



VOYAGES



CHRONICLES OF THE CRUISING CLUB OF AMERICA

ISSUE 59 ✦ 2017

THE FALKLAND ISLANDS CLOSE-UP

by Magnus Day and Silvia Varela, Great Lakes Station

IN MARCH 2016, WE DELIVERED SKIP NOVAK'S *Pelagic* from Puerto Williams in Chile to Stanley in the Falkland Islands, where it was to overwinter after sailing to Antarctica, Cape Horn, and the Chilean channels during the southern summer. This delivery was also a farewell—after many years skippering *Pelagic* and her big sister *Pelagic Australis*, Magnus had come back to southern waters for one more season before embarking on new projects.

The Falkland Islands lie in the South Atlantic, at around 52°S and some 300 miles from Cape Horn. During our three-day delivery, a lively downwind ride, Magnus talked about his love for the Falklands and the exceptional people he'd met there over the years. He'd been there many times, but always in transit from the South Georgia season based in Stanley to the Antarctica and southern Chile season based in Puerto Williams. The archipelago comprises the two main islands of East and West Falkland, as well as numerous smaller islands. Under time pressure from work, Magnus had only visited Stanley and a few other sites. The places in between make fantastic cruising grounds with safe anchorages, abundant wildlife, and dramatic landscapes, and he dreamt of spending time exploring them. As a photographer, Silvia was drawn to remote places and barren, wind-swept islands, and as a longtime resident of Argentina, she was already curious about the Falklands. By the time we made landfall in Stanley three days later, we had firmed up a plan to come back.

Skip kindly lent us *Pelagic* so we could cruise the islands at our leisure, and less than a month later we were on the short flight back from Punta Arenas, Chile, to RAF Mount Pleasant in the Falklands. As we flew over West Falkland, across Falkland Sound—the strait that separates the two main islands—and over East Falkland toward Stanley on a golden afternoon, we were already mentally charting potential anchorages in amongst the countless bays and inlets we could see below.

But our fantasy of island-hopping in calm seas and idyllic weather was soon shattered. Early the next morning we were woken up by a fierce westerly howling through the rigging. This was business as usual

in Stanley, where the average yearly wind speed is 16 knots, even higher in the summer months. Locals joke that when they built the capital of the Falklands in Stanley, they put it in the wrong place. West Falkland was drier, sunnier, less windy, and more beautiful. Now we just had to get there, but getting out of Stanley was proving a challenge, and all we could do was wait.

The problem is that Stanley sits at the far eastern end of the islands, in an area of severe westerlies, a wind which pinned us to the dock for the next week, blowing relentlessly over 40 knots. Every day the wind was forecast to die down overnight, and every morning as we awoke, we would listen out for it, but by the time we opened our

eyes we'd know that we'd be staying at the dock for another day. We drove around Stanley in an old military Land Rover, ubiquitous as the sheep that dot the islands. We provisioned, filled the tanks with water and diesel, met friends and got to know the pub very well. We waited and waited, and we were beginning to worry that our trip might never happen. Finally, a week later, the forecast gap in the weather arrived. The wind dropped to 20–25 knots, and we sneaked out as quickly as we could.

Our plan was to circumnavigate the islands, tracing a figure eight around East Falkland and West Falkland, and through Falkland Sound, since although Magnus had sailed around the Falkland Islands

several times, he'd never been through the sound and was keen to explore it. The wind was forecast to blow from the southwest over the following days, so we chose to make our westing to the north of the islands, where the seas would be more sheltered.

Given how unreliable the weather had been so far, we had no idea how long the lull would last, so our first priority was to sail as far out west as we could while conditions were relatively benign, then cruise slowly back. This made sense particularly in the light of our second priority: to travel under sail whenever possible—after many years working to a schedule in the charter business, Magnus was determined to avoid motoring unless absolutely necessary.

Pelagic at anchor at Port Albemarle.



“The tides around here just seem to do what they want: sometimes they come in and go out; sometimes they come in and stay for a few days.”

“As we neared the island, we veered off our course to take a close-up look at the Colliers, a striking pair of sea stacks that looked like appropriate subjects for one of Silvia’s photography projects.”



