

Hippos and Humpbacks

Flycatcher from Gambia to Greenland and Home

Ed Clay with Megan Clay

Awarded the RCC Challenge Cup

The clicking noise was deafening and confusing as I swung half asleep out my bunk and up the companionway. What on earth could it be? In the gloom I could make out Megan frantically swatting at a swarm of giant crickets that were flying around the cockpit, crawling over her and jumping into her face.

We had left Chichester in August on *Flycatcher*, our S&S Contessa 38. After crossing Biscay, we briefly explored the Rias and Portugal before



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heading to Madeira and the Canaries (*Roving Commissions* 56). It was now the start of November and we had sailed from El Hierro six days earlier. It had been perfect trade wind conditions; following breezes, sun, flying fish and dolphins playing in the phosphorescence. The wind had dropped the evening before and after a night of dodging pirogues, with their



bewildering displays of flashing bike lights (if they have any lights at all), we were now 40nm off the mouth of the River Gambia.

As dawn broke, the crickets stopped flying and instead hid anywhere dark, filling the hatch cover and garage, dorade boxes, rig, self-steering gear, cockpit grating, lockers, cabin and pretty much

everywhere. This made life much more bearable, but it was still extremely loud. We spent the day navigating the sands off the entrance while clearing the worst of the crickets and, we both admitted later, silently wondering if Gambia was such a good idea. By late afternoon we had passed the markets of Banjul and were anchored off the port at Half-Die. We finished the clear up as best we could, hoped the remaining crickets would leave, and turned-in to dream of insects.

The next day, we headed ashore for the formalities which, we had been warned, could take all day and involve lots of 'presents'. We ended up enjoying it. While it was hot work walking around the port searching for the correct people in the correct order, everyone was amazingly friendly. We were given Gambian names, as well as food and tea, by the security guards and met the Harbour Master, who was examining a trainee pilot on the courses to steer into the river. The only time a 'present' was mentioned was when a customs official didn't fancy a 20-minute walk and a dinghy ride to inspect the boat. He left us sweating for half an hour before brokering the subject of payment. Megan's opening offer of a packet of Love Heart sweets started the negotiations at a reasonable level and, after the sweets and 40 Dalasi (70p) were handed over, we were done. It took five hours and then we had time to explore the market in town and stock up before moving on.

Our ten days up the river were magical. We started at the wide mouth

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where we couldn't see the banks, passed the crumbling slave-trading fort at James Island, and travelled through mangroves, paddy fields and forest as the river wound inland. As the water became fresher, the wildlife changed from dolphins and pelicans, to flamingos and eagles, and then crocodiles, hippos and chimpanzees. The birdlife was incredible with flocks of multi-coloured birds and an amazing dawn chorus. Gambia is very flat, so the tides run nearly 200 miles inland with an 18 hour difference from the mouth. We took the flood upriver, stopping at villages to explore or anchoring in deserted creeks at night or when the stream was against us. We saw no other yachts, just the pirogues of the local fishermen and the occasional tourist near the 'camps'.

The main challenge was the complete lack of wind, which meant lots of motoring and made the heat difficult to bear. Evenings were particularly bad as, with a hot engine and no draught (or fans), it was very sweaty down below. On deck wasn't much better as we sat under nets to avoid the mosquitoes. Our best solution was to throw a bucket of water over our heads, go to bed, shrouded in nets, and try to sleep before we got hot again. We were incredibly excited when a slight breeze let us sail some of the way downstream.

The advantage of motoring was that keeping *Flycatcher's* 60 litre fuel tank topped up gave us some adventures ashore. There are few fuel stations but in some villages fuel was resold from cans - though getting diesel might require negotiating a trip to a town on a motorbike. Our most memorable fuel adventure was at the busy ferry crossing at Mandina. I took two jerry cans in a taxi to the nearby town of Farafenni. On returning, I was stopped by police who took me into a hut and started searching my bag. While I



could explain the bread and vegetables, my situation wasn't helped by the roll of cling-film (one of the jerry cans leaked) and the bundles of cash wrapped up in foil (you need a lot of Gambian notes to buy diesel). A policeman and drugs squad officer asked to see the boat.

