

SKIP NOVAK

TRUE HIGH LATITUDES WILDERNESS IS BECOMING INCREASING
DIFFICULT TO FIND... UNLESS YOU KNOW WHERE TO GO

You know what? I actually went sailing recently. I've just signed off *Pelagic* at Iqaluit, Baffin Island, after a delightful three week cruise that began in Ilulissat, Greenland, in mid July.

One of my original partners in the Pelagic project, Chuck Gates, my oldest sailing friend from Chicago going back 60 years, collaborated in getting the boat up and running after two years on the hard in Maine during the Covid crisis. While I was tending to *Vinson of Antarctica* (my day job) in Cape Town, starting the three month annual downtime and service from our southern theatre, Chuck and Tor, a young South African, relaunched and prepped the *Pelagic* for an Arctic summer so he and friends could sail up to Greenland. This is testament to a partnership that worked in 1986 and lives on.

Pelagic has been a demanding mistress for high latitude passions for 36 years. I like to describe her as a boat with a history. Every dent, abrasion and ad hoc modification has a backstory, all within the fabric of this home-built 54-footer.

When *Pelagic* was on her first Antarctic expedition in 1988 I was so enamoured with the region I vowed never to return up north. While incarcerated during a prolonged storm as a statement of intent I cut up all of our Admiralty charts from Europe and hand stitched them into a book (wooden binding, Treadmaster cover) with the flip side pages for the entries – a guestbook-cum-diary. The only rules for contributions were no narrative of thanks allowed, only original prose, poetry, ballads and artwork. It is a treasured record of the many insanities we perpetrated and risks we took – at least by today's standards of due diligence and safety. Eating the wildlife, now protected by law, was one of them.

Changing from south to north with *Pelagic* recently was only for the simple reason that I needed to go there to cover some new ground and find some space. During my three weeks aboard after we sailed north from Disco Bay, having waved goodbye to the few yachts in the boat harbour, we didn't see another yacht nor a cruise ship, nor even a fishing boat for

that matter, until we arrived in the upper reaches of Frobisher Bay, Baffin. It was a revelation.

There's a conclusion to be drawn here. With hand on heart I cannot now deliver a truly Antarctic experience, as we knew it, for my charter guests due to the incredible proliferation of expedition tour ships. It has turned into a different world, not a wilderness but a managed park. The number of tourist visitors projected this coming season are staggering and certainly depressing. Sadly, this same crush of 'visitors' has also arrived in Svalbard. It seems, though, you can still lose yourself to a great extent on the Greenland coasts and in the arctic Canada environs.

We had a spectacular sail north to Upernavik under poled out yankee and reefed main, threading our way through the bergs. Upernavik was our 'ultima thule' at 73° north. For those of us always seeking some originality this Greenland community was a great place to stop – no wifi,

no café, not even a postcard to send. I felt incredibly relieved of all responsibility to stay in touch, and as this was 'enhanced' by our antiquated Iridium system, which was so slow to connect, we didn't bother to communicate.

Completing our loop along and into the Baffin Bay ice edge south to Frobisher Bay was a long haul and challenging in mainly fog-bound conditions, but we managed some great sailing in the 1/10th pack ice. A polar bear with a cub was spotted on a floe berg 80 miles offshore. This would be a long swim for a cub. I would say their only hope was for an east wind to compress the

icepack so they could walk off on to the shore. A pod of orcas stayed with us on another day. Compared to the south, wildlife up north is few and far between. And so are other ships and people.

In Iqaluit, provincial capital of Nunavut, *Pelagic* was dried out on the 12m tide in the inner boat harbour and I flew out while Chris and Tor started to prep the boat for a British/American climbing expedition to the big walls at the mouth of the bay.

It was very satisfying being back on board this little steel boat, realising once again how capable *Pelagic* is in this polar environment. Another example of less is more. ■

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