

# SKIP NOVAK

NAVIGATING THE SOUTH ATLANTIC USING CELESTIAL TECHNIQUES  
BECOMES A TRUE TEST WHEN THE SHIP GOES 'DARK'

**N**ow docked in Cape Town, *Vinson of Antarctica* has concluded what has been, if I say so myself, an extremely successful first year for a new custom vessel. More often than not a new build's first few months, let alone the first year of operation, is spent de-bugging all the systems. This is the point I belabour to my audience of admirers or detractors (ad nauseum, I am told): we have here an example of how to design and engineer a sailing vessel that works 'out of the box'. By definition this also means that ongoing issues years down the road are kept to a minimum. Less is more – my favourite aphorism!

Our schedule has been full on from the launch in March 2021. We first went north to Svalbard in July and August supporting a German government geological survey collecting one and half tonnes of rocks for analysis. A north/south transit of the Atlantic followed in October with scientists on board from the University of Florida and the Russian Academy of Science collecting plankton along the way. In January we hosted a penguin biology team from the Field Museum in Chicago along with Cornell and Bath Universities – a project in South Georgia and the Antarctica Peninsula was all about collecting samples for DNA analysis. Then, after a short break in Port Stanley, off again to the Peninsula with a UK film team in February.

Our last voyage, just completed, might be the one most interesting for *Yachting World* readers. This is our end of season programme that includes the RYA Ocean Yachtmaster shore-based course in Puerto Williams, followed by a cruise in the Beagle Channel, then a short passage around Cape Horn before heading across the pond to Cape Town – a 42-day commitment.

Before I sold *Pelagic Australis*, this was her routine for many years. It had been one of our most popular trips on offer. Passage planning and global weather considerations are features of this course which are valid no matter how you navigate, but the main challenges are mastering celestial navigation.

I wrote about the questionable value of doing celestial study in this column

back in April 2015. I suggested that celestial was more of a hobby and prophesied (with some evidence) that at some point it would drop off the RYA requirements for an Ocean Yachtmaster.

Well, I was wrong on that account as it's still very much with us. And it seems it's even more in demand from otherwise experienced sailors of a certain vintage.

Although classroom instruction was a given, the real test was to put this into practice at sea. While we did encourage our 'students' to practice celestial it was sort of a half-hearted affair. If you don't have to do it, most people won't with GPS data staring you in the face. Like many things, the bare minimum was enough to get you through

the exam, by simply showing an examiner your sight reduction workings and chart work from a few days running.

Our *Vinson* crew have taken this a big step further and immediately after departure from Cape Horn blanked out the

GPS readouts. Eight students had to get stuck into this seriously. The sextants were out in force and the goal was to 'find' and make landfall on Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic. For those of you claiming this might be irresponsible, hang on – they did have the AIS functioning without the GPS display visible and a radar watch at night. There's not much activity along this route.

Sailing to and landing on Tristan, on what is otherwise a delivery passage to Cape Town, is a gamble. If the wind and swell is onshore it makes landing impossible and, if along the way you have to struggle on the wind to get there, it makes sense to give it a miss and slide off on a comfortable reach well below it. This is exactly what happened.

Luckily though, Gough Island, 225 miles to the south-south-east, and more or less along their course to Cape Town, became a surrogate objective. On 28 April, after two days of overcast skies making dead reckoning critical, they made landfall and sailed close aboard the island's south coast. What a way to realise that all the hard work of taking those sights and grinding down pencil leads, has paid off after 21 days at sea! A memory has been created that will stick. ■

**'Celestial navigation is still very much with us'**

