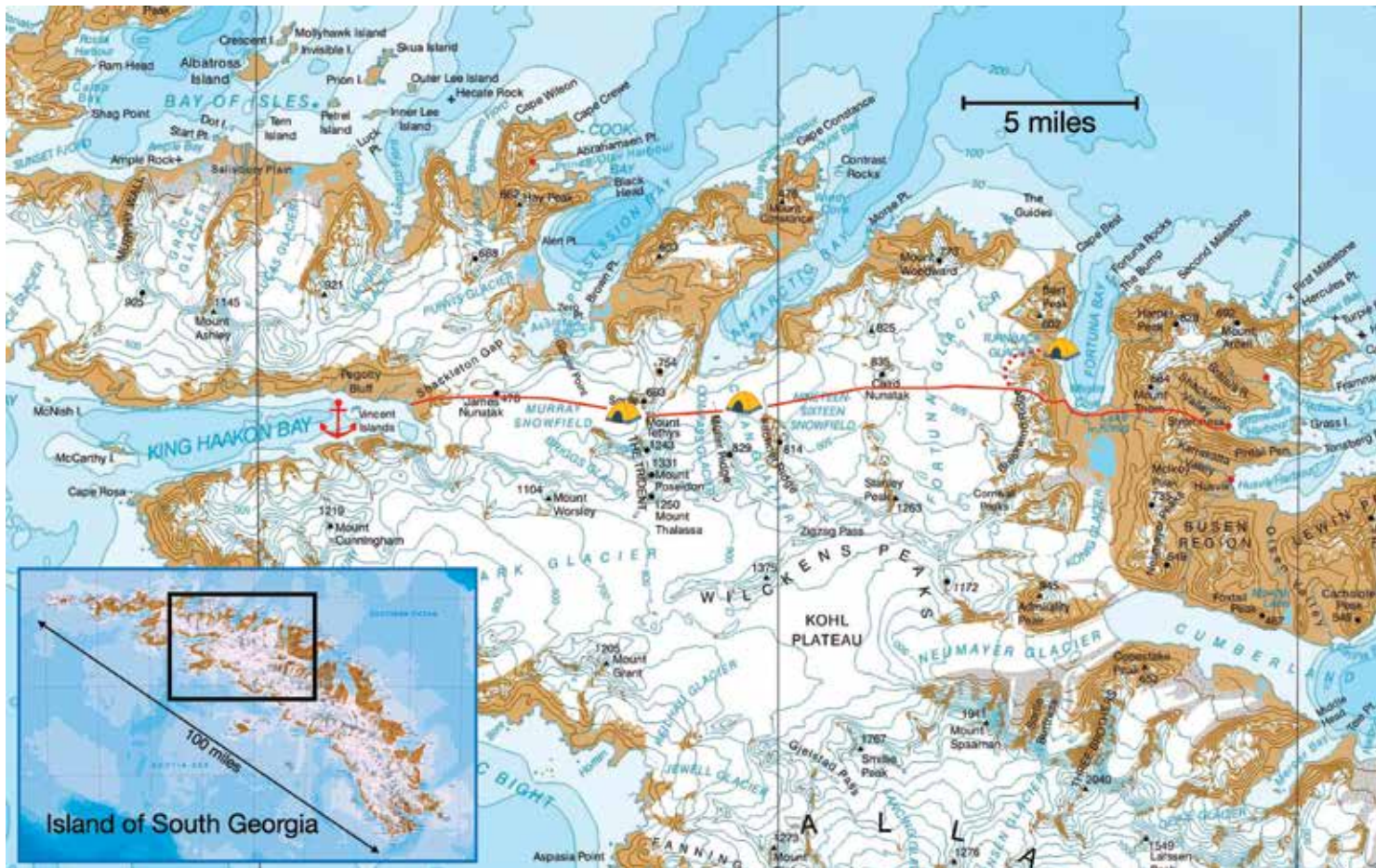


A two-masted sailing ship with yellow sails is navigating through dark, choppy waters. The ship is positioned in the middle ground, with its masts and rigging clearly visible. The water is dark blue with white foam from the waves. In the background, a rocky coastline with a prominent, sharp rock formation is visible under a grey, overcast sky. The overall mood is dramatic and adventurous.

