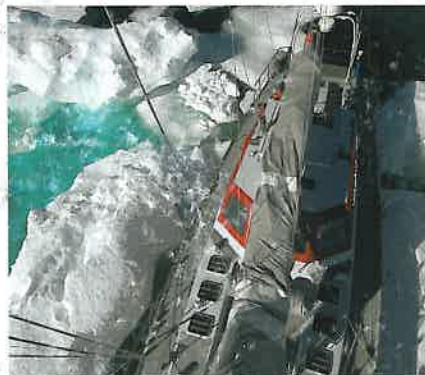


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ATTEMPT AT THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

WITH THE SPIRITS OF EXPLORERS



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Illustration by Bill Munroe, Boston Station

On July 23, 2005, our international crew of nine departed from Aasiaat in Disko Bay, Greenland, for Baffin Bay on the Canadian side. Onboard *Pelagic Australis*, our 74-foot expedition vessel, we had high hopes!

At this time of year the pack ice can reach right across from Baffin Island to Greenland, and this was the case one week previous while studying the Canadian Ice Service charts that are updated daily by satellite imagery. Only a few days before our departure the old whaler's North Water had opened in

Melville Bay, a bight in the Greenland coast above 75°N. We motored for three days at the edge of the 10/10ths consolidated (stuck together) pack ice, at times back tracking east and even south of east as we met ice tongues of pack, in view of testing the accuracy of the ice reports, which were indeed spot on.

For reference, on aluminum-hulled *Pelagic Australis* we can navigate through more or less 3/10th ice safely. Reaching the top of the pack, our *ultima thule* of 75° 20'N, we turned west for Lancaster

***Pelagic Australis* and *Cloud Nine* (above), (insets) Ross expedition marker; graves of the Franklin crew, Beechey Island; (next page) *Pelagic* approaching Port Leopold**



Sound and at 0400 on July 27, navigating by radar in the fog, dropped a hook in Dundas Harbour on Devon Island—and hoisted the Canadian courtesy flag.

This is the high arctic, and the terrain at first glance appears nothing more than hills of sedimentary layers of gravel with uninspiring dome-shaped summits or sheared-off tabletops. The crew went ashore and

trekked up a 600-meter scree slope and had a fine view south across the sound to the ice cap on Bylot Island that Bill Tilman and his crew from the Bristol Channel pilot cutter *Mischief* had crossed in 1963 (read *Mostly Mischief*, Tilman). At close glance, pale yellow arctic poppies were abloom in amongst patches of mossy ground, and from the “sign” it was evident that caribou and musk ox were around in plenty. Later that day we found an extended family of walrus on an outlying rock only 20 meters from shore. Behind us, an arctic fox in his summer coat bolted for high ground.

Here it pays to keep looking over your shoulder—this is polar bear country. Whenever we go ashore, no matter for how long, we carry a high-pow-

ered rifle and a flare pistol with reporting cartridges. The theory is if you have an overly curious visitor, you fire the flare (which explodes with a bang) in front of the bear, but he must be more than 100 meters away—which is the range of the shot—if you overshoot he may run towards you! If he gets too close for comfort and starts wagging his head back and forth then you are advised to shoot to kill.

Leaving early the next morning we continued under high-pressure sunny skies, motoring along the coast of Devon Island, bound for the outpost of Resolute. Lancaster Sound, a wide, often-open waterway early in the season, was the favored gateway for the celebrated Northwest Passage bids during the 19th century.

We arrived in Resolute Bay at 0700 on July 29 and tried to push our way through the slushy sea ice that more or less filled the outer bay. It was still too thick and sticky, so we backed out and dropped a hook near its edge inside the shallow moraine close to the beach on the western shore. Two hours later we had to up anchor in a hurry and go outside of the moraine, as the light westerly wind, combined with an ebb tide, had sheared the ice off the shore and the whole lot was on the move out through the bay—by 1100 the bay was completely empty, and we anchored in the northwest corner in 10 meters.

