

## **SOUTH GEORGIA: A Wild Paradise in the Southern Ocean**

### **Kath McNulty**

*(Franco and Kath have owned Caramor, their Rustler 36, since 2011. In May 2014 they left Holyhead, North Wales for a leisurely circumnavigation, and at the time of writing were in the northern part of the Chilean Channels on the west coast of South American. Follow their travels at [www.caramor.co.uk](http://www.caramor.co.uk).*

*Phil Christieson's dramatic photo of Caramor at anchor in Husvik, in 40–50 knots of wind gusting 70, appears on the front vcover of this issue. All other photos are by Kath McNulty and Franco Ferrero except where credited.)*

Caramor shot down yet another wave, expertly steered by Aries the windvane self-steering, stoic as always. Franco and I huddled in the cockpit peering out into the blizzard. There was nothing to see, only snow and white cresting waves, yet our electronic charts were showing land less than half a nautical mile away: South Georgia.

A dark shape loomed suddenly out of the gloom, in sharp contrast to the white all around – Cape Buller. We were down to a tiny piece of genoa, pushing us along at 6 knots towards Rosita Harbour where we hoped to find some shelter. We turned the engine on. It spluttered and died. Decision time – we were heading fast towards a lee shore. The engine started again, but would miss a beat every now and then. Each time we held our breaths, but it didn't let us down.

In the lee of Cape Buller the sea flattened, but the wind accelerated as it fell down the 200m cliffs. The air filled with spray as the williwaws knocked Caramor sideways from the left, then from the right, a 180° switch in wind direction. With gritted teeth we hunkered down. A cove, Koppervik, opened out on our right ... no shelter there, the water boiled, tormented. We continued past the next point and there, much to our surprise, SY Saturnin sat peacefully at anchor beyond the kelp. We had met skipper Johann when we first arrived in Stanley. Originally from Brittany, he has spent the past four winters working in the Falklands and the summers sailing the Southern Ocean.

Close inshore, we found precious shelter and dropped the anchor. The rocky beach was crowded with fur seals playing, fighting, calling and, just occasionally, sleeping. It felt as if we had arrived at the end of the world, or even gone beyond into a different realm – one where the laws of nature aren't quite as expected and where humans do not belong.

*Fur seals  
swimming*





Six days earlier, on 6 January 2016, we had left the comfort of Maiden Haven, OCC Port Officers Carl and Dianne Freeman's private marina in Stanley, Falkland Islands. If it hadn't been for the numerous icebergs, the breakage of the tiller, and the pea soup disaster we would describe our passage as idyllic – bearing in mind, of course, that in these latitudes F6 is a gentle breeze.

Early on our fourth day we had spotted our first icebergs: pyramids, castles, towering ice walls glistening in the bright sunlight and guarded by growlers. I amused myself imagining that we were sailing around in a huge glass of gin and tonic, with ice cubes. The scale was hard to fathom, but since it took 2½ hours at 5 knots to pass them, we concluded they were rather large and a fair distance away. After that we hove-to during the hours of darkness, but still kept watch.



*An iceberg at dawn*

The next day thick fog smothered the ocean, and we strained our eyes peering through the murk searching for icebergs. The fog is formed where 'warm' air meets the cold water of the polar front (previously called the 'antarctic convergence'). We were sailing in waters affected by the Antarctic Circumpolar Current, where the barometer is seldom steady as highs and lows skitter across the globe in fast succession, bringing strong and sudden winds.

At lunchtime, as we were changing shift, a large wave pushed the stern around, backing the genoa. We rushed out to put things right but, much to our surprise, *Caramor* was back on course. We turned to stare at Aries, who had seemingly developed abilities well beyond those usually credited to a windvane self-steering device ... the rudder was swinging, no longer connected to the tiller which had broken at the tenon. We had a spare, but I remembered, with dread, how difficult it had been to change when we first bought the boat. Even so, with some trapeze work Franco fitted the replacement tiller in less than an hour.

The pea soup? The distance one litre of soup can travel when boiling over in a F7 is unfathomable. I had only turned my back for a few seconds.

