



Real life legend

In 1981, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* became one of the top-grossing films ever made with a box office success of over \$384 million. Four years earlier, a real-life Indiana Jones sailed to England from the United States, looking for adventure. And ever since,

Skip Novak has lived a fascinating life, racing in four round the world races and pursuing his passion for exploration in the remotest corners of the earth. Skip travelled over 7,000 miles to get to Alicante for the Volvo Legends Regatta, including hitching a ride on a ship from South Georgia Island to Argentina and then arriving by air just in time to make the reunion. Did you specifically come to Europe in 1977 to take part in the Whitbread Round the World Race?

'In 1976, we didn't really know about the race in the States. I was amazed by the forthcoming 1977 Whitbread Round the World Race and over a few beers in Cowes with the skipper, Hans Savimaki, I landed the navigator's berth on "King's Legend". That is how it was done in those days. There was no psychological testing and physical examination, I just got signed

Louay Habib caught up with **Skip Novak** during the Legends Regatta to discover tales of races past, races present, and life after the Volvo

up and we went out to gather the crew in the same fashion. It was very casual and haphazard.'

In 1977, the navigator's role was very different to the world of hi-tech systems and tactical awareness today.

'It was all done by celestial navigation. That was the state of the art. We had some basic hyperbole navigation systems inshore, like Decca, but once you went offshore it was all celestial, something that I had grown up with. I did my first transatlantic in 1972 and I feel very privileged to have caught the end of the era of navigating by the sun, the moon and the stars. But 90 per cent of navigating in those days was finding out where in the hell you were. The tactics about where to go were obviously important but the boats were so slow that the weather passed over you, one front after

another and you had no idea what was coming. Today these Volvo 70s manipulate the weather – they know what is coming and are fast enough to ride a front.

'I can remember navigating into Cape Horn having had no sight for seven days and getting a bit panicky about where we were. I eventually got a sight and found that we were 60 miles to the north-east of our dead reckoning, and coming into landfall on the Chilean coast. In those days, the excitement of rounding The Horn was amazing, even more so because you had actually found it.'

'King's Legend' had a great race coming a very close second to 'Flyer' in the 1977 Whitbread Round the World Race. Novak admits that a blunder in the Southern Ocean cost them the win, however, he was well and truly hooked on the race and returned in 1981 with 'Alaska Eagle'. But things did not go well, right from the start.

'The boat was a dog. Three days into the race, we knew we couldn't win and we realised we would be operating under that psychological pressure for months to come. The whole ambience on board was not good. I

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RIGHT 'Pelagic' exploring the ice off Antarctica

had come into the project late but the preparation had not gone well and I ended up skippering the boat after the first leg. The owner left the boat totally disappointed with the boat's performance. It was terrible.'

Fame and fortune

The following edition, Skip Novak skippered 'Drum' with the world famous rock star, Simon Le Bon of Duran Duran, on board. 'Drum' came third in the Maxis, behind 'UBS' and 'Lion', both revolutionary designs from Bruce Farr.

'The Farr boats were much faster than us in a straight line but we had a great crew, the likes of Magnus Olsson, Roger Nilson and Phil Wade. I believe at most times we sailed better than them but we had a slower boat. Simon was only interested in racing one of the largest boats and therefore we had to buy an existing Maxi, because it was too late to build one. We found "Colt Cars", an unfinished Maxi, which was just a shell and a structure and got to work.

'Sure, we had girls chasing the boat, newspapers the whole deal. It was great to have such attention but also with Simon in the limelight, a lot of heat was taken off me, leaving me free to run the mechanics of the boat. I had enough girls chasing me to satisfy myself, I am not that greedy! But you know, it was almost like Mbeki and Mandela

BELOW 'Drum' helped attract mainstream media attention during the 1985 Whitbread

BELOW RIGHT Skip Novak giving a talk at the Legends Regatta



PHOTO: JOHN PEARSON

in South Africa. Mandela was the figurehead but Mbeki did all the work. "Drum" and also the all-girl crew on "Maiden" launched the 1985 race into the wider press. When we lost the keel on "Drum" in the 1985 Fastnet, it was in the mainstream press. Rick Tomlinson was on board photographing sailing in a way that

it had never been shot before. It was news beyond yachting press and all of these factors combined to ramp up sponsorship for subsequent races.'

