



SKIP NOVAK

WHEN HIS YACHT *PELAGIC* WAS LAUNCHED, SKIP VOWED HE'D NEVER RETURN HER TO THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE. NOW HE EXPLAINS WHY HE'S DOING JUST THAT



When *Pelagic* was launched in Southampton in the autumn of 1987 and sailed immediately south I claimed – in a very Bernard Moitessier kind of moment – that she'd never return to the crowded waters of northern Europe. Or, for that matter, to the northern hemisphere.

To demonstrate I was serious about that statement, while on our first expedition to the Antarctic, when caught in a prolonged storm well tied in to the shore, I cut up our UK and European delivery charts and stitched them together to create a log book, using some spare pieces of Treadmaster and left over joinery to make an attractive cover.

Mind you, this log book had nothing to do with position, course, speed and weather but immediately became the record of what fun we were having. The back of those charts were filled with nonsense prose, satire, cartoons, facile watercolours and some impressive ballads. The ballads were invariably authored by the public schoolboys in our crew.

I have this log book still. Hard to tell if my teenage children were amused, bemused or simply confused

when they found it and had a read.

Well, you probably saw it coming. Never say never. At time of this column's publication, *Pelagic* will hopefully be somewhere off Newfoundland after arriving on the mid-coast of Maine to prepare for an Arctic season. She sailed it in one non-stop leg from the Falklands, arriving on the smell of an oily rag.

The decision to move her north for the foreseeable future was, ironically, due in part to the fact that the Antarctic is getting so crowded with tour ships that we can no longer function with that vessel in what was our pioneering spirit.

As my colleagues tend to say – those who are still standing, at least – we were lucky to have had the *epoch d'or*. I use the French as most of those pioneers were French, plus me.

Instead, *Pelagic* will now seek out pockets of solitude in

Greenland and Arctic Canada, leaving the more commercial *Pelagic Australis* to continue with the southern charter business that continues with yet more and more demand.

It is painful to say, but in the highly organised and over-subscribed tourist business in the Antarctic, *Pelagic* is now marginally unfit for purpose according to some bureaucracies. I never did get around to putting in that watertight bulkhead. Better to exit the region gracefully.

While *Pelagic* sailed north during those six weeks of open passage delivery, I have been the absentee owner on shore, comfortable in my armchair with my laptop, waiting for the weekly position report from Kirsten, the skipper. Not being on board during these long hauls, with a schedule hanging over your head and a commitment halfway around the world, makes for an anxious time.

Email reports of fuel delivery problems to the engine, a broken furling drum, an unsolved oil leak, satphone low on minutes and other minor snafus, if not complaints, were at least useful pieces of information to file and is of course all part of this game and must be expected.

Luckily, I never had a satphone call from the boat. When I see that tell tale +88 16 number on my mobile, I always find a chair to sit down on before answering to hear about the major incident that has occurred or one that is currently unfolding.

Worse than the worry, though, was the envy I was experiencing. Reports of 'great sailing' and 'wind aft the beam for the last 10 days' plus things like 'got becalmed finally, lots of swimming and today we caught a dorado' had a more profound effect on me than the list of repairs and spares needed that would cost me money and possibly compromise the schedule at the other end.

Those good news stories made me think: "Hey, that is what I used to do!" Long passages were my passion. Dragging behind the boat on a bit of old rope as shark bait, sailing buck naked, having a libation at sunset, eating simply and being on watch alone under all those stars while anticipating another new landfall and a run ashore in a strange port was my *raison d'être*.

Well, having missed that warm, tropical experience with some regret, I can now look forward to pushing some northern ice. Why not? ■

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