It snowed for two days in Rosita Harbour so we rested and fixed the engine, but at last the weather improved enough for us to continue our passage to Grytviken. Yachts





*Grytviken, with Mount Hodges in the background*

*Windora* from New Zealand and *Kestrel* from Canada were alongside the *Tijuca* jetty, and *Saturnin* came in the next day. Four yachts in Grytviken is apparently a rare sight.

A few days of good weather enabled us to leave *Caramor* at the jetty while we explored the area. The wildlife around the old whaling station was amazing – fur seals everywhere (a fierce trip hazard), bedraggled king penguins waiting for their new feathers to grow after the moult, piles of elephant seals shedding their whole skin and longing for the cool water as the sunshine beat down on their backs. We climbed Orca Peak, but had to give up on



Mount Hodges when it started snowing heavily. We walked over the pass to Maiviken and, in amazement, watched fur seal puppies learning to swim in the lagoon ... so much splashing. We kayaked to the glaciers at the head of Moraine

*Happiness is ... or as close as it gets for a moulting female elephant seal*





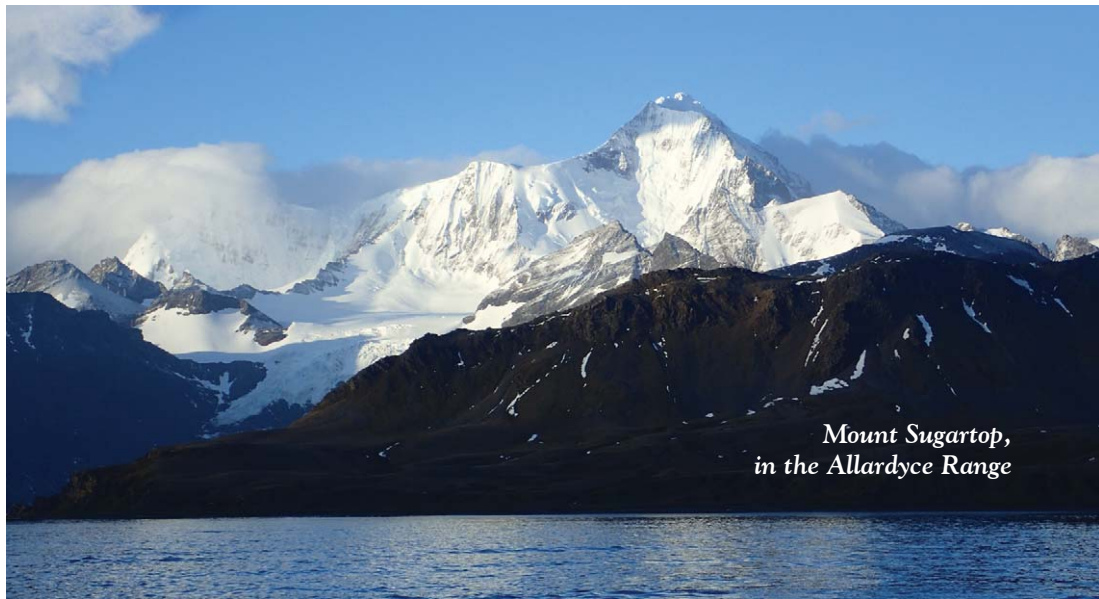
*Fur seal pups learning to swim*

Fjord and returned to find *Caramor* fending off bergy bits. Instead of heading out to sea as they had done every other day, they had been pushed into King Edward Cove by the breeze. Nothing can be taken for granted in South Georgia.

One sunny morning we set sail, our first chance to admire the spectacular Allardyce Range, though we gave Barff Point a wide berth as the waters haven't been surveyed. Despite a headwind we made good progress. Ahead of us, a yellowy-grey band

*Kath kayaking in front of the Hamberg Glacier*





*Mount Sugartop,  
in the Allardyce Range*

obscured the horizon – sea fog. Suddenly it was upon us, driven by an 18 knot wind, the visibility reduced to 50m, just as we were about to make landfall. Neither of the two electronic chart systems we were using is accurate in this region and we were keen not to miss the narrow gap into Cobblers Cove. Out of the mist, a mountain loomed. Slowly we edged towards it and in front of us the channel opened up as the cloud lifted, revealing a magical place.

