



VOYAGES



CHRONICLES OF THE CRUISING CLUB OF AMERICA

ISSUE 55 ♦ 2013

Ice With

by Skip Novak, Great Lakes Station

OUR "PELAGIC" SOUTHERN SEASON WAS AGAIN ACTION PACKED FOR BOTH *Pelagic* (16.5 meters) and *Pelagic Australis* (22.5 meters) In October, 2011, along with the celebrated British climber Stephen Venables, I led a group of eight British friends on the Shackleton Traverse of South Georgia based from the big boat – it was my personal fourth.

In December, *Pelagic* was the mobile base camp for the Washington, D.C.- based Oceanites foundation that has been making penguin surveys on the Antarctic Peninsula for the last 25 years. This season, their team of five researchers spent three weeks making the first complete single season census of the Chinstrap penguins on Deception Island – in somewhat appalling weather and ice conditions.

The past winter on the Antarctic Peninsula was the coldest in 40 years. The sea ice, even in the warmer waters within the flooded caldera of this semi-active volcano, was vestigial as late as early December causing delays for the census with a brief entrapment of *Pelagic* when the drift ice blocked the narrow entrance to the caldera,



Entrance to Lemaire Channel

aply named Neptune's Bellows. The continuous decline in that population since counting began runs parallel with the warming trend on the peninsula (for whatever reason!). Global warming denialists and activists, please read on.

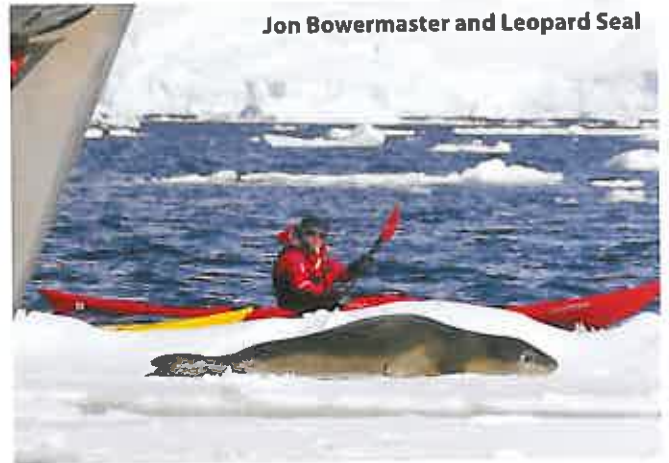
To feed my "rat" of mountaineering, in February we were host to my friends from Lugano who have been on board *Pelagic Australis* on three previous occasions during the last four years. Their scope was ski mountaineering and they were willing, yet again, to suffer the degradations of sea sickness crossing the Drake Passage to experience an expedition style which they consider to be one of the high points of their climbing careers spanning 50 years. That's right, do the calcs – they are all well into their mid 60s, fit as fiddles and an inspiration to age being no barrier in continuing with a life long passion. We spent a marvelous week snow camping on the Marr Ice Piedmont on Anvers Island and climbed the lofty Mt. Agamemnon in very cold conditions. One theory why they like "sailing to climb" is that after

a week in a tent, *Pelagic Australis*, with hot running water, a central heating system and meals and drink laid on, is possibly more attractive than returning to a mountain base camp, albeit with a more elaborate renting arrangement.

After the major objective on Agamemnon was achieved, the pressure was off and then the real holiday began. The run of spectacular weather continued throughout the month of February – clear, cold and generally windless conditions – perfect for early morning kayaking forays through last night's freeze out to the nearest wildlife sites, followed by a leisurely half-day ski tour. This ended when the group was picked up by the Zodiac and met with an *aperitivo* back on board, *alfresco* in the cockpit, while the late afternoon sun drifted into the southern horizon. This was a perfect day in the Antarctic –

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Jon Bowermaster and Leopard Seal



Football match on sea ice at Pleneau Island



Porridge Ice

when it happens day after day, for the next 14 days, it is exceptional. While we watched the late afternoon sun drifting into the southern horizon alighting the snow peaks in alpen glow, our merry band of sailors and climbers were in heaven, saying little, each contemplating our place in the universe.

Let's back track a month though, for one of my most difficult filming projects in over 25 years in high latitudes, and the main part of this story. Jon Bowermaster, environmentalist, author, blogger and film maker, made a superb global warming-themed film in 2008, based from *Pelagic Australis*, using sea kayaks as the main mode of travel. Based on the success of "Terra Incognita" Jon found the support and finance from Giant Screen in Chicago, maker of IMAX films, to produce a similar film but in 3-D. On the cusp of the 3-D filming genre in the field, let alone in Antarctica, this was to be a high risk, experimental project to say the least.

