

SOUTH GEORGIA – The Windiest Place on Earth? Rev Bob Shepton

(Bob has been Flying Fish's most prolific contributor over the past 28 years, though usually sailing his Westerly Discus Dodo's Delight. Further details about Novara, which features in this article, will be found in the introduction to High and Dry in Antarctica, on page 20 of this issue.

For any feelings of déjà vu, blame the March 2018 Newsletter which carried a much-abbreviated account of this voyage. Photos are by the author except where credited.)

South Georgia – the windiest place on earth? At the very least it tried hard to qualify for such a title. And it was cold, with or without the wind chill factor.

For me it all started in Baffin when the crew of *Novara* visited *Dodo's Delight* in 2014 (see *Flying Fish* 2015/1). Somehow a plan to visit South Georgia came up ... 'Oh I would be up for that'. I was kindly included. The flight to the Falklands where *Novara* had wintered proved arduous and expensive, but by 2nd September 2017 we had all assembled on board, ready for the passage to South Georgia now it was the Antarctic spring.

There were seven of us, including Steve the owner and skipper – more than sailing the boat required, but South Georgia is a remote and attractive proposition to those who like challenge. We were a diverse crew, English, Scottish, Norwegian, Spanish, but we gelled well together. The skipper slept on the floor, contending (or was that pretending?) that he enjoyed it. I tried not to feel guilty as I was in his usual bunk! The food cooked by those who claimed cooking skills was second to none, and *Novara* lived up to her reputation as the 'luxury liner', earned in Baffin with unlimited supplies of wine. 'More red wine' had become an iconic phrase from the evening aboard *Novara* in the film of our 2014 expedition. But I did get into trouble for lacing my coffee with



*Novara in Port
Stanley before sailing*





*The systems
are not as
complicated as
they look*

the double cream I found in the 'fridge!

There seemed a strange anomaly amongst the crew, as I was used to my previous crews, even the schoolboys, reading books for shut-off. This crew

just kept on chatting amongst themselves late into the night and never seemed to read books. But I discovered later they were reading on their phones and tablets. So much for old age!

The boat herself is almost unique. *Novara* is a 60ft aluminium schooner with an aero rig, the mast and booms revolving as one unit. There are only three such schooners in the world, plus one or two single-masted versions. One or two of the rigs are immense, but *Novara's* was not so extreme. To the uninitiated like me it still seemed heavy and complex at first sight, though there are electric winches on each mast for setting and reefing the roller headsails on the forward ends of the booms and the mainsails on the after ends, and it did not take long to get a working knowledge of how to raise and lower and reef. There were plenty of possible sail combinations on the two masts, and for balancing them out, though this could take quite a time, and it proved a powerful rig.

