

## Cape Horn and coming home...

I had been monitoring the weather forecasts closely and all the signs were that there was a big weather front coming in. We had had the most incredible weather so far for our trip but it was all about to change. Choices had to be made. And they were, as always never simple, but in a nutshell; Leave Antarctica immediately and try and beat the front across or wait until it passes through.

The risks of waiting until it passed through were sitting for possibly five or six days in Antarctica in bad weather with all the associated risks of shifting ice and a Fiber Glass boat, and also using up our vital diesel reserves. Followed by a very rough passage in the big seas that follow a front like that, with the risk of a lot of growlers on the loose in those seas. Or leave now and miss a few of days of our planned trip and get across before the front kicks in. However, if it sped up or we don't make the daily mileage I planned we risked getting a good kicking around the Horn. That's likely anyhow, I guessed.

So I reviewed the situation again at 6 o'clock that morning and woke everyone up at seven to tell them that we were leaving in two hours. Not the most popular decision I've made, but one all agreed with when the options were explained.

We headed out through a very challenging un-surveyed section of rock and ice to exit through the Nimrod Passage then north back across the Drake Passage.



We rounded the Horn three and a half days later in 30kts of wind from the NE, and headed directly to a safe anchorage in Porto William. Nine hours later, a 50kt plus North Westerly swept through the area, with 10m seas around the Horn, but we were happily having a beer or two in the 'Micalvi'.

## The Chilean Channels and Home

After returning from Antarctica and going around Cape Horn the 'wrong way', my plan was to change crew and restock in Ushuaia, Argentina and then spend a couple of months exploring the Chilean Channels.

Having read a number of books on Darwin and the *Beagle*, especially '*This Thing of Darkness*' by Harry Thompson, I was fascinated by the whole region and the thought of sailing up the Beagle Channel and the Magellan Straits was almost as exciting as going to Antarctica. To be frank I had no idea what to expect. I had the 'bible' of sailing in these parts, *Patagonia & Tierra Del Fuego Nautical Guide* by Mariolina Rolfo and Giorgio Ardrizzi, a set of Chilean Navy tide tables and a full set of Chilean Navy charts, plus an open mind.

Other than that we had no plans other than to meet our wives in Puerto Natales in about a months' time, some 600nm north west of us through some of the most notorious waters in the world.

Once again we were going the 'wrong way' up the channels but six hundred nautical miles in a month seemed easy, very doable. I had planned to try and achieve about 40 nautical miles a day. But then we started to learn what sailing in the channels really meant. The first couple of weeks we made our way slowly up the Beagle Channel and through the channels that connect it to the Magellan Straits. We experienced every type of weather you could imagine, all in the same day. One minute we were sailing gently along in a following breeze, the next minute the wind has turned 180 degrees and was coming at us at 40kts. One minute it's bright sunshine, the next minute it's pouring with rain. Then it all starts again!! English weather has got nothing on this!

Navigation is the biggest challenge in these waters, especially if you are used to using a chartplotter at the helm. The electronic charts are notoriously inaccurate and we found that even the Chilean Navy charts often missed out whole islands. Radar was essential, and it became our primary navigational tool. Although we were laying a constant plot on our paper charts, with very narrow channels, rapidly changing weather, and many uncharted rocks and islands, radar was the only reliable source of information. I found the best technique was to use the radar overlay on the chart plotter and by adjusting the chart offset to the radar image I could get a fairly accurate position. And of course it showed up any rogue islands. We safely navigated through many narrows and challenging tidal gates using this method, but the toughest had to be Paso O'Ryan in the Canal Acwalisanan. It is a very tight little squeeze between rocks. In the flood tide it can have 8kts of tide running through this very narrow gap. These channels suffer from a combination of a strong permanent west to east current, and are tidal. So when your sailing east to west you are always going against the tide/current, when the tide is in your favour it's just slowing the current down a little. So I decided that we would do it at low water slack or as close as we could get to it. That way, although we would have less water under us, I should be able to see the rocks clearly. Well that part of the plan worked, we definitely could see the rocks, lots of them, and very close. But what we hadn't expected was 5.5kts of current under us. We shot through Paso O'Ryan, as if we were running rapids on the Colorado River. The turbulence was quite extraordinary, twisting *UHURU* around as if she was just a floating cork on the water. Once we were committed all I could do was try and steer her as best I could. Another adrenalin high on *UHURU*, as we all realised what we had just gone through.



