

Newfoundland to Iceland, May to September

Martin Fuller and Stephanie Connor

Awarded the Irish Cruising Club Decanter



In May 2023 Stephanie, my very patient partner and chief mate, and I returned to Newfoundland. We planned to continue the circumnavigation of the north Atlantic we had begun two years after I had first learnt to sail in 2017. In my mind, after 20,000 nm and six years (bar two lost to Covid), this cruise would complete my sailing apprenticeship.

Newfoundland and Labrador

Sandpiper had survived a Newfoundland winter without problems and two weeks after returning to her we were launched on 30 May. We were in no rush to start our journey as the ice was particularly severe this year and icebergs were cluttering up Notre Dame Bay, with La Scie and the Great Northern Arm still iced in.

We decided to move slowly north until the ice cleared allowing us to cross Belle Isle Strait to Labrador in early June. Catching one's own dinner is a real treat and with light winds and calm seas, we were soon working our way through the beautiful islands of Exploits and Notre Dame Bay, with a first stop at Knights Island. We collected fresh mussels along the rocky shore and enjoyed a mussel cook-out over an open fire with friends from *SV Packet Inn* against a background of icebergs. This encounter with another yacht was



Sandpiper
Sadler Starlight 39

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Martin and Stephanie enjoying a cook-out of mussels with friends on Knight's Island



to be the first of only three yachts we saw before reaching Greenland.

As we cruised slowly north, we called in at many 're-located' settlements where the previous inhabitants were returning to open up their cabins for the summer. Looking back, visits to Exploits Island, Little Bay Island, La Scie (even with its growlers!) and Triton in particular stick in our minds for the friendliness of the reception we had come to expect from Newfoundlanders; whether an invitation to supper or offer of a lift for provisions.

Elsewhere, it was the beauty of isolated anchorages where we were alone with nature and the wildlife. We

revisited several old haunts including Souflett's Arm in Great Harbour Deep and Maiden's Arm south of St Anthony reminding us just why we had both fallen in love with the cruising grounds of Newfoundland – secure anchorages, stunning scenery and the solitude.

Probably because of the late break-up of the ice, we saw no other yachts after leaving Exploits Bay until we reached Battle Harbour on 27 June, and we were the first yacht of the season to arrive there.

This wonderful heritage site had only been open for a week but was already in full swing and we enjoyed two shore days here and a chance to meet two other crews. Both had aluminium boats, and arrived the day after us to await a weather

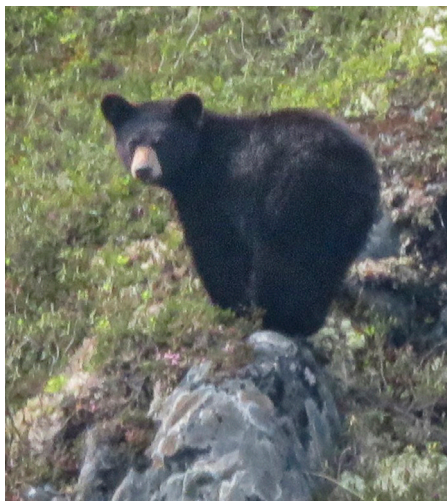
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window to cross to Greenland before attempting the North-West Passage. One young American family's son, six-year-old Dean, had only ever known boat life and kept everyone amused by his energy and ceaseless questions. What a tremendous start to his life.

In general, the weather was kind, with a mixture of sunshine and cloud, and temperatures ranging from 8°C to 25°C. Unusually, Canada was suffering a heat wave causing wildfires across the country, and Labrador was no exception. It was strange to be sailing north in a T-shirt while passing icebergs well, Stephanie was in a T-shirt on occasions, but I still preferred my thermals!

The winds were unusually light for this time of year and consequently we had several days when we had to burn diesel to continue our progress north. Fortunately, windless days were rare, and we enjoyed cruising along the stunning Labrador coast, often in sunshine, with icebergs and birds for company but few whales. We were very lucky to see a number of both polar and black bears, on occasion surprisingly close up; such as when we almost ran over a polar bear when leaving the fjord at Makkovic. We chose an inland route wherever we could, meandering through the islands and visiting isolated anchorages, not solely to collect pilotage information but for the sheer pleasure of cruising through stunning scenery such as Square Islands, Eagle Cove and Curlew Harbour; not to mention the many tickles, rattles and runs we passed through along the way.

