

SHIMSHAL IN THE ARCTIC: Iceland and North East Greenland Simon and Sally Currin

(Simon and Sally bought their first Shimshal in 1996 and commissioned Shimshal II from CR Yachts Sweden AB eight years later. Launched in 2006, she has an LOA of 48ft (14.6m), with 14ft 8in (4.5m) beam and 7ft 3in (2.2m) draught, and was designed as their ultimate boat, ready to take them around the world in comfort and safety.

Simon is currently on the OCC committee, with responsibility for both the Forum and the OCC Fleet Map, while Sally served as Honorary Treasurer from 2011 to 2016. In their days jobs they are a doctor and chartered account.

Shimshal II left Scotland in 2015 to begin a slow circumnavigation taking in various high latitude destinations. Plans for 2017 include a second visit to Greenland, then to Canada and the USA. Follow their travels at <https://voyagesofshimshal.blogspot.pt/p/blog-page.html>.)

Our long dreamed of cruise to North East Greenland began with a fast reach out of Reykjavik in mid April, powered by a cool northeasterly wind. Things were to become much cooler. By 0200 a savage katabatic wind off the Snaesfjell icecap lashed us with snow, but we came closer to the wind and pressed on north for Isafjordur and the Hornstrandir National Park. A few days later we were anchored in the uncharted Lonafjordur on an idyllic spring day surrounded by a wonderland of rolling snowy peaks. It had frozen hard the night before and, as *Shimshal* swung on her anchor, she crunched through the thin glazing of sea ice forming around her. We were in the heart of the uninhabited Hornstrandir National Park in Iceland's remote northwest.

On this occasion we had two hugely experienced guests on board who were only too happy to look after the boat leaving Sally and me free to go ski-mountaineering

Anchored in Lonafjordur





ashore. Those days in the Hornstrandir National Park alone would have made all the planning and preparation worthwhile, but things just kept getting better and better. Ashore we found impeccable spring snow from sea to summit. We were free to ski anywhere in this wonderful playground just a few miles short of the Arctic Circle. What a way to spend a day! To climb a hill on skis in the morning and then whoop with the delights of the descent. To be met in the tender by friends and to celebrate the adventure with fine food in the snug of our own saloon while the world outside shivered in the evening chill.

With a pressing need to return to work we reluctantly flew home, leaving *Shimshal* safe on a mooring in Isafjordur under the watchful gaze of Muggi the Harbourmaster and Halldor the OCC Port Officer. A conveniently placed high-definition webcam meant that we could drop in and see her, as we frequently did during the next three months while we waited for the ice in the Denmark Strait to retreat.

As the weeks went by the sea ice did indeed recede, and at a much quicker pace than had been seen for years. Not good for the planet, but great for us as we were hoping to make Scoresby Sound the destination of our summer Arctic cruise. This place has a fearful reputation, and a high-latitude expert at the OCC annual dinner had talked of difficult ice, fog, storms, ferocious katabatic winds and tenuous anchorages – all the ingredients for a perfect summer holiday! We re-read Tilman's accounts of his Greenland adventures and realised that he had tried and failed to reach Scoresby Sound four times, and had lost two boats in the process.

As departure day got closer our anxiety levels rose, and this was reinforced by the bill from our insurers who also clearly took a dim view! We compensated for rising adrenaline levels by planning and researching. We bought a gun and took shooting lessons in case of polar bear molestation. We converted a spare water tank to diesel to triple our motoring endurance. We familiarised ourselves with the latest web resources for high arctic travel and made sure that we could access all that we needed from our Iridium GO. Sally worked out her provisioning with customary precision and, to my amazement, knew before it was bought where every item would be stowed. Much time and even more money was spent preparing ourselves and the boat in every conceivable way.

On 23 July the plane banked steeply at the head of the fjord, skimmed a ridge while still turning, passed over a few hundred yards of sea and, moments after completing that radical banking manoeuvre, bounced down onto the runway at Isafjordur airport. An exciting way to begin the second phase of our summer's Arctic adventure.

For this trip Sally and I had chosen two old friends with whom we had experienced considerable hardship in previous decades. Denzil's skills for the trip were self-evident, as being an engineer by training he has a profound understanding of and aptitude for all things mechanical, electrical and electronic. Rod had summited Everest on an expedition I led 22 years ago and had moved to New Zealand. Although we had never lost contact, this would be our first adventure together for more than 20 years. We were looking forward to a challenging cruise with great company and we weren't to be disappointed.

Two days were spent provisioning and doing final preparations in Isafjordur. We left this wonderfully hospitable town with light northeasterlies forecast, and spent our first night at anchor in a bay on the western side of Iceland's northern cape.