But for all its challenges, this region does have its charms. The scenery is spectacular, massive granite faces, huge tumbling glaciers, snow covered mountain ranges, waterfalls that cascade down huge cliffs, remote mountain lakes, bubbling streams, flora and fauna straight from Jurassic Park, seals, whales, dolphins, a multitude of birds and some of the best trout fishing in the world.





Our struggle continued as it took us nearly two weeks to do the first 200 miles. One day we beat hard all day up the Magellan Straits into the teeth of a severe gale with the Pacific Ocean funneling down into the straits. We managed a total of just 22nm before slipping into a safe anchorage. The log shows steady 45kts winds with gusts of over 50kts, and that it took us 9 hours to achieve just 22nm, as the crow flies, averaging just 2.4 knots an hour.



Each day at about four o'clock in the afternoon we would have to start thinking about finding a 'bolt hole' to get into, night sailing in these tight and sparsely charted channels is not an option. The process was not quick or easy. First we have to check whether we can actually get in, although we had an excellent nautical guide, which gave us lots of potential anchorages, we couldn't always be sure of getting into them due to ice, kelp, or just the size of *UHURU*. (Most boats down here tend to be a smaller). So we often spent several hours just finding a suitable anchorage. Then we'd have to go through the process of setting lines out to shore so we can fix our position. Very few of these anchorages are big enough to allow us to swing at anchor, and often it was too deep for an anchor. Tying off every night became an art form, performed often in contrary winds and only meters away from rocks. Brother Mike and Chris, my 1<sup>st</sup> Mate, would jump in the tender, I would then try and fix and hold *UHURU* where I wanted her in relation to the rocks, then Botty would feed out our special floating shore lines to the guys who then had to race to shore, climb up the rocky shore and find suitable trees or boulders to tie off too. Then, of course, there were the Dolphins, who seemed to take a perverse pleasure in distracting my crew at the critical moment while they were laying shorelines.

The biggest dangers in these 'bolt holes' is what's known as 'Williwaws', sudden whirlwind type winds, that accelerate down the side of cliffs and mountains, reaching up to 100knots. We came across Williwaws on a number of occasions, sometimes while sailing up a narrow channel, when we would be almost knocked down by the effect of them, but mostly while tied up in small Caletas. The worst moment of our whole trip came courtesy of Williwaws.



*UHURU tied up in Caleta Beaulieu, Chile*

We were tied up in Caleta Uriarte, Isla Desolacion just off the Straits of Magellan after picking our wives up in Puerto Natales. We were anchored with three lines ashore plus our main anchor. The weather had been appalling, with almost constant rain, vast quantities of hailstones the size of golf balls, and Williwaws with 60-70 knots of winds hitting us around the clock. All we could do was sit and watch our lines; in the hope they didn't part.







At the height of the storm, I saw the 'Mini' sized boulder that one of our shorelines was stropped too roll down the beach towards us, suddenly we had gusts of over 70 knots on our beam.



*UHURU shares a 'bolt hole', Caleta Brockneck, with Xplore a charter expedition boat. Shorelines can be clearly seen.*

Our bow shoreline had gone, and the combination of our stern lines and anchor was holding us beam on to the Williwaws just meters from the rocky shores. If the anchor dragged now, we would be smashed on the rocks. Stranded in a rather inhospitable spot a long, long way from any help. Chris and Botty jumped into the tender and recovered our line, no easy feat in winds gusting 70kts, then in between gusts, using a

combination of bow thruster, engine and winches we slowly managed to get her bows into the wind again. It took us nearly two hours to get her around against the constant beam on Williwaws. Beans and Willie (our long suffering wives) were absolute trouperes hauling on lines and helping us reset in the most appalling conditions. All with a smile; well maybe afterwards.







But I shouldn't give you the impression that it was all bad weather, and daring do, we had lots of wonderful sunny days, remote anchorages, long hikes and spectacular wildlife.







We were in the middle of the scallop season and after helping a fisherman unload several tons of logs from his boat in Puerto Natales, we were never short of the odd sack of fresh scallops. We caught southern ocean King Crab (centolla), octopus, mullet and the most wonderful rainbow and brown trout.



But one of the major highlights had to be our visit to Caleta Ferrari, a small farmstead west of Ushuaia and probably the only 'civilisation' between Ushuaia and Puerto Natales, home of Jose and Anemie, a classic Chilean gaucho and his Belgium partner. They tend the herds of wild horses and cattle that roam these parts, and offer fantastic days out on horse back on an informal basis to passing yachts. We spent a couple of days riding out into the Patagonian wilderness finding wonderfully remote rivers to fish.