# The Shackleton Traverse Revisited

*by Skip Novak*



We hit the cold front square on. From light and variable in the center of the low, bottoming out at 973 mb, the wind didn't take but an hour to ramp up for us needing three reefs in the fore mainsail and only a staysail up front. Early in the day, Windy's depiction of what was in store for *Vinson of Antarctica* was clear: 40-plus knots of southerly while still two days out of Port Stanley on the return from South Georgia Island.

When the blizzard set in just before nightfall, off we went on deck fully kitted up, with the crew helping me into my life jacket — a rare occasion. The sail plan preemptively put when the wind filled had been optimistic. It was not much of a struggle to arrive at storm-sail configuration — the fourth reef put in was our trysail, and the staysail deeply reefed on the furler was our de facto storm jib. Eight-meter seas were predicted, and while those were on the way up, it was clear we could not lay Stanley across the wind, but needed to put the wind and sea on the quarter.

For the next 36 hours, things were on the edge, with the wind above 40 knots and often gusting to 55 and the watch, eyes glued to the radar but otherwise warm and cozy in the pilot house, a deprivation chamber of sorts against the howling storm. Snow squalls continually came and went and, luckily, icing on deck and in the rigging was minimal and checked often with our deck spotlights. I was hoping like hell the autopilot would not fail; I was pretty sure we would not be able to hand-steer in these conditions. Heaving-to was possibly on the cards, and although we had years ago tested a heave-to configuration in 30 knots,

turning up into this seaway would be dramatic in this 75-tonne vessel. Luckily, we rode it out sliding on top of the quartering sea doing 8 to 15 knots comfortably. This was probably the most dramatic conditions *Vinson* had ever experienced in her five-year history, and she proved an accolade to the designer Tony Castro and the project team. As Captain Haddock would have remarked to Tintin, had they been on board, 50 knots was “a mere draft.” Indeed, we came through unscathed.

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This was the end of a five-week project sailing *Vinson of Antarctica* to the island and deploying a dads-and-kids team to do the celebrated Shackleton Traverse, following the same route as the 1916 epic journey. Our sistership *Amundsen* was also on the island with day-trip skiers led by the British mountaineer Stephen Venables. The starting gun was fired (actually a signal from a very weak fog horn) off Cape Pembroke, last landfall in the Falklands, and the 750-mile match race was on.

I have to admit that in my previous six Shackleton Traverses, we never waited more than three days to get started. In 2011 on *Pelagic Australis*, we sailed directly into King Haakon Bay, landed at Cave Cove where the *James Caird* first came ashore, then sailed up the fjord, dropping anchor in the lee of the Vincent Islands near Peggotty Bluff. That afternoon, we made a depot above the beach, cached our pulks, skis, and camping kit, then went back on board for a meal and the last night afloat. At 0600 the following morning, we were off and skinning up the glacier to the Shackleton Gap. Easy. Looking back, too easy.



Sailing through Bird Sound.

This dream scenario was not to be, not even after a few days wait. I had been watching the weather patterns for weeks before we set sail from Stanley on August 25. Granted, this was an early-season trip — late winter, not yet early spring. On previous expeditions to South Georgia, weather patterns from late August through September seemed to be more stable than later in the spring and certainly less volatile than the windy summer months, where snow conditions are poor and the joys of skiing and pulling pulks must be foregone for the less pleasant mode of travel in boots while carrying big ruck sacs.

Powerful low-pressure cells were marching one after another across the island, and high pressure northeast of the Falklands also fed the system. After slipping through the majestic Bird Sound at the northwest tip of the island with *Amundsen* close astern — four days out of Stanley, having split the Shag Rocks in two — we decided to bail out into the first available shelter of Right Whale Bay to take stock while *Amundsen* carried on to Grytviken. It did not take much analysing of weather models for us to decide to follow them in the next day to avoid ferocious winds and sea state from the westerly quadrant in the offing. The place to be was alongside on the Tijuca Jetty with mooring lines well-tied to old rusty bollards and pieces of unmovable machinery from the whaling era. Not least of all, this is a tactic to avoid cabin fever, as you can step off and stroll around on shore. It was quite a sight to see these two *Pelagic 77*s together on this magnificent subantarctic island. Not a cruise ship nor another yacht was within a thousand miles of our position.