The Colliers



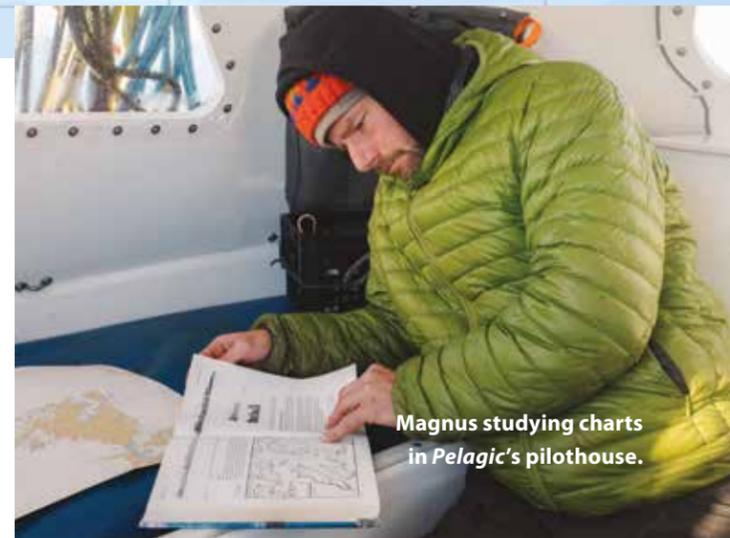
Falkland Islands

With all of this in mind, we left Stanley, turned round the north of the island, and headed west. We sailed through the night, since the north coast of East Falkland offers only a few safe harbors, and none particularly remarkable. Our first port of call would be West Point Island, off the northwest point of West Falkland, where we would visit Magnus’ old friends and cruising legends, Thies Matzen and Kicki Ericson.

It was a rough passage. On the first day we struggled to make progress, with 25 knots on the nose and a short, choppy inshore sea. The following day the wind eased off slightly, but obstinately maintained its direction. We sailed as far as the west end of Pebble Island before heading southwest inside Carcass Island and finally northwest up Byron Sound and into West Point Cove at West Point Island. We arrived very late on the second night, in pitch darkness, relying on instruments alone. It was nonetheless an easy entrance, and we anchored in eight meters in the middle of the cove.

We were woken up by Kicki’s singsong voice on the VHF, inviting us to come ashore for lunch. We were feeling rather dizzy after two bouncy days at sea, and we both perked up at the prospect of homemade food, good company, and a long walk.

With its high sea cliffs and abundant bird life—especially its large colonies of black-browed albatrosses, as well as gentoo, jackass and rockhopper penguins, and striated caracara, known locally as the Johnny rook—West Point Island is one of the most popular cruise ship destinations in the Falklands outside of Stanley. This



Magnus studying charts in Pelagic’s pilothouse.

is to a large extent thanks to explorer and entrepreneur Lars-Eric Lindblad, who brought the first cruise tourists to the Falklands in 1968 and was particularly taken with West Point, heralding a long friendship and partnership with the Napier family, owners of the island.

Numerous cruise ships continue to visit the island, though the Napiers no longer live there. For the last three years, Thies and Kicki have been running the sheep farm and looking after the tourists. Last summer they arrived in record numbers: Kicki told us that season she’d baked cakes and made cups of tea for over 4,000 cruise ship guests on their short stopovers at West Point en route to South Georgia or Antarctica.



Reindeer antlers and skulls at Jérôme Poncet’s house on Beaver Island.

“Our friends Thies and Kicki embody the spirit of uncompromising freedom, awe and wonder, simple living and do-it-yourself cruising that we both admire.”



Thies, Kicki, and Magnus walking through a misty field at West Point Island.



Pelagic approaching Stanley Harbour.

Thies and Kicki greeted us in their sunny kitchen, which would've been perfectly at home in an English country house. We hugged like old friends; I was instantly at ease in their company. Thies is German, a boatbuilder by trade, and Kicki is Swedish, an architect by training. The couple has spent their entire adult lives sailing in *Wanderer III*—their iconic 30-foot wooden sloop built in 1952, in which Eric and Susan Hiscock famously circumnavigated the globe twice. For the last 15 years, they have focused mostly on the Southern Ocean. Most impressively, they lived in South Georgia, on board *Wanderer*, for 26 months, from 2009 to 2011, and published an extraordinary photobook of their time there. In 2011, they were awarded the CCA's Blue Water Medal.