Resolute is an Inuit hamlet of 250 people that serves as a base for forward field operations including mineral exploration, biological science, and



Illustration by Bill Munroe, Boston Station

adventure tourism. Hopefuls skiing and sledding to the north magnetic pole (82°N, 114°W) via the sea ice start from Resolute, and some north geographic pole adventurers use it as a stepping-stone and fly further north to the top of Ellesmere Island to begin their bid. These activities take place in the early spring, when the sea ice is firm and land is covered by snow, possibly the best time to see Resolute. In its summer dress it is a somewhat forlorn jumble of houses, tangles of construction material, dumped appliances, abandoned vehicles, and many snowmobiles left at random where they were when the snow melted.

Nunavut became a separate territory of Canada in 1999. Largely populated by the Inuit, albeit the total population numbers only 28,000 spread out among 28 small communities, Nunavut is almost exclusively subsidized by the government. If you believe half of what you hear, their future is in mineral exploitation—and now that the Inuit have established their land rights the floodgates of investment are set to open.

An aside—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer (one of two in Resolute) who cleared us into

Canada had been there two years and we were the only sailing vessel he had seen. There is no jetty in Resolute and virtually no services, and \$30 per kilo for some frozen sirloin (including the \$6 per kilo for air freight) set the scene for prices to come. Surprisingly, no bush meat was available in spite of the fresh musk ox heads, various hides of bear, seal, and caribou that hung as a decorative feature on almost every dwelling.



were still beset. A Norwegian boat was frozen in last fall near Arctic Bay, another community just to the east in Admiralty Inlet; he is now released. Three of us were starting fresh from the east, and two more from the west; we expected to run into them all at some point. I have records of all ship transits that date

Pelagic Australis' crew (below) included CCA'ers Chuck Gates (left, in back) and skipper Skip Novak (left, foreground); (above) a challenging, ever-shifting playing field

There were a staggering eight sailing vessels in the area with hopes of completing the Northwest Passage, and we were all engaged in a waiting game. Two boats had spent the winter in Cambridge Bay, a major settlement that is more or less the halfway point. They



(above) First encounter with pack ice, Baffin Bay; moonrise over ice; *Pelagic's* crew reads the visitor's log, Hudson's Bay Company

from Amundsen's completion of the first transit in 1906 up to 2001, and I can count ten vessels who I consider to be yachts of some description that have made it (all within the last 30 years). In the last four years there have been several more, so although it is not yet a cruising ground as such, we can say that "it has been discovered."

When we left *Resolute* on July 31 we only made 20 miles before motoring into a cul de sac of 8/10ths pack. We backtracked to *Resolute*, and before re-entering the bay met a polar bear on a floe that had just devoured a baby seal. He swam away from us with alacrity and, like us, looked over his shoulder from time to time. Early the next morning, after studying the latest ice chart, we left *Resolute* for the second time and struck southeast into the middle of Barrow Strait, where we found a gap in the pack not far from Somerset Island. We sailed along the ice edge in 15 knots of wind bathed in glorious sunshine, and by mid-afternoon we had anchored in Erebus and Terror Bay at Beechey Island.

Franklin wintered his two

ships 'here in 1845/6, when things were still going well for him. But the death of three of his crew during that first season—a high mortal-

ity for the genre on year one—was an early indicator of worse things to come. The graves are now part of the Franklin collection of memorial sites that follow a

