

INTREPID

“Tense and unnerving” is not how you’d expect Skip Novak to describe an Antarctic cruise. But even high-latitudes experts must have a first time, especially when inching along a swaying yard in a Force 7. And three weeks aboard the Jubilee Sailing Trust’s 55m barque *Lord Nelson* was always going to be much more than the average expedition

IN THE ICE

LORD NELSON



Bosun's mate Stuart reattaches a blown staysail sheet strop as a Force 10 rips across the Drake Passage



Captain Chris Phillips braves the cold



On watch on the bridge



Beautiful weather, astonishing scenery – our day at Peterman Island was as good as it gets in Antarctica

I'm not one to pass up the opportunity to climb out of my comfort zone. But on 5 March I occasionally questioned my judgment. Just west of the South Shetland Islands in the Antarctic, I found myself in a Force 10 northerly. The barometer had slid to 971mb and the barque *Lord Nelson* was getting it on the nose on our homeward passage to Ushuaia. It had been a memorable morning.

As we clawed off the Shetlands for sea room, the square sails were stowed to leave just 'fore and afters'. First the clew strop on the mizzen staysail parted, followed shortly after by the head strop on the main staysail. Changing from the roller-furling outer jib to the smaller hanked-on inner jib on the bowsprit in a driving snowstorm was a refreshing experience, to put it mildly.

With a single sail forward and both engines going, the ship was holding station comfortably even if those of us on board were not ultimately comfortable. If there's one thing I've learned from sailing the Drake Passage in high winds, it's that a Force 10 is best avoided.

Lord Nelson is a square-rigger operated by the Jubilee Sailing Trust (JST) that, like their second vessel, *Tenacious*, provides a sail training experience for a mix of able-bodied and disabled crew; a unique programme not only in the UK, but worldwide.

She was on the last stages of a two-year, under-publicised tour that had included South Africa, India, Australia and New Zealand before a voyage through the Southern Ocean to Argentina. She would continue home via Brazil and Halifax before arriving in Southampton this September.

From the Chatham Islands off the east coast of New Zealand, she had sailed 34 days to the Beagle Channel without motoring, calms included, and doubled Cape Horn 50° S to 50° S (by continuing up towards the Falklands and back down!) to qualify her crew for the ring in the ear. She was the first British square-rigger to have made this passage since 1991. This is a very capable vessel sailed by a very capable crew.

Working aloft is addictive

With *Lord Nelson* in Ushuaia, I signed on as a supernumerary on 15 February to meet Captain Chris Phillips and his permanent crew. I was to be a pilot and expedition leader for the ship's 25-day cruise to the Antarctic Peninsula, there to cover safety in the ice and anchorages, advise on the itinerary and environmental matters and to conduct visits ashore.

This all came about because I had known John Tanner as a rival navigator in the 1977-78 Whitbread Race. He was on board Clare Francis's *ADC Accutrac* and I was on *King's Legend*. Even though I hadn't seen him since, he had advised his nephew, Captain Chris, a commissioned Royal Naval officer, to contact me for advice.

One thing led to another and once given the nod by Andy Spark, operations manager of the JST and its driving force, I found myself on the end of t'gallant (top gallant) in the Drake Passage three days after signing on board, putting gaskets on the clewed up sail while bowling along on a Southern Ocean swell under topsails alone in a 30-knot westerly.

I am used to working aloft on single masts, but those first few minutes were tense and unnerving. Stuart, a young

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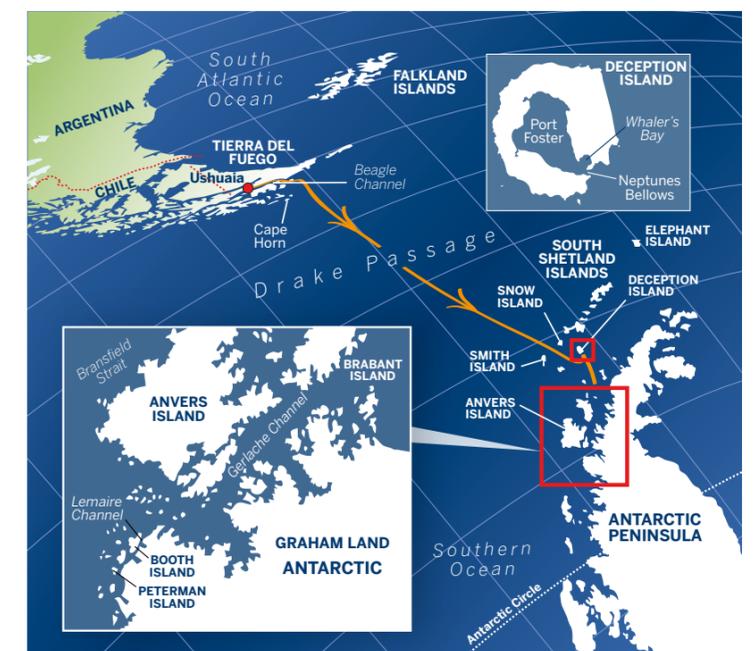
marine biologist and one of the bosun's mates, settled me down with a few tips on how to relax and stay tacked on. I immediately began to enjoy the ride immensely. He warned me that working aloft was addictive, but he had had his 'moments'.

