



# Skip Novak

'Well used' is surely a compliment for a yacht cruising off the beaten track, where keeping things 'just-so' is an exercise in futility

**W**hen superyachts began coming to Tierra del Fuego and the Antarctic Peninsula in the mid-1990s, I gave some professional advice and provided a pilot to a well-known German owner of a 148ft sloop.

When they dropped anchor in the bay of Ushuaia, this impeccably maintained luxury yacht certainly stood out while the motley crews of the motley cruising fleet took high notice.

During the pre-departure preparations and discussions on board I invited the owner and his guests for a

drink on my own yacht, *Pelagic*. This was a risky gambit on my part. The owner was, as you might expect, a serious, no-nonsense gentleman. He sat down in our main saloon, taking his time to look around, eventually curled out his lower lip, a habit that many Germans have when in thought or about to make a judgement call. He simply said: "Well used..."

I'm sure he noticed the worn and abraded edges on the interior furniture – we didn't have a dog on board, but it looked as though we had. Ditto the smoke stains on the overhead from the diesel heater. The saloon table sported enough dings, scratches and burn marks that if they could be translated would fill a short story. I served him an aperitif in our chipped tumblers.

"Well used..." I like to think his remark was an accolade and not a criticism. If so, it implied a vessel fit for purpose and looking like it.

That encounter sticks in my mind every time another precious yacht rocks up in the far south, which can of course be applied to any location off the beaten path with no marinas and marine services.

Superyachts, of course, are a different kettle of fish.

High-end maintenance by professional crews lends itself to perfect appearance always and that spirit is ingrained in the culture. Trying to maintain your small to mid-size cruiser on your own with that same level of perfection is an exercise in futility.

The French cruisers, famous for venturing further afield than most, discovered the joys of bare aluminium hulls and decks long ago for this very reason. If your priority is cruising to see the world, then at a minimum the sailing and mechanical systems must function and the aesthetics be damned.

Even keeping a certain level of cleanliness can be challenging. Rafting up with other yachts less picky can be a source of amusement, especially in the far south. When a new arrival makes alongside the rickety jetty it is always worth hanging around if the locals begin to stack up outboard (usually unannounced).

Crises occur and tempers flare as it is impossible to take off shoes (invariably muddy) in this climate when crossing a nice teak deck. Filthy fenders, lifelines stepped on, water hoses and electrical cables dragged across the coachroof without notice and, Heaven forbid, trooping through the cockpit and not around in front of the mast.

Beyond simple appearances where paint jobs have 'gone south', the leather on the steering wheel now patched with tape and scuff marks on the topsides, there is also the consideration of wear and tear on standing and running rigging, sails, shackles and other fundamentally important parts and pieces. This requires some knowledge of safety factors and loads and what can last the distance before replacement is necessary. A D shackle 30 per cent worn through might be OK for one application, but dangerous for another.

A certain amount of wear and tear in these cases should be acceptable. It is impossible to maintain a cruising yacht 'like new' all the time. I have seen this mindset compromise many a cruise and, in fact, make for an unhappy ship in the attempt. Best to kick back a bit, do as the Romans do, and enjoy it while it lasts, as you will be back in marina-land soon enough.

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