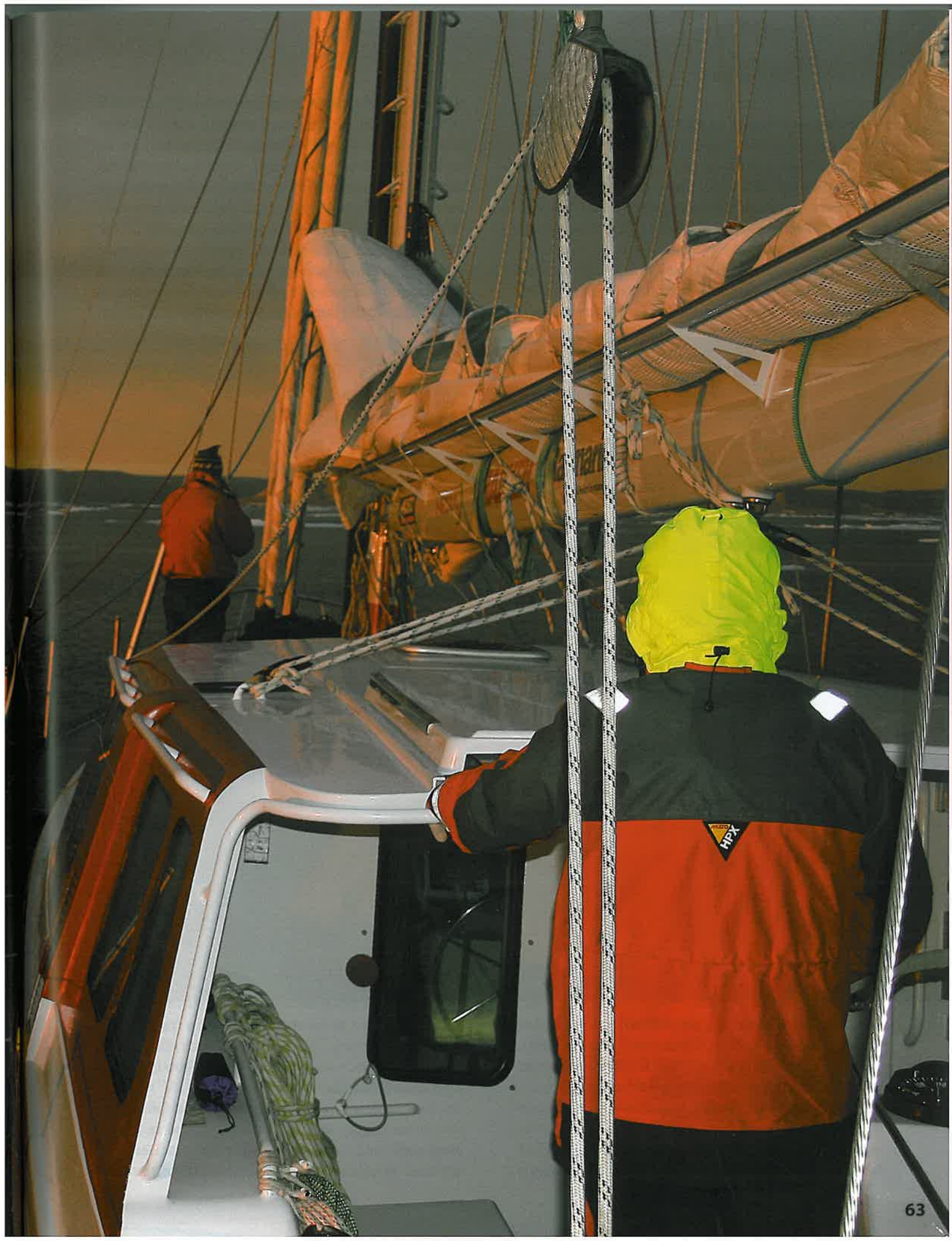
trail of tragedy along a part of the Northwest Passage. At Beechey, you can see not only the graves but the ruins of a supply depot and shelter, which served as a base for the dozens of Franklin relief expeditions that were deployed during the late 1840's and throughout the 1850's.

The next morning, lo and behold, a Bowman 57 named *Cloud Nine* pulled into the anchorage. I had met skipper and CCA member Roger Swanson in the Antarctic in 1992. With his spouse, Gaynelle Templin (GLS), and several friends, this was Roger's second try at the Northwest Passage, having failed for the usual reasons





(spread photo) *Pelagic Australis* navigating at midnight in Prince Regent Inlet; (inset) weeks later, *Pelagic* heads home from the Arctic on an easy sail south



(too much ice) 10 years ago. His HF communications were compromised by unusually high sunspot activity, and therefore he had trouble gathering information on ice conditions. His was a GRP hull, so they would need ideal conditions. We convinced Roger to order an Iridium phone and have it dispatched to Resolute as the only option to stay in the game, and we agreed to wait for his call to stay in touch.