We chatted about life, sailing, South Georgia, photography, literature; our conversation flowed into the evening. One evening after dinner, they invited us on board *Wanderer* for coffee and more thrilling

stories, from rolling the boat near Cape Horn, to the challenges and serendipity involved in procuring firewood in treeless South Georgia. *Wanderer* was one of the coziest spaces we'd ever been in—intimate, full of books, lit by paraffin lamps, kept warm by a wood burner. A real home, as charming and hospitable as its owners. Many cups of coffee later, we left *Wanderer*, arms full of gifts from our hosts—books, homemade lemon drizzle cake and rhubarb chutney, even a kefir starter culture that we named Candida. We jumped in our dinghy and, under a cupola of stars, reluctantly returned to *Pelagic*.

Our original plan was to go to New Island next, reckoned to be one of the most beautiful in the Falklands, and in order to catch the tide, which can run up to six knots through the Woolly Gut between West Point Island and West Falkland itself, we left in the gloaming. We headed southwest under headsail alone on a sea as smooth as oil, motoring occasionally when the wind dropped below five knots. In the perfect silence of the morning, we could hear birds flapping their wings as they took off in the distance as clearly as if they were right next to us. We altered our course many times, trying to anticipate where the next whale would surface, listening out for the otherworldly sound they make when they blow out spray. The morning light bounced off the surface of the water, blurring the distinction between sea and sky, a canvas of pastel tones with no horizon. We took great pleasure in moving slowly, with only a loose plan and no hurry to get anywhere. From that morning on, we were permanently escorted by dolphins. At one point we counted 22 all around *Pelagic*!

As we neared the island, we veered off our course to take a close-up look at the Colliers, a striking pair of sea stacks that looked like appropriate subjects for one of Silvia's photography projects. We spent hours going round and round these rocks, under sail alone, just for fun. The sea stacks were made of layered shelves on which dozens of sea lions were enjoying the sun. With each lap the young males became increasingly agitated, until they finally drove us off their territory with their cacophony of barking and an intense stench.

We'd taken quite a detour to see the Colliers, and by the time we left, the sun was going down. Going to New Island would've meant doubling back on ourselves, so instead we steered *Pelagic* toward Beaver Island.

Beaver Island, the westernmost of the Falklands, is the home of southern high latitude sailing pioneer, Jérôme Poncet and his family. In 1978-79 his *Damien II* was the first yacht to winter in Antarctica, and to this day remains the only yacht to have wintered so far south (67°45'S). We'd crossed paths briefly with Jérôme in Stanley when we delivered *Pelagic*. He'd been absolutely charming and promised to let us try some of his homemade Merguez sausages

when we came back, and we were keen to take him up on this.

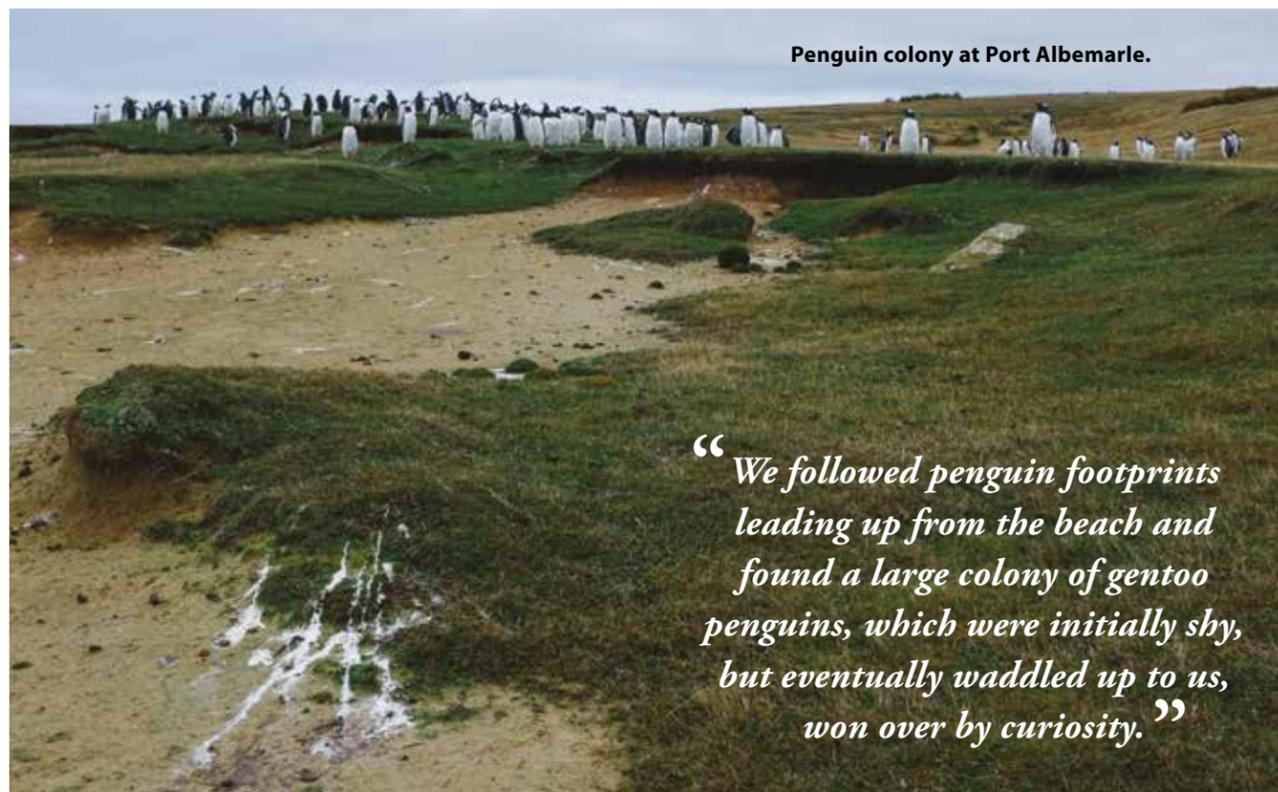
Sadly, there was nobody on Beaver—Jérôme was at Buckingham Palace, receiving a Polar Medal from the Queen. Still, we hiked around the perimeter of the island and had a picnic at the top of one of the impressive cliffs, followed by curious and bold caracaras, and, at a more prudent distance, several flocks of reindeer. These are not



