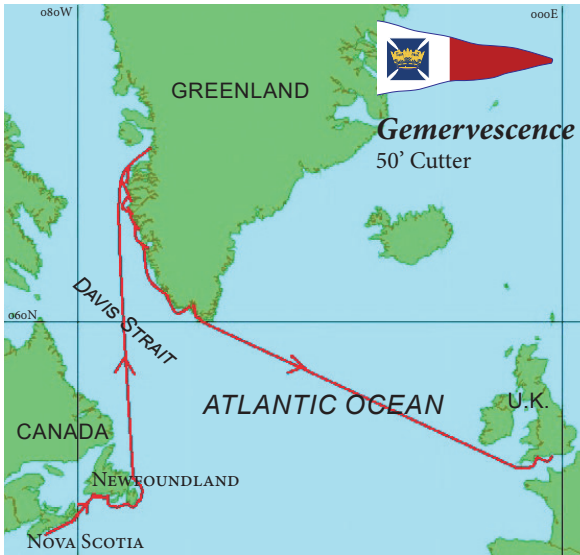


Home from Away

Halifax to Cowes with icebergs

Steven Anderson

Awarded the Challenge Cup



We had laid up *Gem* in Halifax, Nova Scotia for the winter of 2019/20, expecting to return in late 2020. The pandemic put paid to that. Two years later we were determined to bring her home and a new plan started to take shape.

With encouragement and expert advice from Clive Woodman and Angela Lilenthal (RCC) it slowly began to make sense come home via the west coast of Greenland. This, for us, would be

a great adventure allowing us to visit more of Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. Decision made, all we had to do was arrange things so that the house, farm and dogs would still be there when we got home.

We were the yard's first launch of the season in the chilly Nova Scotian spring. The refit afloat worked out reasonably well although there is never enough time for everything on the jobs list.

My daughter Rachel and partner Joe arrived on 1 May for a short shakedown cruise. The following morning was fine, still cool but a clear sky with a gentle breeze to push us along the western shore of Mahone Bay. The lobster season was in full swing and individual pot buoys abounded, each with excess meters of floating line. We were aiming for Northwest or Southwest Coves which offered small adjacent anchorages. Northwest Cove was busy with lobster boats so we headed up Southwest Cove which seemed to be lined with lobster pots on the 10m contour; the placing of the pots proved to be rather more random. Then we hit a reef in the middle of the bay which on the chart was shown well off to the east. We hit hard and planted ourselves firmly on the rock. Fortunately Rachel and Joe row well and we eventually

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Jane steering with emergency tiller after the rock

hauled ourselves off with the kedge. We had no water ingress but also no steering so anchored for the night with low spirits contemplating a ruined holiday for Rachel and Joe and a potential show stopper for our planned trip home.

In the morning things looked a little better, there was still no water ingress and we had a recommendation, East River Shipyard in Mahone Bay only a few miles away, who agreed to lift us as soon as we could get there. Picking our way through a dense field of

lobster pots at the entrance to Mahone Bay under emergency steering will be a lasting memory.

East River Shipyard was extremely helpful over the next ten days. We had a surveyor check over the boat and repairs completed to the steering quadrant and fairing to the keel and rudder. Rachel and Joe rescued their holiday by hiring a car. On 8 May they left us and three friends joined for the next five weeks, with the first few days an unplanned stay in the boat yard. They must be commended for still being friends.

The enforced stay ashore had some benefits, a trip over to the Bay of Fundy side of Nova Scotia and its wine producing area (to be admired for



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the achievement rather than savoured for the vintage) and education in how best to cook fresh lobster on board. It did feel as if I spent most of the time contorted in the depths of the boat refitting the quadrant and inspecting every part of the bilges.

By 12 May our crew of five were finally underway bound for St John's Newfoundland. The Nova Scotia shore is forested with many islands and off lying rocks. A combination of lobster pots and frequent fog mean that our coastal hops tended to entail sailing out some distance from the coast and then in again to the next anchorage. The fog was rarely of the pea soup variety; usually visibility would be at least a few boat lengths, good enough for pot avoidance with four look outs.

Our progress was of day sails, nights at anchor with convivial company and plenty of fresh lobster. One of our group, became very adept at purchasing from local fishermen; the price went down as we went north either because of the local economics or perhaps her increased negotiating skills. We saw few other yachts and on 24 May we went through the St Peters Canal into the Bras d'Or Lakes arriving as the first boat of the season at the very welcoming St Peters Marina.

St Peters Canal



We had probably the warmest day of our trip crossing the Bras d'Or Lake to Baddeck in glassy conditions. No matter we couldn't sail, gently motoring in the sunshine and perfect calm it was a beautiful day.

