

SKIP NOVAK

GETTING INVOLVED IN THE HELICOPTER BOMBARDMENT OF A REMOTE ISLAND... ALL IN THE NAME OF A WAR AGAINST MICE

If you're in the yacht charter business, there's not much you won't do to earn a crust. It's a time to pull your finger out and adapt before the falling tide of marina fees, crew salaries, insurances and various expenses to keep things afloat pull you down to meet Davy Jones.

I love these projects that are so out of the ordinary I immediately buy into them without much logical thought, sorting out the details downstream. The RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), got wind that *Pelagic Australis* was stuck in Cape Town, which was fortuitous for both parties. Last March the RSPB had to abort their project to eradicate mice on Gough Island, a tiny volcanic outlier in the Tristan da Cunha group in the South Atlantic, when COVID locked things down.

The mice, having arrived 150 years ago with the sealers, have turned aggressively carnivorous and are devastating the sea bird population.

We are doing the repeat voyages to establish a team of 15 on the island with two tonnes of bird seed and other equipment who will, over the next two months, sequester two species of fragile endemic land birds and care for them during the bombardment of 'bait' (poison) from helicopters. In May the SA *Agulhas*, the South African icebreaker, will deliver the three choppers and the Kiwi pilots who have the necessary expertise. This is logically an ambitious project in every way, shape and form.

Although Gough is British territory, there has long been a South African meteorological station on the island and in the time of COVID all visitors by definition are suspect. My crew of four, plus eight RSPB staff, had to quarantine for 14 days before departure from Cape Town. Note, this was not one of those 'self-isolation' jobs where you go home and cheat your way through out of necessity. No, this was a full 14 days in a box of a hotel room with a kitchen, and nothing coming in and nothing going out except your trash in the corridor. No hotel food, no Uber Eats.

At least our crew, all Cape Town locals, had time to prepare. I brought in an enormous box of old slide transparencies and a clapped out lightbox, the idea

being to make selections for scanning later. Some of this material was over 40 years old, going back to *King's Legend* on my first Whitbread Around the World Race and, of course, the building of *Pelagic* in Southampton in 1986/87. Through this 'magic lantern' I reunited with old girlfriends, paid respects to many shipmates who have departed and was generally amused on revisiting what we used to get up to.

On 1 February the 12 of us were bussed down from the hotel in negative pressure, jumped on board the sanitised boat and were off that afternoon, maskless, in a howling south-easter, wind aft of the beam with a 5m swell. For the landlubbers this was a bumpy start, heads down in buckets.

After that blow died down, we motor sailed on and off for four days going due west on about 35°S before a nice north-wester filled, allowing a close reach down to the island. It was a pleasant trip in mild conditions and when the autopilot failed halfway it was actually a bonus, as people enjoyed taking half hour stints

on the wheel in the generally sunny and warm weather.

On arrival we were lucky with a calm anchorage just off the kelp line and, within the hour, the RSPB contingent was offloaded with their day bags onto a rocky shoreline under the met station. That afternoon we offloaded their kit by crane from the inflatable, a 30m drop along the cliff face. The next day all the other cargo was uplifted in gravel bags just before increasing swell made the last trips precarious. We moved around the corner for two days to a better shelter to prepare for the return and to admire this

most rugged of volcanic islands by Zodiac.

On leaving the island we circumnavigated and then went wing and wing, main down to fourth reef trimmed amidship and kept that rig for the next 36 hours. With only four of us on board, and my 18-year-old daughter, Lara, on her first crew contract, I was reminded how pleasant sailing in these mid latitudes could be, from my early years of yacht deliveries – shorts and T-shirt stuff, fishing line over the side, making sushi and mid ocean swimming.

To all my high latitude colleagues and die hard aficionados of the cold I would say, try it, you might like it. ■