We were very aware of the lingering ice pack to our north and saw Cartwright as a location where we could pause if necessary; and indeed, we did. Upon arrival we discovered the



Black bear in Cape Bluff Cove, Labrador

ice pack was still denying access to the north with Cape Harrison appearing to be a key anchor point for the ice. Fortunately, Cartwright proved an interesting and useful replenishment stopover with an excellent supermarket, reasonably priced fuel and filtered water available from the Town Hall. There was a bar and very friendly locals who generously plied us with gifts of home baked muffins, smoked char, frozen snow partridge and frozen shrimp straight off the boat.

After four days the ice broke free of Cape Harrison and the rest of the Labrador coast quickly opened up to sea traffic and we were soon on our way north. We had identified several 'must visit' locations in our planning and these included Makkovic, Hopedale, Nain, Hebron and Saglek Fjord, which is the base camp



Hebron from the anchorage

for Torngat Mountains National Park. The Moravian Missionaries had a marked impact on this area from the 1700s to early 1900s, through their efforts to educate the indigenous population. Historic outposts had evidence of their presence, usually in the form of ruins and museums. In Hebron efforts are ongoing to restore the original mission building which is attracting regular tourists including the visit of a cruise ship. Sadly, while we were in Nain and just minutes before we went to attend a presentation at the beautiful new Illusiak shoreside museum, it suffered a catastrophic fire suppression system failure sending clouds of acrid smoke throughout the museum and into the surrounding sky. We suspect the centre, with its excellent display of indigenous history and art, may be closed for some time.

Before leaving Nain, and in preparation for our final passage up to Torngat National Park, and subsequent three to four day crossing to Nuuk, we topped up provisions at the well-stocked but expensive supermarket. I am always grateful to Stephanie for her cooking and the wonders she concocts in the galley to ensure we always eat well. Her freshly baked cakes are special, and the frequent gifts of fresh char and salmon from locals ensured our meals were always a treat.

Our days were filled with easy day-sails up the coast, often sheltered by offshore islands, and stunning anchorages such as Challenger Cove, Perry Gulch, Amity Harbour and Takkatat Bay. Each one has its own character, some surrounded by steep, rocky hills with vertical cliffs rising up from sea level, creating fascinating geological rock formations. Not unexpectedly, we encountered days of dense fog forcing us to move very cautiously due to the real risk of meeting icebergs or worse, growlers and bergy bits that did not show up on radar. Because of this we only day-sailed and when we reached the Torngat Mountains, fog became a particular issue, not just for its impact on safe sailing but because it totally obscured the spectacular mountains we had come to see.

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We lingered for three days at the Saglek Base Camp enjoying their wonderful hospitality in return for which we offered to give a presentation on our ocean passage, which was well received by a mixed audience of camp staff, their paying guests, visiting and indigenous youths.

Sadly, the forecast was for two weeks of fog banks along the north coast, and we could not afford to delay that long. So on 24 July we left Saglek in fog hoping we would find some clear air as we went north. Despite tantalising breaks in the fog and glimpses of stunning mountain scenery it never really lifted before we reached Eclipse Channel, 40 nm from the northern tip of Labrador. It was with some sadness that we looked for a weather window to cross to Greenland to continue our adventure there.



Martin and *Sandpiper* in Saglek

Crossing to Greenland

After spending a quiet 'boat' day at anchor tucked behind Miller Peninsular in the Eclipse Channel, shrouded in damp fog we decided to take the meagre offering presented by the weather gods and opted to begin our crossing on 28 July. To delay further, with the prospect of 10 days of almost no winds combined with the extended fog forecast was not a choice we wanted to take. The first 24 hours promised good sailing with a steady F4/5 northerly followed by a prolonged period of light winds which were due to pick up to a pleasant F3 NW as we closed with the Greenland coast.