I radioed Megan to pick us up in the dinghy; she did a good job of

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making friendly conversation and things lightened up a bit - but we were thinking that at best this was going to involve some big 'presents'. They came below to inspect and quickly found the medicine cupboard which they started taking apart. It was very hot, and crouching in the forepeak in a puddle of sweat explaining what contraceptive pills were was frankly surreal. Thankfully they didn't realise the full extent of our stores and after looking in a few obvious places became more friendly and curious about the boat. Moses (the Policeman) took an interest in the wine box and Megan had to give a demonstration of her accordion. Back on deck they thanked us for being co-operative and invited us for a meal when we came back down the river. We parted great friends and were reassured to see that even Gambians thought it hot down below.

The nearby Ebola epidemic the year before (Gambia had no cases) meant that many of the villages had seen no or very few visitors recently. We were welcomed by crowds of excited children, often swimming out to the boat. We had a particularly friendly welcome at Kudang Tenda - a small village 110nm upstream. Ibrahim, the head man, invited us for fish and rice in his house and gave us a tour. We were accompanied by 40 excited children, who Ibrahim controlled with a stick, but despite our large and loud entourage, we saw monkeys and lots of birds as we walked around the paddy fields. The village was a mixture of reed huts and simple concrete buildings with a bakery and a small school. Ibrahim joined us for a coke in the cockpit and told us about how the President (who took power in a coup in 1994 and claims to be able to cure AIDs with herbs) and his entourage were coming to visit the next week. We learnt some Fula and heard how Ibrahim was raising money to build a schoolhouse. With a permanent school the government provides the teachers, whereas now, with only a reed school, the village pays



Sunset over Kuntaur, River Gambia

for the teachers so can't afford to build something more substantial. The next day we paddled in a pirogue with Ibrahim, enjoying seeing the river banks and wildlife up close as well as learning about the fishing and boats. Further upriver, we passed Kuntaur, an old trading post, the furthest

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point upstream ships could navigate. The warehouses and wharves are being taken over by nature. Beyond here the survey for the chart was done in 1826. GPS often showed us on the land since Banjul.

In the nature reserve around Baboon Island, we were boarded by one of the rangers (a recent rule) who, despite our reservations, proved a great guide. He spotted a chimpanzee in the bushes and it was interesting to hear about their habits and behaviour. He also encouraged us to go near the banks - something that the pass we had been given in Banjul forbade at this point - so we had great views of egrets, cormorants, herons, kingfishers and



Hippo, River Gambia

eagles. Towards the end of Baboon Island we saw several hippos in the water. They swam across the river in front of us and the ranger to our surprise encouraged us to go closer. We saw one emerging

from the river and several swimming along, the bubbles showing their whereabouts under water.

With the tide turning against us, and only a few miles from the electric cables that would halt our progress, we decided to turn around and retraced the 150nm to the coast. We stopped at Kassang, where we climbed the red hill (well, mole hill - Gambia's highest point is well under 100m) by the river with fantastic views, before anchoring in complete solitude at Bird Island. Megan paddled the dinghy to take photos and moments after returning was surprised by a loud snort just ahead; a hippo was a few boat lengths away inspecting us.

We worked back down the river over the next few days and into the mangroves near Banjul. Here we anchored off Lamin Lodge, a precarious looking structure on stilts which organises tourist trips and has a restaurant. There is a number of yachts anchored off in various states of disrepair and an interesting group of sailors; some had spent too long in the sun. We spent a day exploring and getting provisions before getting a bus to Banjul to check out. Unfortunately, our departure was delayed when I got a high fever. After a few days, I was no better so we went to a hospital where I tested negative for malaria but they couldn't diagnose me. The next day, we tried another hospital where I tested positive for malaria,

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which was surprising as we were taking anti-malarials. By now friends and family were worried and between them mobilised the Army Medical Corp and half the UK's university research groups. We were put in touch with a friend of a friend at the Medical Research Council in Banjul who confirmed I didn't have malaria, though it was no clearer what I did have. By this



Red Hill, Kassang, Gambia

time I was recovering and was better a few days later – though I was bothered by reactive arthritis for several months, meaning Megan went full-time pulling up the mainsail and opening jars. Most flew away but one returned, eventually hiding in the self-steering tubes. We were then waved off by another insect swarm – though this one was butterflies making it rather more pleasant.

