

TAKING THE NORTHERN LINE

Jim Little

(Jim, a boatbuilder from Devon, UK, has cruised the Baltic and western Med with his wife and two daughters, adding an Atlantic Circuit in 2008/9. He is currently yachtless while his daughters are at school, but intends to return to serious cruising in the future. The following passage took place in September 2016.

Turn to page 46 to follow Salanjo's route.)

Safely aboard in Reykjavik, about to depart for Greenland some 600 cold, grey miles away, I looked at the GRIB files with the skipper and thought: 'Wow. You call that a weather window?'. I'd known when I'd signed up for this trip – helping crew a 48ft Grainger catamaran from Iceland to Newfoundland via Greenland – that the four of us could expect some bumpy weather, but I didn't know that we'd be deliberately aiming for it.

Our skipper, New Zealander Geoff Thorpe, had sailed *Salanjo* nearly 45,000 miles from his native New Zealand, around much of the western Pacific, up to Thailand (from where she was shipped to Turkey in 2012 to avoid pirates), through the Black Sea and the Med, around the Baltic and Scotland, and then to Iceland. He wanted, despite the warnings of doom he had received, to take her across the Atlantic on the northern route so he could cruise eastern Canada and New England before sailing south for the Caribbean.

There was nothing gung-ho about him, but he was very confident about our journey. "I think we'll be fine," he said. "If we shoot off from here right now on the northerlies at the back of this system, when we hit the next one we'll go over the top of it on the easterlies. We'll get some wind but she ought to take it in her stride." I didn't get

Salanjo in warmer climes



much time to ponder whether or not to take his word for it. I'd only been in Iceland for about four hours before we left Reykjavik in the gathering darkness, with the northern lights in the sky and 25 knots blowing out of the north, and within minutes I was experiencing the conditions that would typify the whole of the trip.

This would be my third Atlantic crossing but the other two were made in a monohull, nearly all the time in a T-shirt and shorts. This journey, it was obvious, would be hideously cold, and no matter how many layers were crammed on, they melted away to nothing in the gale that usually seemed to be blowing on deck. This near-constant strong apparent wind was a fact of catamaran sailing that friends had told me about. They had also correctly predicted that watch-keeping indoors would be a wonderful luxury and that the boat speed on a cat like this would be dazzling. That first night, looking aft, I couldn't believe the view. We were doing 14 knots and it felt like even three waterskiers and a grand piano tied to the stern would barely have slowed us down.

What I had not been warned about – and struggled to get used to – was how hard it would be to get any sleep when the boat was flying along like this. Under my three blankets and duvet, wearing my thermals and woolly hat and with a hot-water bottle between my feet (still in thick socks), I'd eventually get warm enough to nod off. But the motion in my bunk at the aft end of the starboard hull was phenomenal. We seemed to be hurtling out of control across the face of every wave, or leaping from peak to peak in a series of calamitous crashes. It was like being on a tube train going off a cliff.

This was especially the case when we sailed into the second system, about halfway to Greenland. The wind picked up to 35 knots, and though we were well reefed down we began to really shift off the top of the swell. A train of bigger waves came through, the boat roared down the face of one and we were suddenly making over 23 knots. The leeward hull threw up a vertical wall of white water. I remember hearing whooping from one of the younger crew, but was pleased to see that the skipper didn't look in the least bit delighted. Within minutes the headsail was off, we rounded up a little and the boom-furling main was reduced to something about the size of a Laser sail. We were still making 10 knots. The seas were about 15 feet, we guessed, but not steep and spaced well apart. Reefed down like that, *Salanjo* just trucked on. It was awesome.

On our fourth evening at sea, in decreasing wind as we moved away from the system and with the snow-covered mountains of Greenland in sight, we stopped on the edge of the 100-mile iceberg limit and spent the night lying to the sea anchor so we could see the bergs in daylight. It was a welcome chance to take it easy and play cards with the skipper and the other crew, Geoff's 28-year-old son Mike and John King, an old friend of both Geoff's and mine who had asked me along on the trip. During supper we noticed the recovery buoy for the anchor drifting past the saloon window, the glue attaching it to the anchor having failed. This would make recovering the parachute the next morning quite a challenge.