In Gascoyne Bay, just around the corner from Beechey, we climbed a promontory called Caswell Tower that overlooks both Gascoyne Bay to the west

saw a ship that, when contacted by handheld VHF, turned out to be the Russian cruise ship *Ioffe*, a perennial in Arctic waters. They were changing their guests at Resolute in two days, and also told us that the Russian icebreaker *Khlebnikov* had just come through Peel Sound and was now across on the other side of Barrow Strait. When contacted, the master of the *Khlebnikov* said multiyear ice conditions in Larsen and Peel Sounds were the worst he had seen since they made their first tourist transit of the passage in 1992. Indeed, the ice charts showed Peel and Larsen



and Radstock Bay to the east. A Thule culture archaeological site (500 to 1,000 years old) is at its base, with dwelling foundations made from rock and whalebone. On top of this 300-meter tabletop mountain, which affords commanding views over the vestigial sea ice in both bays, a refuge served as a polar bear observatory, apparently supported by helicopter.

In the distance, back in Erebus and Terror Bay, I

with ice still fast to the shore, although a fracture was predicted this week. The captain, however, had doubts it would clear this season. This was not good news. A funk settled over our crew.

For the first time since we boarded in Greenland almost two weeks ago, the weather kicked in with a vengeance, and we had to shelter back at Beechey, this time at Union Bay on the other side of the isth-

mus that connects Beechey to Devon Island. It blew hard from the east for two days and, despite walks ashore (rocks, rocks, and more rocks), the reality set in that the Northwest Passage would not be a cakewalk. Patience is the key. You need to have an innate ability to do nothing but bide your time.

Luckily, *Pelagic Australis*' library is rich in the history of the area, so during this hiatus we lectured each other on the trials and tribulations of Franklin, Ross, Parry, Lyon, Beechey, Back, and others, all of whom had been deployed by the obsessive second

noon of August 5, decided to strike south for Port Leopold in what appeared to be a lull in the wind. Close-reaching in some lumpy seas, the 50 miles across Barrow Strait was run down quickly, but just before we hove into sight of Prince Leopold Island off Cape Clarence the breeze piped up to 40 knots. We finished off with a staysail and three reefs, finally motorsailing through 2/10ths pack to Port Leopold, arriving at 0100. The polenta and sauce that was made on the way over was devoured immediately after dropping the hook.



(facing page) From Mount Morin, high above *Pelagic* (circled) in Albert Harbour; (this page, clockwise from top left) atop Caswell Tower; above the clouds, Dundas Harbor; polar bear on the prow; end-of-the-world feeling in Assiat, Greenland

secretary of the British Admiralty, Sir John Barrow, between 1818 and 1845 (Franklin's being his swansong). *Barrows Boys* by Fergus Fleming is an excellent précis.

Ice charts on August 4 showed *Cloud Nine* firmly entrapped in Resolute Bay, while we, on the after-

We had changed location, but the geography looked much the same. The high point of the morning constitutional ashore was finding a large boulder on the beach with a neatly-carved "E. I. 1849" Back on board, the Arctic chronology was consulted and, sure enough, it was James Clark Ross on a Franklin search expedition with HMS *Enterprise* and *Investigator*.

On August 7, after a night at Port Leopold buffeted by katabatic winds off the high ground, we struck south down Prince Regent Inlet for Batty Bay, about 40 miles off. Although we had a northerly flow, the air stream bent into this wide-mouthed bay to the

west and was obviously carrying ice with it. It looked like a trap, as ice was already piling up on the shore to the north of the bay. We then re-crossed Prince Regent to Port Bowen on the Brodeur Peninsula of Baffin Island, and found suspicious bottom in 15 meters on the spur of a rocky islet. Sir William Parry had wintered here in 1824-25 just prior to losing one of his two ships, the HMS *Fury*, on the other side of Prince Regent Inlet. We found no evidence of his overwinter after scanning the shoreline in detail and going ashore in the obvious places.