Once at sea, we both felt unwell and soon started vomiting. As we were now fetching in 20kts of breeze we put this down to losing our sea legs up river and kept ourselves hydrated while we recovered. It was only after a



Walking on São Nicolau in the Cape Verde Is

night at sea that we realised the problem was our water, ironically from the 'best tank' we had kept from the Canaries. It had gone off in the heat. It was

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a tired and thinner crew that arrived in the Cape Verde Is. Fortunately, we quickly discovered the national dish of *Cachupa* - fish or meat fried with maize and beans and topped with an egg or chorizo. A few meals of this washed down with suitable amounts of beer and we were back to strength.



White Island, Carriacou

were fascinating and very varied. Sal, our landfall, was a flat sand dune but São Nicolau was mountainous and green. We took an *aleuger* (a great system where vans are used as informal buses carrying everyone and everything including chickens and whole tuna) over the island and enjoyed a spectacular walk back, before spending another day walking up Monte Gordo. We spent a windy night anchored off the deserted island of Santa Luzia before going on to Mindelo, where a flooded crater makes

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a great natural harbour. Here we spent two days exploring and stocking up while eating more Cachupa and listening to the local music for which the Cape Verde is famous. Sadly a combination of an ambitious schedule and the harmattan blowing sand from the Sahara meant we didn't get to go walking on Santo Antão or visit Brava and the southern islands, but instead headed out into the Atlantic on 5 December.

The trade winds were unstable after we set off; we had light airs and even beat for a bit, though at least the rain squalls washed some of the sand off the boat. We pushed further south to find favourable wind and cheered ourselves with a feast of *pastel de nata* (Portuguese custard tarts which Megan voted the best pastry of the trip), delicious fresh goats' cheese and fruit and veg from Mindelo. After a few days, we settled into our rhythm and the trades filled in. After a relaxed crossing, with Monique, our Monitor self-steering gear, by far the most active crewmember, we rounded north of Barbados accompanied by dolphins after 15 days at sea.

After clearing in, we anchored off Bridgetown where Megan's parents, met us on the beach. We spent a few days exploring the island with them before they joined us onboard for a Christmas of food, swimming and winch servicing. We

then sailed the 100nm or so to the Grenadines. After the Atlantic it didn't seem far to us, but Ray and Mary aren't sailors and were pleased to get to dry land. We spent the



Buried houses in Plymouth, Montserrat

rest of their stay exploring the Grenadines with their scattered islands and great snorkelling.

The next two months we gently explored the Windward and Leeward Islands from Grenada up to Saba, visiting 40 anchorages in 11 countries. Having always enjoyed more remote places when cruising, we had been concerned that we wouldn't like the Caribbean. We needn't have worried. Some places are busy, but it's not difficult to get off the beaten track. The islands are fascinating, spectacular and varied, the local people friendly, and reaching around in 15-20kts wearing only swimmers is hard to beat.

It was a sociable time as we met up with old friends, made new ones,

and my sister Jo (RCC) and her boyfriend Oli joined us for a couple of weeks. We had some great walking, particularly in the rainforests of Grenada, to a boiling volcanic lake on Dominica, and up the steep sides of the perfectly conical Saba. On Montserrat, we were lucky enough to stumble across Winston, the former head of Police. He is one of two people allowed into the southern part of the island, including the former capital Plymouth, which was destroyed by the (still active) Soufrière volcano in the 1990s. Due to a cancelled ferry we were the only people on his tour. It was fascinating and eerie to see the buried buildings and hear about the evacuation he had planned and executed. Thankfully, only 19 people died during the eruptions, but insurance companies refused to pay up and many lost everything. The population fell from 12,000 to 5,000, with the young in particular leaving. While there is rebuilding in the north, with the only wharf untenable in even the slightest swell, things seemed to be progressing slowly.

