

Now for the cold stuff...

Having spent a few months back home making all the final preparations, shipping vast quantities of extra kit, finalising our Antarctic Expedition Permit and obtaining a permit to go to the “Malvinas’ from the Argentine Navy, a new and frustrating requirement that was to cause us a lot of problems later, we arrived back in Grenada early September and started preparing the boat.

The atmosphere at Spice Island Marine was electric, as they all got involved in preparing us for the Southern Oceans, not something they normally get involved with in the Caribbean. Custom made ‘ice poles’, strong canvas deck bags to stow the 500 meters of extra floating line, galvanized steel strops for tying off to rocks, testing the boats heating systems, and the sight us trying on our survival suits and heavy duty thermal kit in the heat of a Caribbean summer, caused more than a little amusement.

We left Grenada on the 1st October 2010, just as the island was shutting down because Hurricane Otto was heading towards it. Knowing we had about 400nm upwind and against the prevailing current to do to our first stop, the mouth of the Essequibo River in British Guyana, we motored hard straight towards ‘Otto’ for 24 hours in zero wind as ‘Otto’ sucked all the wind out of it’s SW quadrant. (The combination of ‘Otto’s’ anti-clockwise winds and the prevailing Easterlies cancelled each other out, giving us flat calm seas and no head wind). The moment we felt wind coming from the NW we bore away and ran from the Hurricane. The perfect start, bouncing off a Hurricane put us far enough east to allow us to sail comfortably down south to the Essequibo River.

To Bartica and back



One of the many reasons for heading south from Grenada, which is definitely not the ‘proper way’ to do it, was because I wanted to go up a rain forest river and visit Devils Island. Other than ‘doing the Amazon’, which comes with a lot of issues and is a fairly major expedition in itself, the Essequibo River offered everything I was looking for. Challenging

navigational waters, lots of local colour, rain forest and Bartica, an old mining town about 75 miles up river. When we arrived ALL the local dignitaries insisted on coming out to the boat to 'inspect' her for contraband. But in reality it was to drink my gin & tonic and take pictures of themselves at the helm. *UHURU*, we were assured, was the largest sailing boat ever to make it up to Bartica.

After our little excursion up river we had to put some serious miles in. The next leg was 2000nm upwind and against the prevailing current, this would get us around the corner, South America's right hand shoulder. Then the winds and currents split and we are back into normal sailing routes. We also still had quite a tight schedule to get down to the Falklands before Christmas and fit in some 'family' cruising. So apart from one short stop in Devils Island, of *Papillion* fame, we put in a long hard leg, crossing the equator on the 24th October and getting into Salvador on the 6th November. Family joined in Salvador and we had a wonderful couple of weeks cruising down the Brazilian coast before waving them off to fly back home in Rio. Now things would get serious, we were heading into the South Atlantic.

Other than being chased by pirates on our second day out from Rio it all went pretty well. Of course, the pirates could have been innocent fishermen trying to sell us some shrimp 75 miles off the Brazilian coast, but I doubt it.

We arrived in Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, on the 20th December after being hit by three separate gales on the crossing from Uruguay. But we were in time for the Christmas.

Port Stanley, Falkland Islands.



Christmas and New Year in Port Stanley was a joy, singing carols under the Whale Bone Arch and many a lively evening in the *Victory* pub, just like home. Very friendly and helpful locals who took a genuine interest in what we were planning.

The team for the Antarctic leg arrived. It would consist of Chris Durham, 1st Mate, the only permanent crew, my brother Mike (photographer, climber and diver), Richard Haworth, (ice guide, climber and diver), and a good friend and racing partner Al Keck, (sailor).

We then set about our final preparations for heading south to Antarctica; they included rigging a double-glazing system for all the windows, hatches and port lights to reduce condensation. This was done with a mixture of Perspex, dual lock, gaffer tape and cling film, not very elegant, but effective. We didn't have any condensation problems throughout the trip.

And food, food, food, we would be away from any civilization for at least a month, so I planned for six weeks, and added 50% to all calculations as we would need a lot more calories in the cold. We pre-prepared and froze twenty full meals and all packaging had to be removed, as we would have to store and carry all our rubbish out with us. Fruit and veg, was individually wrapped or hung in the forepeak, our two sacks of large potato's became a staple.

We then bolted, screwed or lashed everything down.

Drake Passage and Antarctica



Permanent dawn in Drake Passage

After a relatively easy trip across Drake Passage, in which we managed to be becalmed in the middle of the Southern Ocean, not something I was expecting, our arrival in Antarctica was 'astonishing'. From that moment on I struggled daily to try and come up with new and interesting superlatives to describe our experiences.



'We saw our first Iceberg'

As we sailed into Deception Island through the Boyd Straights, escorted by squadrons of Cape Petrels, we saw our first iceberg, a huge majestic looking thing, which had us all up and excited, so much so we heaved too and launched the tender for a picture session.