Wanderer III and Pelagic at anchor, seen from farmhouse at West Point Island.

Magnus resting after a picnic on top of Beaver Island.





Penguin colony at Port Albemarle.

“We followed penguin footprints leading up from the beach and found a large colony of gentoo penguins, which were initially shy, but eventually waddled up to us, won over by curiosity.”

native to the Falklands, but imports from South Georgia—where, in turn, they were introduced by Norwegian whalers in the early 20th century. In 2002 and 2003, Jérôme sailed 31 reindeer from South Georgia to Beaver Island on his yacht *Golden Fleece*. One can only imagine how disconcerting the voyage must have been for the reindeer, but somehow they made it to the island and thrived.

Our delightful experience traveling under headsail alone from West Point Island set a precedent, and we continued to do so early the following morning, all the way to Pit Creek, on Weddell Island—the third largest of the Falklands, named after 19th-century English explorer James Weddell. The anchorage is very narrow and shallow, so even with *Pelagic*'s lifting keel, we couldn't get to the head of the cove. Dolphins known locally as “puffing pigs,” after the noise they make when they come to the surface, escorted our dinghy to shore. These were different from the dolphins that had accompanied us on open waters. The smaller, playful puffing pigs are Commerson's dolphins, found in narrow passages, rarely offshore. Out at sea, the sleeker Peale's dolphins take over, often leaping playfully alongside a vessel for hours.

By now we'd developed a cruising routine: arrive at a new anchorage, drop the anchor, take the dinghy to shore, go for a hike around the island. On our walk around Pit Creek, we found vestiges of earlier human settlement—an old fishing buoy, the ruins of a house with only the fireplace and chimney still standing—but again we had the island to ourselves.

We upped anchor at first light and sailed in light airs around the north of Weddell Island, toward Weddell settlement. We called into the bay hoping to meet the owners of the settlement, but nobody answered on the radio, so we decided to use the last light of the day to continue on to New Year Cove, where we spent the night.

From New Year Cove, we sailed down the Smylie Channel. Crossing Race Reef and heading out to the open sea was very rough, with tremendous overfalls. Heading southeast, we passed the impressive cliffs of Port Stephens and Cape Meredith, toward the settlement at Port Albemarle, famous for its abandoned sealing station.