After the Leeward Islands, we went on a whistle stop tour of the British and US Virgin Islands before crossing to the unspoilt Passage Islands off Puerto Rico for a choice of deserted anchorages. One of the joys of cruising *Flycatcher* is the number of people who have memories of racing on or against her. However, we were still surprised when we sailed into Puerto Real on Vieques and were hailed by a lady with a beautiful Spirit who had done a Fowey week onboard when John Roome (RCC) owned her.

We rushed along the southern coast of Puerto Rico and were sad not to have more time to explore there, Hispaniola or Cuba, but if we wanted to see the States it was time to head north. We jumped to the Bahamas to meet Philippa, my sister, and her boyfriend, Dave, in Georgetown. The Bahamas are expensive, Nassau is a dump and some of the larger anchorages are like a floating holiday camp for baby-boomers. On the other hand, there is excellent and interesting cruising amongst the islands and over the banks. We had good snorkelling, including in the 'Thunderball' cave of James Bond fame and over a ditched drug-running plane, and enjoyed the surreal feeling of sailing out of sight of land in 3m of water, learning to judge depth by water colour. Though we (more accurately I) haven't got the hang of it yet, as we ran aground on a sandbar which was just where the chart said it was. Fortunately, it was soft and we got off quickly. Phili and Dave flew on to Cuba and, after a week more in the Bahamas, Megan and I headed off on 31 March for the States.

As we crossed the Gulf Stream, the temperature dropped 15°C and we picked up a stowaway when a Snowy Egret, lost at sea, landed on board. It refused food or water and cowered in the cockpit for several days, including a short gale during which it looked less than happy being soaked by the waves big enough to set off Megan's lifejacket in the cockpit. While the bird got in the way, and during breakfast we accidentally dripped honey

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on it, we became quite attached and were sad when, about 20 miles from the U.S. coast, the Egret grabbed a moving rope and ended up overboard.

We made our landfall in Charleston, South Carolina, and frantically searched for the duvet and warm clothes stowed months before. We spent April and May chasing the start of the sailing season from the Carolinas up to Maine. This meant quiet anchorages, though it was mooring laying season and harbours were often full of buoys but no boats. After trying the Intracoastal Waterway for a day and running aground, we decided it wasn't our scene, so jumped to Beaufort, around Cape Hatteras and into the Chesapeake. We motored and sailed up a windless Chesapeake with its great historical sites, hundreds of creeks and rivers and excellent crabs and oysters. The Chesapeake & Delaware Canal led to the less-picturesque Delaware, unless you like power stations. A stunning morning



sail into New York harbour, past the Statue of Liberty and Manhattan, was followed by four days exploring the city, joined by Megan's parents.

After heading up the East River and into Long Island Sound, Ray and

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Mary hired a camper van and we chased them around Long Island and Connecticut. My other sister, Bridget, and her boyfriend, Ben, joined us for the east end of Long Island and New England. We enjoyed the interesting boats in New England, particularly the amazing maritime museum at Mystic, and Newport where Ed Handasyde Dick (RCC) showed us around *Ranger* and we drooled over *Dorado*. Bridget and Ben left us in Boston, and we jumped on to Penobscot Bay in Maine where we simultaneously began our fog apprenticeship and love affair with our radar. We enjoyed exploring the Scandinavian-like islands by boat, foot and bike, reaching Roque Island, 30 miles short of the Canadian border, before crossing to Nova Scotia. Here we enjoyed the legendary hospitality of Shelburne Harbour Yacht Club and, fortuitously, the town's lobster festival.

