

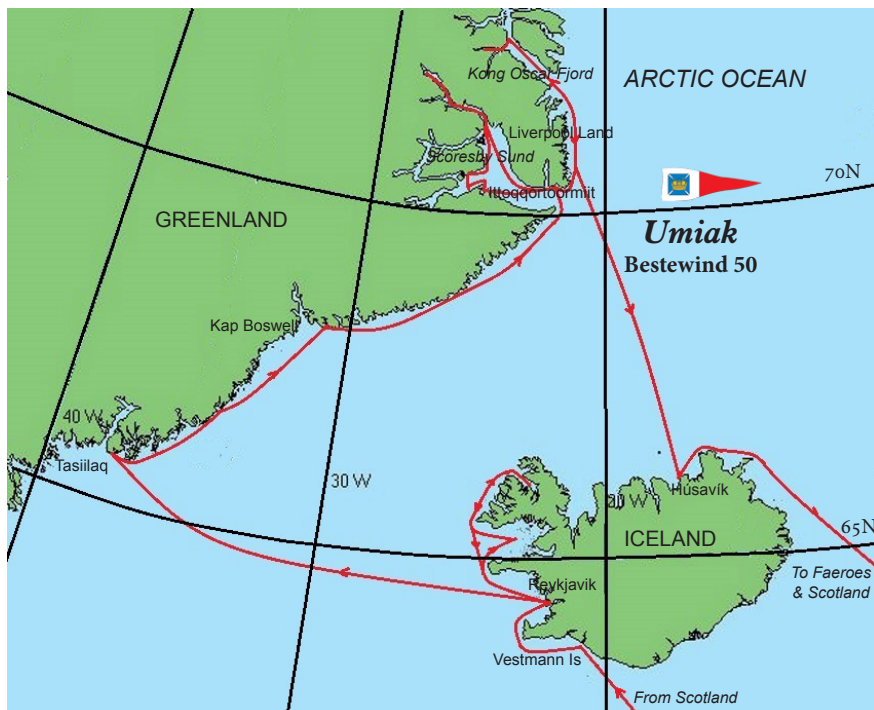
An East Greenland Adventure

Mike Jaques

Awarded the Tilman Medal

During the summer of 2015 we sailed our relatively new Bestewind 50, *Umiak*, to Svalbard and completed a circumnavigation of Spitsbergen combined with mountaineering, mostly on skis. Several of the crew were keen for another adventure and so plans to head for East Greenland evolved. As before, we were keen to merge high latitude sailing with mountaineering, but this time with increased focus on the latter. We had a couple of years to do the research, prepare the boat and deal with the administrative matters that mount up. Some additional objectives were added; clear any beach of plastic, collect input for the RCCPF *Arctic and Northern Waters* pilot and absorb some of the history of the early exploration in the region. Our plan evolved into a three-week delivery trip to Iceland from Scotland, making landfall in Tasiilaq on the east coast of Greenland, then sailing north to Scoresby Sund and hopefully sailing even further north, if the ice allowed, into Kong Oscar Fjord. Six weeks were allowed for this phase which we hoped would be sufficient to summit several peaks. We would then head back to Iceland, visiting the Faeroes on the way home to Scotland. Inevitably there would be a few planned crew changes to accommodate work and personal commitments.





The Bestewind 50 is a fast cruiser designed by Dykstra and built in the Netherlands. She has a straight bow and a pilot house and some say she looks like a fishing boat. She also has a fin keel with a large bulb and a carbon rig. She is ideal for this type of voyage with easy living space and substantial stowage, paramount when you have 100 days of food, climbing kit, skis, sledges, camping gear, winter clothing and all sorts of yacht spares on board.

Departure from Ardfern was on the proposed date of 20 June with a little more wind forecast than we would have preferred. As is usual, the wind was coming directly from our rhumb line course, so we tacked our way towards Iceland, stopping overnight at Canna, hopeful of an improved wind direction and then briefly at St Kilda. A sea routine was soon settled into which, with six on board, was not onerous. Our wind direction backed allowing a spritely reach in winds up to 35kts. The destination was the Vestmann Islands and as we neared we were treated to 45kts of veered wind on the nose, which made for an interesting landfall and berthing. This was soon in the past when our attentions turned to the two young policewomen who appeared for immigration duties, making us feel that we had just signed on as cast in a Scandinavian TV thriller. This was at 0300 in the morning. After a short explore of the island which had been the scene of significant volcanic activity in recent times, we were on our way to Reykjavik, escorted for a short way by

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a pod of orcas.