The afternoon of August 8 we continued down the coast for a few miles to inspect Port Neill, another likely bolthole, but there was no bottom to anchor. Seven miles further south an unnamed inlet looked attractive, in spite of no information in the pilot nor any soundings on the chart. We entered over the bar with 12 meters and found deep water throughout this inland system that ran for over five miles and doubled back on itself to the coast. Mirror calm, we found 10 meters in good holding in the last south bend and spent the night there. "Port Pelagic" has been added to the Rutter.

Crossing Prince Regent again we tried to enter the inner bay of Creswell, but could not find the passage in the fading light. Anchoring in what was open water far offshore outside the bar, we were fortunate with a dead calm night. Narwhal were first heard and not seen, blowing and puffing away, and then with binoculars we could see them raising their single tusks in swordplay. Typically they would come no closer than several hundred meters. Inuits hunt narwhal for meat and ivory, so a quiet, skillful approach is necessary to get close within camera range—quite beyond our impatient blunderings with paddles in a fully-loaded Zodiac!

Forsaking Creswell Bay, we continued down to Bellot Strait to wait for any opening in Larsen, as this strait effectively bypassed Peel Sound. Here the tidal current runs at 8 knots and the pilot describes "ice chokes" that can occur without warning, in addition to unpredictable counter currents. Magpie Rock, which uncovers at low water at the eastern entrance, is the only danger below the water, but obviously to run the 20 miles through to safety in Peel a lot has to be right *vis-a-vis* ice at the other end and the timing with the tidal current.

Pushing our way through 3- to 4/10ths pack ice, we managed to enter Depot Bay near the entrance of Bellot. Fort Ross—consisting of two buildings—was a Hudson's Bay Company trading post long since abandoned, but now serves as a refuge for various sci-

ence projects in the area, including polar bear tracking. The refuge log book mentions the polar bear that managed to claw his way inside a few years ago and the catastrophic result—now the door and windows are braced by steel strong backs and two-inch-thick wooden drop boards! During 1986-88 David Scott Cowper's RNLI converted lifeboat, the *Mabel E Holland*, spent two winters here. He left the boat unattended during the first winter (while he returned to England) and it was holed by ice. The second and third summers were spent repairing the damage before he completed his four-year, epic transit.

Anchoring in Depot Bay was tenable for the first few hours, but then, as if by a conjuring trick, the bay filled with ice—contrary to the light wind direction from the north—and we had to up anchor and recall the shore party. We barged our way out and motored back through the pack around the corner to the north, anchoring off the entrance to the suspicious-sounding Hazard Bay (which when entered leads to some coves only about one mile away from Fort Ross). Luckily, we again had calm conditions and we were treated to an exceptional arctic sunset, one of the first of the season. An hour later—Voila!—an arctic sunrise.

The next morning we sounded the bar in the dinghy and went in with 7 meters at low water. Hazard Bay was clear of ice, and five miles up this sound we dropped anchor on rocky slabs—which is possibly the "hazard."

On August 12 a satellite photo and ice chart showed little or no movement in Peel and Larsen Sounds, and my ice guru's predictions about a late August open-water route or the possibility of these sounds not clearing at all seemed to be holding. The combination of below-average summer air temperatures that dictate the melting, and the lack of strong winds to break up the pack, were conspiring against us.

The majority of our team on board had to fly back to Europe on August 20, so a decision was made to retreat east into Lancaster Sound to be in Pond Inlet, effectively putting an end to our attempt. If we persisted, any problem along the way, such as ice moving inshore in the Beaufort Sea, prolonged heavy westerly winds, or mechanical breakdown, could raise the risk of an overwinter by an unacceptable amount. We had calculated that to do this passage safely in one season we would need to be in Cambridge Bay by August 15.


