



SKIP NOVAK

PREPARING FOR SUMMER IN THE FAR SOUTH INVOLVES A SUPPLY RUN TO CAPE TOWN FROM THE FALKLANDS AND A BOAT LOAD OF BUREAUCRACY

Pelagic *Australis*, the flagship of my two-boat fleet, which includes the original *Pelagic* (my ‘Pelagians’ call me the Commodore), was back on station in the Falkland Islands at the end of August after our annual refit in Cape Town. While the bigger of the two boats made this annual 4,000-mile voyage from Chile with charter crew on board, *Pelagic* sat decommissioned in Stanley for the southern winter. The high latitude charter season has now begun in the far south. When this goes to press I will be on South Georgia with both boats engaged. Although I have never been one to follow a routine, this is a routine nonetheless and one that we have been keeping since *Pelagic Australis* was launched in 2003.

Planning for such a season is essential. Yacht services could be described as primitive in the Falklands, not due to lack of expertise on the ground – the Falkland Islanders are a resourceful bunch – but rather because of

the continuing economic and logistic stranglehold Argentina keeps over this British outpost since they fought the war of possession in 1982. A bilateral agreement allows only one overflight of Argentine airspace per week from Chile. The alternative is a twice weekly service from Brise Norton in Oxfordshire with the RAF ‘air

bridge,’ subject to availability from the UK Ministry of Defence. Hence, there are no spare parts for yachts kept in stock in Stanley.

This goes for Puerto Williams in Chile, a charming venue at the ‘ends of the earth,’ where it is impossible to buy a spark plug. Ushuaia is better supplied, but whatever services there are in that city of 70,000 people get undermined by arcane regulations and bureaucratic inconsistencies for customs and port clearances. There is not even a fuel jetty for small craft in Ushuaia – we roll 200-litre barrels down the dock, one by one and siphon the diesel into the tanks.

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Consequently, refitting *Pelagic* is done by remote control to a great extent. This means an end of season audit, then loading *Pelagic Australis* with things like her liferaft for the annual inspection, outboards, inflatables, any motors and alternators for servicing and of course the sails for loft inspection and repairs. Without our ‘walk in’ forepeak on *Pelagic Australis*, which is a virtual cargo hold, this would be impossible with a full contingent of charter crew. On the return ‘dead heading’ journey the big boat is full to the brim with spares, supplies and provisions, plus, more often than not, spares and supplies for my colleagues on other boats in the area.

I am left on the dock in Cape Town. My other moniker is ‘The Cheque Book Captain’ – I do the rounds and pay the bills. The preseason checklist is also a substantial office job. Cruising permits with the South Georgia government must be finalised. Same for Antarctica with the Foreign Office, which processes our Antarctic Treaty permit applications. All our charter guests are subject to bio-security requirements to prevent the introduction of alien species to these fragile polar environments, so several reminders are sent out to make sure everyone is on side with their equipment and clothing.

The International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators also has preseason checks including logging our applications and permits with our flag states. Verifying things like our company information, vessel call data, shore side emergency contacts, crisis management plans and our schedules for the entire season are necessary for a smooth operating season for the organisation, and for us.

Like many things today, it has become more complicated with more and more due diligence required, at least if you play by the rules. Sometimes it is hard to stomach, especially having been south in the golden period, decades ago, when we asked no-one and just cast off and went.

However, having jumped through all these hoops, whether it be for your first time, or in my case 27 seasons later, there is always that reward on making landfall: snowy mountains and icebergs.