



SKIP NOVAK

WE USED A DRONE TO FIND OUR WAY THROUGH ICE THIS SEASON. FINDING ONE SAFE ANCHORAGE WOULD HAVE BEEN DOUBTFUL WITHOUT IT, SO THEY ARE HERE TO STAY



Going to the first spreaders up the steps, or to the top of the mast in a bosun's chair to scout a route through shallow water, through coral or, in our case, through ice in the Antarctic is commonplace.

A lookout is a yo-yo, up and down at short notice. The alternative is to just leave the poor sod up there and tie off the halyard. That is pleasant enough in the tropics, but could be a desperate business in high latitudes. And in our case on *Pelagic Australis*, the masthead only gets you 28m off the waterline – good for what's immediately off the bow and bit further.

Skipper Dave Roberts has had his drone for the second season on *Pelagic Australis* and during our Antarctic expedition cruise in February it was the first time I had witnessed it in action.

We used it extensively to find our way through brash ice and last winter's sea ice in Crystal Sound, which is at the latitude of the Antarctic Circle.

'A DRONE IS FAST BECOMING A MUST-HAVE ITEM FOR MANY CRUISING SAILORS'

A skilled pilot can have his drone out of the box and up in the air within ten minutes. Without this capability it would have

been doubtful in finding at least one safe anchorage that had an ice bound approach.

On another occasion we faced spending hours navigating through brash ice hoping to find an ice edge in search of a lost emperor penguin that was said to be in the area. It was obvious from our drone footage that it was not worth the effort.

In the Antarctic, as everywhere, drones are becoming controversial. Within a short space of time the phenomenon has evolved from hobbyists who built their own drones into a mass market recreational item, albeit with many commercial applications coming to the fore. Some of these uses are justifiable, while others verge on privacy issues.

Like a GoPro camera, which is a 'must have' item for any teenager who does individual sports, having a drone on

board is fast approaching being an essential item for cruising sailors. It's a case of bigger toys for bigger boys and girls.

In sensitive areas like the Antarctic there are two aspects that are of concern. Before the tour ship industry realised what was happening, guests were arriving on board with drones packed in their suitcases, expecting to fly them.

The chance of an errant drone out of control through pilot error or suffering a software failure and flying into a crowd on the deck was real. So the industry has agreed there is to be no recreational drone flying by guests. Only commercial flights are allowed, which means companies can take promotional pictures for their websites, with the drone piloted by staff. Commercial film teams are also exempt from the ban. South Georgia has banned them full stop, taking a precautionary approach.

The other concern is disturbance to wildlife. The tourist guidelines for drones now have coastal areas as no-fly zones, especially where wildlife is concentrated. But this is vague and the jury is still out about just how far away certain species may be disturbed, if at all.

Losing a drone is also a worry. Operator error, software failure or high winds beyond the flight velocity can make the drone owner cry like a baby who has lost his rattle. Therefore, line of sight during flight is required and a maximum ceiling of 250m. Having said that, it is always tempting to push beyond those limits for aerial reconnaissance. Floats are also required for ditching into the sea, but pilots don't like them as they affect control and stability, and that is not great for filming.

In spite of these precautionary guidelines and recommendations, drone use is continually under review and many opinions are in conflict. My feeling is that, on yachts, whether for recreational use in image making or as a necessity for reconnaissance, they are here to stay. If you are in a crowded anchorage almost anywhere in the world it is best to keep a weather eye out for them. Needless to say, if you are nude sunbathing on deck, you are now taking your chances. If you hear that characteristic sound of a giant mosquito, grab a towel – quick. At least we don't have to worry about that where we sail. ■