Icebergs in the Denmark Strait

Anxious to use the light wind forecast to cross the tempestuous Denmark Strait we ended up motoring much of the 300 mile passage, passing our first icebergs 100 miles off the Greenland coast. We were to become very familiar with the drone of our engine on this trip!

Growlers appeared 40 miles off the land but the mountainous coast, swathed in low cloud, did not reveal itself until we got within 20 miles. We were visited by a spectacular

pod of minke whales – twenty or more of them came spouting, tail slapping and breaching towards us. At several points we were surrounded, with the nearest just 20m away. We liked to think they were welcoming us to Greenland. At almost the same spot on our homeward voyage they came back, flapping their tail fins as a farewell gesture.

Three massive sentinel icebergs stood grounded off Kap Brewster, which we passed at midnight in grey and overcast twilight. An hour later we came clear of the cloud and mist banks and the sparkling dawn sunshine lit up the peaks of Liverpool Land to the north and Volquart Boon Kyst behind. A scene of jaw dropping beauty.

*Rounding Kap Brewster
in the middle of the night*

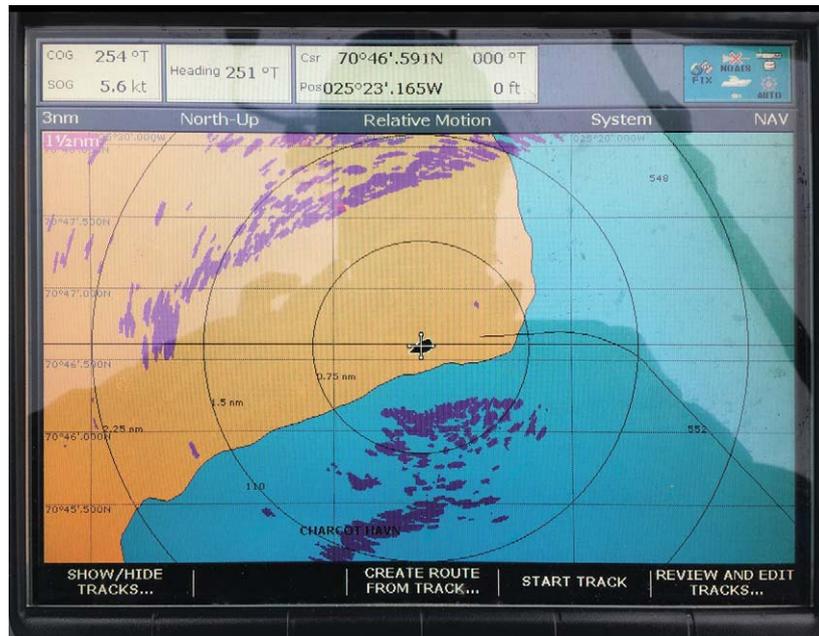


Radar superimposed on the chart revealed a 1.5 mile error

The anchor dug into the wonderful, welcoming mud at Fox Bay at 0400. We could hardly believe our luck. We had crossed the Denmark Strait without drama, mishap

or even seasickness, and had managed to reach 70°N on Greenland's most inhospitable coast and find the entrance to Scoresby Sound to be completely free of sea ice. Of course there were plenty of icebergs to contend with, but the sea ice had all gone – completely different to last year when no sailing boats had managed to approach this point until much later in the season. In our enthusiasm to get ashore we went wandering off along the coast leaving the gun on board. Later that day in Ittoqqortoormiit we learned that polar bears had recently been seen on that same shore, so made a mental note to obey the rule of thumb we had been given in Iceland: never go ashore without a gun.

The village, officially listed as one of the ten most isolated communities in the world, inevitably had a frontier feel to it. Snowed in for most months of the year this is a hardy community of Inuit hunters sustained by two supply ships from Denmark. The first ship for 2016 was due in on 2 August and the last one in September. It is an impossibly remote community, tenaciously clinging to the rocky hillside and struggling to survive the threats of depopulation. We wandered around the village chatting with the policeman (who insisted that the UK was a Schengen country and therefore no formalities were required), and with Erik the meteorologist who sends up his balloon twice a day at 1100 and 2300. We met a Canadian woman who, with her English husband, has been running dog teams on the sea ice for many years. Everywhere we went there were teams of huskies overheating and howling in the summer sun.



The southern coast of Scoresby Sound





Ittoqqortoormiit, at 71°N

Brian and Eric of SV *Seafram* came on board and generously shared their experiences of seven summers in these waters. Later SV *Imam* arrived – she had been tied up behind us at Isafjordur and had left the day before us. They had spent a couple of nights at anchor on the Forbidden Coast and had had chastening encounters with polar bears ... made worse, no doubt, by their large and welcoming stern boarding platform!