During the night the wind rose to about 25 knots from the north, and though *Salanjo* was generally remarkably comfortable lying to the sea anchor, being perched at the bow while Geoff tried to motor up to the parachute next morning was a different prospect. We hauled on the rode to try to steal as much in as we could before the bows were blown off once again and the line went bar tight in a flash. The boat was dropping into some



deep troughs, it looked like we were on the verge of getting a proper soaking, and we seemed to be fighting increasingly hard for every inch. We were also using up precious daylight with a long trip still to make to the Greenland coast, where we definitely did not want to arrive in the dark. It seemed to me to be a losing game, but Mike insisted on a bit more time before we gave up and, to my immense surprise, when I thought we still had about 50m of line to go, the parachute materialised in the water before us. Sprawled on the trampolines and hauling for dear life, we were able to collapse one side of it and drag it on board.

Back at the wheel, Geoff was just about dancing with joy. When I said we'd won because Mike wouldn't give up he shouted, "Of course he bloody wouldn't – he's a bloody Thorpe! Never say die! Where there's breath there's life!". Geoff said later that the loss of the sea anchor would have been a huge blow to him. It was the cornerstone of our heavy-weather tactics, and he had every reason to suspect we would need it when we were among the weather systems in the Davis Strait.

The previous evening, in the last of the light, we had glimpsed what we took to be icebergs on the western horizon. As we gradually closed the coast these revealed themselves as enormous snow-covered mountains. It was only in the late afternoon, arriving at the entrance to Prins Christian Sund which cuts across the southern tip of Greenland just north of Cape Farvel, that we saw bergs in the dying sun and, between them, intermittent fountains of spray from blowing whales. This combination of sunset, icebergs, whales and mountains set in almost limitless solitude made that evening the most wonderful landfall I've ever experienced. I think everyone was a bit breathless and freaked out by the splendour of it all.

That feeling just didn't let up over the coming days. Having spent the night off an unmanned weather station we motored west through the Sund. By making the



One of the larger bergs in Prins Christian Sund, calved from the end of a glacier

trip in September we were leaving it slightly late in terms of the weather – the incidence and depth of depressions were both greater – but it gave us much better prospects regarding ice. Earlier in the year Prins Christian Sund would typically be blocked, but now we just had to avoid the bergy bits that calved from the glaciers that we passed, some of them crashing into the water as we watched. These ‘small’ pieces were sometimes as big as a car, though even something the size of a dining chair could do serious damage to a GRP yacht if you hit it at speed. Standing on the port bow with a long piece of timber bought in Iceland for the purpose, with John doing the same to starboard, I tried to fend the ice off as we crawled past the heads of glaciers, realising why most boats that sail up here are metal.

Before we left Iceland Geoff had explained that we couldn’t have even tried this





*Geoff, Mike and
the author in Prins
Christian Sund*

journey if the ice hadn't been forecast as mostly clear in the Sund. At Cape Farvel the currents gather the bergs along the coast and the wind blows very hard from the west nearly all the time, and the later in the year you leave it, the worse it gets. To visit Greenland at all without coming through the Sund would involve some grisly sailing to windward in any boat – in a cat it would be pretty much impossible.



*Glassy calm alongside the quay at the
unmanned weather station*



*Left and below: Spectacular
Prins Christian Sund*

All was calm inside the Sund though, as we motored under vast cliffs and snowfields perched a thousand metres up in the sky with tendrils of water cascading down the rocks. We tied up in the midst of this wonderland at the village of Aappilattoq, home to 130 permanent residents and a gang of Danes smashing out bare rock to accommodate oil tanks. We got to stretch our legs properly here, climbing the hills behind the village to get an absurdly wonderful view of the hamlet, the Sund and the mountains, and meeting a Greenlander who had recently shot one of his annual allocation of polar bears. He told us that he had only once left the island, to go on a language course in Exeter! He'd liked the fish and chips,

but had been understandably unimpressed by Dartmoor.