So, at 0400 we raised the anchor and slipped through the fog out to the open sea. We had the predicted winds accompanied by thick fog but rougher than expected seas for the first 24 hours. It did make watchkeeping tense as we navigated through the bergy bits, shoals, and reefs offshore. By mid-afternoon we were still in thick fog but at least we were clear of the coastal hazards. The sailing was not fun. The fog lasted for 36 hours, the wind veered then dropped off by the evening, albeit to a useful F3, and unusually it left us both feeling a little sea-sick and our spirits rather dampened. However, by the evening on the second day we had made good progress and the fog finally cleared. The downside was the wind dropping further, to F2 and an updated prediction that put us on the edge of a light wind zone that

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stretched to within 50nm of the Greenland coast. We settled down to a gentle, if potentially somewhat longer than planned, passage, and were thankful that the sea state at least matched the wind – flat! It felt strange to sit back and enjoy moving slowly across an almost flat table of grey water, a gentle zephyr just filling the sails, giving us 3-4 kts at best with no choice but to take what little was on offer.

Surprisingly we saw no whales in what were 'perfect whale watching conditions'. Instead we were accompanied by fulmars by day and Leach's petrels at twilight, a prolonged period from 2300 to 0300 before the sky once more brightened up. As we slid across the sea towards Greenland it felt, at times, as if we were sailing on a table of rippling grey silk with an endless grey horizon, grey sea and grey sky; though the sun did break through to provide one memorable sunset and dawn. We began the mandatory Greenpos reporting 200 nm offshore and received an updated ice report from the Greenland Joint Rescue and Response Centre which identified bergy water up to 50nm off Godthaab (Nuuk) littered with bergy bits and growlers in the approach to the fjord. Given the strong currents in the north channel into the fjord at springs, and the belt of bergy water, we decided to adjust our sailing plan to ensure a daylight passage through the bergy belt and to enter the channel with the flood tide; unusually we had to slow down from our steady four plus knots to three and a half knots.

As we closed with the coast fog rejoined us, the seas remained flat, and any freshening of the wind was absent. After four days, at 0300 on 1 August, we reached the edge of the bergy water belt - time to burn some diesel. With no useful wind and shrouded in fog we motored eastwards to meet our tidal window and enter Godthaab fjord as planned.

West Coast of Greenland

For me Greenland was a new adventure, my aim being to find out why so many sailors return here year after year. I wanted to see as much as possible in the time

Bergy bits approaching Nuuk - I rather overdid the photos





we had left, to reach the Arctic Circle and to visit the spectacular fjords that Denise Evans and Bob Shepton (RCC) had recommended. For Stephanie it was also a voyage of discovery, but she was intrigued to see how the lives of the people had changed since her previous sailing and kayaking trips here almost 10 years ago.

Our entry in Godthaab fjord and approach to Nuuk set the scene for our cruise around Greenland. The fog lifted as we entered the fjord to reveal icebergs and bergy water surrounded by towering snow and glacier covered mountains – all glittering beneath a blue sky. And I rather overdid the photographs.

Nuuk proved to be an excellent point of entry having a straightforward Customs' procedure, a friendly harbour master and excellent food stores reasonably close at hand. Added to which the Seaman's Mission, recently refurbished and renamed the Somands Hotel, provided good food and Wi-Fi close to our berth on Kutterjak wharf; a real bonus was the cheap price of diesel. Shortage of space alongside the wharf meant we had to raft up outside another yacht, *SV Hayat* with its Polish/Canadian crew of six preparing for the NW Passage. They in turn were secured

Approaching Nuuk - a magnificent panorama



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to a seemingly dilapidated old tug alongside the wharf. In the early hours of the following morning, we were rudely disturbed when the old tug decided to move out with no warning, simply casting off everyone's lines – apparently this is an all-too-common practice!

After re-provisioning, refuelling, and a couple of days sightseeing, we took the afternoon tide out to Habets O Havn anchorage at the entry to the inner channel going north, ready for an early start the next day. Our journey north was to take us through parts of the inner channel as well as offshore, with diversions into fjords and settlements from time to time, but always with magnificent mountains and spectacular glaciers.

We preferred to day sail as the bergy water and icebergs continued for 150nm north of Nuuk and we saw no reason to mix that with the inevitable fog when deserted and beautiful anchorages beckoned. The inhabitants' ongoing reliance on the sea and the fishing industry was ever-present. Often, we saw only the crumbling remains of a settlement or fish plant, such as at Tovqussaq. Elsewhere, such as at



It became obvious why so many people keep returning to these waters

Kangaamiut and Kangerlussuaq, there were active fish processing plants servicing a flourishing inshore fishery.

