

# SKIP NOVAK

SAILING A BRAND NEW CUSTOM BOAT OFF THE EDGE OF THE CHARTS REQUIRES A RETURN TO FIRST PRINCIPLES

I am writing from 80° north – in truth 79° 45'. The *Pelagic 77 Vinson of Antarctica* bit off a lot to chew on with her first real offshore sea trial sailing from the UK direct to Tromsø. We had to enter Norwegian waters in order to deal with a quarantine and then carry on to Longyearbyen in Svalbard. A gamble for sure given a new custom boat straight out of the box.

This was our first charter and had been seven months in the negotiation, supporting a German government team of geologists in their long term study of the geophysical structures of that archipelago and taking samples for age analysis – that will be 1.5 tonnes of rocks in the forepeak after 30 days in the field. We are in *Vinson of Antarctica's* polar environment and have had no showstoppers from our side, so far, testament to our design and project management team and KM Yachts in Holland. The 130 items on the 'snag list' – some warranty, but most modifications when she returns to KM in September – are par for the course in a new build and not in any way excessive.

The big question was whether we could enter Norway at all, and this was not clear until we presented ourselves in Tromsø. Likewise, the German team scheduled to meet us in Longyearbyen were also clueless if they would be allowed into Oslo by air. Unlike the UK, which had dates for things opening up, Norway did so with no prior plan to work to, only if and when the data gave a green light. We were all working on spec right up to the day; acceptable for a professional project of small scale, but this uncertainty has blown the arctic tourism cruise ship sector right out of the water for the season.

So our 10 days spent in Longyearbyen prepping and waiting for the geologists was like going back in time to 1983 when I first visited on the 61ft sloop *War Baby*. Back then there was little in this mining town and no tourism whatsoever. Now, we could enjoy the proliferation of cafés, restaurants and gift shops with the few locals who have hung in during the Covid washout.

The last time I was up in this region was 2004 with *Pelagic Australis* and, although cruise ships were certainly a feature then, they were not excessive in number.

Pre-Covid in 2019 there were over 55,000 tourist visitors, many ship borne, and we were told in normal times we'd hardly ever be left alone in any of the fjords.

Fooling around at 80° of latitude is interesting. In 2004 we hit 80° in the fog and all our instrumentation went down – a total black out; no speed, no wind, no GPS, but more to the point no radar and sounder. It was as if one of those clever young programmers of these increasingly complex and integrated systems thought no-one would be going that far north or south, so why bother extending the algorithm beyond that convenient arbitrary figure... After many reboots, a few anxious Iridium calls to the company, who were as perplexed as us, and some hours of nail biting moments as we untangled the leadline, it miraculously came to life. We were on paper charts in

those days but without the fundamentals of radar and a sounder we were playing a tricky game.

Fast forward to the present and although the electronic chartplotter

worked meticulously until about 79° 45' the folio does end about there. So it was no surprise when we were once again on and off in the fog in relatively shallow waters and back to 1983 techniques of taking transits, back bearings and using the fundamentals of radar for distance off. All this requires a level of concentration not found when using a chartplotter, at least in well surveyed areas.

Luckily, I was not phased by this transition into the past, nor was Kenneth, my understudy and an RYA instructor.

One wonders however (and I am reminded of celestial navigation in the same context) that although you have to learn these first principles on paper at some point in a training progression, how often will you actually use them?

It might seem cavalier to turn your plotter off and spend time navigating in the Solent and English Channel and getting these techniques down pat, but make sure you don't go aground (especially on my advice!) as you'll then be accused of not using the tools available to you. Or you can do the real thing and sail up to 80° north and literally fall off the end of the electronic chart. It can be a liberating – or sobering – experience. ■

## 'Fooling around at 80° of latitude is interesting'