Sadly in Reykjavik, Jim, Adam and Dave had to depart, leaving Ian and Colin on board to be joined by my wife, Pam. Reykjavik was disappointing, not helped by rainy weather, but it was absolutely smothered by tourists, mostly straight off the cruise ships. Our next destination was the opposite, the north-west fjords. This is an interesting area, again not seen in a great light due to the inclement weather, but a very remote place to live with an economy based on fishing, which I'm sure in the winter would be a particularly arduous life. Here the majority of fishing vessels were 25ft day-boats, rigged for line fishing, mainly cod. This is obviously a premium product and we too tried our hand in a rather more amateurish fashion, resulting in a dozen within 20 minutes. We headed back to Reykjavik for our crew changeover.

Only Ian, my longest serving climbing partner with whom I first came to Greenland in 1977 remained on board as we welcomed our new team. Both Olly and Giles had been with Ian and me in Svalbard. Olly had just finished a contract with the *Dong Feng* team in the Volvo Race and whilst in Svalbard had taken to mountaineering which he continued on his return. Giles, a professional rigger, is both a high level sailor and mountaineer as well as a great fixer. Ash, none of us really knew well, but is another yacht racer keen to explore, while Rod, our doctor, was in the Antarctic with me nearly 40 years ago. There was an interesting age split: three over 60 and three under 40, which was entertaining.

Our passage to Tasiilaq was pretty straightforward, making landfall, or at least we think we did, in thick fog. This is very common off the coast of Greenland due to the temperature differences between the sea ice and the air.



Coastal navigation

We were soon through it, delighted to have seen our first bergs and anchoring in front of the settlement. Tasiilaq, often also called Angmagssalik, is the largest of the east-coast settlements, with about 1,500 inhabitants. The majority of Greenland's population live on the west coast which

benefits from the Gulf stream keeping more of it free from sea ice. The days of the Inuit living as hunters have declined and it was unclear to us how their economy really works other than some contributions from tourism. It was a good place to top up with fuel and a few groceries and we were able to moor alongside a coaster on the jetty making this easier. However, at 0500 we were

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awoken and asked to move as a salvage tug required the berth. The said tug had alongside her a wooden ship on a barge. On closer inspection she looked like an early 20th century, ice-strengthened ship, about 100ft long, not dissimilar from the *Fram*. It was, in fact, the *Maude* by the same designer, Amundsen's ship for the North East Passage that been raised in Cambridge Bay and was on



The *Maude*

her way home to Norway for restoration. If you are going to get bumped off your berth it doesn't get any more prestigious than this.

Our next objective was to sail north to Scoresby Sund, but stopping in the area of 67°N where we had spied some possible climbing

from the maps. Incidentally, even though the maps were small scale they proved to be great aids to navigation. The Cmap, Navionics and paper charts were all exceedingly sketchy, often conflicting and did not align with the GPS positions for the surveys, at times a couple of miles out. Positions needed to be verified with plotting from visual and radar bearings. Charted soundings were rare, so we extrapolated land contours to estimate soundings.

We anchored overnight a couple of times, before an area was found that offered some mountain projects. These anchorages seemed a good time to do training and briefings on our systems for those less experienced or out of practice. Specifically we looked at dinghy operations, ice-axe arrest, crevasse rescue and rifle shooting as we were going to be in polar bear territory for the next six weeks.

'Lesson one': distances are greater than they look, so double the expected time. With no really workable maps for anything other than an overview, it took us a couple of routes to get 'scaled' in. Whilst most of our coastal peaks were about a 1,000m the starting points were at sea level with often difficult terrain to cover before we could begin



The Author

climbing. If at all possible it was preferable to travel by ski or snowshoe to our objectives. We managed a couple of routes in this area, one in particular being

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Kangerslussuaq

a very good rock ridge.

