

From Westminster to the Arctic

26 Years old. No mortgage. No wife, no kids and soon no job. A career landmark fast approaching with a potential break to follow... What better time to embark on a serious sailing expedition?

These were the thoughts running through my head as I conducted yet another weekend training session in a budget hotel somewhere in the West Midlands. Having put my mind to nothing but the 2015 General Election as a Conservative Party employee for the past four years, the time had come at last to think of life beyond. And so, staring at a forgotten globe in suburban Walsall and dreaming of tales of the sea, the seed was sown.

Time for a plan. I explored various opportunities: The Clipper Race for the modest sum of £45K... perhaps not! Plugging the holes of a small wooden skiff and making a solo trip around Northern Europe... I mean I like the sound of my own voice but I'm not sure I'd be willing to sacrifice my relative sanity quite yet.

My research continued. Inspired by the logs of RCC legends such as Bob Shepton, Trevor Robertson and others I started to grow a fascination with Greenland and the Arctic. In February 2015 I was put in the awkward situation of trying to explain to my new girlfriend that rather than spend Valentine's Day with her, I was going to fly to the Outer Hebrides and spend the weekend in a confined space with a man forty years my senior who I'd never met - and this wasn't even anything to do with the Conservative Party! It was here in the frosty Stornoway Marina that I met the inspirational Trevor Robertson. Unfortunately, timings would dictate that I wasn't going to be able to play a part in the 2015 expedition of *Iron Bark* but I came away more inspired than ever and determined to visit the Arctic.

Over the next few months I spent the little bit of spare time that I had away from the campaign trawling the endless sailing forums and crewing websites. But it was through the Royal Cruising Club that I would have the most success. Through a combination of networking at sailing club dinners and use of 'crew wanted' pages, as well as the generous Noel Marshall Award which helped me to afford the trip, I was able to piece together a challenging voyage to faraway lands.

Fast forward to June 2015. Feeling triumphant after the recent surprise victory in the election, having quit my job, moved out of my flat and with a one-way ticket to the ocean, I bade farewell to my nervous mother and excited father (who undertook a similar expedition at a similar age). I boarded the night train up to Oban to join Martin Wright (RCC) and crew on board his 1993 Chuck Paine designed Bowman 48, *Boandaro*.

***Boandaro*: Oban, Scotland – Ísafjörður, Iceland**

After months of preparation, my excitement was palpable, but I was forced to check my over-eagerness to get out into the ocean as we had a weeks' worth of sea trials and preparation. This was no bad thing though as it gave us time to stock up on our whiskey supplies and make a quick circumnavigation of Mull. It didn't take long for me to realise that *Boandaro* was a serious sailing boat and I'd be hard pushed to find a better balanced and more comfortable cruiser for phase one of my adventure.

With a full crew in place we headed north slaloming the inner and Outer Hebrides under spinnaker accompanied by pods of busy dolphins, nosy seals and more than enough birdlife to get the twitchiest twitcher twitching. After stops in Rùm and Skye we arrived in grey Stornoway. Since the age of 7, I've had a fascination with the Isle of Lewis stemming from being a young RNLI lifeboat fanatic and observing that Stornoway is (or at least was) the most equipped lifeboat station in the UK. I'm afraid to say I found the reality somewhat bleaker with its dreary architecture, abandoned houses, bus shelters like Second World War outposts, history of fishing fatalities and abandoned communities. The locals however provided the perfect relief, inviting us to join them for a sail on their traditional Lewisian

Skiff, a Sgothan Niseach, enjoying the company of the international community of intrepid sailors and partaking in a kitchen ceilidh with local musicians, storytellers and poets partying late into the night.

Early the next morning we cast our lines and made our way out into the North Atlantic Ocean. Unfortunately, the big Atlantic rollers didn't mix too well with last night's questionable home brew and it was time for me to pay a few visits to the lee rail to bid farewell to the captains (delicious) soup. The crossing was rocky, if otherwise uneventful, and we made steady progress into the bitter northerly wind before being welcomed to Icelandic waters with rain of biblical standards after 90 hours at sea. It was in these conditions (and with limited visibility to boot) that we made our way around the volcanically formed breakwater and into the incredible harbour at Vestmannaeyjar.

When the rain abated the next morning we were able to truly appreciate the incredible surroundings of Vestmannaeyjar. The island has been afflicted by severe volcanic eruptions over the years, including in 1973 when the whole town was evacuated to the mainland. The locals heroically fought back by using fire hoses to cool down and solidify the ensuing molten wave. After a 7 month battle they were successful and had rescued the harbour and town from ultimate destruction. The island is now a significantly different shape and the scars of eruption are still visible in the dramatic cliffs and crags which are now the home of breathtaking amounts of sea birds. As you can imagine, this made for some fantastic climbing and exploring.

We proceeded on to Reykjavik where we were able to download the latest ice maps for our intended destination of Eastern Greenland. Unfortunately there was little sign of the Arctic ice decreasing. We took some time to discover the surprisingly cosmopolitan (and expensive!) capital city before escaping the hordes of tourists and heading north into yet more unwelcome northerlies. Of course the boat was more than equipped to deal with this and after a few days of bitterly cold, hard and wet sailing we arrived in Ísafjörður, a stones throw from the arctic circle and the traditional departure point for those few boats attempting the trip to East Greenland.

