

INTELLIGENT LIFE



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Icebergs ahoy

Forget cruising in the Mediterranean. Real sailing is all about battling the freezing winds and pack ice of Antarctica—for a chance to experience unbelievable solitude and beauty | Helena Douglas

EVER since explorers such as Franklin, Amundsen, Scott and Shackleton drew attention to the Earth's higher latitudes, fascination with these remote areas has grown. Cruise ships now routinely ply Antarctic waters and Russian icebreakers take guests to picnic at the North Pole. But what if you fancy something more personal than a carpeted cruise-ship—a trip, say, with the feel of a pioneering voyage of old? Then book a berth on a high-latitude expedition charter yacht.

High-latitude sailing involves navigating to the Earth's extreme north and south in dangerous conditions not found in the lower latitudes: freezing temperatures; remote, often-uncharted waters; hazardous floating ice. The modern-day pioneer of sailing in these regions is Jérôme Poncet, a Frenchman. In his 33-foot wooden sloop, *Damien*, Mr Poncet in 1969 became the first small-yacht skipper to reach Spitsbergen; and, in 1973, the first to sail inside the Antarctic Circle.

Chartering in the high latitudes took off in the late 1980s when, inspired by Mr Poncet's exploration of the south, crews of six boats based in Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego, saw an opportunity to run sailing expeditions for paying guests. Boosted by the "Shackleton worship" of the 1990s, a handful of yachts now regularly take clients to remote cold-water destinations.

Be warned, however. Although no previous sailing experience is necessary, high-latitude expeditions are a far cry from classic blue-water charters, with their warm winds, foredeck sunbathing and rum-punch flavoured sunsets. High-latitude sailing can be physically demanding in cold, rough seas. But the rewards can be huge: a sense of adventure and self-sufficiency; a rare engagement with the elements; the thrill of exploring uncharted waters with dramatic landscapes and abundant wildlife.

The prime southern destination is the Antarctic Peninsula, a mountainous continuation of the Andes. The west coast, one of the most beautiful areas of the Antarctic, is usually free of ice during the austral summer from November to March, and is famed for its pristine, glacier-clad peaks, glistening icebergs, pack ice and wildlife. A highlight of an expedition here is sailing through the narrow, ice-filled Lemaire Channel, fringed by steep mountains on Booth Island and the mainland, and considered the most scenic stretch on the peninsula.

The peninsula is a haven for wildlife: humpback whales in the crystal blue water, elephant seals beached on Pleneau Island, squawking adeliie, chinstrap and gentoo penguins, and wheeling cormorants, petrels and terns.

Expeditions depart from either Puerto Williams in Chile or Ushuaia in Argentina, and include a tough three-to-four-day crossing of the notorious Drake Passage. Once at the peninsula, you are in rare company. Over the past 30 years, no more than 150 or so private yachts have anchored in Antarctica. Expeditions take around four weeks and cost about \$14,000 per person.

For sheer remoteness and scenery, visit South Georgia, a narrow, 106-mile-long, snow-covered, glacier-strewn, unpopulated island with two majestic mountain ranges. The coast is characterised by cliffs, glacier-headed fjords



Sailing lore allows “Cape Horners” to wear a gold earring in their left ear and spit to windward.

▶ and deep anchorages. Bergy bits, growlers and brash ice infest many bays. South Georgia has extraordinarily rich wildlife and is home to 30m breeding birds, including huge concentrations of wandering albatross, cape and giant petrels, and king and macaroni penguins. Voyages to South Georgia are not for the faint-hearted. Merely getting there involves a 600-nautical-mile, downwind “sleigh-ride” from the Falkland Islands. Expeditions take four to five weeks. Expect to pay, again, around \$14,000 per person.

Nearer the mainland of Chile and Argentina are the uncharted channels and fjords of Tierra del Fuego—the archipelago at the tip of South America. Discovered in 1520 by Magellan, the “Land of Fire” is separated from the mainland by the strait bearing his name. Here you can watch flightless steamer ducks, Andean condors and guanaco (rare llama-like herbivores), and explore the glacier-lined Beagle Channel, made famous by Darwin and Fitzroy.

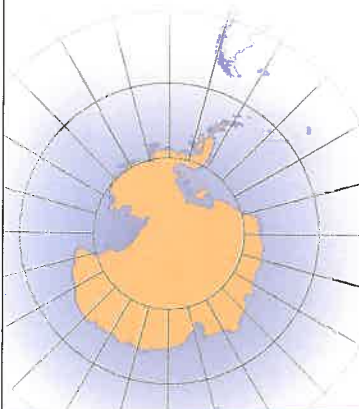
Alternatively, you can sail round forbidding Cape Horn, renowned for its violent weather, and held in awe by sailors for centuries. Sailing lore allows “Cape Horners” to wear a gold earring in their left ear and spit to windward—normally, a serious breach of nautical etiquette. Tierra del Fuego expeditions depart from Puerto Williams or Ushuaia, and take around two weeks. Prices are about \$5,000 per person.