*Amundsen and Vinson* on the Tijuca Jetty, Grytviken.

Strange as it may seem, a vacuum of sorts can be created within the two arms of Cumberland Bay that strike into the central section of the island, whereby the winds jump up and over the Allardyce mountain range, leaving the Grytviken environs windless and sunny although with dramatic lenticular clouds stationed aloft along the island's spine — a not-too-subtle warning to keep a weather eye out.

Not to waste a precious moment, Jerome (yes, the Poncet himself, CCA Blue Water Medal winner) got stuck into butchering one of our four mutton carcass halves with an electric multi-tool and chucking a leg and shoulder in the oven for



Top: Jerome and Lenny Laird butchering the mutton.  
Center: A marvelous ski down from Glacier Col.  
Above: Lara and kings, Salisbuty Plain.



slow cooking. The rest of our traverse team — Hamish Laird and daughter Lenny, Frank Macdermot and son Zu, me and daughter Lara and son Luca, Falkland Islander and *Vinson* veteran Steve Brown, and Kenneth Perdigon from Barcelona — were off on skis and skins, warming up with a 500-meter climb to Glacier Col. We were joined by a full contingent from *Amundsen*, so we had 18 people of mixed abilities spread out between the dock and Glacier Col itself! It was a glorious day — a seven-hour jaunt to limber up after the incarceration of the voyage.

Before the days of accurate forecasting (at least for three days, maybe four in this region), this deception of amazingly good weather in Cumberland Bay would have instilled a sense of angst in our climbers and skiers, who'd be chomping on the bit to get out and rise up to their lofty objectives and thinking the management (me) was overly hesitant and possibly afraid to stick my nose out there along the coast. Luckily, we have a relaxed group, a combination of paternal maturity and inexperienced youth, both leaving our next move in the hands of the weather gods. "Playing it by ear" is another way to describe the methodology used often in our art of "sailing to climb."

On September 2, we pulled away off the dock, with *Amundsen* following. They were on the way to Larsen Harbour, the majestic deep fjord at the south end of the island. They

would work their way back north ski touring and visiting the wildlife sites, while we headed north on standby to begin the Shackleton Traverse.

After a brief overnight at Jason Harbour, we made a nostalgic pilgrimage up the bay to the head of the Neumayer Glacier. Based from the original *Pelagic* in 2002, three of us had camped for four days in the middle of the dry glacier (on ice, no snow), having to call a halt in knock-down windy conditions on the way to climb the Three Brothers. Under the weight of enormous ruck sacks from the abandoned whaling station Husvik, we trekked in via Gulbrandsen Lake, an ephemeral body of water held in place by a moraine and ice dam on the Neumayer. Occasionally the dam broke and the lake emptied, leaving bergy bits grounded in the dry lake bed, and then it replenished — a surreal geographical phenomenon to walk through.

The Neumayer has the reputation as the fastest retreating glacier on the island. Where we camped in 2002 is now ocean 200 meters deep. The front, or snout, of the glacier is now close to reaching the shoreline below the Kohl Plateau. Antarctic terns were feeding en masse on the upwelling at the snout, and the Three Brothers (climbed solo by the Welshman Crag Jones that year) towered above us, with the summit of Admiralty Peak, climbed by Hamish in 2018, coming and going in the mist.

Moving up the coast slowly but surely, we spent a day and



Left: *Vinson* anchored at the Vincent Island, King Haakon Bay.  
Above: Cave Cove, King Haakon Bay. The cave is under the icicles.

night at Stromness Bay with a grand ski tour around the abandoned whaling stations, then a windy landing at Salisbury Plain in the Bay of Isles for a visit to the king penguin colony. We returned to Right Whale Bay with 4 inches of snow on deck, once again blocked by more strong winds from the west, with no point in going farther.