By morning it was snowing heavily, and from the comfort of our cockpit tent we watched the landscape turn white. Forty knot winds were forecast for the following night. *Caramor* pitched and rolled as williwaws struck her from all sides, but despite the violent motion she didn't come tight on her chain. Nevertheless, we didn't sleep much. As the sun rose over this beautiful sheltered cove, the snow melted rapidly and we got ready to go ashore. In our backpacks we carried food, full sets of waterproofs, insulating clothing, a dinghy repair kit, a pump, and dry suits in case we had to swim back to the boat!

There is a large macaroni penguin colony on nearby Rookery Point, but to get there we first had to run the fur seal gauntlet. "Between the two large males?" "No, it looks less crowded near the penguins". "Argh, the fur seals are all in the water, back to plan A". Luckily, the two large males were fairly relaxed about our intrusion onto their beach. The sun was shining and the girls were whining. Keeping all the females in your harem happy is a full time job.

We started up the gully, a snarl here, a snarl there. "Oops I nearly stepped on that one". Fur seals have two fangs at the front of their mouth with which they can inflict serious damage. Bites invariably become infected. Recently a cruise ship passenger was bitten on the arm and an artery severed. A rescue mission was triggered which involved a helicopter refuelling in mid-air, a warship, and emergency surgery in Stanley. He recovered from the bite, though I'm not sure he survived the wrath of his fellow travellers who had their cruise cut short to rush him towards the Falklands.

Fur seals love dinghies. If you leave one lying around it will soon be adopted as a sun-lounger. We hauled ours beyond the fur seal line, glad not to have an outboard.

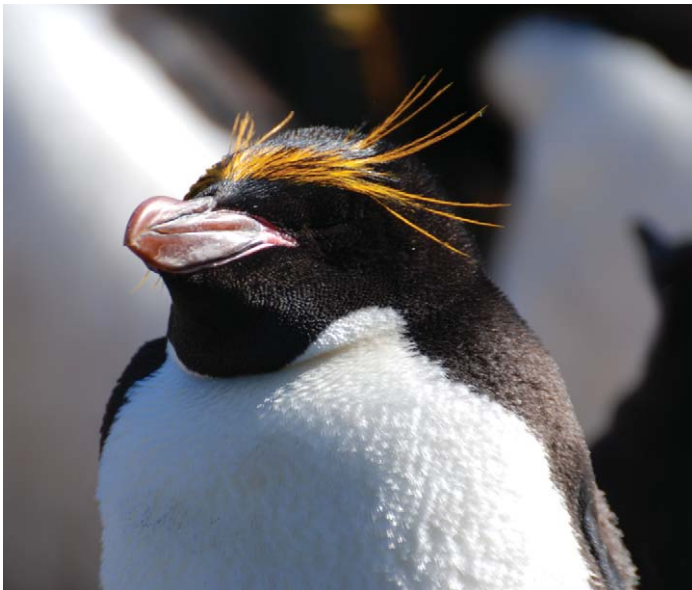
We followed reindeer paths down to the penguin colony. We were sad thinking about