In early June, we were in Lunenburg where my parents, Henry (RCC) and Louise, met us to check their half of the boat was OK, and sail with us to Greenland. Lunenburg was fantastic, with wooden buildings, traditional schooners being built and *Bluenose II*, replica of the champion of Grand Banks schooner racing, in the water. We worked along the south shore of Nova Scotia – visiting Halifax and deserted anchorages, while not for the first time lamenting we didn't have more time. We cut through the Bras d'Or Lakes at the east end of Nova Scotia and enjoyed a few days out of the fog, and a session of Cape Breton music in the pub.

Our landfall in Newfoundland was the Bay of Islands, on the west coast. The hills and cliffs were magnificent – but greeted us with 45kt katabatic squalls. We found a good anchorage at Woods Island – though the house that had blown over suggested it wasn't always so sheltered. A week of fresh SW breezes blew us to the Straits of Belle Isle while giving us time to explore. We particularly enjoyed Port au Choix, with archaeological evidence of three different waves of settlement starting 6,000 years ago; Red Bay, with the remains of a 16thC Basque ship; and L'Anse aux Meadows, at present the only confirmed Norse site in America. Newfoundland was also remarkable for the friendly welcome – we had to force money into the hands of one fisherman who provided diesel from his supply when there was none available – and the amount of wildlife. We saw humpbacks lob-tailing and hundreds of sea birds. The Right whales the Basques were hunting are long gone though and the collapse of fish stocks and moratorium on cod fishing have clearly had a huge impact on the local people.

It was getting colder; lots of layers and big gloves were required on deck and we met our first ice off Red Bay. From the northern tip of Newfoundland, we re-crossed the straits to Labrador and St Charles Harbour. This was an out-port, without road access, where the residents fished, mainly for cod. Most were closed by a government programme started in the 70's to 'encourage' people to move closer to services. Like

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most, St Charles is empty but for a few weekend cabins and was deserted during our stay. We tied up on the decaying wharf and explored the overgrown village.

We went on to Battle Harbour, known locally as the capital of Labrador when cod was at its peak. It used to be full of schooners, had a Grenfell Mission Hospital, and was the base from which Peary broadcast his news of reaching the North Pole. It has been restored as a museum and we enjoyed learning about the history, as well as the present from a fisherman on a shrimp factory boat. After getting stores in Fox Harbour we spent a night in the excellent natural harbour at Petty Harbour, another abandoned outport. We had read that Labrador had two seasons, winter and July. With July just starting, we were tempted to work further up the remote coast, but wanted to press on to Greenland, so consoled ourselves with thoughts



Flycatcher on the wharf at Qeqertarsuatsiat

of returning. We left deserted St Francis Harbour and pushed offshore in the daylight to get clear of the Labrador current, which brings ice down the coast. As usual, we had fog to make things harder. We saw our last ice 60nm offshore and, after 90nm, headed north for two, fairly hard days of cold, wet weather, up to 30kts against us, a leaking dorade and seasickness.

By the fourth day the wind had dropped and moods were lifted by the exciting news over the satphone that my sister, Phili, and Dave, had got engaged. This led to celebratory cooking, and a series of celebration poems, written by Louise and those ashore. Even the sun came out briefly. Louise was also able to spend her night watches planning the wedding in amazing detail.

Our last 36 hours saw light winds, before they died completely and we motored over glassy seas in the midnight sun. We headed for Paamiut, which with its falling down 60s flats isn't the most picturesque place in Greenland. A Dane we met later called it 'the arse of Greenland', which we

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thought a little unfair. We negotiated showers at the fish plant, stocked up and followed the inner leads for six days north to Nuuk. These leads snake between striking islands and skerries of granite and are at best sporadically marked and charted. They are a positive motorway in Greenland though – being the only way of getting between towns and villages, except by air. We had a foggy and cold time of it with light headwinds, but enjoyed the exploring. We



