

SKIP NOVAK

A RETURN VISIT TO SOUTH GEORGIA NEVER FAILS TO EXCITE, ESPECIALLY EXPLORING THE 'ALTERNATIVE' SHACKLETON ROUTE

I'm not a counter. I'm not the sort of guy to add up things like ocean miles sailed (I get asked that continually and don't have a clue what the answer is, other than 'a lot') or how many around the world races I've done. At least the latter is easy to remember, it's the fingers on one hand.

Another one is how many times I have been to Antarctica and places like South Georgia. For these I have also lost count. It's not the volume of trips that is important during a life's passion but rather the quality of each of those trips. And South Georgia tops the list in that category. It's getting on to 35 years I've been involved at the cutting edge of high latitude sailing in the deep south. Every project is different, special, carries risk, is physical and can be stressful at times. If you add up all of this it brings a certain level of satisfaction. Although going to South Georgia might be considered a routine for me, I never take it for granted and I'm as enthusiastic about it now as I was on our first trip there during the southern winter of 1988 on the original *Pelagic*.

In fact, recently I came back from a month's expedition to the island at the very front of this season. Based from *Vinson of Antarctica*, the focus was a ski traverse starting in King Haakon Bay that took in six days in the field, including skiing 50km across the snow and ice of five glacier systems (the Murray, Briggs, Esmark, Kohl Plateau, and the Konig) and crossing four cols. After five camps, our party of nine arrived into Stromness Bay.

For Shackleton aficionados some of those names will ring a bell if you've read his *South or Shackleton's Boat Journey* by Worsely. But rather than doing the classic Shackleton Traverse (another repeated trip I can count on the fingers of my other hand), this was the 'alternative Shackleton route' – one that in 1916 his party of three could have done from where they landed with the *James Caird* in King Haakon Bay and arrived at the same point of refuge at the whaling station at Stromness. The advantages of our route were the avoidance of the famous 'come what may' slide into the unknown off Razorback

Ridge above the Compass Glacier, and also the steep descent down from Breakwind Gap into Fortuna Bay off the Fortuna Glacier.

What is often considered the downside of the route is a technical part which is in fact the main attraction for us. Dealing with those obstacles is not to be missed! The difficulties for us on our alternative route would be having to cross three glacial cols instead of two to reach Fortuna Bay, but the important thing from my co-leader Stephen Venables's and my own perspective was to cross some new ground on the island. Uncertainty is what it is all about!

The sub-Antarctic Islands of the Southern Ocean are where wildlife proliferates. These fragile environments are now protected by convention to an extent of either not being available to land at all, or it being so highly regulated that if you are allowed on shore you see things from a prepared boardwalk and a story articulated by a dedicated,

obligatory guide. And here is where South Georgia is an exception. Because of the long history of human contact with the island from the sealing, then whaling on an industrial scale, the government of this UK overseas territory does manage it strictly, but does not forego the tradition of expeditions into the interior – although there is a rigorous vetting process to achieve the permit to do so.

This, coupled with the fact there's no airstrip on the island and the distance of 800 miles from Port Stanley, both there and back across a stormy Southern Ocean, is a self-limiting mechanism. It's a boat trip, and usually a rough one, so we see a mere handful of self-supported expeditions that venture beyond the cruise ship landing sites each year. It is the lowest of the low impact activities you can do on South

Georgia, camped well above the shore line in sort of a biological vacuum, but one of stunning and dramatic alpine scenery, always with one eye on the outlook for what can be very volatile weather.

One of our group summed things up quite nicely on the *Vinson* blog: "You don't find outings like this at your exclusive high class travel agents. Thrilling, unique, physical and highly recommended but not for the faint-hearted." ■

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