven months. Fortunately we had no vermin'.