Running before under the foremast sails on the way to South Georgia

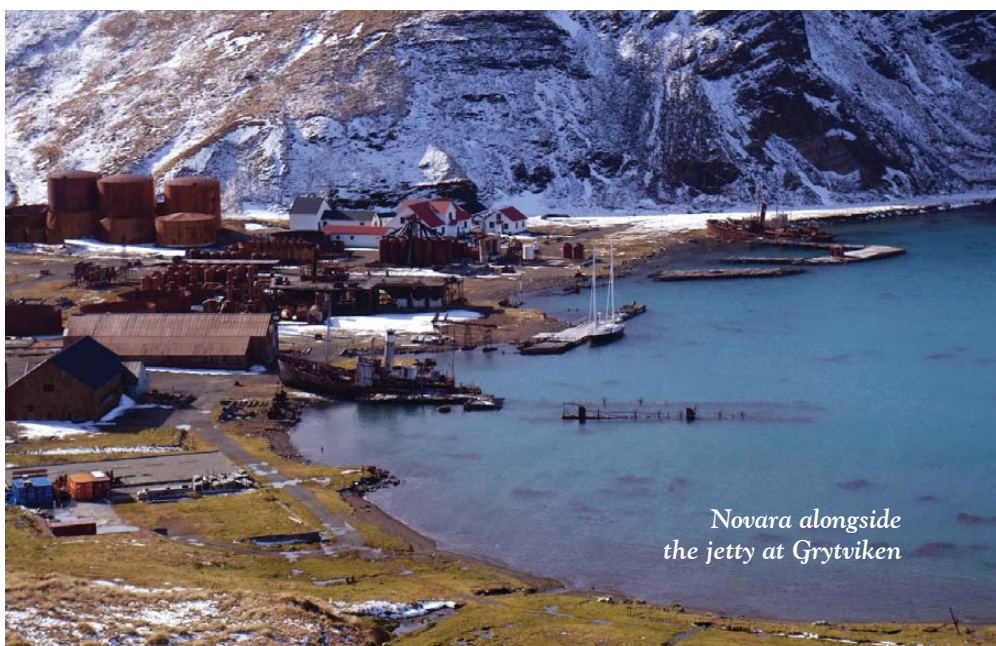




*Serious sailing. Photo
Bjorn Riis-Johannessenn*

*The skipper at the
command post. Photo
Bjorn Riis-Johannessenn*

The passage to South Georgia can only be described as exceptional. We were crossing the Scotia Sea at the east end of Drake Passage, possibly the stormiest sea in the world. Our passage was positively benign, force 4–5 occasionally 6 from the northwest giving a broad reach most of the way. On the penultimate day the wind came around astern – “the worst point of sailing on this boat”, as Steve said – with the sails on the foremast booms blanketed by those aft. She rolled even more, but we put into Grytviken five days and eight hours from Stanley, having also diverted down Possession Bay to inspect it as a possible alternative start to the Shackleton Traverse.



*Novara alongside
the jetty at Grytviken*



The iconic Petrel, an abandoned whaler

South Georgia is a World Heritage Site and we had been rather fearful of the rules and regulations in place to safeguard the island's pristine eco-systems. The Government Officer came aboard and gave an efficient, comprehensive and effective resumé of the regulations whilst remaining completely welcoming. In fact Paula and the scientists at the British Antarctic Survey base could not have been more welcoming – we remained at Grytviken for a week waiting for weather and they had us up to King Edward Point for drinks and even the occasional meal. I did have to give a couple of slide shows of past expeditions as a thank you, though I had never been paid in spare jars of marmalade before!

Grytviken is a special place. It is the only old whaling station where you can wander freely and look around, the others being in dangerous states of decline. The museum and shed with the James Caird replica which they opened for us, and the handsome church built originally from prefabricated parts, were of special interest. They opened the Post Office and we did the tourist thing, buying postcards with South Georgia stamps even though

we were going to post them later in the Falklands, otherwise they would not arrive



A replica of the James Caird, in which Shackleton's party made their incredible voyage from Elephant Island

*Paying my respects
to the great man*

for over a month. We went for training walks including some ski touring where possible, and sorted our gear in preparation. A great week.

From Grytviken we went harbour hopping down the coast to the southeast. Ocean Harbour was sheltered and fine with an interesting three-masted wreck from whaling days, but there was a lot of kelp, a feature of South Georgia. Gold Harbour was not so fine. We had motored down there with gusts of 65 knots coming out of Royal Bay, and that night we watched our track on the chart-plotter as *Novara* swung at anchor. Suddenly, in a 70 knot gust, she shot backwards on the plotter and Steve and Alan leaped out of the saloon to turn the engine on and stop us dragging further. With help from Terry, they winched the anchor up and re-set it. Steve and Alan slept fitfully in the saloon that night, keeping half an eye on the plotter. It was not the only 70 knot gust but we did manage to stay put.

The next morning proved reasonable and we continued on southeast. Iris Bay for the Hertz glacier was sheer and the Twitcher glacier had receded hugely from where it was depicted on my map of the island, and was just a horrible, huge, serrated icewall falling into the sea. We continued on and I was on the helm as Alan stood amidships and then

at the bow giving hand signals as to which way to weave through brash and growlers – on such a large boat it was difficult to see the ice in front from the cockpit way back aft.

*An example of the
minimal gear
they took with
them on the
Traverse*





*The whalers' church at Grytviken, built by
the whalers from prefabricated sections in 1913*

We viewed Wirik from a distance as we passed, and as I was gently approaching on echo-sounder to see whether it was possible to go through a gap between an outlying reef and the mainland the skipper came out and quietly but firmly stated his preference. A skipper's word is law, so we immediately swung radically to port to take the longer but safer way round. Bjorn, using his magic iSailor chart on his tablet ("let's hope they also produce charts for android systems soon") gave courses for the Cooper Island side of the channel, and the skipper was clearly happier to take over himself as we went through the fairly narrow Cooper Sound with rocks on either side to view the Salomon glacier beyond. It offered a comparatively gentle start for a ski tour, but the sea was too rough that day for taking the dinghy in. We looked into Drygalski Fjord but put into Larsen.

