



# SKIP NOVAK

DESTINATIONS THAT WERE ONCE OFF THE BEATEN PATH ARE NOW EITHER CONTROLLED BY PERMITS OR CROWDED WITH OTHER BOATS



How rare it is, to be left to your own devices on a wild island. From the tropics to the high latitudes, more often than not when you think you are alone and have achieved a sense of isolation, allowing your imagination to conjure up allusions of first contact, as in the voyages of Captain Cook, someone comes steaming around the headland and drops anchor next door. Or else the prefecture or a park warden will materialise out of thin air asking for your cruising permit.

Indicative of the interest in worldwide cruising beyond the well-charted, well-known waterways of the Mediterranean and Caribbean (in large part thanks to Jimmy Cornell), over time, many of the uninhabited islands in far flung locations have seen a steady traffic, publicised even more so now on social media websites and cruising forums.

Tropical island destinations were first on the hit list, a trend that began in the middle of the last century. The average cruiser was more than capable of dealing with the navigational challenges of coral atolls and fringing reefs, plus the elements

that might make the experience in part miserable, such as the heat, jungle environments and the critters that infest them. Surrounded by shoal waters cruisers could provide for themselves by fishing or diving for their dinner, no permit needed, which satisfied the primeval desire of otherwise urbanites to 'live off the land' in solitude. For any cruisers less adventurous flotillas now regularly ply these waters, which, in one sense, seems to deflate the purpose of getting away from it all.

High latitude destinations certainly offered more challenges. Considerations for the cold, risk of ice, short seasons and generally heavier weather mean these austere outposts have found focus only in relatively recent times. Many sub-antarctic islands as well as arctic equivalents were, as a rule, ravaged by sealers and

whalers for hundreds of years and then forgotten by territorial governments. This created a vacuum, opening up a golden period for bold navigators willing to make the necessary preparations and take the necessary risks to visit them.

Lately, though, sovereignty has had to be reinforced either for potential mineral exploitation or, altruistically, to protect a unique ecosystem for scientific study. An organised tourist destination is also a motive. At present there are no sub-antarctic islands you can visit without a permit and many where no permits will be issued at all. A few are even off limits for the scientists. This due diligence also extends to the entire Antarctic continent as per the terms of the Antarctic Treaty. Permits are now also required throughout much of the Arctic, which is all sovereign territory. In many cases daily position reporting is a requirement. The 'golden period' of showing up on a voyage of personal discovery unencumbered by bureaucracy seems to be truly over.

In September our early season South Georgia mountaineering expedition on *Pelagic Australis* was, as usual, well planned out with the full approval of the South Georgia government, having gone through a rigorous permitting process. The difference, though, in going down in early September was that we would be the only yacht on the island and well ahead of the tour ship season, which opens in mid to late October. Although the administrative base at King Edward Point alongside the abandoned whaling station of Grytviken, now a museum, is manned by a British magistrate and a harbour master plus a retinue of British Antarctic Survey scientists, this staff is restricted to their station and the immediate environs of Cumberland Bay.

The point is that while roaming around on the beaches and in the mountains we were utterly alone – not counting the penguins, seals and other flying birds numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Although we are aware of and adhere to all the guidelines regarding the wildlife and biosecurity protocols, there was a certain sense of freedom knowing there would be no-one sharing our anchorages and no-one to 'bump into.' A liberating experience indeed.

**“THE ‘GOLDEN PERIOD’ OF SHOWING UP ON A VOYAGE OF PERSONAL DISCOVERY UNENCUMBERED BY BUREAUCRACY IS OVER”**