Our intention was to attempt to circumnavigate Milne Land which, from Ittoqqortoormiit, is a 300 mile cruise within this enormous fjord system. Scoresby Sound is, in fact, the largest fjord system in the world and everything is on a breathtaking scale. We sailed overnight to Charcot Havn and anchored in the glacial, silty waters off the east coast of Milne Land. The glacier had receded a couple of miles up the valley leaving a braided network of mud flats and sand banks. We climbed the hill at the north end of the bay and looked down on the glacier. Ashore the land was covered with mosses, lichens and exquisite wild flowers – harebells, moss campion, sedum and wild berries. Sadly the mosquitoes were there too, with itchy consequences.



Overlooking the snout of the glacier at Charcot Havn



Our next anchorage was in Jyttes Havn on the Bear Islands where, again, we found good holding in mud. Icebergs came and left the bay, drifting just a few metres from us, but we were protected from them by a narrow reef. Another hill to climb, and more spectacular views which even surpassed the last. To the north lay the Ofjord, chaotically littered with icebergs of all shapes and sizes,



*Above and right:
Shimshal anchored
in Jyttes Havn.
The one above was
taken from a drone.*

Below: Bear Island





Cathedral Peak

some up to a kilometre long. On the north side of the fjord the Cathedral Ranges reared to 2000m peaks, towers and spires, loftiest of them all the magnificent, polished tower of rock known as Cathedral Peak. Two boat handlers, Peter and Tom, working for Tangent Expeditions, had the week before dropped off a party of climbers to attempt a multi-day, porta-ledge ascent of this mountain, but we could see no sign of them.

Thinking that we had seen the best, we sailed west along the Ofjord dodging and weaving our way around the bergs as we went. Just how many photos we took we don't know, but it could never be enough to document the full majesty of our surroundings. Blue fjord, gleaming icebergs and innumerable calving glaciers descending, with 2000m icefalls, from summit icecap to sea.



Intricate icebergs in Scoresby Sound

Gradually the geology changed and tundra vegetation returned to the northern shores. A distant group of musk ox grazed high on the hillside. Finally came the red rock mountains of Harefjord, burnished by the evening sun. At anchor that evening the glowing red ravines of the mountainside contrasted with pristine, glistening icebergs. As if that weren't enough we were treated to the warble of a great northern diver which came fishing close to the boat. After a few minutes he emerged with a fish in his bill and splashed his way back into the air en route to a distant nest.

A friend in the UK was sending us regular ice satellite photos, which he trimmed down to make them manageable enough to receive by Iridium. In this way we were able to receive full resolution satellite imagery, and knew that a successful circumnavigation of Milne Land was going to be unlikely due to the amount of ice calving off the massive glaciers further west. The unusually warm season which had cleared the sea ice to allow us in was now melting the ice on the glaciers and speeding their calving – so perversely we had more icebergs to contend with. Those massive calved bergs were continually exploding and disintegrating in the powerful sun, leaving behind the much more dangerous growlers and brash that clogged our passage south. We had become acutely aware of the remoteness of our situation the day before, when we kissed a rock with the keel while seeking out an anchorage safe from icebergs. Fortunately we got off easily, but a serious grounding or growler damage to rudder or propeller would be a huge difficulty for us 160 miles inside the fjord. We were in no mood to take excessive risks.

We took a second tender in case the main one got trashed by a polar bear



Sally

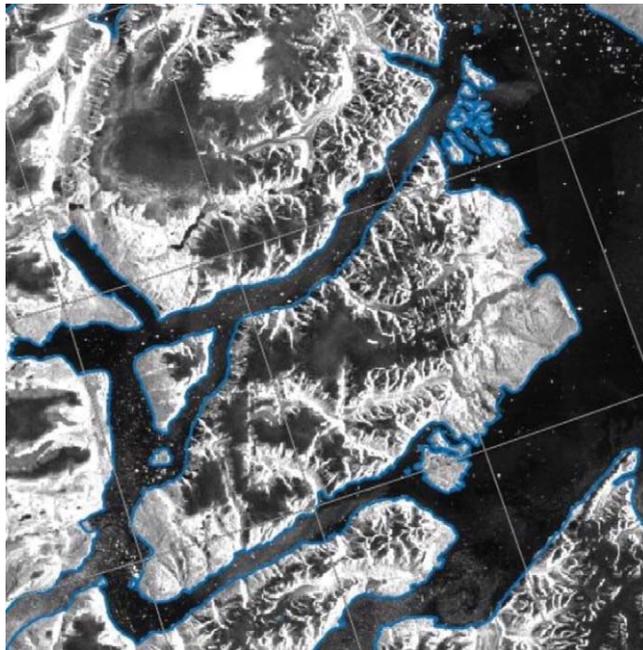




It was with trepidation then that we ventured out into the oncoming motorway of icebergs that was the Rodefjord. This fjord lived up to its name, with a range of red mountains to the west. The satellite pictures proved accurate and the ice grew denser and denser. We began to falter, but found a safe way towards the narrows where two gargantuan glaciers calved vast quantities of ice. We didn't want to give up too easily so pressed on, but then the unequivocal end came. The horizon was choked by dense bergs floating in a soup of growlers and brash ice – no place for a plastic boat. Sally was looking nervous and I knew we had reached our limits.