Early the next morning we motored through 1/10th pack and "bergy water" up through Prince Regent Sound, encountering three pairs of bowhead

whales, the largest of the truly arctic species. The breeze filled in fresh from the northeast, so we were just able to lay the coast on the Brodeur Peninsula of Baffin Island with three reefs, staysail, and engine. Late that night it went calm again as we swung east, and later turned south into Admiralty Inlet. We were heading for Arctic Bay, another Inuit community where we hoped to take on water and fuel. Meanwhile, Roger Swanson on *Cloud Nine* called in to say they were still in Port Leopold and would hang in for a few more days before making a decision about whether to continue.

Arctic Bay is a community of 650 Inuit that lies nestled in a well-protected south-facing bowl backed by steep hills and has deep water throughout. Fuel and water can be acquired by tanker truck, so we were able to put our bow on the rock-and-landfill jetty the village had built as a small-boat shelter. The hoses were just long enough—after some precarious repositioning of the fuel truck.

Many Inuit, and especially a crowd of children, had gathered to see this streaming maneuver in the strong offshore wind, as well as the couple on *Jotun Arctic*, the Norwegian boat that had wintered here. Shopping was easy in the two general stores, and within a few hours all the chores had been completed. The next day we sailed again in calm conditions through to Pond Inlet. Big, majestic Greenland icebergs from Melville Bay and farther north were a welcome and familiar sight, and signaled the end of the sea ice regime that had been ours for the last four weeks.

Based from Albert Harbour on Baffin Island, our crew climbed up Mt. Morin, a 1,200 meter scree-and-glacier trek that culminated with impressive views over the ice cap to the south and across the inlet to Bylot Island to the north. This was a fitting and strenuous end to our more-or-less shipbound 30-day expedition cruise focused on a transit of the Northwest Passage.

Our Italian friends left us at the community of Pond Inlet on August 20 and flew back to Milan via Ottawa, leaving Chuck, Henk, and I to push *Pelagic Australis* south to Maine and warmer climes. The day after they left, I checked the ice chart, and luckily (it must be admitted) the conditions in Peel and Larsen Sounds were much the same, choked with 9- to 10/10ths pack ice. 

Postscript: Based on a precarious lead developing very late in the season, Cloud Nine and Jotun Arctic became entrapped in early September when trying to run south into Larsen Sound, but gained shelter in a cove. At the same time, Fine Tolerance and Idlewild, the two boats who had wintered in Cambridge Bay, tried to force their way north and became beset in the drifting pack. Fine Tolerance was squeezed and was temporarily abandoned, the crew of two walking across the ice to Idlewild. Eventually, the Canadian icebreaker Sir Wilfred Laurier rescued the four vessels by breaking them out and shepherding them through Bellot Strait and into the clear waters of Prince Regent Inlet.—From a report by Roger Swanson, September 24. (See Roger's story, page 74)

The Northwest Passage—Next Time

Looking ahead—and now armed with our limited experience of over one month in the area—I would not attempt this again with a view to making it through in a single season. The reasons are many. To engage the Northwest Passage on its own terms, you must accept the possibility of an overwinter. And frankly, an overwinter is a necessity to fully experience the Canadian Arctic.

To complete a transit of the Northwest Passage is an accomplishment—more to the point, a test of nerve. But in my view to do so in a single summer is not really interesting for its own sake. Other than the kudos of getting through, the rewards are not high on the ground. In such a short window of opportunity, your whole focus becomes moving on. There is no time to meet people along the way,

to appreciate their extraordinary lifestyle, and, like all remote places, this experience needs time measured in months, not hours and days. When the channels are clear you would think twice about stopping along the way for a look-see, and with good reason—an unplanned winter is staring you in the face.

Wintering by design makes sense if you have the time and the wherewithal. A boat can be left safely unattended in some of the communities, but certainly you would want to rejoin your boat in the spring and participate in the lives of the Inuit—dog sledding and skidooing overland and on the sea ice, hunting along the way. Waiting for the summer break-up would be a time to gather your thoughts—and let nature call the shots instead of forcing the route. —S.N.