Baddeck, its yacht club and the Alexander Graham Bell museum were an enjoyable stop for two days. The season was just getting underway and there was quite an air of anticipation after two years of lockdown. We met another British couple whose yacht had been stranded there through Covid; they were preparing for the trip home via the Azores.

From Baddeck we motored in the rain up the long sound and out of the narrow northern entrance to the lakes where we had over 4kts of tide under us. Sailing a

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little further up the Cape Bretton coast took us into Ingonish. The harbour has a long spit across most of the inlet with a narrow dog leg entrance that looked as though it moved about regularly with the tide or storms. The buoys all turned out to be in the right place and there was no problem getting in despite it feeling quite a squeeze. From here the idea was to make the short passage to Newfoundland. We spent a day ashore exploring while we waited for the weather to be slightly kinder across the Laurentian Channel. The wait proved worthwhile and we had a good 106nm daylight sail to Rose Blanche albeit with some fog.



The Barasway Waterfall

Rose Blanche harbour looked potentially too small and somewhat exposed so we went around the headland and into what we thought would be the more sheltered Harbour Le Cou which was all but landlocked. The harbour was beautiful with steep hills and the Barasway Water Fall. Entering through the narrows we found ourselves applying full astern when one of the team saw a thick hawser stretched across the entrance just on the surface. It transpired this is put across for the winter by a local fisherman to prevent the ice from blowing into the main harbour of the settlement opposite and had not yet been removed. We spent the night instead on the government wharf for Le Cou. We came to be rather pleased to see these Newfoundland government wharfs with their distinctive yellow bollards, which were always free and substantial although often busy with fishing vessels.

With plenty of breeze in the forecast we explored the adjoining fjord of Bay Le Moine hoping to find a sheltered anchorage at its head. The wind had other ideas and a combination of the steep sides and a dip in the hills saw catabatic gusts at 90 degrees to the gradient wind blast across the potential anchorage. We couldn't get the anchor to set. Each attempt was a challenge in the deep water, the poor holding and the narrow fjord. Discretion being the better part of valour we flew back down

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the fjord under genoa and manoeuvred again onto the government wharf. It was not the most restful night for Jane and me with gusts up to 50 knots.

By morning things had moderated, so with full main and two rolls in the genoa we made a rapid passage to Ships Cove in the Ramea islands, the centre of the scallop fishery. As scallops are a particular favourite we had a great stopover in the islands. It's a small community and we were the only visitors (we think the first yacht since lockdown). The Newfoundlanders are famously hospitable and everyone we met was friendly but perhaps rather more reserved than normal. The local social life had clearly not really returned in these somewhat remote settlements and there was a degree of wariness.

From Ramea we explored White Bear Fjord and on to Francois and then McCallum. Both are remote outport fishing settlements with access only by sea. Populations are shrinking; in the case of McCallum we were told the resident population is now 30, down from 90 in 2015.

By this point wine reserves were low and availability scarce. The island of St Pierre beckoned and arrival was carefully timed to be on the evening of Sunday 5 June in order to get to the shops first thing Monday morning. St Pierre is part of France. It looks as though a French village has been put on a ship and taken out there; in many ways it probably has as all imports come from France not nearby Canada. Sadly for us the planning was not as clever as we thought; the Monday was a public holiday and all shops firmly shut. We had little contingency time as crew flights in and out were booked from St John's. No wine was acquired by the time we left and our cellar looked decidedly depleted.

Back to Canada and check in at Burin. The Canadian Border Agency sent two friendly and helpful officers out to stamp us back in which must have taken most of their day. From Burin we made an overnight passage to St John's timed to pass

Burin



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inshore of the bird sanctuary islands in Witless Bay (what a great name). The islands are home to a large puffin colony but we thought the thick fog would frustrate us seeing them. However, the puffins flew out of the fog in great numbers as the tips of the islands ghosted past; a magical sail.

0100 the next morning we were alongside Pier 8 in the metropolis of St John's, a major contrast to anywhere we had been since Halifax. It was all change in St John's: our three guests departing and Gui joining us from France and Jane Williams (RCC) from the UK. We spent four days in St John's, exploring the city, provisioning and getting extra kit for the passage to Greenland before heading around the peninsula to the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Club. Here we met up with Martin Fuller and Stephanie Connor (RCC) on *Sandpiper*. The yacht club were enormously helpful, taking us to purchase supplies, including several diesel cans.

We were now taking a keen interest in the weather and ice reports for the Davis Strait, conscious that every day spent in Newfoundland now meant a day less in Greenland. The weather systems had different ideas so we used the opportunity to visit Catalina and Bonavista. In Catalina on the government wharf the fishermen were helpful talking about the ice reports and we learned much about the fishery and its history from them and through the local museums. What we learned has informed our views on sustainable fishing.