Humpback whales feeding in Disko Bay, Greenland

spent nights at two deserted Faroese fishing stations, Ravens Storø and Færingehavn, as well as tying with lines ashore amongst the skerries. We also stopped at the small village of Qeqertarsuaatsiaat where we had the rare treat of a dry and sunny walk and took advantage of the local supermarket. These not only sell excellent Danish-style bread, pastries, fruit and veg, but also rifles, ammunition, flotation suits, anchors, and a whole host of other useful items, alongside whale and narwhal and other unidentified meats. At Amitsoq, in the fjord south of Nuuk, the weather improved and we had a

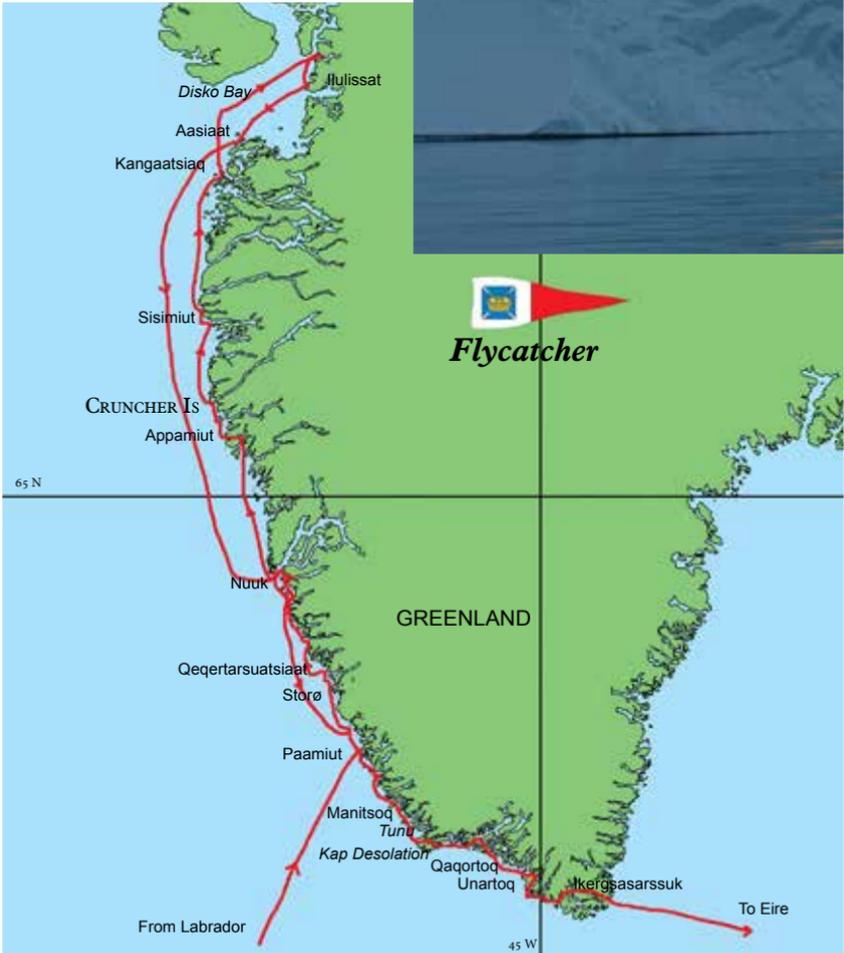
Flycatcher and ice, Disko Bay



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superb evening walk up the granite and quartz strewn hillside for a view across the fjord to mountains and the ice cap beyond.

Louise and Henry left us in Nuuk and we were joined by Tom Smedley, a friend from university. With a southerly wind blowing, we put him straight to work and headed to sea half an hour after he arrived despite it being midnight. This also meant Megan had her birthday at sea – but we had ordered a following breeze with sunshine and celebrated with the



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spinnaker, cake, presents, lots of food, champagne and *Flycatcher* decked out in birthday banners. That night, we crossed the Arctic circle under motor in a flat calm before another day under spinnaker. We saw more bergs as we neared Disko Bay, where several very active glaciers calve huge icebergs. Many of the bergs we saw in Labrador started life here a season or two ago and thousands process across Disko itself.