Our anchorages were inevitably in stunning scenery; always surrounded by high, dramatic mountains, with glistening snowfields and glaciers working their way down towards the sea. Combine these with our diversions into the fjords, such as Evighedsfjord and its spectacular glaciers and historic anchorages used by the renowned Tilman, and it was obvious why so many sailors keep returning to these waters.

Eleven days after leaving Nuuk we nosed our way into the small, congested harbour at Sisimiut to raft up once more alongside two fishing boats on the crowded wharf. Having reached the Arctic Circle, and with the days shortening, it was time to head south and leave further exploration north for another year.



Sandpiper in Marraq anchorage

We planned an overnight passage back to Nuuk, sailing outside the bergy water in fine winds and weather before taking to the inner passage again to head south. The inner passage provided some interesting pilotage, more spectacular scenery including views of the icecap reaching out for the sea. We called in at deserted and peaceful anchorages and small, friendly harbours on our way towards Cape Farvel, in light and variable winds with temperatures seldom above 11°C. Our anchorages were certainly varied and included an abandoned Cold War USA airbase at Marraq and the popular hot springs at Iglukasik Havn.

We had planned to leave Greenland for Iceland from Prince Christian Sund (PCS) by the end of August. In fact, we reached Aappilattoq in the PCS on the 31 August but unfortunately, so did a deep depression which brought a F9 storm around the Cape for three days.

Thankfully, there was space for us to tie up to the wharf in this small and sheltered harbour as the storm had prevented the arrival of the coastal supply vessel. With numerous lines ashore, including our two 100m dynema shorelines, we sat out the Prince Christian Sund



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Stranded iceberg impeding the entrance to Aappilattoq harbour

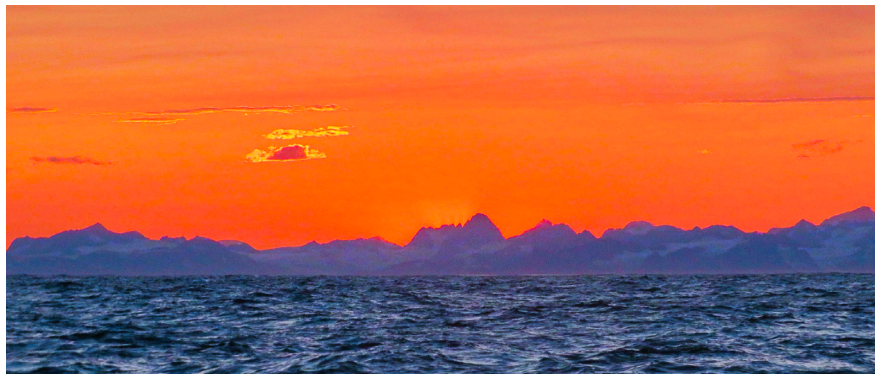
storm, taking the opportunity to attend Sunday church service. We enjoyed singing along from the Kalaalisut language hymn book, and thought we were doing well, until the second hymn when we were surprised that everyone stopped singing, while we were ready and keen to carry on with the remaining two verses. Only then did we realise we had been singing the wrong hymn! I don't think anyone noticed or perhaps they were too polite to comment.

To Iceland

By early September we arrived at the weather station at the eastern end of PCS ready to cross to Iceland. The pilot book fails to point out that it is necessary to reverse towards the wharf if one wants to berth bow out – something that became glaringly obvious only after we had crept around a stranded iceberg grounded in the harbour entrance!

The weather looked promising with a five day window of favourable winds and thankfully the grounded iceberg had not blocked our exit the next morning. A

Last sight of Greenland, we thought



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fresh SW wind and good visibility helped us move safely through the iceberg belt into clear water 80 nm offshore and we settled down for a good passage across this notoriously treacherous piece of water.