So, the routine continued. Jerome's quick bread, Frank's sourdough, Melissa's cornbread, and John's braided white loaf — it was a veritable breadmaking competition on board amongst some very elaborate cuisine. Reading, editing photographs, repairing gear, backgammon games, and various discussions took over the expedition. Speculation, some doubt, renewed enthusiasm when the sun made a rare appearance — all very similar (excepting the digital world) to the golden era of polar exploration when the weather halted all forward progress.

\* \* \*

The window finally arrived on September 13. To begin this overland journey, to my way of thinking, you need a benign forecast of three days to comfortably get stuck in and committed. Day one was just getting to the start — predawn up-anchor from Right Whale Bay, five hours to slip back through Bird Sound and around into King Haakon, and dropping the hook near Cave Cove, a tiny defile almost hidden from view on Cape Rosa, where Shackleton and his men first made landfall after leaving Elephant Island.

This is where the traverse story starts for us. We spent an hour ashore inspecting the "cave," which is nothing more than a miserable overhang with icy Swords of Damocles overhead. Shackleton and his five companions heartily ate the wandering albatross chicks off the nest to regain their strength after their epic boat journey. Today there are no nests. We were there on *Vinson* in 2024 conducting the once-in-ten-year wandering albatross survey for the government, and we searched high and low all over the Cape.



Top: South Col camp.

Above: Luca and Skip struggling up to the Razorback Ridge; Luca coming down the fixed rope below the Razorback Ridge.

We continued down the fjord that afternoon, and with pulks, food bags, skis, and the heavy gear ready, we dropped anchor behind the Vincent Islands near Peggotty Bluff and offloaded everything onto snow above the beach. A lone bull elephant seal took little notice as we intruded into his fastness.

On day two, the work began. We took our personal kit bags ashore just after first light, harnessed up to our pulks and began the long ski and skin up to the Shackleton Gap, followed by a steep pull up to the Murray Snowfield. On the gap, we radioed *Vinson* and said goodbye to crew Tor Bovim, Melissa Du Toit, John De Wet and Jerome — they could up-anchor

and head back around to the relative safety on the north side of the island.

Snow conditions were mixed. The high winds we had been experiencing on the island did their work here, and instead of a flat pulling surface, the winter snow of the glacier was a patchwork of mini summits — wind-blown sastrugi, annoyingly at right angles to our direction of travel. More hauling energy required!

It was a long day. By 1600, I was trailing way behind our youthful contingent, and after a steep pull up the last 100 meters (much steeper than when I was last here in 2011, or



Steve Brown coiling up on the Breakwind Gap.

maybe it was the 14 years tacked on to the equation!), we gained the south of three cols that define the Razorback Ridge where Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean made their famous desperate slide, in little visibility, off the crest of the north col into the abyss. Having previously used the center col, the south col was an experiment that worked, but just. It was a hard ice platform, just big enough for our three tents — our ice screws came in more than handy for guy anchors. The forecast was benign for day three, but this was certainly an exposed position, with 10 degrees of frost overnight.

The next morning was a hard and windy start to breaking

camp. When I climbed out of our cocoon at 0600, we were in the mist — a concerning situation for the descent, but luckily it lifted by 0800, and we were met with spectacular views in both directions — down the Murray into King Haakon Bay and due east along our route across the Compass Glacier immediately below, the Crean Glacier, and finally, in the far distance, the expansive Nineteen Sixteen Snowfield. Optimism returned! And with that the shocker: I had been across that stretch four times previously, usually a bit later in the season, and it was always a clean stretch of winter snow as far as the eye could see. Now we were looking at two substantial moraines



The final descent into Anchorage Bay; Stromness Bay, the 'zed stone' strata on the left headland.



descending down the Crean Glacier. The obvious conclusion was the glacier had down-wasted, melting and ablating from top down to reveal rock features, meaning not much depth of true glacial ice was left. Everyone talks about glacial recession, as it is tangible and easily measured over time. Not so, the depth of ice. You need to be on it to see it revealed by the bedrock trawled up into moraines, which signals the beginning of the end of South Georgia's ice age.

