

Story and photography by Skip Novak

It was all hands on deck for an expedition
cruise aboard the tall ship *Lord Nelson*

FORCE 10 TO ANTARCTICA

The tall ship *Lord Nelson* powers
through the Antarctic brash ice.

Gentoo penguins stand watch as the author's arctic explorer *Pelagic*, which the BBC chartered for four months, meets up with *Lord Nelson* at Port Lockroy.





Kate, one of the paying crewmembers, takes in the view at Cuverville Island.

Never one to pass up an opportunity to climb out of my comfort zone (something to do with a 62-year-old body trapped in the mind of a 25-year-old), I found myself questioning my judgment during the memorable morning of March 5, when, just west of the South Shetland Islands in the Antarctic, I found myself in a Force 10 northerly, barometer at 971 millibars, getting it right on the nose on our homeward-bound passage to Ushuaia, Argentina.

Clawing off the Shetlands for sea room, the “squares were stowed,” and we only had “fore and afters” flying. First the clew strop on the mizzen staysail parted, followed shortly after by the head strop on the main staysail. A change from the roller-furling outer jib to the smaller hanked-on inner jib was a refreshing experience on the bowsprit in a driving snowstorm. With a single sail forward and both engines going, we were comfortably holding station, if not ultimately comfortable on board.

Sailing the Drake Passage in high winds is not new to me, but I have learned that a Force 10 storm is best avoided if at all possible. And I was not aboard my bluewater cruiser *Pelagic* that was designed for high-latitude sailing, but on the barque *Lord Nelson*, a square-rigger operated by the Jubilee Sailing Trust, which along with the second of the group’s two vessels, *Tenacious*, provides a sail-training experience for a mix of able-bodied and disabled crew.

Lord Nelson was on the last stages of a two-year, around-the-world tour that included stops in Brazil, South Africa, India, Singapore, Australia and Argentina, before continuing north on her voyage home to Southampton, England, in September 2014. 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, sailing 50 degrees south to 50 degrees south by continuing up toward the Falklands and back down to qualify her crew for rings in their ears. She was the first



British square-rigger to have made this passage since 1991; a very capable vessel sailed by a very capable crew indeed.

Lord Nelson arrived in Ushuaia on February 9 and I signed on board in a supernumerary role, meeting Capt. Chris Phillips and his permanent crew for the first time. When this 25-day adjunct cruise to the Antarctic Peninsula was announced, it was the quickest seller. I was added as pilot and expedition leader to cover all safety issues with respect to ice and anchorages, and to advise on the itinerary and environmental matters in addition to conducting the visits ashore.



Kate stands watch, and the crew is all smiles as the ship charges across the Drake Passage, left.

One thing led to another, and after negotiating my involvement with Andy Spark, the operations manager of the Jubilee Sailing Trust, I found myself in the Drake Passage three days after signing on board, out on the end of the t’gallant yard arm while bowling along on top of a Southern Ocean swell under topsails alone in a 30-knot westerly, putting gaskets on the clewed-up sail. Being used to working aloft on a single mast, I found those first few minutes tense and unnerving until Stuart, a young marine biologist and one of the bo’sun’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, though, working aloft is addicting.

Climbing up the ratlines, you are on your own, and once at the top, you clip on to a safety wire that leads up and over the futtock shrouds to the crossrees. From there you clip on to the safety wire along the yard and move out. Although safe in theory, falling off onto the safety wires at any point could be ugly, and certainly embarrassing. Letting go is not really an option with the deck 100 feet below you.

Lord Nelson carried 50 people for this voyage. The 35 voyage crewmembers, who ranged in age from 24 to 77, were paying trainees that 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 medic, cook and a bo’sun’. Four volunteers were also signed on as bo’sun’s mates and a “cook’s ass” a term that evolved from the word assistant not fitting onto a crew manifest spreadsheet cell, rather than the crew’s



personality. There were more crew than normal for this special voyage, but these were can-do men and women who knew the ship from many previous voyages and did the heavy work, made running repairs and the like, beyond the capabilities of the voyage crew and would be instrumental in providing muscle for the shore landings.

The voyage crew was split into four watches and stood four hours on and eight off. Responsibilities included steering (there is no autopilot), a lookout on either side and a scribe to record the 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 duties to help prepare the meals (washing, peeling, slicing potatoes for chips and top and tailing green beans for 50 is not to be underestimated) and then washing up. Every day except Sunday, “happy hour” was observed after breakfast, regardless of the weather or come what may. It was a full pull through from stem to stern, scrubbing and mopping of lower and upper decks, cleaning the heads and galley. The physically challenged sailors were not excluded from any of these tasks, the rule being that they were not to be helped unless they asked for help. If you are looking for rest and relaxation, disabled or not, signing up with this ship is not for you.



The crew stands ice watch from the main crosstrees as the ship heads through the Lemaire Channel. Katherine and Victoria jump for joy in the Penola Straits, right.

As usual with a Drake crossing, when the wind died between weather systems we motorsailed. The object was to cross quickly as the axiom of “it can only get worse” is fundamental with anything that has an engine. We passed south of the Antarctic Convergence on February 19. This boundary zone, now redefined in science circles as the Polar Front, is where the cold water of the Southern Ocean meets the super cold water of Antarctica. Accompanied by a proliferation of black browed and wandering albatrosses, Cape pigeons, Wilson’s storm petrels and a plethora of all those “other

petrels,” the water temperature dropped and settled in at about 35 degrees. This zone contains the upwelling of nutrients that provide a base in part for the Southern Ocean food chain, and being a continuous ring around the continent, isolates to a great extent the unique polar ecosystem.