Larsen, our furthest south



Larsen was noteworthy for three reasons. First it is almost bomb proof – probably the safest anchorage on South Georgia, or anyhow in the south. Secondly we all went for a dinghy ride to the end of the inlet and discovered some Weddel seals. This is the only colony of Weddel seals on South Georgia, and our contacts at Cambridge were thrilled to hear they were still there, as they are in decline on the island, and that these had produced offspring. We saw two live pups but were saddened also to see two dead ones, one mother trying vainly to revive hers. Thirdly Alan, Terry and Steve took the opportunity in this safe, quiet anchorage to undertake the complex task of joining the 45kg Bruce anchor to the 45kg CQR on their respective bow rollers, with 10m of chain between so they could be laid in series one behind the other, with another 80m of heavy chain laid out from the second one. The first anchor would have to be raised on a separate line, but there was a capstan on the electric anchor winch, as well as a spare winch on the mast. Suffice it to say that henceforth we laid out two anchors every time and it generally worked superbly, however strong the winds.



Wirik Bay, another beautiful anchorage

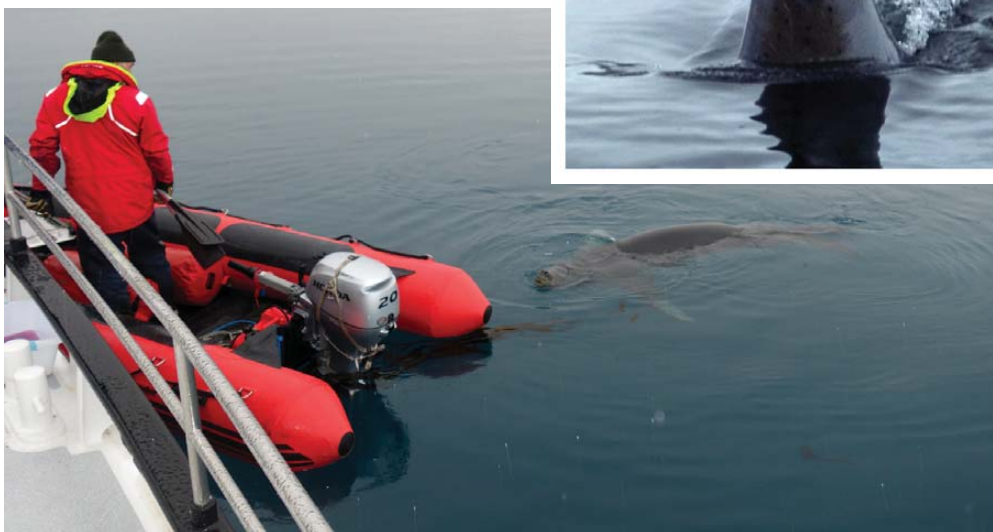
The next day we returned to the Salomon glacier and conditions were much calmer. Bjorn, Dan and Alex duly landed, sorted their gear on the beach, attached skins to their skis, and started up the glacier. Some hours later near the top they found a fairly flat section and started to put up their tent. Bjorn was just saying “It’s nice to put up a tent in calm conditions” when whack, a 50–60 knot blast hit them and it turned into an epic, putting up the tent, cutting snow blocks and building a wall to windward, and then all through the night.



Elephant seals at Wirik Bay

Meantime we were also having something of an epic in Coopers Bay. We had laid our anchors and Alan and Terry had fixed two lines ashore when the wind hit us. The big problem was that it became entirely unpredictable – it went round in circles and so, after releasing the lines ashore, did we. I remember the skipper standing at the helm shrugging his shoulders and saying, “So which way do we lay the anchors?”. Even though the keel was raised, at one stage the keel scraped over a rock. Eventually we laid them with the bow pointing to the entrance and they

*A leopard seal took a liking
to the dinghy...*





Two mighty objects, Wirik Bay

held, in spite of us only being able to lie to 25m of chain from the second anchor for lack of swinging room.

All this time a leopard seal had been circling round the boat giving every appearance of resenting our invasion of his territory. He really did look a slinky dangerous animal. Ashore there were fur seals, elephant seals and giant petrels. I was continually surprised how big these latter really were.