We spent the first night at anchor in Deception Island, an anchorage inside a volcano that had erupted as recently as 1976. We managed a few very important maintenance jobs in the morning then spent the afternoon on the beach with the Penguins. Yes, there are beaches, all be it black lava sand, and the Penguins love it because the hot spring water seeping out of the still active volcano gives a water line of hot water for about 18 inches out.



We set out very early the next morning in near perfect conditions, sunshine and wind. The moment we came out of Deception Island, through Neptune's Bellows, the aptly name gap into the volcano, we were greeted by whales and penguins. And Icebergs there were, hundreds of them, and nasty little 'growlers', large chunks of ice, often weighting several tons that have broken off an iceberg and are floating just on the surface and very difficult to see, anyone of which could easily rip the bottom out of *UHURU*. Which is a rather sobering thought while you are on watch, tends to focus the mind.

We spent a lot of time pinching ourselves; we just could not believe this place, Antarctica was truly out of this world. How do you adequately describe the feeling of sailing along under a deep blue sky, with the wind whistling through the rigging, little Penguins 'hopping' alongside, birds circling constantly, whales popping up every now and then, all with the "ever present danger of growlers". And I don't care who you are, every now and then that very deep and dark thought will creep up on you. 'We are at the end of the world down here, and if anything goes wrong...' Well let's not finish that thought, but I am sure everyone who has ever come down here must have had it.



After a couple of days exploring other anchorages we arrived Enterprise Island where we rafted up to an old sunken factory whaling boat, called 'The Governoren' which caught fire back in the 1930's and ran aground. This is remote, really remote, we got the feeling that we have gone back in time here as everywhere you look there are reminders of a bygone era. Whaling was massive down here in the early 1900's and the Whalers established supply bases all around Antarctica.

Edging our way in stern first to a narrow and shallow gap between the wreck and a rocky ice wall was testing at best. But once we had lines across to the wreck we found it to be a very secure berth, if a little noisy from the screaming Arctic Terns that have taken over the ships boilers.





Right behind us was a glacier wall, which immediately became the object of much interest to Brother Mike and Rich. No sooner had we tied off our last line than out came the climbing gear and off they went. It seemed like only minutes later and they were halfway up this ice wall. It was here that we harvested our first crop of Thousand Year Old Antarctic Ice, straight off the bergs. It made our early evening Gin & Tonics go with a zing.

The next day we spent exploring the area discovering old wooden water supply boats, and bollards that had been painstakingly chiseled into the rock. We also had our first Antarctic Dive, on the wreck. Cold but very exciting.

The Perfect Day

We set out at 5am the next morning, Friday, 14th January 2011, to be precise. Words cannot possibly begin to describe that day. The weather was perfect, blues skies and little white fluffy clouds. A strong and stable High had settled over the Peninsular, which later became known as the “UHURU High” by the local charter skippers.



As we eased our way into Orne Bay a pair of Crabeater Seals obliged by posing on a berg right next to us.

We started off with the usual escort of Penguins and Terns, and then we had a full display from a pod of Hump Back Whales. As we eased our way into Orne Bay a pair of Crabeater Seals obliged by posing on a berg right next to us. Mike, Buzz and Chris then went ashore to climb Spigots Peak.



They got photographs of the Penguins and a picture of *UHURU* creeping through the ice in Orne Bay.





As we left Orne Bay we came across a Leopard seal basking in the sun having just finished a snack, evidenced by the blood still on his chin.



Then a large pod of Orca's (Killer Whales) followed us for about 30 minutes as we gently cruised down the Gerlache Straits towards Port Lockroy. By this time there was a very distinct holiday atmosphere onboard, we were running around the boat snapping pictures here and there, at the wildlife, at the scenery, at each other, kids in a candy factory.



Mike and Richard ascend Pico Luigi

The next few days saw us based in Port Lockroy, an old British Ice Station that is now a Penguin research station and 'tourist stop' for the large expedition boats that visit.



We did a lot of diving, climbing and exploring from there. Mike and Rich successfully climbed Pico Luigi, a major 1530m peak behind Port Lockroy.

65 Degrees South

As we headed further south the ice got thicker and the going got slower, but all the time the spectacular scenery kept us spellbound. Mike and Rich dissected every peak as a possible challenge one day. I spent my whole time dodging growlers and trying to find clear routes through the ice. The occasional heavy thump of ice hitting the bow reminded us all of how potentially perilous this endeavor was.

We successful navigated the Lemaire Passage, aka Kodak Alley, one of the most spectacular scenic spots in the world, but the weather was closing in. We anchored that night in Port Charcot, site of the first sailing expedition to winter over in Antarctica lead by Jean-Baptiste Charcot, a Frenchman, in 1903. The wind changed constantly that night and we had to change our anchorage. We finally settled into a small sheltered cut, with shorelines out to rocks. But despite that, bergs started to move during the night and the sight of Rich and Buzz at three o'clock in the morning in their thermal long johns using the tender to push large 'growlers' out off our anchorage would have been comical, were it not so serious. The risk of being trapped in our anchorage was becoming a major concern.