



With thanks to Gill and to Bertie, David,
Edd, John, Laura, Mag, Rob, Rodrigo,
Skip, Stephen, Toby and Tony

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Antarctica



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The story of a unique voyage to Antarctica
aboard Pelagic Australis for exploratory ski-
mountaineering in February, 2013.



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To the edge of the world





Mount Français

We climbed steadily up through crevasses and seracs high on the Menelaus Ridge towards the summit of Mt. Agamemnon. Having started in the semi-darkness of Antarctic night, the sun was rising slowly, casting enormous shadows for miles across the ice shelf far below from the peaks along the ridge, now gleaming in brilliant sunshine. The gold highlights and purple shadows are that rare treat when climbing high above the surrounding mountains, here made even more glorious by the extraordinary clarity of the light. Inevitably it was continuously tempting to stop for photographs and to draw breath in the thinning air. In Antarctica the spectacle was extra special, knowing that we were certainly alone and very probably the first to set foot up here all year.



The Trojan Range

Around me was a wealth of experience at high altitudes and also of mountaineering in Antarctica, so there was no shortage of ideas on how to work our way up through the jumbled seracs to the summit snowfields of Mt. Agamemnon, 2570m. Having reached easier ground there was still a long pull up to the summit before the briefest of pauses on top. Knowing that parties had made it this far and then had to turn back added a sense of urgency to get on towards the real prize, Mt. Français. And gathering clouds to the northeast added their encouragement to keep moving. This was not a great place to get caught out in bad weather.

So we descended easily enough to the saddle and then on up to the summit of Mt. Français, 2825m. Perhaps it was my impatience to reach the top, but it certainly seemed further than it ought to have done. It also felt higher than expected, presumably because the pressure at high latitudes really is lower than in our more usual Alpine playgrounds. The views back across the Gerlache Channel were exceptional, even with the clouds beginning to limit the visibility. I had to let the others get away whilst I stayed to take a few more photographs, but took care to follow promptly enough to keep in touch. As it turned out, we could enjoy some excellent skiing back down to the saddle. Then it was back onto skins for the long return haul up to the ridge. The possibility of descending the Iliad Glacier had to be ruled out because of an obvious crevasse barrier that would almost certainly be bothersome and time-consuming to cross.



Summit, Mt. Francois.

Photo: David McKeeking

As Rodrigo and I prepared to ski back through the upper seracs and down the ridge, the wind was now picking up. No matter the team's long, collective experience, we were going to be caught yet again by the speed with which mountain conditions can change. The skiing was reasonable, but the visibility was rapidly deteriorating so that the hardest part was keeping in touch with one another as we spread carefully down the ridge. This now became the priority to the detriment of the skiing.

At length, with a combination of careful judgment, GPS and luck we located our marker flag, wisely left during our ascent to mark the start of our route down through the lower seracs and back to the tents. As we skied over the edge into the lee, the wind became less troublesome, the crevasses were more easily seen and there was more skiing to enjoy.

After our long day out, the light was beginning to fade again ready for the short night. We were more than happy to tumble into our tents and get a brew going. By now the wind was really howling down here on the ice shelf, occasionally generating deafening gusts. During the night winds of up to 110kts would be recorded down in the channel. Fortunately, the storm brought more snow, which helped to dig us in and protect the tents. It would be more than two days before we could consider sledging back to the coast, leaving plenty of time for idle chatter and reflection on the journey so far.





Stephen Venables and Skip Novak had assembled a delightfully eclectic, multi-national team. Rodrigo Jordan joined us from Chile, Tony Bell from the States, John Hollott from Australia and then David McKeeking, Rob Davis, Toby Fountaine and me from England. Our collective sailing enthusiasm was high, though skill and knowledge were relatively low for the challenging latitude, apart from Skip who has sailed around the world countless times. So we also enjoyed the company of a professional crew, led by Magnus Day, with Laura Hampton, Bertie Whitley and Edd Hewett. The joy of our expedition came as much from the whole ship's company as from the wonderful environment we were exploring.