When climbing up the ratlines you are on your own – no change from the days of Jack Aubrey, the fictional captain of Patrick O'Brian's novels. At the top you clip on to a safety wire that leads over the futtock shrouds to the crossrees. There you clip on to the safety wire along the yard and move out.

So, in theory you are safe. Yet falling off on to the safety wires at any point could be ugly – embarrassing at the very least. Letting go is not really an option.

Lord Nelson carried a complement of 50 people for this voyage. Some 35 were either 'voyage crew' – aged 24 years old to 77, the average age being 57 – or paying trainees who included watch leaders, who had a substantial number of voyages under their belts. The permanent crew of nine included the deck officers, two engineers, a medical purser, a cook and a bosun. Four volunteers were also signed on, designated as bosun's mates and a so-called 'cook's ass' – the word 'assistant' was too long to fit into its allotted cell on the crew spreadsheet!

A few more than normal for this voyage, the volunteers were can-do men and women who knew the ship from previous voyages and did the heavy work. They made



LORD NELSON



▲ Above (left-right): a group effort helps Croat Mislav, paralysed in the Balkans war, ashore at Port Lockroy; everyone goes on watch



▲ Above (left-right): furling sails in the caldera at Deception Island; the ship is cleaned six days a week during 'Happy Hour' after breakfast



Freezing but fun – a dusting of snow on the inner jib is standard on a cruise of the Antarctic Peninsula

running repairs beyond the capabilities of the voyage crew and were instrumental in providing muscle for landings.

The crew were split into four watches and stood four hours on and eight off. Responsibilities included steering (there is no autopilot), look-outs on either side and a scribe to record log entries and meteorological readings. Bracing the yards and setting fore and after sails required two watches or all hands in heavy weather. Oncoming watches also had to help prepare meals – the amount of work required to scrub and chop potatoes and green beans for 50 cannot be under-estimated – then wash up. Except on Sundays, there was 'Happy Hour' after breakfast – a pull-through from stem to stern to clean the decks, heads and galley no matter what the weather.

Across the Polar Front

We had three wheelchair users on board and several walking wounded. None was excluded from any of these tasks. The rule was they were not to be helped unless they asked for help. So, if you seek rest and relaxation, the JST is not for you. Disabled or not, you come as crew. They take no passengers.

As usual with a Drake Passage crossing, we motorsailed when the wind died between weather systems. The object is to get across and not dally – conditions can only get worse. We passed south of the Antarctic Convergence on 19 February.

This boundary zone, known by scientists as the Polar Front, is where the cold water of the Southern Ocean meets the super-cold water of Antarctica. We were accompanied by a proliferation of black browed and wandering albatross, cape pigeons, Wilson's storm petrels and a plethora of other petrels, unidentifiable to the layman. The water temperature dropped and settled at about 2°C. This zone of upwelling nutrients provides a haven for the Southern Ocean food chain, and its ring around the Antarctic continent isolates this unique polar ecosystem.

Although big bergs can persist for a time north of the Polar Front, once south of 60° S ice was our main concern.

To obtain an Antarctic Permit, *Lord Nelson* had to be considered seaworthy by the Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA). That the MCA had approved *Lord Nelson's* world tour, including the 4,000-mile passage from New Zealand to Cape Horn counted for nothing in a proposed Antarctic voyage, which featured a short stretch of the Drake Passage, then a flexible itinerary within a relatively sheltered archipelago. Concerns were raised regarding stability, the windage of the rig and the strength of the hull in ice. Such is the enigma of bureaucracy.