From here we had hoped to sail into Kangerlussuaq Fjord and anchor in Suhaili Bugt but the ice was too heavy. *Umiak* is built of GRP and, although there is a steel-reinforced bow, we are conservative with ice navigation. It is possible to make progress in up to 3/10ths ice concentration. However, this is quite slow and, when given a choice, we would tend to divert around heavy ice concentrations rather than push on. Generally it was clearer further offshore. We had taken a drone with us to help find leads through the ice but sadly one day it dropped out of the sky straight into the sea; this was somewhat ironic as we were trying to clear plastic not dump it. We greatly enjoyed navigating in the ice and on this particular day we saw hundreds of seals basking in the sun. This is the area that the British had been so involved in exploring between the world wars, in particular the Arctic Air Route Expedition under the leadership of Gino Watkins. We were focussed on identifying the landscape from their reports.

Anchoring was quite difficult in this area. The bottom was very rocky and the holding often required a few attempts



Bergs off Steenstrup Sondre

and plenty of chain. It was also deep until quite close inshore, the fjords being very steep-sided. At our next destination, Kap Boswell, we found a lovely zawn (very small inlet), into which we reversed and tied off in four places to the shore using a mixture of rock pegs and slings. It was here that we received 'lesson two'. We worked a system in which there were always two people left on the yacht, one of whom was capable of skipping to another anchorage in case she had to be moved. On the shore, at the point where the climbers were dropped, a barrel with basic survival gear was left in case it was not possible to retrieve the shore party. In our zawn there was a nice waterfall and whilst



Sermiligaq

Rod and I were filling up our water barrels we noticed *Umiak* was yawing badly. The engine was battery charging and I unfairly presumed that Ian, who was on board, must have put her in gear by mistake. We hurtled back and then realised that the boat was riding waves that were getting larger. I took over the engine controls and played her ahead and astern whilst we took stock. The preference would have been to leave rather quickly by dropping the lines but we had 70m of chain down so this could not be a swift exit. By this time the waves were about 4ft high and getting confused as they bounced off the back of the zawn. Then one of our rock pegs came out and the sling to the other peg broke; the warp was under a lot of tension and came singing towards us. It was a floating warp, but it appears that the end doesn't float if they have steel pitons attached. Inevitably there was only one destination for it – the propeller. Now the pressure had gone up a level but we were able to steady *Umiak* with the bow-thrusters and the remaining warps all held as the waves dropped. We believe our tsunami must have been caused by a capsizing or calving iceberg. I have since read of a similar experience in Bob Shepton's book, one to be wary of.

After a couple more climbing routes at Kap Boswell, a decision was made to push on to Scoresby Sund, 150nm to the north, and we enjoyed a good downwind sail for most of it, albeit occasionally in poor visibility. This can be hard work as, whilst the radar will pick out icebergs, it will not register smaller bits of ice and so we had to reduce speed from time to time and keep two sets of eyes on watch.

Ittoqqortoormiit is the most northern settlement on the east coast and

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is at the mouth of Scoresby Sund. This is one of the largest fjord systems in the world and was named after a whaler from Whitby who operated with many others in the area in the 1700s. We were keen to visit the fjord and some of the anchorages that feature in the RCCPF pilot book. The northern side of the fjord had softer terrain than what had been experienced so far, which was a pleasant change after the 500nm of granite peaks and glaciers we sailed past on our way up. There was, according to the ice chart, too much ice in the south-west of the sound so we headed to the north-west hoping it would clear in due course. We had an Iridium Pilot satcom on board which was used to download the Danish and Norwegian ice charts. After 100nm we entered Nordvest Fjord where the sides steepened again and searched for some climbing objectives, but nothing really hit the spot. The ice, which was a mixture of bergs and pack increased. Eventually we anchored for the night in Leicester Bugt, particularly apt as I was born in Leicestershire. We were now 170nm from the mouth of Scoresby Sund. It is a huge fjord.

On an earlier watch Olly thought he had spotted a suitable mooring with some decent peaks, so we headed back to it. By the time we arrived it was blowing about 20kts and the small bay was a lee shore so mooring wasn't really viable. It was decided to drop Olly, Giles and Rod off so they could traverse over a col whilst *Umiak* was sailed around to an anchorage at the end of their route to pick them up the following day. Going back to 'lesson one', the next day extended to the early hours of the following day and our intrepid team had completed quite a journey, with major boulder fields, glacier travel and serious river crossings all in poor visibility.