Reaching Antarctica had been part of a long-held ambition for me, much as it was for others on the expedition. When Stephen suggested coming South, I jumped at the

chance. Gathering in Ushuaia at the end of January, there was a sense of mounting excitement mixed with some trepidation at the thought of rough seas in the Drake Passage. My own sailing experience was rather limited. I had learned windsurfing amongst the crocodiles on Lake Kariba, which is recommended for an incentive to learn quickly how to stay upright. Later sailing trips in the idyllic conditions of the Caribbean and around the Canaries were hardly the preparation needed for a multi-day crossing of the Southern Ocean. So I felt justified in wondering how well I would get on. Nevertheless, I was determined to enjoy the experience and I quickly felt completely at home on Pelagic Australis, in the company of the excellent crew under the leadership of Magnus. It was obvious that we had the ideal vessel for the job, a no-nonsense design with nothing fancy or unnecessary. I genuinely admired the practical functionality. The provisioning was also well thought out: Plenty of beer and three lambs hanging from the stern to keep us going. We even had Marmite from Port Stanley under the floorboards.



Skip Novak

Rodrigo Jordan



Skip



Tony Bell



Rob Davis



David McKeeking



John Hollott

Toby Fountaine



Bertie



Mag



Rodders



Laura



Edd



Hourglass dolphin - photo Toby Fountaine



Port Lockroy









After leisurely preparations, waiting an extra day for winds to drop around Cape Horn, we finally left Argentina on 4th February, following the regulation pilot out down the Beagle Channel and into the Drake Passage. The seas were indeed rough and chaotic to start with, though nothing particularly unpleasant, I'm told. I took precautionary tablets, which certainly helped though I didn't feel quite at home in the galley until I'd doubled the dose. Our spirits were periodically lifted by accompanying dolphins, especially the beautiful, black and white Hourglass Dolphins playing in our bow wave.

Three days after setting out, I finally sighted land in the half-light of early morning. At first it was just a smudge on the horizon, which could have been a darker cloud. Then I realised we were looking at a distant rock face on Smith Island. We still had a whole day of sailing to our first port of call, with the islands and the Gerlache Channel providing a spectacular backdrop to sightings of Sei and Humpback whales.

I woke early on our first morning in Port Lockroy. Pelagic Australis was now utterly still; the only sounds were from distant seabirds and penguins with the occasional crunch of some brash ice against the aluminium hull. The contrast with the constant motion and sounds during our crossing could not have been greater. This was heavenly. We took the opportunity of visiting Port Lockroy to see the historic research station and send some postcards from the novelty post office. Then at last we could unpack our skis and assemble our gear for an ascent of Jabet Peak by way of a trial to ensure that everything was in working order. More contrasts; from sea legs to ski legs. The ascent of Jabet was straightforward enough, although we chose to stop just short of the true summit. Time was running out, we had visitors for dinner on board and the snow conditions did not promise a rapid descent.





On Mount Scott. Below is the Lemaire Channel with Mt Français in the far distance







Towards the South Pole. Views south from Mt. Scott







We then had a day of preparation for the main trip ashore. There were sledges to pack, tents to check and provisions to divide amongst us. Eventually we were able to sail up towards Access Point, land our gear and return to the sheltered harbour at Port Lockroy, ready for an early start the following day. Three days of sledging got us across the Marr Ice Shelf and installed at our base camp ready for the ascent of Mt Français. An earlier plan to land at Bonnier Point and climb the Zeus Ridge had to be abandoned because of high winds and swells along the coast. Reaching the Zeus Ridge from our alternative route proved impractical and so we set up camp below Agamenon.

After our successful ascent and entrapment in the storm we were finally able to return to the coast in one long day. Visibility remained poor, making navigation difficult, but eventually we were able to set up camp again at Access Point, with yet another day confined to tents before the swell died down enough for a safe pick up in the Zodiac.

Returning to the boat for a splendid breakfast early on Monday 18th, we then had time to climb Hovgaard Peak, which provided some excellent skiing, before returning to the boat at anchorage next to Pleneau Island. We were just settling down after dinner on board when a call came for help from a nearby vessel. One of the sailing crew had gone ashore in a small walking party and disappeared down a crevasse, high on Hovgaard. Some of these ice sheets look harmless enough but are riven with deep cracks. Fortunately our hauling gear was still packed so we assembled a small rescue team and quickly reached the forlorn visitor. He was cold, shaken, badly cut by the ice and suffering cracked ribs from his 6m fall, but we were able to haul him out and bring him back down. Two of our doctors, Rob and John, then stitched him back together and plied him with painkillers. A couple of weeks later, back in Ushuaia, he looked in much better shape.