The next morning we received word via sat phone from the ski-ing team that they were coming down, so moved round to Wirik. They were able to cross over from Salomon to the Lewald glacier which led down satisfactorily to Wirik. We went ashore and admired the elephant seals and gentoo penguins in the morning, and the ski-ing team arrived down safely in the afternoon. Sausages and mash, the ever flowing wine, and Simon and Garfunkel from the speakers made a memorable ending to the day.

The visit next day to St Andrews Bay was another highlight. There were literally thousands upon thousands of king penguins, with a brown mass of chicks corralled together in the background. Elephant seals, fur seals and giant petrels were also part of the mix. There was even a leopard seal – which we noticed had been tagged for research – asleep on the beach. It was a truly incredible assemblage of wildlife, most

King penguins and Novara, St Andrews Bay



of which paid little attention to us, except for the fur seals which always resent an inadvertent close approach.

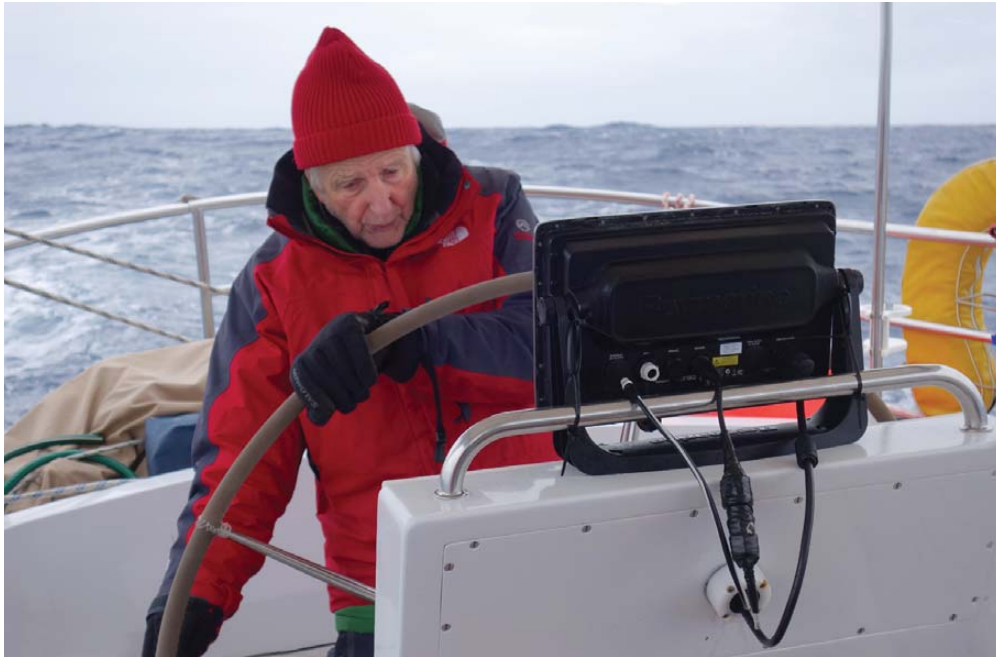
We returned to Grytviken via a night in Godthul Bay. We were a little apprehensive that we might be out-staying our welcome, but not a bit of it – Paula and the BAS people were as welcoming as ever. We also met up again with *Pelagic Australis*, with whom we had socialised in Stanley before departure. After they had to leave the BAS jetty we lay outside them at the main jetty. She is a large and massively strong boat, able to take a fair number of clients to South Georgia or the Antarctic.

We eventually moved round to Husvik in Stromness Bay where we saw *Australis* again, at anchor, and then on to Prince Olav Harbour where there was a truly dilapidated whaling station. We had no intention of visiting it, but one has to keep 200m from all these old, disintegrating whaling stations anyhow, other than the better-preserved example in Grytviken. We were ready to start our campaign re the Shackleton Traverse.

I went on a couple of pleasant training day tours but was faced with a difficult decision. I had come with the intention of doing the Traverse, but was it really feasible? First of all the party was reduced from five to three, to save taking two tents and to lessen the amount of work involved building snow block walls for protection – which added stress to me as the slower third man and also weighed out another member – but in the end crucially it was the weather that made the decision for me. Aged 82 and so going more slowly than the rest I anticipated needing three or four days to do the Traverse, but the forecast looked as if it just was not going to give us three or four days of settled weather. I withdrew, with regret but also with some relief that I was not going to have to do the long distances and heights involved on consecutive days without a break. In the end safety, not least of the whole party, and sense had to prevail.

