



# SKIP NOVAK

THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE IS STILL A TREACHEROUS WAY TO TRAVEL BETWEEN THE ATLANTIC AND THE PACIFIC. A FALLBACK PLAN IS ESSENTIAL

I checked the Canadian Ice Service's website just before the deadline for this column – one last time – lest this column proves to be totally irrelevant by the time it goes to print. I was partially relieved. Why? Because it appears that in early September, close on the onset of winter, the Northwest Passage might be a no-go, at least for flimsy yachts, due to heavy concentrations of first-year ice in the Franklin and Victoria Straits – the normal route through this labyrinthine archipelago.

There are alternative routes, but at the time of writing they were also problematic. With a big change in the wind direction, some vessels might squeak through and I will be a laughing stock, but as always in this column, I will take that risk.

I attempted the Northwest Passage on *Pelagic Australis* in 2005 and failed due to ice in this very area. Although we were too early in the season, the decision to retreat back down Baffin Bay was justified, as it never cleared. A few small yachts did make it through: one on the deck of a Canadian ice breaker and another following behind in

their wake, resulting in serious hull damage.

Following an ice breaker is not to be undertaken lightly. Thereafter, if your yacht floats at all, you will be sailing a squashed tin can.

Since 2005 the Northwest Passage has gained the

reputation of being not only always possible, but almost a given for robust small craft and even precious superyachts with hulls that are not ice-strengthened. The optimum period for planning a successful transit of the critical 'choke points' is the last week of August into the beginning of September, which is really near to the onset of winter and not long before the freeze-up.

Irrespective of how this season pans out, it is worth noting that although seasonal sea ice is fast disappearing all over the Arctic, there is still plenty of multi-year ice persisting through the summers. This is getting harder and more dense with time and shifts about on the vagaries of weather.

So if last winter's sea ice doesn't melt off, this

accumulation of 'heavy ice' might still stop you. This inherent risk of possible failure for small (or precious) craft must be gladly accepted if an attempt on the Northwest Passage is to be made.

The big mistake when planning this voyage is to lock yourself into another cruising itinerary immediately on the back of it, assuming you will get through. You might find yourself at the end of the season in the wrong ocean, having retreated back down into the North Atlantic when you were supposed to be approaching Hawaii. It is noteworthy that the coast of Baffin Island opens up late in the summer so this is a good back-up plan if you have to retreat back out to the east. In fact it is a much more interesting cruising ground than the western sector of the passage itself, if box ticking is not your primary motive.

## Pen Hadow's Arctic Mission

Meanwhile, on the Alaska side, the British polar adventurer Pen Hadow is attempting to sail to the North Pole with two 50ft yachts to publicise the disappearing environment of Arctic summer sea ice. I was asked to attempt this on *Pelagic* about eight years ago. It was a far-fetched project then and it still is today.

However, successful or not, this bold project will draw further attention to climate change. Russian ice breakers have been breaking their way to the North Pole for decades, but to arrive at the top of the world in a lead of open water on a small craft will be an event worth noting – even more so if they manage to extract themselves.

Getting up there is one thing, getting back another. If their leads close out and the yachts become beset in the pack, the team will certainly be evacuated. But then the environmentalists will put the boot in for the two yachts being left adrift in a pristine environment.

From the blog ([www.arcticmission.com](http://www.arcticmission.com)) it seems already apparent that the Pole might not be attainable, and they are falling back on a short-course menu of science projects at the edge of the pack ice. By the time you read this column they will have either attained the Pole or have been stuck in the ice trying, which will, in both cases, create the requisite media attention.

The irony is that if they were sensible, they would stick to the edge of the pack and retreat before getting caught out. But you wouldn't hear about that at all. ■

## 'THERE IS STILL A LOT OF MULTI-YEAR ICE IN SUMMER'