Ísafjörður is a captivating place and I was keen to explore the surrounding area by bicycle. Whilst in the hire shop the attendant suggested that I might want to wear a helmet 'for the turns'. I assumed she meant the roads were very windy and didn't think much of it. Actually it turned out part of my journey took me through a 500m long, 1,000 + strong Arctic *Tern* colony, and they were not happy to see me. Like something out of an Alfred Hitchcock movie, as soon as they saw me approach their young they darted straight for my head, screeching down my ears and chasing me along. All I could see was their shadows as I tried to sprint away before they started aggressively pecking at my bag and on my neck. As I left one area, the next lot would see me and this terrifying bullying process was repeated again and again. It had quite an effect on me and other than the cuts I received I seemed to develop a sort of ornophobia which had me tensing up every time I heard a noisy bird.

Unfortunately the ice situation in Greenland wasn't getting any better. This was a problem for me as my plan was to sail to Tasilaq (East Greenland) and then hop on a flight to Western Greenland to meet my next crewing connection before the end of July. Fortunately, I was able to find a flight. I bade farewell to *Boandaró* and hopped on a small propeller plane bound for Ilulissat (Jakobshavn), Greenland. Here I spent a good 24 hours, silently staring with mouth agape at this breath-taking, iceberg-strewn UNESCO world heritage site. The sheer volume of icebergs was too much for any cruising yacht to get in here so I blagged myself onto a ferry with the local football team and we bashed and weaved our way through the ice before I was dropped off in the sleepest of backwaters, Qasigiannguít (Christianshåb). This road-less, airport-less village, population 1,000, was to be the unlikely venue for my next crew change. After a few hours of nervous waiting, the good ship *Suilven* (2003,

Holman & Pye designed Oyster 47) sailed into view and not long later I was enjoying hot soup aboard with my new hosts, John and Linda Andrews (RCC).

***Suilven*: Qasigiannqut (Christianshåb), Greenland – Halifax, Canada**

After their ‘close encounters with ice’ whilst entering the North West Passage’ in 2014, John and Linda had opted for a more leisurely cruise around Greenland in 2015. It was towards the end of their cruising season that myself and Ben Warnick (now RCC) jumped aboard *Suilven*. After a quick Arctic dip and a check up on the night life in Aasiaat, we headed south. *Suilven*’s gearbox was in need of some TLC so we made way slowly, covering 320nm in 70 hours before arriving in Nuuk. With *Suilven* coming out of the water we were able to take some time to enjoy the delights of the Greenlandic capital. It didn’t take us long to befriend the other land-starved sailors we found in the harbour and together we enjoyed climbing the local mountain Ukkusissat, singing with the vodka-fuelled Poles and traditional dancing with the equally drunken Inuit. Alas my attempted search to find an Inuit wife had been ultimately unsuccessful, but it had been a very amusing time all the same.

We headed out across the Davis Strait bound for Labrador and joined by dolphins, humpback, minke and pilot whales as well as witnessing for the first time the Aurora Borealis on our return to genuine darkness. After a 650nm, 98-hour passage we landed in Nain, Labrador and continued our southing, through Labrador and Newfoundland where again and again the musical charm of the local ‘Newfies’ won us over.

Whilst in mesmerising Battle Harbour, a once bustling cod capital now completely deserted bar the odd tourist, we were introduced to the concept of an ‘ugly stick’. The idea was that when enjoying one of their regular ‘kitchen parties’, there is no room for large percussion instruments given the tight space. Instead they have devised an ‘ugly-stick’. This comprised of a large griddled stick (for scraping), a hinged boot (for stomping), bottle tops attached to nails (for rattling), tin cans (for cymbals) and a slightly spooky knitted dolls head (for decoration, I guess). As we made our way south we received invitations to numerous kitchen parties serving wild moose, ‘doing the stomp’ with pensioners and playing the spoons by Viking heritage sites. Eventually Captain John decided *Suilven* needed an ‘ugly stick’ of her own and set to work on an old flagstaff, a now redundant ice pole and Linda’s old Dubarrys. The result - ‘Hurty Gurty’ - is featured in her very own music video (available on request) and became a key member of the *Suilven* crew.

Following the fantastic Newfie hospitality it was onwards to Nova Scotia. We sailed towards Cape Breton under cruising chute, in shorts and t-shirts for the first time and in high spirits (despite my discovery that the holding tank was leaking on my bunk). We passed through Baddeck, our first sense of real civilisation for a while, before inadvertently mooring up in the middle of a wedding reception in Ben Eoin. It would have been rude not to say hello and it wasn’t long until ‘the English guys who came on the sail boat from the Green-land!’ were enjoying the delights of Canadian pop music on the dance floor.

We exited the Bras D’or lake and returned to the white horses of the Atlantic for what was to be *Suilven*’s final passage of 2015 on to Halifax. After a fantastic six weeks on board the time had come to take *Suilven* out of the water and for the Andrews to return to the UK.

For me though I was only just getting used to this life at sea. Having come so far and met so many fascinating people along the way, why couldn’t I carry on? Okay I didn’t have a boat, or indeed a place on a boat but these were just little details... And so my life as an ocean hitch hiker began....

The rest of the story including videos, songs, poems, photos and in depth accounts (including the search for an Inuit wife) can be found at Oliver Wells’ blog:
<https://oejwells.wordpress.com>