Novara went round to await the Traverse party's arrival down the glacier





Steering was not always easy

All, however, did not go to plan. We got up at 0600 on 1st October to move to Possession Bay and land the ski traverse party. There was a delay as it was still blowing 40 knots, but finally it moderated somewhat and we fetched our anchors, but when we turned the corner it was blowing at least 40–50 knots (the wind instrument had given up) and there was quite a sea running straight up the bay against us. I was on the helm and the chart-plotter shows a zigzag course – with slow engine revs, skipper's orders to prevent slamming, it was impossible to keep the bows from being blown off. We persisted for a while but then came the welcome order to return. "Choose your moment and turn round" ... "I don't think there is a moment, Al, I'm going now". We turned around and made our way back and laid our two anchors down where we'd been before.

It was misty and dull next day but much calmer as we retraced our route down Possession Bay, and by the

time we landed the traverse party with all their gear it was like a mill pond. Al, Terry and Dan helped them carry their haul sacks over moraines to the start and returned to the boat. Sometime later the wind began to get up – we rushed to get the anchors up but, sure enough, we were soon experiencing gale-force gusts. It became something of a struggle as the tripping line from the first

Camp 1 on Shackleton's Traverse



*The ski party break
through a gap in the ridge
to get to the next plateau*

anchor got caught round the keel which we were now not able to raise. But after a while we got our anchor and made our way back to Prince Olav Harbour.

The ski party of Bjorn, Steve and Alex did very well. They had clag with zero visibility much of the time, constant rain for over a day, and big winds from time to time, but they completed the traverse from Possession Bay to Fortuna in two days plus, leaving the final short trek with no snow over to Stromness. I had undoubtedly made the right decision – there was no way I could have done it that fast.



At noon on 8th October we departed for the passage back to Stanley. It was another bouncy ride against the wind, but we had not gone far when it was discovered that all eight bolts holding the aft mast to the hull had sheared, so we put into Elsehul to effect repairs. Al, Steve and Alex did a brilliant job, but by that time we had received a forecast showing a huge depression marching up Drake Passage and on its way to us. It would have been stupid, maybe dangerous, to head out with that on the way so we put back to Prince Olav Harbour in choppy seas to await developments, and two days later retired back to Grytviken.



We were made as welcome as before, and took the opportunity to make a small presentation one evening to Paula who had been such a helpful, welcoming and yet efficient Government Officer. Then we were invited to a birthday party

*Still a long way to
go to get to the boat*



*Return
to Grytviken*

aboard *Pharos*, the Fisheries Protection vessel which had recently come in, and enjoyed being given a tour of the ship by its skipper. Two yachts had also arrived from the Falklands – *Santa Maria Australis* with a BBC film crew making another Planet Earth-type film, and Thies and Kiki in *Wanderer III*, once owned by Eric and Susan Hiscock, wooden and still with a Haslar windvane system. It took us back a bit.

The return passage to Stanley was horrendous. A sharp short sea and strong wind greeted us as we came out of Grytviken and then we tacked for days against the wind,

We got back to Port Stanley just in time for our flights





Guess who had to rethread the drogue when we got back to Stanley...

never being able to lay the course. There was one day of sunny sailing weather but still the wind was not in our favour, and soon we were lying-to on a drogue for 42 hours in winds reaching at least 45 knots (I heard afterwards it reached 70 mph in Port Stanley). *Pharos* offered help, but we were secure, and later a *Hercules* checked us out. Water was forced into the engine through the exhaust outlet, and the oil had to be pumped out and changed at least twice before we could proceed, but finally we motor-sailed hard on our course but against the wind for two days or more before the wind finally went round to the southwest to take us into Stanley. Ten days and 1200 miles for the 800 mile rhumb line passage ... another 'Never Again' experience!

So, South Georgia – remote, windy, wild, pristine, with the magnetic attraction of glaciers and snow-covered peaks (a number still waiting to be climbed), and abundant polar wildlife. Unique. Special. But a hard, hard place with little or no let up from the weather, at least while we were there. Or as I remarked one supper time, “I happen to have sailed in every ocean of the world, but I have never come across a place so persistently vicious as South Georgia”. The skipper was quick to agree, but neither of us would have missed it for the world – except perhaps for the return passage ...

I am very grateful to The North Face, and especially to Patagonia, for their support.



If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

King James Bible, Psalm 139 verses 9 & 10