Aapilattoq receded astern next morning as we continued west, a tiny imprint of humanity on Greenland's vast wilderness. The town we were heading for, with its 1500 people, represented an entirely different order of conurbation. It had a laundry, a café, three supermarkets and a long-anticipated bar. Tied up in Nanortalik, having been to the laundry and the bar, where there was a fight (not involving us), we made





Jim and Mike hiking above Aapilattoq

some minor repairs and filled up with water and diesel. We then turned our attention to the chart table and pondered our departure for Newfoundland. Looking at that day's GRIBs for the Davis Strait, we saw an unexpected window opening up. We'd have to wait for a big blow to go through (which meant another chance to go to the fight pub) but could ride out on the back of that and, in theory, endure nothing worse than a day of close-reaching in 30 knots heading due west. We would then make landfall in Labrador, and hop down the coast to Newfoundland in between the more awkward bouts of weather. The Strait, which had been lurking at the back of our minds as a potential ogre, now looked benign.

So it was a cheerful and optimistic *Salanjo* that left Greenland the following evening. We motored through the moonlight with a vast iceberg glowing on the southern horizon, then the wind filled in and we got our 30 knots on the beam for the next 24 hours. We made superb time without any dramas, save the odd wave that broke against the starboard hull with a stunning crash. Two days later the wind decreased as we sailed into an extended ridge of high pressure, and from then until our arrival in Labrador 36 hours later we had tradewind conditions (apart from the cold), with the wind well aft, glorious sunshine and moonlight, an easy rolling sea, and making 6 to 7 knots in 12 knots apparent. The younger members of the crew thought it a little dull. I thought it was heavenly.

We made landfall at dusk in an anchorage in Labrador a few miles south of Goose Bay. By first light we were away again heading south, motoring into a gentle headwind until the breeze filled in strongly from the northwest and gave us 30 knots again. We flew across the mouth of the St Lawrence, motor-sailed through the night in dying wind, and on the evening of the next day went into Bonavista, our first Newfoundland

landfall. On our return from the pub, however, we soon sobered up when we found that the holding tank in the port hull had backed up and leaked about 100 litres of liquid sewage into the bilge, a sobering experience.

We were now only a day's sail from St John's, where the boat was to spend the winter, and the skipper smelt the finishing line more strongly than he smelt the sewage so, despite the horrific stench, we were off early in the morning. With 25–30 knots from the northwest once more, crashing along in big, ugly seas to get around Cape Bonavista, it was hard to decide which was worse – outside in the rain with the thermometer at about 4°C, or inside with the stink. I voted for the stink, and passed the journey thinking that this was not the final day's sailing I had dreamed of. Even after we'd motored through the narrow passage between the cliffs into the long, thin harbour and tied up among the oil-rig servicing ships and the trawlers right in downtown St John's, there was the grim and time-consuming bilge-defouling operation to be got through. But after that, and a blissful shower, armed with the heroic hunger and thirst of successful ocean navigators, we went out and made merry.

I landed back in London after 16 days away, a pretty short time for such a voyage. That was partly due to good luck with the weather, and partly due to the terrific speed of the boat – we averaged about 10 knots – meaning we could get past deteriorating conditions that would have hit slower boats. It was great that we could spend so much of our night watches inside – I wouldn't have fancied much more than half an hour at a stretch in the cockpit of a monohull in those temperatures. On the whole though, the weather gods treated us kindly – we always got the conditions forecast by the GRIB files, and didn't suffer any of those unexpected escalations in wind speed that can put a boat and crew under sudden and dangerous pressure.

I was lucky to make the journey with an excellent skipper and two superb crew, and while I hope my next long cruise features the occasional leap into the sea from the afterdeck of a boat at anchor in the tropics, our brief glimpse of Greenland was a stunning experience and I'd love to go back. The harbour master at Nanortalik said he'd never seen as many yachts as had visited that summer: "I think 20 of them just this season". It might be a good idea to go there before that becomes 2000.

(Parts of this article first appeared in the February 2017 issue of *Yachting World*. Visit salanjo.blogspot.com to catch up on some of the yacht's previous passages.)



Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street and methodically knocking people's hats off – then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.

Herman Melville