After an amazing four months in the Southern Oceans we started north again before the weather closed in, we had close to 8,000nm to travel to get home to Lymington.

Just as I thought we had successfully conquered the Southern Oceans, Antarctica and the Chilean Channels, and had started north feeling very happy with myself. Mother nature decided that we had had it too easy and she wasn't going to let us go without instilling a little respect. So she did, with a vengeance.

We left Ushuaia on Tuesday, 29<sup>th</sup> March, and headed east down the Beagle Chanel, we turned north through the Estrecho De Le Maire, with a plan to head straight north up to Punta del Este, Uruguay as our first stop. All was well. The weather forecast had predicted a short period of northerlies followed by a shift to the west with 30kts and a 3m sea running. It sounded perfect for our trip north, a little vigorous, but a good sail for what should have been a comparatively easy sail up the coast.

But we got caught in what I was later to learn is not an uncommon phenomenon in this stretch of water. Although the weather forecast for the east coast of Argentina was 30kts, on the west coast there was a major storm brewing which normally hits the Andes then slides south around Cape Horn and on into the Southern Ocean. But occasionally, and this was to be one of those occasions, it builds up so strong behind the Andes it eventually 'spills' over the top without warning, and screams down over the east coast straight out into the stretch of water we were happily navigating.

We got caught in this on our second day out of Ushuaia, and later that night I was becoming increasingly concerned as the 'beam on' seas were building to dangerous levels. By midnight we had a steady 45kts of

wind and 7-8 metre seas. I decided that as we couldn't 'run' with the wind, as we had an unpleasant lee shore in the shape of the West Falkland Islands, the prudent thing to do would be to heave too and make a decision in the morning. During the night we took some very big waves, and after a partial knockdown, our AC/DC panel was soaked, blowing all our breakers instantly. Most of our major systems were now out; fortunately we still had lights.

Dawn presented us with a truly daunting sight, the wind had continued to build and now we had 8-10m breaking seas. Continuing North in these conditions risked a serious beam on knockdown. Trying to go upwind would get us nowhere and a good kicking, while bearing away to the NE risked being blown onto the West Falklands, so I decided that the only safe option was to head SE back down to the south of the Falklands and then run East with the wind behind us with a view to seeking a safe haven in Port Stanley which was 280 miles away.

For the next two days and nights we ran with the wind, the storm built to a full Force 10/11, survival conditions. As Chris and I were the only two onboard with any real helming experience we shared the helming duties one hour on, one hour off, exhausting. As we dropped south of the Falklands the full Southern Oceans effect kicked in and we had huge seas, although the underlying seas were probably 10-12m, every 20 minutes or so we get a set of 15m plus monsters come through, and the wind was now a steady 55-60kts with gusts of over 65kts.







We were pooped twice, ripping our tender off the davits and twisting our port stainless steel davit arm like a pretzel. Our tender was then hanging on one arm, we managed to get some extra line around it but it was too dangerous to do anything else, so we half carried it and half dragged it the rest of the way.



We hove too again that night to get some sleep. It is remarkable how good this technique is, even under the most challenging conditions. Without it, I suspect fatigue would have put us in serious danger, as every wave required complete commitment, both physically and mentally.

Early on the third day the first dolphins arrived, Peele Dolphins, the prettiest dolphins I have ever seen, white & light blue bellies, jumping and spinning in the air as they escorted us. They never left us, all day they stayed with us, some would go, others would arrive but we were never, never alone. The sun started to break through occasionally and the light bouncing off the spume that was flying horizontally off the top of the breakers became the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. Power, beauty, and fear all wrapped in together. I was suddenly enjoying it.

We arrived in Port Stanley at 3am, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, five days after leaving Ushuaia. We had spent three days and nights in a Force 10/11 in the Southern Ocean. We celebrated, M&M's and whisky.

It took us a week in Port Stanley to make repairs and continue on our journey. Once again the people in Stanley were fantastically supportive and hospitable. And although we had more adventures heading north, none of it would compare with what we had already experienced.



It took us another two months to get home, with further crew changes, and we arrived in Lymington to a heroes welcome as friends and family, came out in a small flotilla of boats to greet us at the Needles.

A long journey from Sunsail to the Southern Oceans but one I will never regret or forget.