

SKIP NOVAK

THE EXPEDITION CHARTER BUSINESS HAS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS,
AS SKIP RECALLS HOW DEALS USED TO BE DONE...

In January my daughter and I were riding the upper deck of a London bus along Piccadilly and, as we slid by The Ritz hotel, my memory twigged. There was enough time on the way to Victoria Station to tell her a story, an old favourite, of how I got one of my most interesting charters on *Pelagic* back in 1993. A sort of 'back in the day' tale, and a contrast to the current 25 pages of contractual gobbledegook required to keep me and my charter clients happy.

At a drinks party in the New Forest I was introduced to a foreign gentleman in his mid-to-late-60s who was an avid yachtsman. When the conversation came around to the fact I had a 54ft expedition yacht based in southern South America, he immediately asked if I could sail him and his friends around Cape Horn and up the west coast to Puerto Montt in Chile. I guess he assumed that the company I was keeping (in truth, it was my then girlfriend's company) was enough due diligence.

This was in October and he, a busy man, had to do this trip the following March, which was the end of our Antarctic season. While munching on a canape I explained that a group of scientists already had an option on *Pelagic* for that month. He replied: "Come have lunch with me at the Ritz next week and we can talk about it. I stay at the Ritz when in the UK." As it was more of a statement rather than a question, I agreed.

I turned up on the day, unknowing that a jacket and tie was required, so I was ushered into the cloakroom to suffer the embarrassment of having to don a jacket too short in the sleeves and put on a well-worn, food stained tie, dished out by the concierge who was smirking, not smiling. My host was waiting for me at the table and we settled into an animated conversation having nothing to do with sailing.

The sommelier arrived, a diminutive man in tails who was on a first name basis with my host. Both gesticulated with the wine list as they settled on a bottle of – let's say for the sake of the tale – a Bâtard-Montrachet for our salmon starter. I was made aware, somehow, possibly for my benefit, that it was £200 a bottle. And

the red for the main course? The sommelier tried his luck with an £800 bottle, but the gentleman exclaimed that was ridiculous. "Who would pay £800 for a bottle of wine?" They compromised on a £600 bottle of Château Haut-Brion '66 (also a supposition).

As we worked our way through lunch, knowing my prior options were well and truly drowned, the general charter plan was outlined. He'd meet us with four friends in Puerto Williams. We'd sail around Cape Horn and then take three weeks to go north through the inside of the archipelago to Puerto Montt, all of about 1,000 miles.

Fast forward to March and on the date, they arrived by private plane, laden with wine supplies and a case of Laphroaig whisky. The host also brought on board a

sizable box of books which, one by one, he devoured during the trip. This was prescient, as although it was a fascinating cruise through that complicated archipelago with a stunning anchorage every night, it was

a motor sailing slog against wind and rain most of the time. My girlfriend and I were up at 0600 in pre-dawn darkness to cast off the shore lines and up anchor, always joined by the ex-Chilean admiral, who was to become my friend and fixer for all problems in Chile going forward for many years. We usually tied up just on dark...

The highlight of this voyage was listening to these old friends having lengthy discussions about a variety of topics; economics, global politics and history. I put my foot in the discussion a few times and was corrected with

inarguable facts and reasons – a reality check on my admittedly none-too-brilliant education.

But back to the Ritz. Lunch was winding down, enjoying the Armagnac. My new friend, having paid the bill, fished around in his jacket pockets and pulled out an envelope containing \$10,000 and laid it on the table. "Can we make a deal?" he said. I thought of my scientists who'd taken an option on those dates... but for only two seconds. "OK, deal," I replied. And we shook on it. I slipped the envelope into my pocket, not bothering to count the money at the table – you don't do that sort of thing at the Ritz. ■

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