With the hurtles of the Drake successfully passed, we made first misty landfalls on Smith and Snow islands on the morning of the 20th, and later that afternoon passed through Neptunes Bellows, the entrance to Deception Island. This area is the usual first shelter after a Drake crossing and it affords an easy landing beach head and walk ashore to stretch legs and spin wheels at Whalers Bay inside the drowned caldera of this semiactive volcanic remnant—a truly unique feature in the Antarctic. After giving way to a cruise ship that had scheduled an afternoon landing, we came to grips with getting our people ashore that evening. For me these landings were the object of the voyage. Here, the attractions were the industrial ruins of the Norwegian whaling station from the 1920s and 1930s and what is left of the British Antarctic Survey base destroyed by the last volcanic eruption in 1969.

Piers Alvarez-Munos, my supernumerary colleague, is a master mariner, superb raconteur and jokester who spares no one. He had just finished a stint as first mate on the cruise ship *National Geographic Explorer* operated by Lindblad. Doing his time on *Lord Nelson* through its early years from the bottom up, and knowing how things worked on board, he took over the organization of the disembarkations and re-embarkations for the landings and did all the tender driving, leaving me to swan around on shore enjoying myself. The group enjoyed the time ashore in dull gray conditions

that gave way to an euphoric burst of sunlight over the rim of the caldera just before nightfall.

Lord Nelson usually lays alongside jetties in ports of call and disembarks her crew via a gangway. Although the ship was designed for wheelchair users with electric lifts to access the lower working and upper decks, and having no sills through the various watertight doors, getting people into the inflatable tender was a different story. Disability is a relative thing, and while we had three wheelchair users, the average age of the voyage crew pushing 60, and they moved slowly while descending a vertical ladder hanging over the side to a heaving inflatable tender. The various layers of clothing and the PFDs required for this climate 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 the anxiety that this whole voyage might have been a mistake. Once on terra firma, engaged at close quarters with a pair of chinstrap penguins looking you up and down or having a fur seal growl at you for being too close, all is forgotten, and the Antarctic adventure really begins.

The next day we headed south across the Bransfield and into the Gerlache Straits, dodging bergy bits and growlers spotted on radar or visually during the dark night of late summer. Pier’s and my job was six



Sailing near the Shetland Islands, *Lord Nelson* bashes through Force 9 and building, with her windspeed instruments pegged, above.



The author stands ice watch in the crosstrees.

on and six off at the end of the bowsprit with a VHF radio and a projector lamp. However, with a modicum of pressure off, having at least arrived on the Peninsula, I could relax to some extent. Not the most sociable of characters at the outset, my disposition and tongue were loosened to a degree in the pub on the lower deck most evenings. This was not a dry ship. Well stocked, you simply pencil in your drinks taken on a charge sheet.

Over the next few weeks, we mingled with the penguins and the seals onshore and off, observed whales and icebergs, and enjoyed the vistas when they appeared. I met high flyers, mid flyers and low flyers (by their own admission). I met a banking executive, financial gurus active and cashed out, health care workers aplenty, teachers, a geologist, a retired fireman (Derek the cook), a Royal Navy helicopter pilot recently retired with his charming daughter along, consultants of various types, an IT man and an occupational therapist. Certainly a cross section of British society with a few Irish, a Kiwi, a couple of Aussies and a Croat to mix it up. The majority had been on previous voyages, a few as many as 20 times, which is accolade enough when judging the ethos of the trust. However, I don’t recommend this voyage to anyone with an overly sensitive nature. Conversation was refreshingly not politically correct in just about every respect. You had to take it and be able to dish it back to survive.

Over the course of 12 days on the Peninsula we made six good landings in amongst some false starts and periods hunkered down at anchor. We failed twice going through the Lemaire Channel due to ice blockage, once going south and then once going north

after we finally got through on the second go. The weather was generally windy, closed and hard going with only one truly stellar day ashore at Peterman Island. At the end of our cruise, having retreated on March 3 from trying to pass the Lemaire Channel, again due to ice, Capt. Chris brought us back into our safe anchorage in the Argentine Islands in a blinding snowstorm in one of the finest pieces of seamanship I have witnessed given the conditions and the nature of the vessel. This was our last shelter before striking out north on the homeward passage.

Just underneath Cape Horn a new low, predicted at 956 milibars ripped across the top of us and a Force 9 southwest drove us under topsails and jib up into the Beagle Channel for an exciting finish. We dropped the hook at the pilot station on the evening of March 10 and had the next day to tidy the vessel (harbor furls on the square sails) and reflect. Most officers and voyage crew admitted that this has been the most demanding, yet one of the most satisfying voyages on *Nelly*. We were all pleasingly exhausted. And isn’t that the way a true sea voyage should end?

At the captain’s debrief before signing off, I felt it was appropriate to address the voyage crew. I told them how the word expedition is probably one of the most over used, misconstrued words in travel these days. Everyone on a cruise ship is on some sort of expedition or another, in spite of some very passive situations. Sailing *Lord Nelson*, a collective effort of 50 people, on the other hand, is very different. I told them if someone ever asks them if they have been on a sailing expedition, they can put their hand on their hearts, and say yes, they have. (P)