On a bright and sunny evening we wound our way in retreat back beneath the Cathedral Ranges – and had to photograph them all over again lit by the long sunset. We had resolved to anchor at Sydkap, where we thought we would find good holding and good shelter as there were a couple

A satellite photo of the ice obstruction on the west side of Milne Land





A one kilometre iceberg

of hunter's huts on the shore. In fact we found lousy shelter and indifferent holding, and had to leave in a hurry when our safe haven turned into a lee shore with 25 knots of wind blowing us onto it.

Though sad to be leaving the upper reaches of Scoresby Sound, we had received satellite images of the Forbidden Coast which had never been so ice free. Our consolation would be to attempt to cruise a coast that has seen very few yachts indeed on our way south back to Reykjavik. What's more, we were enjoying prolonged fine dry weather and the forecast promised more of the same. We steered eastwards toward Kap Tobin and the Forbidden Coast.

Back at anchor in Amdrup Havn we spent 7 August diving to clear a growth of barnacles that had occluded the seawater intake for the aft heads and transferring diesel from tank to tank around the boat. I don't think we smelled too badly, but the fact remains that between the four of us we had only used 250 litres of water in over two weeks, so a trip ashore was in order, to refill our tanks in order to enable more generous water rationing. For this I had an experiment in mind which, surprisingly, worked rather well. We had brought with us a 200 litre flexible water tank about half the length of our dinghy. We took it ashore to a nearby meltwater stream and, once full, we transferred it back to the boat at anchor. We then hoisted the dinghy,



Kap Tobin



complete with 200kg water, on a spare genoa halyard and successfully siphoned it into our onboard tanks. It's great when a plan comes together!

The day was relaxing and sunlit, and at supper we barely noticed the breeze from the north. The anchor was well dug in, so we had no anxieties when we went off to bed. However, with the others asleep below, I began to get nervous about all the banging and clanking as the boat sheered around her anchor. Fierce gusts were now lashing us and spray was blowing off the waves. Our deck level anemometer was reading gusts to 45 knots, and there was a loud thud as one of the blades of the wind generator broke



***The boiling hot
spring adjacent to
our anchorage***

off. The gusts were now ferocious, and despite the long snubber there was a firm jolt as we sheared off to starboard. A quick check to see if we were dragging... The shore was now 50m closer, so on went the engine and, within seconds, my magnificent crew were on deck and hard at work battling with the anchor chain and a huge ball of mud clinging to the anchor. Presumably it had been yanked out and had failed to re-set. It took three hours of motoring around to find depths appropriate for anchoring, then five or six goes to get it to hold. Of course as soon as the anchor did find good



mud the frequency of the gusts grew fewer and their intensity weakened, and within a couple of hours all was calm. We had survived our first serious katabatic. It was as if the winds were reminding us that cruising up here is not for the faint-hearted.

The night had been spent wrestling for shelter and safe anchorage, so we delayed our departure south by a few hours to make sure everyone was properly rested and fed before the 70 mile passage around Kap Brewster and on to Turner Sound.

Suited and booted for the cold Arctic night we sailed southwest along the Forbidden Coast before tentatively putting our nose in behind Turner Island and anchoring at 0500 off a beach protected from swell by a low basalt bluff. The smell of festering drains was in the air, and my heart sank at the thought of another assault on the ship's plumbing. But then the source of the sulphur became obvious as we saw steam rising from the beach and, higher up, some bubbling fumaroles simmering away gently. We had fetched up, by accident, at a perfect geothermal bathing pool with views of peaks, icebergs and, of course, our anchorage – a glorious oasis of vegetation in a stark and arid landscape. Flowering sedum, rich green mosses and even dandelions added colour to the stark skeletons of whales and seals that had been butchered there. A hunter's hut 200m away marked this extremely remote spot as a favoured outpost of seasonal hunters.

We'd had plans to cruise further down the Forbidden Coast, but the call to retreat was sounded when we learned of a developing system in the eastern Denmark Strait. It was with great regret that we altered course for Iceland. In our wake now lay the endless ranges of mountains visible for 100 miles to north and south. Almost stripped of their snow by the summer sun, these burnished ochre mountains stood between the pure blue sky and the occasional pristine iceberg drifting on the polar current. We were racing south to avoid the blow we knew was coming.

They say Greenland gets under your skin, and it had. We'll be back next summer for sure.

