



SKIP NOVAK

ROUNDING CAPE HORN IS AN EXPERIENCE TO CHERISH, BUT WHAT REALLY QUALIFIES FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT? WONDERS SKIP

I distinctly recall telling a magazine editor that if asked to write another article about Cape Horn, I would shoot myself. That was a long time ago. The time has passed.

In January, after piloting a superyacht in the Antarctic, we re-crossed the Drake Passage and came in slightly from the west, 'rounded' the Horn, and then managed to land on Cape Horn Island.

One of the guests, vaguely aware of my sailing history both racing and cruising in the south, asked me how many times I have rounded.

Years ago I would have arrogantly told him only five, for to actually round Cape Horn in the classic sense you need to start from somewhere like New Zealand. The implication is there are some miles to do before and after, and just rounding the Horn on a day trip, as I have done many times with our charter guests during the Beagle Channel/Cape Horn cruises, doesn't really cut it.

To answer the gentleman I just said: "Many," not having any idea exactly. No point in giving him a lecture and spoiling his moment.

Indeed, to be a member of the International Association of Cape Horners (I have never joined for one reason or another) you have to be on a non-stop sailing passage of at least 3,000

nautical miles and double 50°S from the Atlantic to the Pacific or vice versa. I guess they had to draw the line somewhere as it would have been lots of ears to pierce if every cruise ship contingent including those coming back from the Peninsula qualified.

On my first rounding during the Whitbread Race in 1977, the visual experience was locked in a mystery. We rounded at night, the feeble light on the island barely visible, and when dawn broke we vaguely had a view of the mountainous terrain falling behind in our wake as we began to climb north towards Staten Island. We remained largely ignorant of what we had seen. In those days you would have had to be an academic to find out any of the recondite history of Tierra del Fuego, let alone its then

present place in the politics of southern South America. Other than the well-worn Cape Horn sagas known to all sailors, there were precious few popular books on offer about the region in general.

It was only when I started my second life in the late Eighties as a pioneer of the Southern Ocean charter game that we came to grips with the region. Our two-week routine cruises included a short trip around the Horn launched from the spectacular anchorage of Caleta Maxwell just to the west on Isla Hermite. If it wasn't blowing a gale, which wasn't often, the Southern Ocean swell was always rolling through. After only a few hours we rounded up into Caleta Leon on the lee side of Cape Horn Island and dropped a hook off the kelp line.

In the early days, getting ashore and up the rickety staircase on the sheer cliff to the station was quite an original experience. It was manned by a Chilean naval rating with his family and maybe a three-legged dog, and we were always sincerely welcome and invited in for tea or coffee. Our visit was even more appreciated when we brought a cabbage or two and some potatoes. This family was on station for a year straight and supplied infrequently so any contributions to augment their supplies, which were always a bit short, went down well.

Over time more yachts started to visit and the interior of the station was decorated with yacht club burgees from around the globe. Inevitably, this most famous point of land was put on the cruise ship itineraries and the numbers of visitors increased to what now must be many thousands per season. A gift shop with Cape Horn paraphernalia evolved.

This January, we landed with 10 people, climbed those same steep stairs – still rickety – and made a very brief visit to the lighthouse and chapel. The naval officer, smartly dressed for the occasion, was courteous, but no coffee or tea was on offer, the gift shop was gone and it turned out to be a slightly stilted encounter. Possibly he was about to be overwhelmed by another ship arrival.

We took the time to stroll out on the boardwalk to the statue – an albatross cut out of outsize steel plates (that could do with a lick of paint). This overlooks the vast expanse of the Southern Ocean, one thing that will never change. ■

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