But with those hurdles cleared and the Drake successfully passed, we made our misty landfalls on Smith and Snow islands then passed through Neptunes Bellows, the entrance to Deception Island. This is the usual first shelter after a Drake

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crossing. It affords an easy landing beach-head and a trip ashore to Whalers Bay inside the drowned caldera of a semi-active volcanic, a unique feature in the Antarctic.

Having given way to a cruise ship that had scheduled an afternoon landing, we came to grips with getting people ashore that evening. The landings were the object of the voyage for me. The attractions were the ruins of the Norwegian whaling station from the 1920s and the remains of a British Antarctic Survey base destroyed by the last volcanic eruption in 1969.

Enter Piers Alvarez-Munos, my colleague, who was seconded to get us through the MCA's hoops. A master mariner and superb raconteur, he had just finished a stint as first mate on the cruise ship *National Geographic Explorer*. Having served on the *Lord Nelson* in her early years, he organised disembarkations and re-embarkations and handled all the tender-driving, leaving me to enjoy myself on shore.

Lord Nelson usually disembarks its crew via a gangway on to jetties. The ship was designed with electric lifts to allow wheelchair users independent access to the three decks, but transferring people into an inflatable tender was another matter.

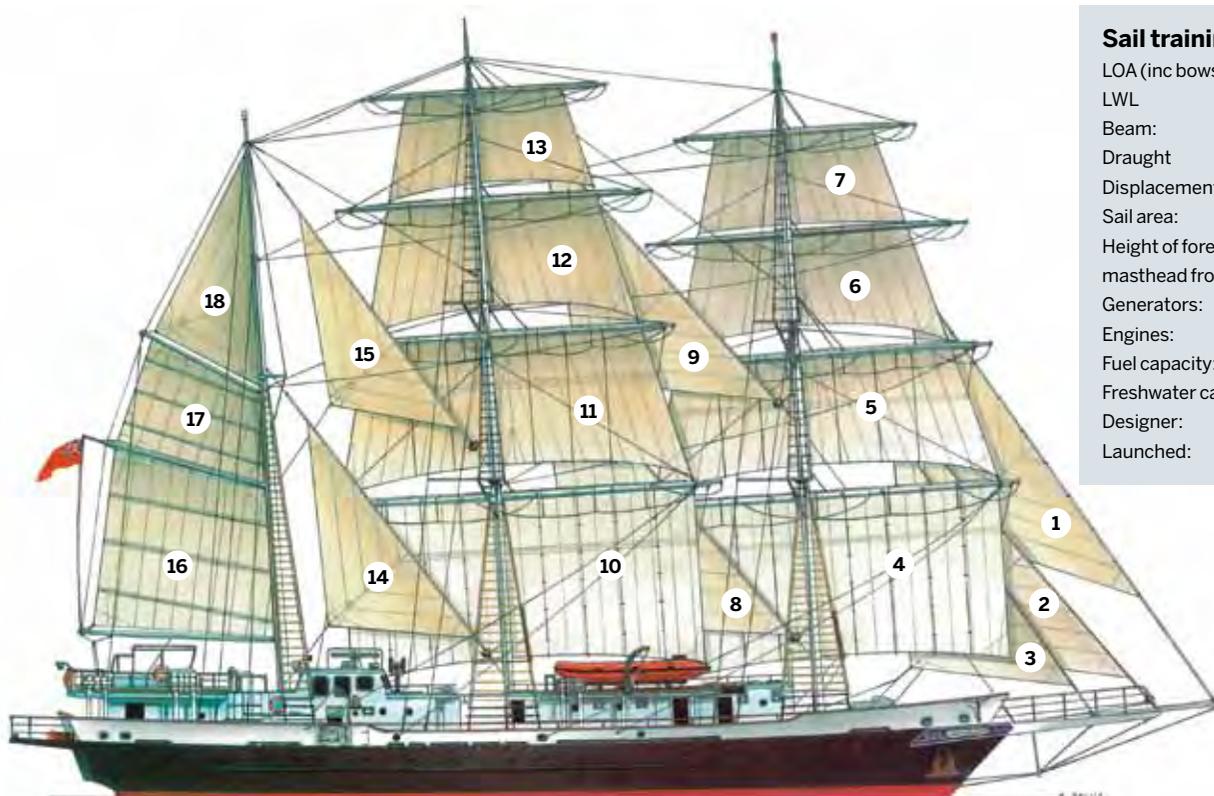
Actually, disability is a relative thing. Although we had three wheelchair users, things moved slowly anyway given that the average age of the voyage crew pushed 60 and people had to descend a ladder over the side into a heaving tender. The many layers of clothing and lifejackets required sometimes brought the process to a near standstill.

