

# PELAGIC

By Skip Novak

If there ever was a boat with a “history,” at least in my life, it would have to be the original *Pelagic*. *Pelagic Australis*, the latest and purpose-built expedition sailing vessel of the Pelagic Expedition’s fleet represents an evolution of all things learned on *Pelagic* over the first 14 years of our 22 years of sailing in the far south.

*Pelagic* was conceived on the weather deck of the Whitbread maxi *Drum* as she sailed into the history books on the last leg of the Around the World Race in 1986. In those days, just on the cusp of the transformation

of grand prix yacht racing into full blown professionalism, much of the last leg of this marathon race was spent contemplating and speculating on your short-term future, soul searching of what to do next. Three of us sat on the windward rail and decided then and there to design and build a “go-anywhere” expedition boat based on a three-man partnership. Each would have a year on the boat, go wherever in the world they wanted but hand it over to the next in line on a predetermined schedule in a defined refit condition.

I built the boat with help from friends in an abandoned shed in Southampton in 1986 and 1987. The construction, not least of all the funding, was at times a precarious affair. I had to appeal to the partners for top ups, take a second mortgage on my house and I can remember quite a few sleepless nights staring up at the ceiling thinking about what I had gotten myself into. The unfinished boat left Southampton for Chile late on schedule in November 1987 with no sea trial, and about all you can say was

that she floated. She went on to lose her rudder off Uruguay and then later limped into Punta Arenas in January with a broken mast base and plenty more gone wrong.

After frantic repairs things then became interesting. My year was spent in Tierra del Fuego, the Antarctic Peninsula and South Georgia leading sailing to climb expeditions, and these experiences of dealing with raw nature, taking many risks, learning by trial and error (and having quite a few near misses) set the scene for the next two decades of what is now known as “high-latitude sailing.” Along with half a dozen other French yachts, we were the first to begin to charter to these destinations in the early 1990s, becoming pioneers of the present genre. My partners Phil Wade and Chuck Gates went on to explore the Pacific Basin and then I had an extra year in 1990 to 1991, before buying them out based on the niche charter business in the far south.

The 54-foot *Pelagic* is an overbuilt steel construction with a swing ballast keel and rudder. This allowed us to sail in uncharted waters boldly, at times using the keel as a veritable depth sounder. We could beach her on the tide, rig four lines ashore, run the mast in the trees. This was expedition cruising: so much more satisfying than lying at anchor, not least a safer way to operate in places like Tierra del Fuego and Antarctic with tight shelters, katabatic winds and drift ice to deal with as a matter of course. But it was the connection (literally at times) to the land that attracted me. *Pelagic* became a taxi to the wilderness of my dreams in a Conradian sense.

We were on our own, in places with no marinas or marine services, few bureaucratic controls, no permits and no “due diligence” required. Self-sufficiency was the key. We could hunt, fish, in effect live off the land to a great extent. We drank and smoked heavily. We had the sense we were on our own, always having the adventure of a lifetime. The cast of characters we hosted for those first 14 years were legion; climbers, filmmakers, wannabe adventurers and

friends from around the world chartered us for what became known as the “Pelagic Experience,” which implied uncertainty (our motto: Every herring hangs by his own tail), struggle (one guest accused me of running a “boot camp”) and risk, but also conviviality and above all camaraderie. Relationships were conquered, then undone. My wife Elena and I consummated ours in the lower starboard bunk on a cruise down the Argentine coast while anchored in Caleta Elena (it exists in name) on her birthday—magic! In those early days in between and while on charter I relied on a core group of friends for crew, in it for the “crack,” as we used to say. They must have been as they never complained when I had to occasionally tap into their credit cards to bail me out when lean (always reimbursed eventually).

Up until 2003 when *Pelagic Australis* was launched it was thus so. Then things changed. I was older of course, then became a father and so more responsible. The new boat was built to the highest standard and has all the certificates for a vessel of her size. We were insured to the hilt. This was now a “business.”

With the new build, and having a professional crew to run it, and not least of all a young family ashore, I sailed on *Pelagic* less and less, until 2008 when I hosted Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, Sir Ranulph Fiennes and the foreign correspondent John Simpson for a film around the Horn for the BBC. This was followed by a month’s Christmas cruise in the Beagle with the family. Last January I took another BBC crew to the South Orkney Islands. Compared to *Pelagic Australis*, a great vessel for sure, I was at once reminded of the joys of sailing the *Pelagic* again. It was all so easy. “Small is beautiful and more capable” never rang more true. To be back on board is my youth revisited.

*Skip Novak is a veteran of four Whitbread races as well as several other round-the-world and ocean races and record attempts. He founded Pelagic Expeditions, which takes people on high-latitude sailing adventures.*

## HIGH-LATITUDE EXPLORER OPENED UP A NEW WORLD FOR SKIP NOVAK



Skip Novak, his wife Elena and their children Lara and Luca have enjoyed their adventures on *Pelagic*.