The plan was to spend three weeks in January on the peninsula to capture enough images to produce a 50-minute documentary destined for science and exhibition centers that already have IMAX screens. The IMAX film format, which is very expensive to shoot and edit, is being rapidly superseded by 3-D as the screen format fits IMAX format perfectly which saves the investment in these specialized cinemas. Although less cumbersome than IMAX cameras which use 70 mm traditional film, the 3-D digital camera is a very complex, fragile, and sensitive piece of equipment requiring three "techies" to maintain, calibrate and shoot with it. In theory this was all doable given average peninsula weather and ice conditions.

Our team of 11 got off to a rocky start from Ushuaia, three



days late waiting for a one-meter cube, 150-kilogram custom-built underwater housing for the 3-D camera. This was an object too big and heavy to carry as extra luggage, so it had to go airfreight – and there it sits today, never having cleared Argentine customs in Buenos Aires, possibly now useful as a card table (complete with *mate* gourds and *bombillas*) for officials at the airport. Even though we were supposed to be filming underwater as part of the shot list, this turned out to be a blessing in disguise as the 3-D camera was so time consuming to rig on land, it would have been a nightmare getting it underwater. Script modified.

I asked the 3-D expert of the three-man team, Ken Corben, if he somehow was planning to use the big camera in Drake Passage to capture some of the drama of big seas. This was always a problem in the many films I have supported where the cameraman goes down seasick and this critical filming never happens. His answer was in "Californian."

"Man, if you show big seas jumping out of the screen, the audience will be throwing up in their popcorn boxes and running out of the x#\$\$%^& cinema. This thing ain't gonna leave its case in the Drake, man."

Right!

The customs debacle, however, caused us to miss a very favorable weather window in the Drake Passage. We left in a fresh south southwesterly, triple reefed, sometimes down to four, with a staysail, having to steer well east to make it an easy and safe ride, adding a day extra in having to round the eastern end of King George Island, rather than going straight for Deception Island in the South Shetlands.

On arrival into the caldera, we dropped anchor in Whalers Bay and immediately brought the equipment ashore and did a trial set up – which took most of the day. It was revealed at this point the camera crew had failed to bring a shelter of some description to drop over the camera in order to work in a relatively windless and dry environment. This oversight would cost us dearly in time wasted, frozen fingers, and a real risk of running out of lens wipes.

Filming documentary style with 3-D is all about things close up, say one to five meters from you moving across, away or towards the camera. Backgrounds are almost an irrelevance. What better subjects than the Chinstrap penguin colony at Bailey Head, home to 200,000 breeding pairs, the largest penguin colony in the Antarctic.

We motored out of the "Bellows," east around the corner of the island and anchored off the main beach where the Chinstraps take to the sea. The surf landing was just doable staying dry. An hour later it was untenable as an easterly swell set in out of nowhere. After a frigid day filming Chinstraps marching to and fro, the six of us had to carry all the equipment up and over

“Back in the safety of the anchorage at Pleneau, just before dinner was served, I leafed through my copy of "Frozen Ocean," the definitive book on the make up of sea ice, and discovered that we had been in 'porridge ice!' ”



Snowey and Skip

Sticky brash ice





Hauling 3-D rig up to summit of Pleneau Island



Palagic crew at Palmer Station

a ridge that forms the top of the "amphitheater" which encompasses the nesting ground, and luckily managed to re-embark in the Zodiac in a small sheltered cove. We were all frozen and sufficiently exhausted after the first day of filming.

We motorsailed through the austral night (a daylight run), to reach the central section of the Gerlache Straits, a labyrinth of islands and islets, submerged rocks (both on and off the charts), channels and fjords. Here would be our main focus, concentrating on filming more penguins, seals, icebergs, bergy bits and growlers and of course ice melting, as this was a global warming film. We expected bad weather, but also spells of clear, in order to achieve a balance of backgrounds to our 3-D action in the foreground.

We made for the secure anchorage of Port Lockroy, where a Gentoo penguin colony hosts the old abandoned British Antarctic Survey Base, later renovated as a tour ship visitors' center managed by the U.K. Antarctic Heritage Trust. While it continued to snow and sleet, we rigged the kayaks, we set up plywood platforms for the 3-D camera to film from the pulpit of *Pelagic Australis*, other platforms in order to

film from the Zodiac and what appeared to be platforms for the platforms. Then we waited for better weather. And waited.

With the clock ticking, it was evident we would have to film come rain, snow or shine, working under the assumption things would get better. I made the suggestion to head further south because often a mere difference of 10 or 20 miles can bring clear skies. Adelie penguins were also on our shot list and the Penola Strait, just south of the Lemaire Channel was their northern boundary.

