

Having sailed many miles in high latitudes over many years, the attraction of returning to Antarctica never diminishes in spite of often repeating familiar routes. In February 2012, I embarked on a cruise along one of those routes, but it was a completely different experience. I was going 'square rig' to Antarctica on the Lord Nelson, a British three-masted barque operated by the Jubilee Sailing Trust (JST). But that was not all: she is one of only two sail training ships worldwide that cater to a mix of able-bodied and disabled crew. I was engaged as the ice pilot and expedition leader in order to comply with Antarctic Treaty regulations on behalf of the UK Foreign Office's Polar Regions Division. Although this was not a 'Pelagic' trip, I thought this story well worth recounting as it typified a spirit of adventure that would be appreciated by our CCA membership.

by Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station



Lord Nelson at
Cuverville Island

Voyage of the Lord Nelson

Never one to pass up a singular opportunity to climb out of my comfort zone (something to do with the mind of a 25-year-old trapped in a 62-year-old body), I did question my judgment at times 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 971mb, getting it right on the nose on our homeward-bound passage to Ushuaia.

While clawing off the archipelago 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 nothing new to me, but I have learned that a Force 10 is best avoided if at all possible.

Lord Nelson was on the last stages of a two year, much under-publicized round the world tour which had included Brazil, South Africa, India, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand before a voyage through the Southern Ocean to Argentina. She would eventually continue up north on her way home via Brazil and Halifax before arriving in Southampton in September 2013. Note that 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 degrees south to 50 degrees south (by continuing up toward 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. A very capable vessel sailed by a very capable crew indeed.

Lord Nelson arrived in Ushuaia Feb. 9 and I signed on board as a supernumerary on the 15th, meeting Captain Chris Phillips and his permanent crew for the first time. When this 25-day adjunct cruise to the Antarctic Peninsula was published in the world tour's brochure back in 2011, it was the quickest seller. I had my name on it then as pilot and 'expedition leader' to cover all safety issues with respect to ice and anchorages and advise on the itinerary and environmental matters, in addition to conducting the visits ashore. The sailing world is truly an amazing genre to be part of. This all came about as I had known John Tanner as a rival navigator in the 1977/78 Whitbread Race. He was on board Clare Francis' *ADC Accutrac* and I on *Kings Legend*. I don't think I have seen him since but he advised his nephew, Captain Chris Phillips, a commissioned Royal Naval officer, to contact me for advice.

Well, one thing leads to another and after negotiating my involvement with Andy Spark, the operations manager of the JST and its driving force, I found myself in the Drake Passage. Three days after signing on board, I was out on the end of the top gallant yard arm while bowling along on a Southern Ocean swell under topsails alone in a 30-knot westerly putting gaskets on the clewed up sail. Well used to working aloft on single masts, those first few minutes were tense and unnerving before Stuart,

a young marine biologist and one of the bosun's mates, settled me down with a few tips on how to relax and stay tacked on – thereafter I immediately began to enjoy the ride immensely. He did warn me though: working aloft is addicting, but he has had his 'moments.'

Climbing up the ratlines you are on your own, no change from the days of Jack Aubrey; at the top you clip on to a safety wire that leads up and over the futtock shrouds to the cross trees. From there you clip into the safety wire along the yard and move out. Although safe in theory, falling off on to the safety wires at any point could be ugly, at the least very embarrassing. Letting go is not really an option.



Eileen scrubbing the teak.

Lord Nelson carried a compliment of 50 people for this voyage. 35 were 'voyage crew' (average age 57, youngest 24, oldest 77) paying trainees, including 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, cook and a bosun. Four 'volunteers' were also signed on designated as bosun's mates and a "cook's ass" (which I believe evolved from the word "assistant"—the whole word not fitting onto the crew manifest spreadsheet cell!) A few extra than normal for this special voyage, they were the 'can do' men and women who knew the ship from many previous voyages, did the heavy work—made running repairs and the like—beyond the capabilities

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Eileen driving the windlass.



Author enjoying the view from aloft..