We now had time to dry our gear, enjoy the penguin colonies and canoe around some of the islands.







For sheer ski-mountaineering quality, the ascent of Mt. Scott, 880m, was undoubtedly the highlight of our expedition. Access to the mountain was spectacular, involving a steep climb directly from the sea followed by a traverse below a somewhat threatening couloir. The steepness was sustained through crevasses higher up until the main glacier could be reached. Further large crevasses ran right across the glacier in several places but these were fortunately bridged firmly so that ascent was possible with minor detours. The apparent summit provided spectacular views through the Lemaire Channel but it quickly became obvious that a higher point about half a mile further east must be the true summit. This is the joy of working from maps with limited detail; always more to do. Determined to meet the standards that Scott himself would surely have expected, we descended to the slight col and continued to the top. Our reward was some of the best mountain skiing imaginable, in perfect powder snow all the way back to the fixed ropes of our traverse.

A day spent ice-climbing and exploring some of the scientific history of Antarctica enabled us to prepare for more, adventurous skiing. We stopped at Vernadsky Station, now run by delightfully hospitable Ukrainian specialists, and the restored Wordie Hut in the Argentine Islands. After a morning spent enjoying a colony of Adele penguins, a smaller skiing party set off up Mt Demaria, 640m. This comprises a long, rather steep, south facing slope. It's probably 35 degrees and gets steeper higher up. In the right conditions it would provide more superb skiing, but we had left it rather late in the day to set out. The ice was getting firmer as the day drew on so that a fall during descent would have been potentially far more serious than we needed in these remote parts. Discretion took over and we decided to ski down from about half way up. As it turned out, the skiing was excellent; just steep enough to be challenging and with snow conditions that were still just workable.



North Face of Mt. Demaria







We saved our final day in the mountains for an attempt on Mt. Luigi, 1415m. Another early start put us on the glacier behind Port Lockroy for an ascent to the main ridge. It seemed the temperatures had risen somewhat because we were constantly assaulted with the sound of distant avalanches and not-so-distant icefalls. One massive serac came crashing down into the col ahead of us. The impact created a huge, billowing cloud of ice particles, whipped up by the venturi gale howling down the aptly named Thunder Glacier, between the ice cliffs on either side of us. Undaunted, we carried on but with half an eye always on the conditions ahead of us. The summit of Mt. Luigi was not quite as Skip had remembered it. He assured us that he had skied to the top some years ago, but by now it was a complex mass of bulging, hanging seracs and ice mushrooms, with a particularly pronounced loaf-shaped tower on top. I began to realise that Stephen and Rodrigo might be pining for the North East Face of Everest, to which the spectacle ahead of us bore a passing resemblance, admittedly on a somewhat smaller scale.



Eventually we realised that the warming conditions would not provide a safe ascent to the very summit. So we stopped on the final ridge, perhaps 300m from the top, to admire the views back over the distant Trojan Range, including our trophy summit, Mt Français.

The ski down was in sticky conditions and included a steep, tricky descent on the narrowest part of the ridge, causing pause for thought and extra care. Again, discretion was always demanded; a fall might be unlikely but the dire consequences for the whole party had to be considered.

Early the following morning we set off back up the Neumayer Channel, through the Gerlache Strait and out past the Melchior Islands to reach the Southern Ocean. We made a swift crossing in about 3 days, averaging 9 or 10 knots in 20-25kts winds to reach a delightful anchorage at Harberton in Tierra del Fuego. Once again, the contrast from the ocean crossing was complete. We now had a couple of days to enjoy the wild greenery and uttermost coves before reluctantly returning to Ushuaia for the journey home.









Stephen leads the first ascent of Neverest Buttress in the Argentine Islands, close to Vernadsky





Really. Swimming in Antarctica













The last of the lambs on an asado