We found out just how menacing it is the following afternoon when downloading the latest GRIB file – instead of the light N winds it showed, a full blown S9 storm approaching 24 hours ahead which was due to last for 48-72 hours. Given that we consider Predict Wind forecasts to err on the conservative side, this new report did not look favourable - to say the least. We decided discretion was the best path and therefore turned around planning to make landfall approximately 100 nm north of PCS at Timmiarmiut then to work our way north to Tasiilaq. From there we could potentially make a shorter crossing to Isafjordur in Iceland allowing us the option of taking a northern route around Iceland back home via the Faroes to Scotland.

At Timmiarmiut we were hoping to anchor in a reputedly very sheltered anchorage at the head of a 1.5 nm channel used by Tilman in 1965. Unfortunately, the bay in the approaches to the anchorage was full of large icebergs and bergy bits and the channel itself was blocked by a large, grounded berg.

We headed around the island to seek out the alternative safe anchorage on the SW side of the bay. We found the bay as dusk began to fall and after a couple of attempts persuaded the anchor to set with plenty of swinging room, albeit quite close to the shore. Fortunately, the forecast was for a quiet windless night, and we both fell soundly asleep, sheltered from the multitude of icebergs by the shallows in the bay, and surrounded by imposing mountains with the edge of the icecap lurking around the corner. Suddenly, at 0100 we were rudely awoken by the sound of a furious wind ripping through rigging, swiftly followed by the unnerving sound of the anchor dragging. After five frenetic minutes we were both fully dressed, as a F6 wind swept across the anchorage driving us perilously close to the rocky shore. We then understood what a williwaw really was! It was at this point (of course!) that the engine decided not to start. Mercifully, two tense minutes later it did start and we were making an emergency exit, successfully navigating our way out of the bay into surprisingly calm water, albeit full of bergs. Both Stephanie and I drew a long, deep breath acknowledging that this very remote spot was no place to be washed onto the rocks in the middle of the night. We made the decision to make our way slowly out through the ice belt without further ado and to head for Tasiilaq and review our options there.

Throughout our passage we encountered countless icebergs, but, surprisingly, not an abundance of wildlife. However, one spectacular event stands out. When becalmed 90nm SE of Tasiilaq in the middle of a dark, moonless night Stephanie called me up on deck to share the scene.

The sea was inky calm, no wind and no noise except for the gentle heaving and blowing of several whales and their haunting calls to one another (and possibly to us, we pondered) sounding in the still night. They appeared, several at a time, gently rising and falling only a few feet away on both sides of the stern. It was



impossible to count them in the dark as we caught glimpses of their huge backs and blow holes while they kept station with our slowly drifting boat. This fascinating experience lasted a full 15 mesmerising minutes before they quietly slipped away, and we wondered if they mistook us for a whale in trouble and came to help ... a tow would certainly have been useful!

The following evening as we approached Tasiilaq we were greeted by a wonderful display of at least eight humpbacks as they cruised in circles around us, breaching and waving their flukess as they dived. A warm welcome after our unintended diversion from our planned crossing to Iceland.

Tasiilaq was busy with two tankers, one cargo ship and the coastal supply vessel all queuing up for the one quay. In addition, there were two other boats in port, *Juvel II*, an expedition/scientific vessel we had last seen at the hot springs on the west coast and a steel sailing vessel, *SV Byr*, from Isafjordur, which had been visiting the area for the past 20 years. The sheltered and safe anchorage gave us time to review our sailing plans and the thin sheet of ice covering the anchorage in the morning served to remind us that summer was ending. We wanted to head further north and take the 192nm shortest crossing to Isafjordur in Iceland but we knew we would be facing unfavourable winds with an unreliable engine and increasingly short weather windows. So, given the forecast, we decided to take the more prudent route and head for Reykjavik; a reasonable three day passage allowing us to make port ahead of an expected strong depression due to blow up the Straits in five days' time. Our decision was reinforced by the generous offer of help from Egill Kolbeinsson, RCC Honorary Foreign Representative in Iceland, who offered to look after *Sandpiper* if we needed or decided to overwinter her there, (which we have).

After two days we set sail on what was to be the final leg of this cruise. The winds behaved as forecast and apart from half a day beating against easterlies, we had an excellent crossing with two clear, starlit nights when the sky was ablaze with curtains of green - the northern lights gifting us a magical approach to Iceland; an enchanting way to end this year's cruising.