*Franco and the dinghy above the fur seal line at Cobblers Cove*

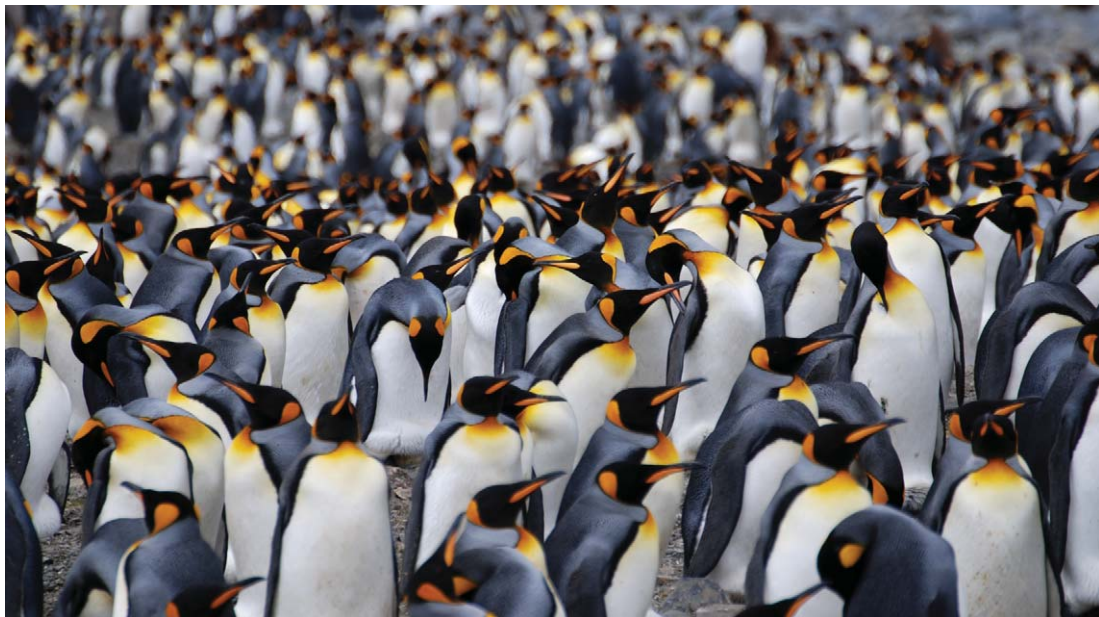
the last reindeer, which was being stalked in Husvik as we walked – the others had all been shot in 2015 when the government decided to eradicate them at the same time as the rats. We soon cheered up though, watching the macaroni penguins. There was never a dull moment – birds displaying to one another, chicks being fed or corralled in crèches, stones and twigs being tidied. A southern petrel wandered through and was rapidly seen off.



Our next stop was at Ocean Harbour. Despite the stiff breeze, inside the reefs we were out of the wind and in the sun the temperature was pleasant. The forecast for the following day was for very light winds – our chance to visit St Andrews Bay, home to the largest king penguin colony on the island. 150,000 penguins sitting with eggs on their