Victory Adventure Expeditions, a broker based in Puerto Williams, lists around 20 yachts—including Mr Poncet’s

Golden Fleece—which offer charters in the region for \$300-400 per person per day. But plan ahead to get your pick of vessel and destinations. Many voyages are booked far in advance and the most popular fill up quickly.

Hamish and Kate Laird offer charter expeditions aboard *Seal*, their purpose-built, 56-foot aluminium expedition vessel. They start discussing voyages with clients at least a year or more in advance. “We want to know the people we are going to sail with,” says Mrs Laird. While not necessarily adventurers, their clients are usually looking for something off the beaten track. The Lairds, along with other skippers in these parts, will ask you to fill out a medical questionnaire and may veto clients on health grounds.

Accommodating six guests, *Seal* offers expeditions to ▶



Opposite page: steel yacht *Pelagic* motors through pancake ice off the Antarctic Peninsula. This page: crew film a humpback whale (below left); anchorage off Dream Island, Antarctic Peninsula (below centre); elephant seals and emperor penguin chick on mother’s feet (below right)

BLUEGREEN PICTURES, MINDEN PICTURES







Endangered mariner

At length did cross an albatross | Helena Douglas

SEAFARERS have long believed that killing an albatross brings bad luck. But around 100,000 a year are slaughtered by longline fishing, and 19 of the 21 species of albatross are now threatened with extinction. The birds can no longer reproduce fast enough to make up their numbers.

Longline fishing fleets trail lines up to 80 miles long behind them, each carrying thousands of baited hooks. Albatrosses and other sea birds prey on the bait, become hooked and drown. Some of the fishing fleets causing the greatest concern are those hunting Patagonian toothfish, worth \$7,000 a tonne, and southern bluefin tuna, single specimens of which have fetched \$100,000 in Japan. Swordfish and hake fisheries also have a serious effect on albatrosses. Up to a third of the birds killed are victims of pirate vessels.

The Save the Albatross Campaign, set up in 2000 by BirdLife International, has recently started an Albatross Task Force to teach fishermen how to reduce the slaughter. Mitigation techniques include flying bird-scaring streamers,

weighting lines so they sink more quickly, dyeing bait blue which makes it harder for birds to see, using thawed bait which sinks faster, and setting lines at night when fewer albatrosses feed. Such techniques can reduce bird deaths from longlining by up to 95%, says the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Britain.

Yachtsmen everywhere have a special empathy for albatrosses, which are found in every ocean of the world except the Arctic. The Volvo Ocean Race, which left Spain in November 2005 to circumnavigate the world before finishing up in Sweden this June, has adopted the Save the Albatross Campaign. Meanwhile, Ellen MacArthur, the yachtswoman who recently broke the single-handed round-the-world record, has been participating in a sea-bird count on South Georgia.

But even though fishing fleets are reported to be losing some \$20m a year because albatrosses are caught instead of fish, these inexpensive and effective mitigation techniques are still not widely used. Winning over the hearts and minds of the fishing industry is proving to be the biggest challenge of all.

both the southern and northern high latitudes, and is one of the few yachts offering trips to the hard-to-reach east coast of Greenland. Mr Laird has made a dozen voyages to Antarctica, and between them the Laird's have sailed over 130,000 nautical miles. Private charters cost \$2,000 per day and individual berths \$300-400 per person per day.

One of the best-known skippers in the business is Skip Novak, a four-times Whitbread Round the World Race sailor, mountaineer and one of the original charter pioneers. His company, Pelagic Expeditions, runs two vessels, each with a permanent crew of two, and offers voyages to a range of southern destinations.

The original *Pelagic*, a steel 55-footer built in 1987, has spent 15 seasons in Antarctic waters and accommodates six clients. His 75-foot cutter-rigged *Pelagic Australis*, purpose-built as an expedition vessel in 2003, accommodates ten guests.

Recently, Mr Novak has decided to take a break from the northern hemisphere "to expand the southern season at both ends", beginning in October with South Georgia and ending in mid-May with trips to Cape Horn and Tierra del Fuego. *Pelagic Australis* is for charter at €3,500 (\$4,200) per day and *Pelagic* at €1,500.

But because there are only 25 or so charter vessels in the region, the southern wilderness is unlikely to become an icy equivalent of the Solent or Chesapeake Bay any time soon. That's heartening news for those who want nothing more than to follow in Shackleton's wake. [72](#)

Helena Douglas is assistant books editor of *The Economist*, and sails an Oyster 26 at weekends.

SAILING Challenge Adventure Sailing (www.challengebusiness.com), Victory Adventure Expeditions (www.victory-cruises.com), Hamish and Kate Laird (www.expeditionsail.com) and Pelagic Expeditions (www.pelagic.co.uk) offer trips in high latitudes.