In 1989, Skip Novak was the skipper of the first ever Russian entry in the round the world race. The crew of 'Fazisi' was made up of five different Soviet nationalities and the team was formed in the year that major changes were afoot in the Soviet Union. Before the start of the race the world witnessed the beginning of the fall of Communism, and by the end of it most of the communist regimes had been overthrown.

'In those days just before Perestroika, the source of the funds for "Fazisi" was pretty murky. I never knew where the money came from. All of a sudden it would arrive, sometimes in a brown paper bag. The boat was built in Georgia and initially I was invited out to train the crew. But the boat was still just a shell with nothing inside except the engine – no mast, rudder or keel. It was just six months before the start of the race and I told them that to have any chance of finishing the boat they would need to get it to England. But at the time, I felt it was a lost cause.

'The next thing I heard was that they were going to fly the boat in using an Antonov 124 the largest cargo airplane in the world and I

headed back out to Georgia. The trip was extraordinary: a barge to the Ukraine then a truck to a local airport. The plane took the 80ft boat and a 20ft container loaded with Russian kit and food. We even had tins of cabbage and sausages hanging up in there! It was all the stuff that the guys would live off in Hamble. On top of that, the 18 crew and myself got in. But there were no proper seats, everyone was sitting around a table, not even strapped in.

'We flew to Moscow because the crew still needed their passports. There was a lot of bureaucracy trying to screw things up and we waited in stifling heat until the passports arrived and then we flew into London. We had sponsorship from Pepsi that summer, but before the race started they got too nervous about supporting what was still a "Soviet" project and stopped the sponsorship. But a week before the start, money arrived from an unknown source and we managed to pay off our debts, literally in cash.

'We struggled for funds all the way around the world and a lot of shit happened. It was a very stressful project but a fascinating cultural experience for me, looking back it was quite tough but a fantastic encounter.'

High latitude exploration

Whilst Skip is best known for his sailing



PHOTO: SKIP NOVAK/PPL

exploits he has been a keen mountaineer for many years and wishing to combine this passion with sailing he built the expedition yacht 'Pelagic' in 1987 and has spent every season since in Antarctic waters. Skip continued to race and became fascinated with multihull racing. In 2001, he was co-skipper with Loick Peyron for

there over the last 23 years – not just tourists but as logistical support for divers, climbers, kayak expeditions and film makers.

'Nowadays Antarctic tourism has exploded. Last year there were 87 boats on the Antarctic Peninsula; in 1988 there were two. Of course, by publicising our operation I helped

ABOVE Skip at the helm of the 1989 Russian Whitbread entry 'Fazisi'

“Last year there were 87 boats on the Antarctic Peninsula; in 1988 there were two”

The Race on the 112ft catamaran, 'Innovation Explorer', completing a lap of the planet in less than 65 days. But over the past 23 years, Skip has led high latitude sailing expeditions.

'From very early on, sailing in the Southern Ocean, passing by places and getting glimpses of Cape Horn, I wondered what the land was like and promised myself that I would go there someday. But you need time to visit these places. In the late 80s it was the pioneering days of sailing small boats in high latitudes. It is an amazing environment and I love it every time I do it and there are still places I haven't seen. It is such a complex area and we have taken a lot of people down

create the problem, or situation, however you judge it. But I like to think that people who come on our boat have really experienced a true expedition.

'We don't force the issue but the ethos on board is full participation to your ability and that means sailing the boat, standing watches, cooking and cleaning. A big part of what we do is uncertain: we don't know if we can follow the planned itinerary. Everybody has to go in with their eyes open, it is all part of the experience, you don't really know what the next chapter will be.' □

For more information about Skip Novak visit: www.pelagic.co.uk



PHOTO: SKIP NOVAK/PPL