



THE FALKLANDS EFFECT

MAGNUS DAY AND SILVIA VARELA ON HOW A FAREWELL SAIL AROUND THIS REMOTE ARCHIPELAGO BECAME A TURNING POINT IN THEIR LIVES TOGETHER

Last spring my partner, Magnus, and I delivered *Pelagic*, one of two yachts owned and run as a high-latitudes adventure charter boat by former Whitbread Round the World Race skipper and *Yachting World* columnist Skip Novak, from Puerto Williams in Chile to the Falkland Islands. Having sailed to Antarctica, Cape Horn, and the Chilean channels during the southern summer, *Pelagic* was due to overwinter in the port of Stanley. This delivery was also a farewell for Magnus. After

many years skippering *Pelagic* and her big sister *Pelagic Australis*, this was his final season in southern waters before embarking on new projects. The Falkland Islands lie in the South Atlantic, at 52°S and some 300 miles northeast from Cape Horn. During our three-day delivery, a lively downwind ride, Magnus told me about his love for the place and the exceptional people he'd met there over the years. The archipelago comprises the two main islands of East and West Falkland, as well as numerous smaller islands. Usually under time pressure of



‘OUR FANTASY OF ISLAND-HOPPING IN CALM SEAS WAS SOON SHATTERED’

charter schedules, Magnus had only visited Stanley and a few other sites, but the places in between make fantastic cruising grounds with safe anchorages. He dreamt of exploring the dramatic landscapes and abundant wildlife. As a photographer, I too am drawn to remote places and barren, windswept islands, and as a longtime resident of Argentina, I 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. But our fantasy of island-hopping in calm seas and idyllic weather was soon shattered.

The problem is that Stanley sits at the far eastern end of the islands, in an area of severe westerlies, which pinned us to the dock for the next week, blowing relentlessly over 40 knots. 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 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.

The wind was forecast to blow from the south-west 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 the 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 schedule in the charter business, Magnus was determined to avoid motoring unless absolutely necessary.

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 harbours, and none particularly remarkable. Our first port of call would be West Point Island, off West Falkland, to visit Magnus’s 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 south-west inside Carcass Island and finally north-west up Byron Sound and into West Point Cove at West Point Island. We arrived very late on the second night, in darkness, relying on instruments alone. It was nonetheless an easy entrance, and we anchored in eight metres in the middle of the cove.

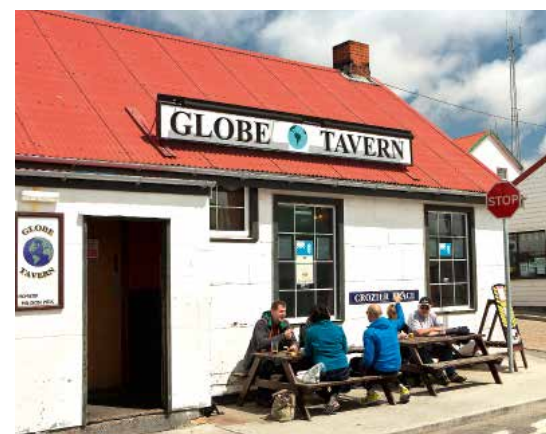
The next day we were woken by Kicki’s singsong voice on the VHF, inviting us to come ashore for lunch. We were feeling rather dizzy after two bouncy days at sea, and both perked up at the prospect of homemade food, good company, and a long walk.

With high sea cliffs and abundant bird life – especially 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. For the last three years, Thies and Kicki have been running the sheep farm and looking after the tourists. Last summer they

Pelagic is a steel-hulled 55-footer built specifically to cope with high-latitude conditions



Above: while waiting for a weather window we drove around Stanley in an old Land Rover. Right: one of a number of ‘watering holes’ in the capital, Stanley



Magnus studying the pilot book for the Falkland Islands inside *Pelagic*'s pilothouse



Magnus working the jib as we sail round the Colliers

Silvia Varela



Pelagic at anchor at Port Albemarle, famous for its abandoned sealing station

Silvia Varela

‘AT ONE POINT WE COUNTED 22 DOLPHINS ALL AROUND *PELAGIC*’

A picnic and a rest on top of Beaver Island

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.

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. The couple have spent their entire adult lives sailing in *Wanderer III*, the iconic 30ft wooden sloop 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 III*, for 26 months, from 2009 to 2011, and published an extraordinary photobook of their time there. In 2011, they were awarded the Cruising Club of America'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 III* 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 cosiest 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.

Our original plan was to go to New Island next, reckoned to be one of the most beautiful in the Falklands. 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 south-west 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. 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. 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 course to take a close-up look at the Colliers, a striking pair of sea stacks that I wanted to photograph. We spent hours going round and round the rocks, under sail alone, just for fun. The sea stacks are made of layered shelves on which dozens of sea lions were enjoying the sun. However, with each lap of the yacht, the young males became increasingly vocal, 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



Silvia Varela

The Falklands can be tricky to navigate – the tides are especially hard to predict



Philip Mugridge/Alamy

A Magellanic penguin on the beach at New Island



Silvia Varela



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Pelagic and *Wanderer III* at anchor, seen from the garden of the farmhouse at West Point Island

Top: from left to right, Thies, Kicki and Magnus walking in the mist. Above: shipwreck on the beach at West Point Island

(67°45'S). Sadly, there was nobody on Beaver Island – Poncet 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 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, Poncet 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 they made it to the island and thrived.

Our delightful experience travelling under headsail alone from West Point Island set a precedent, and we continued under the same sailplan early the following morning, all the way to Pit Creek, on Weddell Island. 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 are Commerson's dolphins, only 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 ashore and 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 weighed 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 south-east, 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, the channel that divides the two main Falkland islands, Port Albermarle 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 seemed to be 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



Silvia Varela



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Top: *Pelagic* approaching Stanley harbour.
Above: the first cup of tea of the day

moments are magical and a large part of why we live the way we do.

Although we were running 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. Motoring up this narrow channel – at times only 80m 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 childhood 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, stopping only 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 chartplotter has a waypoint at the door of the Victory pub. I 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 travelled mostly under sail, saving energy by going to bed at dusk and getting up at dawn, as well as reading by candlelight to avoid turning on the engine.

We'd learned to work together on a boat efficiently and joyfully, and we realised that the time we had spent with Thies and Kicki at West Point had planted a seed in us: what if we took up cruising full time? We'd both been travelling 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 were heading for the Caribbean to start a new chapter on our 39ft steel-hulled home: *Lazy Bones*. And so it was that our time in the Falkland Islands heralded the start of our cruising life.

Professional skipper Magnus Day and photographer Silvia Varela live aboard their 39ft steel-hulled cruising yacht *Lazy Bones*.
www.highlatitudes.com