*A macaroni penguin*



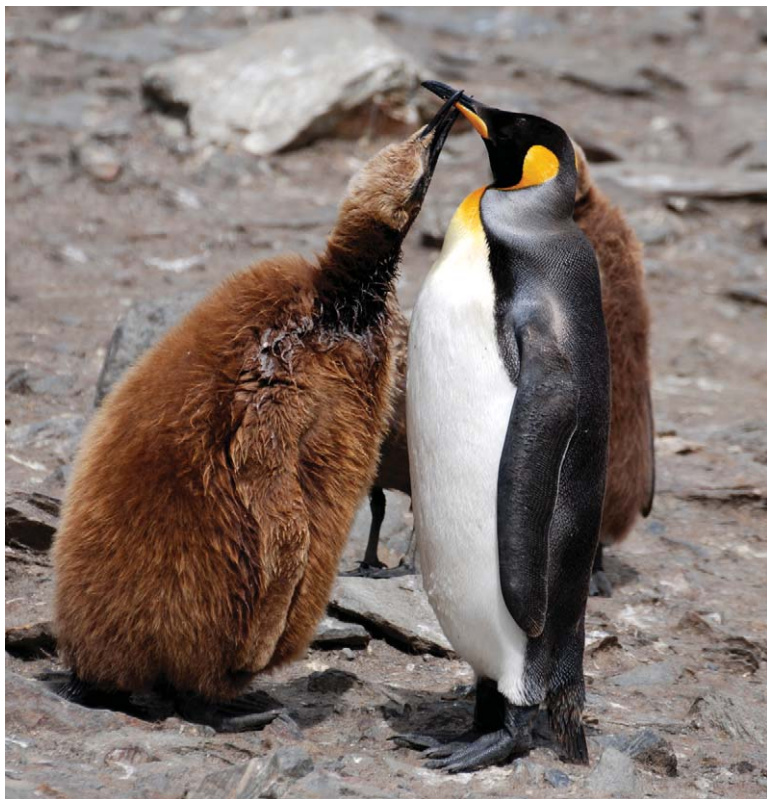


*The king penguin colony at St Andrews Bay*

feet was quite a sight! It wasn't totally one sided – they found us fairly intriguing too. A cold breeze picked up, dropping off the glaciers, and we decided to retreat. Once back on *Caramor*, the wind picked up and it started to snow.

The next day, back in Ocean Harbour, we fancied a walk but the fur seals were grumpy and wouldn't let us through the tussock grass. We were tolerated on the beach, however, where we watched the pups learning to swim. Suddenly they all came out of the water and stared at us, as if the swimming tutor had blown his whistle announcing the end of the class.

*A king penguin  
feeds its already  
rotund chick*





After a brief stop back in Grytviken we sailed north to Husvik, a good anchorage in Stromness Bay. Three boats were already at anchor – *Windora* and *Kestrel* had arrived the previous day, and *Braveheart* was supporting a team of radio amateurs attempting to beat some record for the maximum number of radio calls from a remote island. They were operating day and night out of a bright orange dome tent on the shore.

We dropped anchor in 8m just off the beach. As we were tidying up, a large seal swam over to us – at first we thought it was an elephant seal. It came alongside and up, up, out of the water it went, until it was looking down into the cockpit, its reptilian head at the same height as ours. I looked at Franco, who resembled a king penguin in his yellow and black sailing gear, and the expression on his face was that of a creature about to be eaten. She, for it was a female leopard seal, came back for another look and I could swear she licked her lips. At that moment we understood what it means not to be at the top of the food chain.

From Husvik we enjoyed a couple of good walks. The first took us past the cemetery with its freshly painted crosses, up the Husdal Valley and over a pass to the site of the former Gulbrandsen Lake. The lake used to be dammed by the Neumayer Glacier, but when the ice retreated the water drained away leaving concentric lines, marking former water levels, etched into the side of the mountain.

The second is known as the Postman's Walk. During the whaling era, mail would be delivered at Grytviken, the postman would walk over the hill to Maiviken, row across West Cumberland Bay to Carlita Harbour, and then tramp up to the pass and down the Olsen Valley to Husvik and Stromness. Over the hill from Husvik we came across gentoo penguins, which breed inland along the Olsen River. Our visit should have coincided with chicks being fledged, but there were none and the adult birds looked very subdued. The gentoo of South Georgia had had a disastrous year – their diet consists of krill, and

*Kath standing in front of the former Gulbrandsen Lake, which drained when the glacier retreated*





there hadn't been any at the critical time of incubation and hatching. Many penguins out fishing simply didn't return, and the mate incubating the egg had to abandon it to avoid dying of starvation. Of the chicks that had hatched, most died.

The wind had been picking up, and the forecast for the weekend was for 40 knots, dying off by Sunday evening. All three yachts decided to stay put and on Friday night we got together for dinner on *Kestrel*. Saturday was windy, around 35-45 knots, so we deployed our second anchor which held at the third attempt. The wind remained steady overnight but increased on Sunday morning to 40 knots gusting 70. The bright orange tent on the shore had been flattened during the night and the five radio operators evacuated back to *Braveheart* at 0130.

At 0945 Phil from *Windora* radioed us to say he had taken a few photos of *Caramor*

***A gentoo penguin swimming in the Olsen River***





looking windswept and interesting. Less than ten minutes later we noticed that *Windora* was dragging her anchor and that Phil and Bernie were deploying more chain ... still she dragged. They started the engine and were winching in their anchor to re-deploy. Then we heard Bernie on the radio: "we have no engine, we are drifting; we have no engine, we are drifting". In helpless horror we watched beautiful *Windora* being blown relentlessly towards the reef. Surely Phil would pull something off at the last minute?

Linda, over the VHF: "We are on the rocks".