Aloft under reduced sail.

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 look out on both sides 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. Daily, after breakfast (except on the Christian Sabbath), 'Happy Hour' is observed, weather come what may. This is a full pull through from stem to stern—scrubbing and mopping of lower

and upper decks, cleaning the heads and galley. We had three wheelchair users on board and several 'walking wounded' who are not excluded from any of these tasks. The rule is they are not to be helped unless they ask for help. If you are looking for rest and relaxation, disabled or no, signing up with the JST is not for you. You sign on as crew. They take no passengers.

As usual with a Drake crossing, when the wind died between weather systems we motor sailed. The object is to get across, not dally, as the axiom of 'it can only get worse' is fundamental on this stretch. We passed south of the Antarctic Convergence February 19th. 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 albatross, cape pigeons, Wilson's storm

petrels and a plethora of all those 'other petrels' unidentifiable to the layman, the water temperature dropped and settled in at about 2 degrees C. This is the zone of upwelling nutrients that provides a base in part for the Southern Ocean food chain, and being a continuous ring around the continent isolates to a great extent this unique polar ecosystem.

Although big bergs can persist for a time north of the Polar Front, south of 60 degrees in the Drake ice was now the main concern. Ice was indeed a risk, but the greater risk to the JST was if the *Lord Nelson* had not encountered the ice at all. In order to obtain an Antarctic Permit, now required by British law for a British registered vessel, as per the terms of the Antarctic Treaty and subsequent add-on protocols, the vessel had to be considered seaworthy by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. The fact that the MCA had approved *Lord Nelson's* world tour, which included the voyage from New Zealand to Cape Horn, the exposed passage of 4000 nautical miles through some of the potentially roughest conditions of the Southern Ocean did not count for our proposed Antarctic voyage – which would include a short stretch of the Drake Passage, followed by an itinerary that was fully flexible while navigating within the relatively sheltered archipelago of the Peninsula.

Instead, many concerns were raised with regards to stability, windage of the rig, auxiliary power, strength of the hull with respect to encounters with ice (and granted the low-slung martingale and dolphin striker) in addition to additional manning requirements. Many negative points were raised, some valid, some arguable, taking over eight months of painful negotiation to unravel. Up to the eleventh hour this situation threatened not only the voyage, but also potentially the financial viability of the JST itself. The fact there were two

Lord Nelson meets Skip's charter yacht *Pelagic* near Port Lockroy.



Mate Marcin and Nick help Eileen get aloft.

Visit to Port Lockroy.



well-known precedents of arguably less capable tall ships making habitual voyages to the Antarctic Peninsula were not taken into consideration. Nor was my 25 years of navigating on the Peninsula, mind you in yachts not ships. Such is the enigma of bureaucracy.

With those prior hurdles eventually cleared, and with present hurdles of the Drake successfully passed, we made our first misty landfalls on Smith and Snow Islands on the morning of the 20th and later that afternoon passed through Neptune's Bellows, the entrance to Deception Island. This 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 wheelchair wheels at Whalers Bay inside the drowned caldera of this semi-active volcanic remnant - a truly unique feature in the Antarctic. After giving way to a cruise ship who had scheduled an afternoon landing, we came to grips with getting our people ashore that evening. For me, the landings were the object of the voyage. Here, the attractions were the industrial ruins of the Norwegian whaling station from the 1920s and 30s and what is left of the British Antarctic Survey base destroyed by the last volcanic eruption in 1969.

Enter Piers Alvarez-Munos, my supernumerary colleague who was seconded in to get us in part through the MCA hoops and ladders. A master mariner, superb raconteur and "pistaker" 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 the *Lord Nelson* through its early years from the bottom up, and knowing the modus operandi of

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how things worked on board, he took over the organization of the disembarkations and re-embarkations for the landings and would do all the tender driving, leaving me to swan around on shore enjoying myself.