Information from Lockroy had warned us, however, that neither ship nor yacht had been able to enter the Penola this season, which is an extraordinary situation in mid-January. It became more evident why the yacht anchorage at Lockroy was starting to resemble an overcrowded cove in the Caribbean, high season.

Never one to completely trust good advice, we sailed south, got turned back in the entrance to the Lemaire Channel, but then went out around the outside, west of Booth Island and managed to wind our way in between the usual bergs and wide bands of brash ice, into the protected archipelago between Pleneau and Hovgaard Islands, the first yacht that season to do so. Climbing the easy summit of Pleneau in our sea boots, we saw that the Penola was indeed completely filled with rotten sea ice and brash with not a stitch of open water. It was a beautiful site, a channel of diamonds scintillating in a rare burst of sunlight. This load of ice was all being held in place by the string of islands from Pleneau to the Argentine Islands, 10 miles to the south. This late season phenomenon was a combination of the exceptionally cold winter combined with the lack of any strong northeast winds that would otherwise help break up the sea ice and flush it out of the channels that link the barrier island chain.

To use the time, we filmed bergs shifting with the current, huge concentrations of Gentoo penguins feeding on krill swarms and also took some overhead shots from high up on Pleneau, pulling the 3-D rig on a sled. This was all good material, but the skies continued to be generally grey and dull.



Convinced that we might find a "lead" along the shore of Peterman Island, enough of one to be able to land and film the Adelies there, we steamed on the outside of the islands the short distance to the French Pass, a wide channel that empties the Penola Strait. *Pelagic Australis* can push through a certain amount of unconsolidated brash ice (bits of ice not stuck together) so I took the chance of charging into what appeared to be a soupy mess of ice crystals. The 250-horsepower engine and three-bladed fixed prop made a good job of it, but ever so slowly the speed through the water dropped and within 100 yards we came to a halt, throttled back and assessed the situation. Not least of all we had to shut down an overheated engine and clean the sea water intake of what appeared to be ice the consistency that would be perfect for a round of margaritas.

It was a windless day, the sun had finally come out, but I was in no illusion that we could press on any farther. Best to retreat into open water, pronto. That took an hour of seesawing forward and carefully in reverse through 180 degrees, three more stages of shutting down and emptying the sea water intake along with some apprehension amongst the ranks, principally Miles, the skipper on board, having deferred the responsibility of this rash attempt to yours truly. Back in the safety of the anchorage at Pleneau, just before dinner was served, I leafed through my copy of "Frozen Ocean," the definitive book on the make up of sea ice, and discovered that we had been in "porridge ice." An interesting name and no surprise to anyone today, especially if they have had to scrape out the leftover cold oatmeal from the morning's breakfast pan. The text went on to say that this condition can stop big ships and even ice breakers as the surface tension combined with a certain viscosity is extreme. The Adelie penguins will not be making an appearance 3-D, at least this time.



Eventually retreating back to the relative open water of the Gerlache, taking flight in a full blown snow storm, we were back at the Port Lockroy yacht haven yet again. Still struggling with overcast and generally dull, uninspiring weather we moved around the corner to Paradise Harbour to use what time we had left, mainly filming leopard seals riding ice floes with the current and waiting for chunks of ice to break off the aptly named Avalanche Glacier that discharges into Skontorp Cove.

Filming projects always carry some risk. To get those interesting shots, we hear very often the director's mantra, "Can we do that again, but a little bit closer?" Taking our eye off the ball, we ran aground on an uncharted moraine near the ice front. The lifting keel on *Pelagic Australis* came into its own and with the press of a button we were off. Once again, I was glad we had sacrificed some interior volume to accommodate this most useful tool for exploratory voyaging!

Watch for the film (as yet unnamed) on IMAX screens in 2013.



Skip Novak 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 2nd place. He skippered Simon Le Bon's Drum in the 1985/86 Whitbread Race coming in 3rd. He wrote a book entitled "One Watch at a Time" about this experience and it was published simultaneously in England and in America.

In 1989, he was project manager and skipper of the Fazisi, the first Soviet entry in the Whitbread Race, and he chronicled this watershed event in his book "Fazisi - The Joint Venture" which was short-listed for the William Hill Sports Book of the Year Award in Britain.

Wishing to combine his mountaineering skills with sailing he built the expedition yacht Pelagic in Southampton in 1987 and has spent every season since in Antarctic waters, many of which were leading combined climbing and filming projects based from his two vessels.

In 2002/2003, Skip project-managed the construction of his new Pelagic Australis, a 23-meter purpose-built expedition vessel for high latitude sailing in order to augment the charter operations of the original Pelagic. Launched in September of 2003, she is the flagship for Pelagic Expeditions. ☺