There was nothing we could do to help *Windora*, but we were ready to jettison our anchors should her crew take to the dinghy and need picking up. *Windora* asked *Braveheart* for assistance and a RIB was launched, but in the strong gusts it couldn't even get near. *Braveheart* couldn't help – her two anchors weren't holding either and the skipper was concerned for the safety of his own ship. *Windora* was heeled over but wasn't taking in water, and Phil, Linda and Bernie would have to find their own solution. She stopped rocking as the tide went out, but high water would be at 1900 and she would have to get off the rocks by then or risk being driven on further. The wind wasn't due to ease until 2200.

Franco and I spent the morning in the cockpit, keeping watch. Slowly our transit lines were no longer aligning – our anchors were dragging too. We weren't in any danger, as there were no reefs immediately downwind of us, but we needed to get the anchors up and make sure that our drift continued between the rocks, not towards them. *Braveheart* was on our starboard quarter and needed avoiding too. Our main anchor seemed to be the culprit, but of course as you haul one in you put more pressure on the other. Both were clogged with kelp, so winching them in took longer than usual, using the slow gear on the windlass because of the weight. By now *Braveheart* was reporting 50–60 knots, gusting 85, the strongest winds we have ever experienced in *Caramor*.

Up the anchors came at last, just as we were clearing Bar Rocks, the terrible reef that was holding *Windora*. Franco had steered us through the gap while I lay on my





*Caramor in Hercules Bay*

stomach hacking kelp off the dangling hooks with our machete. Suddenly I felt a sense of great calm. I looked up, the sun was shining on my face and the wind had died completely! Back in Husvik, less than half a mile away, it was still blowing all bells. We guessed that the williwaws were crashing down the valleys, hitting the water and bouncing back up. We anchored in the kelp off Grass Island, where the wind was a mere gale force. A little later *Windora* radioed to say they had succeeded in winching themselves off the rocks using the kedge anchor during a short respite in the wind.

Early the next morning we returned to Husvik, the water so still that ice was forming on the surface. *Windora*, *Kestrel* and *Braveheart* sat peacefully at anchor, as if the maelstrom had been a figment of our collective imagination. *Braveheart* blasted her horn to say farewell. Her mission was over as the radio equipment had been badly damaged in the storm and they were heading back to Stanley early.

Phil, 'Mr Calm' during the previous day's events, was clearly in shock. He explained that the engine had overheated. Four cable ties in a row had perished, letting the engine water inlet pipe drop onto the engine and melt, leaking the coolant into the bilge. *Windora* had motored a lot recently and everything had been fine, he added – it was Sod's law that the engine failure happened just as the anchor dragged. The rotten cable ties were above a battery that had boiled a few months ago, and maybe the acid gases released had eaten into the plastic.

An hour later we set off for Hercules Bay. Sunshine, no wind, a beautiful waterfall, fur seals, macaroni penguins – it was bliss and we started to relax again. After lunch