Hamish and Steve had done a recce down the descent the afternoon before, and it was steep but doable, although with a joggle on the way down. It's an easy walk down in crampons, but a different story with pulks in tow. We had to lower off along a fixed rope, which was unwieldy for some, and we consequently lingered in the operation far too long, as seracs were threatening from above.

Once safely on the Compass Glacier, we let it rip by riding the pulks in luge fashion down to the flat — the most fun of the day. It was 1230 by then, so we continued skinning on an undulating surface for another two hours, then camped alongside the second moraine, spending a relaxed afternoon as we were sort of "out of the woods" with regards the difficulties.

The next day, we passed the wrecked Wessex helicopter from the 1982 Falklands War (read Roger Perkins' *Operation Paraquat: The Battle for South Georgia* and Cedric Delves' *Across an Angry Sea: The SAS in the Falklands War*), which had moved 450 meters down slope with the glacier since I logged the position in 2006. Sadly, we had to forego camping below the Caird Nunatak. The forecast for day four was bad, so the consensus was to carry on down the Turnback Glacier to the beach at Anchorage Bay and camp there. This is where Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean tried to descend but were met with a sheer glacial front ending in the sea. Today it is the normal descent route for various parties doing the traverse, as it is an easy down-and-out — for us, nothing more than an ice tongue covered in what was left of the winter snow.

Luca's moment of truth came at the beginning of this descent near the Caird Nunatak. He was on a split snowboard — no problem on the ascents, but hard to imagine descending with a pulk. It was a Bart Simpson moment — he took off and immediately zoomed by me, sitting on this pulk looking very smug and relaxed, the snowboard edge steering his direction of travel. Yes, he must be the first to do the Shackleton Traverse on a snowboard, but as he later said, "A first of absolutely no consequence." I was more impressed by that statement than the actual first.

We camped late that afternoon on the edge of the outwash plain, behind a buttress to avoid any katabatic winds coming down the Turnback. Next day we were happily tent-bound in the pouring rain brought in from a strong northerly airstream. Lara, Luca, and I were very comfortable in our bags, all reading Jack Kerouac. Frankly, I was not adverse to a day off. *Vinson* was just around the corner at Husvik, a terrible temptation to reboard for some, but we held firm not wishing to break the spell of our journey, so we maintained radio silence.

Next day was dingle, as a Kiwi would say, so we skinned back up the Turnback Glacier and over the Breakwind Ridge, where Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean could see the recognizable zed stone on Busen Point, a folded strata above Stromness Bay, and where they heard the early morning whistle calling the whalers to work — and telling them that they had made it. It is an historic part of the journey, and sadly few people do it today. Fourteen years ago we had pulled pulks across it and easily skied them down, but now the vestigial glacier on the east side of the ridge is about gone and everything on the descent has steepened off. The ravine is gnarly, with rockfall threatening from above. And, with a yacht or cruise ship waiting near the beach at Anchorage Bay, well . . . that part of this historic journey is often foregone in lieu of drinks and dinner on board.

The message here, without gainsaying Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean in the least, is that this famous journey is still worth doing, but it must be kept in mind the terrain bears little resemblance to what it was in 1916, let alone in 2011. When you read Shackleton's *South*, keep that in mind.

On September 19, we took the tourist route from Fortuna Bay to the whaling station at Stromness, the "Last Day of the Shackleton Traverse," a description of which can be found in any cruise ship brochure touting the island. Nevertheless, it was a great day, especially when our base camp *Vinson of Antarctica* was waiting for our return, jogging off the beach at Stromness. The next morning we were off to Stanley to meet that cold front, which could not be avoided. No matter. This is what *Vinson* was built for.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Skip Novak is one of the preeminent authorities on high latitude sailing, having spent close to four decades running expeditions to Antarctica, the Falklands and South Georgia.

He is a veteran of five racing circumnavigations including four Whitbread Round the World Races, and co-created the 77-foot exploration yachts, *Vinson of Antarctica* and *Amundsen*.