Hecla Havn was our next destination, a recommendation in the pilot book which on our last ice chart was icebound, but we



Ice navigation

hoped it would clear. Sadly it was not to be and we anchored short of it in a bay called Myddebugt. This was undertaken with radar in very poor visibility, using our regular process of creeping forward until reaching shallower water. *Umiak* has a forward echo sounder, but, as so often with electronics, it had become unreliable, despite Olly's best efforts to repair it. This time though, the keel did the sounding for us as we hit a sand bank. In the morning the fog had cleared a bit and as we were getting our bearings a polar bear swam out to have a look at us. They are awesome mammals and we spent some time watching it swim to the shore, dry itself off in the snow and then walk around.

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We mused how well camouflaged he was against rocks and to remember him the next time we were moaning about climbing with a rifle.

A nice sail in improving weather saw us back at Ittoqqortoormiit primarily to buy eggs for our rapidly expanding baking programme. On all these expeditions cooking becomes slightly competitive.

Our next stop was Liverpool Land where we hoped for some more



Ilivitiarik return to boat

climbing. We were not disappointed. Anchoring in Kolding Fjord, we had three successful ascents including our most serious attempt where we repeated lesson one. Ian, Rod, Ash and I had returned to the boat from our various trips when Giles announced that he fancied climbing a very distinctive peak a little further inshore via a snow gully and that they would do it overnight for colder snow conditions. Giles and Olly set off planning to be back for breakfast. When parties were ashore we kept in regular contact with at set sched times via VHF, but if this failed we used Iridium phones. Therefore, we got a regular update from our climbers and it was pretty clear that the toast and porridge could be put away. They summited at 1400 before making many abseils to descend the other ridge, thus completing a traverse of the peak. They called the route 'Don't forget your toothbrush'. It was 970m high and, for the alpinists, it was AD+.

Another move north saw us again thwarted from our preferred anchorage at Neld Bugt, so turning back we dropped anchor at Tvoersund. The following day Giles, Ash and I climbed a wonderful 550m snow gully with a couple of ice pitches at the top, from where we were able to summit two fine peaks. The day after, whilst I was on boat duties, Giles skied the gully from below the ice pitch, which at over 40° was impressive. Meanwhile I dropped Olly and Ash on the island opposite and they climbed another great ridge. The pickup though was challenging as the swell had built up and necessitated

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them jumping from a small cliff one at a time in to the dinghy. That was probably 'lesson three' on shore support. Ashore that evening, I think we had the world's most northern BBQ, eating very fine beef that I had brought from Cumbria.

I hoped we would be able to push north of Liverpool Land into the next fjord system, Kong Oscar Fjord. This area is rarely visited and entering requires permission from the government. To date, however, the ice charts made it look like this would not be possible. From their last summit Olly and Ash could see a fair distance north and believed that we could get into the entrance, so that's what we set off to do. We had patches of ice, but we just kept going and going, eventually getting into open water making Antartics Havn, that evening. This is the most northern entry in the pilot book. The ice chart had been updated that afternoon and sure enough it reported that the southern half of Kong Oscar Fjord was now open water.

With the intent to see how far in we could get, we carried on and rather surprisingly noticed a ship on the AIS. This was something we hadn't seen for weeks. It was a cargo ship unloading at what appeared to be a mine. The grib files were predicting no wind so we knew that more fuel was needed if we wished to get further in to the fjord. Hoping that we might be able to purchase some here, we anchored and went ashore. It was actually a disused mine site and the depot for the Sirius Patrol.

A little history: during the World War II after Denmark was occupied, Greenland retained their independence and supplied weather information to the Allied Arctic convoys. The Germans were also eager to use Greenland for this purpose so the Greenland Government formed a unit called the Sledge Patrol made up of Danish, Norwegian and Inuit hunters who would patrol the East coast to ensure that the Germans had not landed and established a weather station. This is all documented in a wonderful book, *Sledge Patrol*, by David Howarth, that you should all read. The Sirius Patrol is the modern-day version and they still use dog sleds to patrol the coast.