Bonavista was an unexpected highlight. The town lays claim to Cabot's first landfall and there is a replica of his ship, *Matthew*, in a dedicated building in the harbour. The town also boasts a Garrick Theatre, part cinema, part music venue and part theatre, where Jane discovered her new favourite band Rum Ragged (*It's All About the Fish...* really check it out).



By 21 June the weather window looked good and we departed towards Greenland. We are unused to high latitudes and ice was prominent on our list of things we didn't understand. With some reassurance from others more expert we decided to sail at much reduced speed during the hours of darkness while we cleared the Newfoundland waters that had ice reported. We took a northerly course and then headed up the centre of the Davis Strait until past a group of icebergs off Nuuk before starting to close the Greenland coast. Pilot whales and dolphins joined us intermittently as well as Jane's favourite fulmar, named Freddie.

Temperatures were low and we spent quite a lot of time resolving intermittent problems with the heating. This was a theme throughout the trip but we usually had heating when it was needed although I think Jane has a slightly different perspective. A standard watchkeeping position was to sit in the companionway, on the bridge deck, with legs in the relative warmth of the cabin while still able to keep a lookout.



Keeping a lookout and legs below. Sea temperature 2.9C

Sunday 26 we saw our first iceberg, sufficiently large and far off to be impressive rather than concerning. After this we got more used to the idea and started to gain a much better understanding of how the bergs and the associated bergy bits move. We were sailing most of the time with significant periods of motoring in light or no winds but we were now sufficiently far north to have constant daylight.

Early on 30 June we made landfall at Aasiat; it was a significant birthday for me and about the best present I could have imagined. Gui captured a bit of iceberg to go in the birthday cocktails and make it a perfect day. The seaman's hotel provided showers and we checked into Greenland with the local police (who produced a stamp they said was last used in 2012). The seaman's hotel also provided internet and much helpful advice. Many of the young staff seemed to be from Denmark taking a summer job. We refuelled with diesel at less than 50p/litre, diesel turned out to be easily available in most settlements we visited.

Aasiat was crowded with fishing boats both large and small. We rafted alongside an old fishing vessel with a harpoon mounted in the bow. It looked as though it had not moved in years but we saw it a week later in another harbour. Other vessels were new but not monstrous in size (we had seen a much larger vessel offshore); but most striking to us was that all the local residents seemed to have their own small boats used for fishing and transport. The network of islands on the coast mean that navigation in the 'inner leads' is relatively sheltered.

I chatted with a retired local fisherman, who had skippered the ferry and whale watching boats, he recommended a route around Disko Bay where whales might be. He was interesting on the Greenlandic economics of the fishery and where he felt the profits ended up.

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For us Aasiat was the beginning of an amazing experience. Everywhere we sailed we were in awe of the surroundings, the ice, the islands, the mountains and the remoteness of the settlements. Whilst cold we had very little rain and much fine weather (as well as our share of some rough weather). From Aasiat we took a long day motoring around the southern shore of Disko Bay, past islands where the huskies spend the summer, watching for whales. In that first day we didn't tire of photographing icebergs. The route along the southern and western shore means crossing the relatively dense icefloes just south of Ilulissat which my fisherman acquaintance had made rather light of; a bit of fog and a change of wind direction gave rise to some concern before we found a way through. In amongst the ice, the whales were blowing and we caught an occasional glimpse, the noise echoing off the icebergs; another magical time.

Disko Bay (above and below)



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Feeding huskies on islands where they spend the summer

Ilulissat harbour was choc a bloc. Two expedition yachts and many fishing vessels filled every available space. It was a squeeze but we got in. Outside the harbour were two cruise ships with passengers being ferried ashore. Ilulissat is very much a tourist centre with World Heritage status and some government infrastructure investment. This means the town is untypical in many ways but the museum is well done. Its World Heritage listing is easy to understand and the sight of the glacier from the land is almost surreal.

Glacier at Ilulissat



From Ilulissat we somewhat reluctantly began our journey south anchoring for the night in the islands of Kronprinsens before heading into the inner leads and the settlements of Kangatsiaq and Attu.

By the evening of 6 July we reached Sisimuit. It was here that Jane Williams and Gui had to leave us to fly home. Sisimuit is a significant settlement and we saw more yachts than anywhere else in Greenland (four). We felt slightly inadequate alongside the expedition yachts including *Pelagic*, but we were going south not north as they were. We were getting used to the Greenlandic ways of mooring but even so were surprised to come on deck to find that our raft of three yachts

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Provisions, water and diesel were all readily available in Sisimiut

had been cast off by a large local fishing boat which was squeezing in between another ship and the three moored yachts. A quick start of the engine and a bit of manoeuvring and order was restored; apparently all perfectly normal.