Our first stop was Aasiaat, where it was so warm ashore we were walking around in t-shirts. Tom was wondering what all the fuss was about. The next morning though he was wrapped up in his thick down jacket as we left in the fog. We spent a few hours carefully picking through islands and ice, able to hear whales blowing but not see them, though we did convince ourselves that we could see them on radar.

After a morning of fog, it cleared and we motored across Disko Bay before picking up a light breeze to sail past some huge icebergs. As we approached Ilulissat, we first saw a mirage of the larger bergs, then the ice in the ice-fjord, and finally the river of thousands of bergs heading north.



Appamiut - best anchorage in Greenland, apart from the mosquitoes

We were treated to the most amazing display by two groups of Humpback whales bubble netting and feeding. They circled repeatedly and then, after diving with a tail flick, would emerge as a group, mouths open, vertically out of the water, through the middle of their 'net'. We had to tack to avoid one group but had the most amazing view, and overpowering smell, as they passed a few lengths in front of us. We were buzzing like over-excited schoolchildren and nervous as they came close. We poked our noses into the dense ice off Ilulissat, but weren't prepared to follow the local boats right in, again feeling we were near something big we didn't fully understand.

We wiggled through the leads and to Ilulissat where we shuffled boats

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to make space in the busy harbour. The next morning, we headed through town, past the sledge dogs chained up for the summer, mainly sleeping or tucking ferociously into seal meat, and over to the ice-fjord. The whole 25nm of the fjord is crammed with ice from the Sermeq Kujalleq Glacier at its head which moves at 40m a day, filling the bay with bergs. The view is remarkable and we spent hours watching, photographing and walking along the fjord.

We sailed north through the bergs to Paakitsoq Fjord where we found an uncharted shallow patch off the lake before feeling our way into Tasersuaq. Here we celebrated our furthest north of the cruise at 69°31'N. The next morning, we walked to a waterfall and, in a stupid example of *Flycatcher's* strict one-in-all-in policy, all got underneath it. It was invigorating, but on the plus side there were no mosquitoes in the water. We had an over 'night' sail out of the bay to the picturesque Kronprinsens Ejlands. The fog rolled in, but fortunately after we were through the worst of the ice. We anchored for a few hours' sleep before heading south and out of Disko Bay.

At Kangaatsiaq we moored alongside a fishing boat and while Tom and I were filling up fuel cans we were surprised to see the fishing boat, still with *Flycatcher* alongside, leaving the wharf. Megan, who was down below, got a bigger shock when she suddenly realised she was underway. Tom helpfully remarked 'they're stealing your boat and your wife – shouldn't you do something?'. Beyond waving and shouting I couldn't think of much. Fortunately, they were only moving for a ferry and soon came back. They even gave us seven snow crabs. We tend to eat well when sailing but the snow crab thermidor Tom created as we ran along the coast took cooking on board to another level. Our bellies full, we kept going through the night to Sisimiut.

The next three anchorages were truly superb. First we headed for a promising-looking bay on the north of Manĩtorssuaq, an island south of Sisimiut. It proved to be a great deserted spot with good views of the hills and fog rolling up the fjord. The following day's fog cleared as we approached our next anchorage at Cruncher Island, near the entrance to the long Kangerlussuaq fjord, giving us views of the mountains off Evighed Fjord. The icing on the cake, though, was at Appamiut. Others with more knowledge say it may be the best anchorage in Greenland and, as we climbed the hill behind with the most amazing views over the anchorage and mountains and glaciers of Sermersuut, we heartily agreed. The next day was equally spectacular, passing inside Sermersuut along the Tunu (Hamborgersund). We detoured up Sermilingnaq fjord, with the hills and glaciers towering above us reflected in the still water. Off the glacier at the end we picked up a breeze and beat back out. We could have spent days in Sermilingnaq alone, but somewhat sadly headed out of the fjords, past Maniitsoq and out to sea for a foggy overnight sail back to

Nuuk.