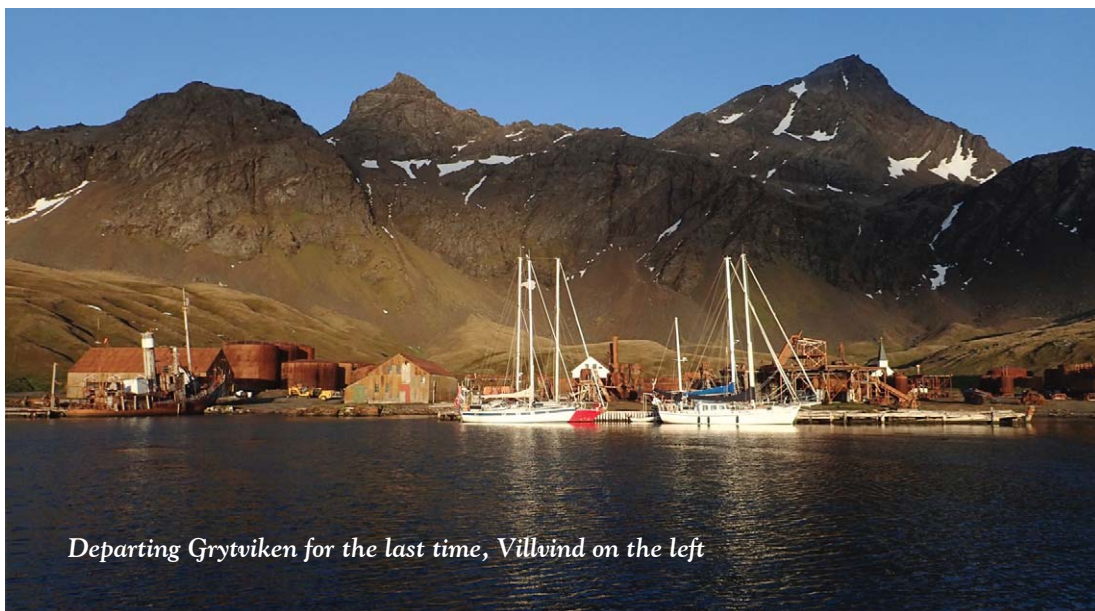
we weighed anchor to take advantage of the light winds to get to Fortuna Bay before night. As we motored out of the bay the breeze picked up, and within minutes it was blowing 35 knots on the nose and the world disappeared into whirls of mist. We didn't need this. Fortuna Bay was no longer an option – open to the north and prone to williwaws, it wouldn't offer any shelter in the strong northwesterly. We wouldn't have time to get to the next anchorage before dark, so we turned and ran for the relative safety of Grytviken and the company of friends.

In addition to *Windora* and *Kestrel*, which had arrived a few hours earlier, two other yachts were in Grytviken – Norwegian OCC member *Villvind*, heading for South Africa, and *Izuma* from Canada. With *Caramor* that made five. “Welcome to the regatta,” government officer Simon greeted us on the VHF as we sailed in.

*Windora's* damage had been assessed and wasn't as bad as feared – the core structure of the yacht was sound. Phil and Gabor, helped by Bernie and Franco, were soon hard at work tingling her hull using copper sheeting and Denzo tape. The rudder would need to dry before it could be repaired. The government officers agreed that *Windora* and *Kestrel* could stay until the work was completed. The latter's crew explained that they hadn't dragged in Husvik, despite having the lightest chain, because her anchor had caught on a thick hawser left over from the whaling days.

Our permit was running out and it was time for us to head back up the coast. We motored against a strong headwind to Blue Whale Harbour where we sat out another gale. The fur seal party on the beach carried on regardless of the raging blizzard. From a fur seal point of view, summer in South Georgia is as hip as Ibiza – hot, fun, a great place to meet a girl or two or four, catch up with friends and share pup-minding duties. The next bay north is Possession Bay where Captain Cook first landed in 1775 and claimed the island for King George III.

Our final day sail in South Georgia was splendid. By mid-morning the sun was shining and the gale moderating. From Blue Whale Harbour we enjoyed a very pleasant sail to Rosita Harbour, tacking past the Grace Glacier and Salisbury Plain with its large colony



*Departing Grytviken for the last time, Villvind on the left*

of king penguins. Even Koppervik looked peaceful, nothing like the devil's cauldron it had been on the day we arrived. There was just one problem – that morning at the tiller something had slipped in my back, I was in terrible pain and couldn't lift my right leg.

We arrived in Rosita Harbour just as the weather was changing, and sat out three days of gales. I was still in a bad way, but the forecast was as good as we would ever get, so we sailed. Fortunately Franco can sail *Caramor* on his own. He wedged me into a bunk and I took the extra strong painkillers we carry for emergencies ... and woke up three days later once the nausea became worse than the back pain. Slowly I was getting better.

The passage back to Stanley took 10 days and 22 hours. Eight of those days were to windward in force 6–7, and we hove-to on four nights because of icebergs and during ten hours of force 8. Janet and Bob of the Stanley Sailing Club met us at Maiden Haven to help us tie up. It was good to be back.

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What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth.

Chief Seattle

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