It took an hour and a half to get 40 people ashore, but it was a good first run. There is nothing like a walk (or a wheel) ashore at Deception to cure chronic seasickness from a Drake crossing or relieve lingering anxieties about the voyage. All worries are forgotten once on *terra firma*, at close quarters to a pair of chinstrap penguins which look you up and down or see a fur seal. This is when the Antarctic adventure really begins.

The group enjoyed a very atmospheric time ashore – dull grey conditions gave way to a euphoric burst of sunlight over the caldera rim just before nightfall.

The next day we headed south across the Bransfield Strait and into the Gerlache Straits, dodging bergy bits and growlers on radar and by eye during a dark night. Piers and I were operating six-on, six-off at the end of the bowsprit with a

LORD NELSON



Sail training ship *Lord Nelson*

LOA (inc bowsprit)	54.7m (179ft 6in)
LWL	37m (121ft 5in)
Beam:	9m (29ft 6in)
Draught	4.12m (13ft 6in)
Displacement	491 tonnes
Sail area:	1,024m ² (11,029ft ²)
Height of fore masthead from deck:	31m (101ft 8in)
Generators:	2 x 100kVA
Engines:	2 x 230bhp
Fuel capacity:	33 tonnes
Freshwater capacity:	22 tonnes
Designer:	Colin Mudie
Launched:	October 1985

Lord Nelson's sails

- 1 Flying jib
- 2 Outer jib
- 3 Inner jib
- 4 Fore course

- 5 Fore topsail
- 6 Fore t'gallant
- 7 Fore royal
- 8 Main staysail
- 9 Main t'gallant staysail

- 10 Main course
- 11 Main topsail
- 12 Main t'gallant
- 13 Main royal
- 14 Mizzen staysail

- 15 Mizzen t'gallant staysail
- 16 Spanker
- 17 Upper spanker
- 18 Spanker topsail

The Jubilee Sailing Trust ships *Lord Nelson* and *Tenacious* sail 12 months a year and anyone can join a voyage, aged 16 upwards, no sailing experience required. To find out more, visit jst.org.uk



▲ Above: with over 50 crew on board, cook Derek, a retired fireman, has his work cut out
 ▶ Right: author Skip Novak (left) with Captain Chris and bosun's mate Stuart

VHF radio and a projector lamp. However, some of the pressure was off. We had arrived on the peninsula.

A cross-section of society

Over the next few weeks we mingled with the penguins and seals onshore and off, observed whales and icebergs, took in the vistas. I met a banking executive, business gurus, health-care workers, teachers, a geologist, a retired fireman and Royal Navy helicopter pilot, consultants, an IT man and an occupational therapist. It was a cross-section of British society, with a few Irish, a Kiwi, a couple of Aussies and a Croat to mix it up.

Most had been on previous JST voyages, a few as many as 20 times. However, these voyages are not for the over-sensitive – you have to take a ribbing and dish it back out to survive!

Over our 12 days on the peninsula, we made six good landings and spent periods hunkered down at anchor. We failed to go through the Lemaire Channel due to ice blockage twice until we finally got through. The weather was generally windy, closed and hard going, with only one truly stellar day ashore.

Having retreated from trying to pass the Lemaire Channel on 3 March, again due to ice, Captain Chris brought us back into the anchorage in the Argentine Islands in a blinding snow-storm. It was one of the finest pieces of seamanship I had ever witnessed given the conditions and vessel. This was also our last shelter before striking north on the homeward passage.

Just beneath Cape Horn a new 956mb low ripped across and a Force 9 from the south-west drove us under topsails and jib up into the Beagle Channel for an exciting finish before we dropped the hook at the pilot station on 10 March to tidy up.

Most officers and voyage crew admitted this has been one of the most demanding yet most satisfying voyages on 'Nelly'. We were pleasantly exhausted – and isn't that the way a true sea voyage should end? At the captain's debrief, I addressed the crew. I told them the word 'expedition' was one of the most over-used misconstrued words in travel today – everyone on a cruise ship is on some sort of expedition or another, it seems.

Sailing the *Lord Nelson*, a collective effort of 50 people, is very different. Every member of this crew had been on a genuine adventure. I told them if anyone ever asked, they could put their hands on their hearts, and say, yes, they had been on a true sailing expedition.