At the southern end of Falkland Sound, Port Albemarle has some of the most striking scenery in the Falkland Islands, with white sandy beaches and large patches of seaweed in prominent shapes and textures. We followed penguin footprints leading up from the beach and found a large colony of gentoo penguins, which were initially shy, but eventually waddled up to us, won over by curiosity. On the way back to *Pelagic*, we were again escorted by puffing pigs, which we could've sworn were making fun of us by leaping up and belly flopping all around the dinghy, soaking us with icy water. We laughed and cursed them in jest, reminding ourselves never to forget that such moments are magical and a large part of why we live the way we do.

Although we were beginning to run out of time, Magnus was keen to explore Chaffers Gullet, a long, thin channel at the end of which there was a very appealing anchorage at the foot of a hill called the little mollymawk, which would've made for a perfect hike.

(The molly-mawk is an albatross species.) Motoring up this narrow channel—at times only 80 meters wide—took longer than we anticipated, and by the time we got to the anchorage it was almost dark, so we never made it off the boat. But it was a worthwhile detour that reminded Magnus of his days as a child sailing dinghies on England's Norfolk Broads.

Overnight, the barometer started to drop, and by first light the wind had got up and the air felt much chillier. We'd been very fortunate so far, but given what we knew about the weather in the Falklands, we didn't want to push our luck. It was time to head back.

The days remained cool, but sunny, and the winds light as we sailed up Falkland Sound and on to Stanley almost in one stretch. We only stopped briefly along the way, arriving late at night and upping anchor before dawn, at Shag Harbour and Salvador Waters.

At Salvador Waters—a large expanse of water joined to the Atlantic by a narrow channel of varying depth, about seven miles long—we encountered some interesting tidal effects: at one point, *Pelagic* was making 11 knots over the ground with the engine at idle! While this was a particularly extreme case, it was by no means unusual. Throughout our circumnavigation, we'd been puzzled by the tides, which rarely seemed to do what they were supposed to be doing. Eventually, we concluded that, while there is extensive tidal information for the Falklands, it has no bearing in reality. Or, as our local friend Paul Ellis put it, “the tides around here just seem to do what they want: sometimes they come in and go out; sometimes they come in and stay for a few days.” The prevailing westerlies play a significant role, but seldom in the way one would expect.

Pelagic's chart plotter has a waypoint at the door of the Victory pub. Silvia assumed this was a joke or a mistake—until we tried to get back into Stanley in a hurricane-force westerly. It was a long day beating into the wind, by the end of which we were yearning for a pint and a hot dinner. Still, we were sad to see our time on *Pelagic* and in the Falklands come to an end. In the three weeks since we'd left Stanley, we hadn't seen or spoken to anybody other than Thies and Kicki; we'd had the wild, idyllic playground of the islands all to ourselves. We'd traveled mostly under sail, saving energy by going to bed at dusk and getting up at dawn, reading by candlelight, to avoid turning on the engine. We'd learned to work together on a boat efficiently and joyfully, and got to know each other very well in the process. Our friends Thies and Kicki embody the spirit of uncompromising freedom, awe and wonder, simple living and do-it-yourself cruising that we both admire. The time we spent with them at West Point planted a seed in us: what if we took up cruising full time? We'd both been traveling constantly for some years and were eager to call somewhere home, though we weren't ready to stop exploring the world. The solution was staring us in the face: we would live on our own boat. A few months later, we are heading for the Caribbean to start a new chapter on our 39-foot steel-hulled home: *Lazy Bones*. And so it was that our time in the Falkland Islands heralded the start of our cruising life. ☪

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Magnus Day

A lifelong sailor in all its forms, Magnus has spent much of the last 11 years exploring the icier parts of the world from north of 81° N to south of 69° S. He is well-known in the south for his long association with Pelagic Expeditions having crewed and skippered both the company's boats, the 57-foot Pelagic and the 74-foot Pelagic Australis. Several seasons in the Arctic from Alaska to Spitsbergen culminated in the 2016 season with a successful west-to-east Northwest Passage transit. Magnus lives with his partner, photographer Silvia Varela, on their steel 39-footer, Lazy Bones, currently in the western Caribbean, and works as a consultant skipper and ice pilot.



Silvia Varela, photographer and videographer

Originally from Madrid, Spain, Silvia has sailed for many years on the River Plate out of her adopted home of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and more recently with Magnus on adventures in the high latitudes. A photographer with a passion for capturing the wilder places of the earth and the people she meets there, she has spent the last few years working in remote locations, from the Faroe Islands to Tierra del Fuego, and has sailed a traditionally-built Viking longship around the Norwegian coast.