We left Sisimiut bound for Cruncher Island and Maniitq where Rick, an old sailing friend from the US, arrived on the evening flight into the small airport. The hotel restaurant in Maniitq has a stunning elevated view over the harbour and the mountains to the south where we enjoyed a rare meal ashore. With Rick on board we took to the fjords going north up to the glacier at Sermlinguaq and then west along Hamborgersund to anchor at the abandoned settlement of Appamiut. The glacier has receded but is still remarkable, the fjords and mountains are stunning. *Gemervescence* anchored off Appamiut



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We kept reminding ourselves how lucky we were to make this trip; the words to describe the landscape may get repetitive but we never tired of the experience.

From Appamiut we headed south to a sheltered anchorage at Tovqussaq and then on to Nuuk outside of the shelter of the inner leads. It felt like a long beat into 25 kts and a confused sea. In Nuuk Tom, a 19 year old family friend who has raced and sailed with us, joined our adventure as part of his gap year.

We spent a day exploring Nuuk and another on maintenance and fixing a staysail problem. Tom bought cod from a local passing boat and created a fantastic supper learning to fillet along the way. Nuuk is the capital and by far the largest settlement in Greenland and a good place for supplies, not least the Fishing supply store where Norwegian socks, jumpers and thermals were acquired at very reasonable prices.

Departing Nuuk we were again able to use the inner leads and visited the abandoned fishing harbour of Kangerluarsorseq, spending a day there avoiding weather and exploring ashore. We left early on Friday morning to make 250nm south to the fjords of south west Greenland. On this passage we were back in



Eqaulugarssuit

amongst the icebergs which made the inner leads spectacular as we threaded our way through. We anchored in Eqaulugarssuit on Sunday morning and climbed a hill to photograph the enclosed anchorage and views before moving on later that day to Narsaq, from where Rick would start his journey home by helicopter.

Narsaq is quite a different environment from settlements further north; the landscape is greener and further up the fjord are the few sheep farms of southwest

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Greenland. The farms were taking a cut of hay from the home fields. While the climate is still severe it is clearly a little less harsh than in the north. We hired quadbikes for a trip around the settlement. It is again spectacular with many icebergs flowing past the harbour and in the fjords.

Sailing from Narsaq we went further up the fjord anchoring at Ittileg for a walk across to Igaliko and then to the Eric the Red settlement at Qagssiarssuk. A further night at Narssarssuaq to pick up Rosie who was joining us for the last leg of our trip in Greenland and our trip home; another young sailor who has the great ability to keep smiling in almost



Jane and Steven in Narsaq



Rosie with iceberg stocks for the fridge

all circumstances. After no luck trolling in the fjord Tom caught five cod in the harbour in about 30 seconds.

29 July saw us thread our way down Skovfjord through the icebergs to Qaqortoq filling up with iceberg stocks for the fridge along the way. From there we moved on to Uunartoq, known for its hot springs. Soon after anchoring we were approached by a fast boat

which had pulled a local fisherman out of the water. Unfortunately the rescuer had clearly done all that was possible and it was too late to do anything more. It brought home that in remote locations you need enough knowledge and kit on board to help yourself as far as possible.

We spent a subdued evening but in the morning visited the springs; surreal bathing in warm water surrounded by icebergs.

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From Qaqortoq we proceeded to Nanortalik for final supplies and diesel before heading into the southern fjords at Narsaq Kugulloq for Prince Christian Sound. The sound is perhaps the most spectacular we visited. We anchored off the glacier at Igdlorssuit for the night before motoring down the rest of the sound. The old radio station quay is still useable (if you can tolerate the flies) and we squeezed in for a temporary stop to stow the dinghy and make ready for the passage home.

We finally took our departure from Greenland and waved our farewells to the mountains on the afternoon of 2 August. The passage home was one of those where



Greenland astern

the weather did the right thing, even if a little forcefully at times. We had a seven day starboard fetch from Prince Christian Sound to the SW tip of Ireland sailing the great circle without deviation. It was a little bumpy to begin and a little tiresome when the auto pilot died one day out but no one was complaining (once we stopped the main hatch leak).

South of Ireland the Round Britain and Ireland fleet were going the other way, the sun came out and we made landfall in St Agnes, Isles of Scilly. HM Revenue & Customs were easy to contact and we were cleared in before the anchor hit the bottom. The anchorage in St Agnes had in it more yachts than we had seen cumulatively during the whole trip from Nova Scotia . The beer in the Turks Head was good. All too soon we were heading east, Falmouth and the pleasure of seeing old friends, Dartmouth where we stayed for the regatta and finally 30 August saw us through Hurst and home to Cowes.