Tom left us there and we were joined by Ben Lister, who has sailed with us several times before. Having our first darkness for several weeks, we worked quickly south of Paamiut to Ikergsasarssuk, a great anchorage where we watched eagles circling overhead. We followed the inner leads from there, with three relatively sunny days before the weather changed. Approaching Kap Desolation, we met katabatic squalls and then beat into a gale up Torssukatak, the narrow gap between the mainland and Kap Desolation. After 45 tacks, we had done enough for the day so felt our way into the nearest place on the chart labelled as a Havn, and sat out the rest of the gale there. At Sildefjord, we looked for the remains of a Norse settlement but couldn't find them; we were good at spotting different coloured bits of vegetation and claiming they were a ruin, and found great mussels and blueberries for supper. In Qaqortoq, we moored alongside David Cowper (RCC), on his way to the North-West Passage via the Fury and Hecla straits. We admired the strength and functionality of *Polar Bound* and David joined us for an enjoyable supper.

Our next stop was Unartoq, a small island with a hot spring, which the Norse apparently knew about, though we couldn't find any reference to it in the sagas. We spent a surreal half hour sitting in the small pool drinking beers with icebergs behind us. We had been studying the weather for a few days to find a good time to head back across the Atlantic and, with an opportunity opening up, decided to keep moving. After a rainy evening anchored in a bay off Nanortalik, we entered the fjord system near the



At anchor in Manitsoq, off Isbergsund, SW Greenland

southern tip of Greenland. These are steep sided and impressive, so we spent some time photographing the boat (in the rain) and exploring a bay under a glacier which was much shallower than the chart suggested.

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Having done a final stock up on fuel and food at Aappilatoq, an amazing keyhole harbour and village of around 60 people, we headed into Ikerasassuaq, Prins Christian Sund, a channel running for 40nm or so between mainland Greenland and Egger Island, the most southerly point of Greenland. Glaciers reach down to the water and spectacular mountains rise up on either side, and we spent a great day motoring down the channel, negotiating brash ice, passing seals on icebergs and marvelling at the scenery. The sun even started to come out as we neared the eastern end.

At the end of the channel is the Danish weather station which has been welcoming to yachtsmen since Tilman's time, but this year became unmanned. We tied up to the small quay and were amazed by the infrastructure, with tens of buildings, bridges, cable cars (still working), fuel tanks and lots of aerals. We had been told by a kayaker that you could get into one of the buildings and, after a bit of exploring, found an entrance to the living quarters. It was as if it had just been left, with the power still on, all furniture intact and, more remarkably, freezers and store cupboards full of food for at least a year. We presume it was just too expensive to take it all away.

We sailed from Greenland early on 16 August in decreasing, following winds that left a confused sea. A couple of times we had no wind at all and dropped the sails to stop them crashing around in the swell, keen to preserve our small fuel supply in case we needed to avoid bad weather. We weren't going anywhere fast. The worst was 66nm in 24 hours, but we were moving most of the time and had an escort of pilot whales and fulmars.

Five days out, we met the next low pressure system. We worked south to keep the wind behind us and our speed picked up as the wind built. The system was ideal for us as it slowed up giving us 4 days of favourable wind 20-35kts, albeit rainy and grey. The wind dropped and came around to the East as we approached Ireland, and our final night gave a beat past the Skelligs. We felt pretty lucky as we tied up in Lawrence Cove, Bantry Bay, after 11 days at sea; we had barely seen a gale.

We stopped at Crookhaven, the Scillies and Falmouth, where Ben left us. In Exmouth we were well fed by Megan's parents and spent our first nights ashore in 13 months. A sail along the south coast took us to the Beaulieu Meet and finally to Cobnor, Chichester Harbour, where we picked up our mooring 400 days, 16,450 miles and 240 harbours after leaving. We were surprised to find we had been underway nearly a third of the time. Perhaps we should go more slowly next time.