

SKIP NOVAK

SKIP RECALLS THE FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES THAT LED TO HIS
PIONEERING SAILING IN THE ANTARCTIC

I'm often asked by people more familiar with my ocean racing career how I got started in the high latitude charter business. Chartering for profit if not just for sustenance was never the reason I 'went south' and subsequently became recognised (as I'm constantly reminded) as an entrepreneur of the genre.

The beginning had to do with what a quorum from the crew of *Drum* on the 1985/86 Whitbread Race thought was the next move. On the cusp of a path making a decent living out of racing offshore, but certainly before it was evident, a few of us who were getting on in years thought it time to do some sailing on our own agenda.

Three of us put money into the DIY building of the 54ft steel *Pelagic*, and each of us had a year on board doing our thing. Mine was Antarctic-focused and, after the second season that I was awarded for the sweat equity put in during the building, we had to decide what to do. I'd only scratched the surface of the southern regions and there was so much more pioneering in the offing.

We three partners drafted a buy-out agreement based on what I recognised as an opportunity. My father always told me in his wisdom: "Son, whatever you do, don't quit the Chicago Yacht Club," which of course I did soon after landing in the UK in 1976. But I was wise enough to keep the channels open with all the members I'd sailed with as a nipper. My first charter was with five gentlemen yacht owners for a two-week junket to Cape Horn and the Beagle Channel. That was a success that led to more of the same.

Contrast my second charter that same inaugural season of 1991 with my Kiwi mates who'd saved the day with the *Fazisi* campaign in the 1989 Whitbread. Via an FM radio station, they bought the rights to the Soviet story and funds raised were enough cash to get us around the second half of the world. It was stressful, but from these situations you get mates for life.

This was before the days of legal charter agreements. I'll never forget Kiwi Paul Smit telling me: "Not to worry, we'll sort it all out later," during the first night while we were cavorting on the dance floor of the Tropicana Club in Ushuaia. I kept reminding him he had the entire \$10,000

charter fee in cash in his back pocket.

Everything about that trip was cavalier in the extreme. We capsized the Zodiac twice, one from a katabatic wind and another by a glacial tsunami – learning experiences the hard way. The copy that charter produced in New Zealand led to a firm marketing base in Australasia that continues to this day.

A while back designer Tony Castro and I were recalling some early boyhood adventures. He told how he and his friend borrowed without notice the friend's Dad's 32-footer and sailed it out of Lisbon down the coast for 30 miles and anchored – as you would. There were 14 of them. When the search and rescue plane flew over the next morning and dipped their wings it was all over apart from the consequences.

I had one better. The details of how this deal was struck escape me now but, aged 15, I 'chartered' my father's 40-foot cruiser-racer to six high school seniors who'd just graduated. It was for a

Friday evening sail up and down the Chicago lakefront.

Things got out of hand. Fuelled by the booze on board (my Harbour Rat crew of two and me stayed dead sober) they started to climb the mast and make other gymnastic moves trying to impress their terrified girlfriends.

Then, to cap things off, while motoring back in at 0100 the engine quit in the harbour entrance in a dead calm. Harbour Rat crew Billy immediately dived over the side and swam the 200m to the dock to bring back the dinghy for a tow in. We then managed to get the hysterical 'charter guests' off the boat and into their car, plastered, and luckily never seen again.

Next morning my Dad and crew were due to arrive for the Saturday regatta. The Rats and I spent the early hours of the morning giving the boat a pull through, but at short notice the smell of whisky and cigarettes was difficult to wash out of the upholstery.

My old man didn't say anything that day and I was sure I had got away with it. Years later I was reminded of this adventure when reading about Mark Twain who wrote (which I will paraphrase): 'When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years.' ■

'We were learning experiences the hard way'