The *Lord Nelson*, if truth be known, usually lays alongside jetties in ports of call and disembarks its crew via a gangway for junkets ashore. Although the ship was designed from the outset to account for wheelchair users having electric lifts for them to access the lower, working and upper decks independently, and having no sills through

the various water-tight doors; getting people into the inflatable tender was a different story. Disability is truly a relative thing, and although we had three wheelchair users, it has to be said, with the average age of the voyage crew pushing 60, things moved slowly while they descended a vertical ladder hanging over the side and down into at times a heaving inflatable tender. The various multi layers of clothing and PFD required in 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, well, all is forgotten, and the Antarctic adventure really begins. Our first foray ashore had been atmospheric in dull gray conditions which had given way to a euphoric burst of sunlight over the rim of the caldera just before nightfall. Splendid start!

The next day we headed south across the Bransfield and into the Gerlache Straits, dodging bergy bits and growlers on radar and visual during a dark night of late summer - Pier's and my job was six 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. Yes, this is not a dry ship. Well stocked, you simply pencil in your drinks taken on a charge sheet. Much the same as a 'lock in' system I enjoyed in a certain pub in the Hamble many years ago.

Over the next few weeks while we mingled with the penguins and the seals onshore and off, and observed whales and icebergs and the vistas when they appeared (the pictures tell the story), I met high flyers, mid flyers and low flyers (by their own admission). I met banking executives, financial gurus (active and cashed out) health care workers aplenty, teachers, a geologist, a retired fireman (Derek the cook), a recently retired Royal Navy helicopter pilot with his charming daughter along, consultants of various kinds as expected, 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 JST 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 over-sensitive nature. Conversation was refreshingly not PC in just about every respect. You had to take it and be able to dish it back out to survive!





Happy hour on the Drake Passage.



Lord Nelson crew in Antarctica.

Over the course of 12 days on the Peninsula we made 6 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 March 3 from trying to pass the Lemaire Channel, again due to ice, Captain Chris brought us back into our safe anchorage in the Argentine Islands in a blinding snowstorm—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 956mb 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 11th 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 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 the *Lord Nelson*, a collective effort of 50 people, 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, we have!” ☺

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skip Novak was born in Chicago in 1952. He is best known for his participation in four Whitbread Round the World Yacht Races since 1977. In that year, at the age of 25, he navigated the British cutter Kings Legend to second place. Novel entries followed: skippering Alaska Eagle in 1981-1982, the first American entry; Simon LeBon’s (rock group Duran Duran) Drum in 1985-1986 and Fazisi in 1989-1990, the first and last entry from the Soviet Union. “One Watch at a Time” chronicled the Drum campaign and “Fazisi – The Joint Venture” told the epic story of the Soviets, both written by Skip. His swansong from professional ocean racing was sailing over 50,000 miles on maxi multihulls over three years including co-skippering the 110-foot maxi cat Innovation Explorer in the millennium nonstop around the world event, The Race, in 2001.

A keen amateur mountaineer, having climbed internationally with several first ascents, he followed in the explorer-sailor Bill Tillman’s wake when he built the expedition yacht Pelagic in Southampton in 1987 and has been south every season since.

He is frequently asked to comment on high-latitude adventuring and ocean sailing by radio, TV, Internet and print media and is a regular contributor to many sailing magazines worldwide, including several stints as a columnist for the Daily Telegraph in London.

In 2002-2003 Skip project-managed the construction of the Pelagic Australis, partnered with fellow CCA member Rob Lansing (GLS). She is a 23-meter purpose-built expedition vessel for high-latitude sailing and is the flagship for his company, Pelagic Expeditions.



Skip sits on the panel of experts that vets expeditions to South Georgia on behalf of the South Georgia government. He is also on the executive committee of IAATO (International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators).

In April 2014 Skip was awarded the Ocean Cruising Club’s Geoff Pack Memorial Award for having exposed millions of ordinary people and sailors around the world to extreme adventure sailing through writing in books, magazines and newspapers plus appearances in film and video.

In March 2015 the CCA presented Skip with The Blue Water Medal for his many years of cruising and exploring the Antarctic.