They were very friendly, gave us ice data which confirmed that the ice had just cleared and allowed us to purchase a drum of diesel. The following day we sailed to their summer base, Ella Island, which we had read about in the book. The original hut is still there and in use. The scenery in Kong Oscar was quite different, a lot softer, a more yellow colour, almost like you would see in the Middle East, but still with high snow-capped mountains.

We made an about-turn at the head Dickson Fjord. Time was ticking away and we wanted to have one final climbing push, so we headed back overnight in fog and ice to Liverpool Land, specifically Mariager Fjord. After another radar entry and anchoring, the next day we set off ashore, in beautiful weather. Ian and I were hoping to ski up the glacier to a peak, but couldn't find a safe access point onto the glacier so climbed a rock route on the other side of the fjord. Meanwhile Ash and Olly managed another attractive peak. The



Ella Island

following day Olly and Ash added three to the bag and Giles and Rod, with a combo of skiing and climbing, made the highest peak of the trip. Using skis really contributes to the distance one can achieve as the descent can be a real time-saver.

We were now downloading grib files and routeing for our return which was looking a little tricky. Eventually a slot was found that meant we had one last day on the mountains. By now there were several weary bodies, but, after a late start waiting for the visibility to clear, Giles and I skinned onto the high point of the ice cap about eight miles inland and skied all the way back to the beach; it was a great excursion to finish on.

We set off, sad to be leaving but delighted with our experiences. We had sailed over 1,500nm in Greenland mostly in uncharted waters and between us we climbed 16 presumed first ascents. There is no real recording of this but we found no evidence of any previous ascents. We covered the passage to Husavik without mishap except a broach under spinnaker, which was a challenge for Ash who was making bread at the time. So if there is a 'lesson four', it would be, 'Don't bake bread when the guys get into race mode.' We had wind up to 30kts from behind and made the 350nm in 40hrs, which the sailors thoroughly enjoyed.

Husavik is the whale-watching capital of Iceland, where, except for Ian, our Greenland crew would be saying goodbye. We tidied up and reprogrammed ourselves into society in readiness for our new crew. Alastair and Angie had been to Svalbard with us and we were also joined by my neighbour in Cumbria, Charles Lambrick, instigator of my membership of the RCC. In Husavik there were about 20 vessels taking tourists out to view whales. They all had AIS, so we followed them and were treated to the most amazing display by two humpbacks.

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We now had to cross to the Faroes and we were getting plenty of depressions pushing through so the right departure time was important, if we were to have a civilised sail. *Umiak* is a good passage-maker, comfortable down below and able to knock out 200nm days with a bit of wind. We left from Raufarhofn on the north-east peninsula and made good time to the Faroes. There was one weird episode, though; Alastair and Angie were on watch and noticed on the AIS what they believed was a fishing fleet of about 10 boats on our course. The odd thing was that they all had the same name followed by sequential numbers and from the AIS were 10m long. They had no navigation lights! There was also a helicopter flying around to add to our intrigue. Many theories were put forward.

What a stunning landfall the Faroes are: vertical cliffs straight out of the sea and for Ian and me rather nice greenery too. We were particularly interested in having a good explore of the Faroes and despite mixed weather we did manage to see quite a sample. I think we would all recommend it although it does require being alert on the navigation. Not unlike Scotland, there are plenty of tidal races and overfalls building, in some cases, powerful seas.



Giles helming

Another day waiting for a crossing slot and we were off on our shortest crossing to Stornoway. It was all pretty straightforward apart from one little incident when we spotted a whale blowing that tracked right across our bow; we had to gybe to avoid the large fin whale. Generally, I felt that we had seen a lot of sea mammals on this voyage and I hope that this is a good sign for the future. We were also reassured that only three pieces of plastic were found on the beaches in Greenland.

Past Stornoway, Mallaig, Lochaline, in home waters now, we still had 25kts on the nose through the Sound of Luing to keep us focussed. We made it back to Ardfarn on 9 September, covering 4,700nm since we left twelve weeks earlier, with 14 different folk involved and we never even got the first aid kit out. It was quite a summer.