

## BAFFIN, BEARS AND BOB!

### Steve Brown

*(Steve and Trish took early retirement in 2006, selling their business and commissioning a new Oyster 56, which they named Curious. Departing in May 2008, they made a four-year circumnavigation covering some 30,000 miles, starting and finishing in London's St Katherine's Dock 'so that we could cross and re-cross the Greenwich Meridian'. Steve sums it up as 'a truly golden time for the two of us, giving us memories and friends that will last forever'. Visit [blog.mailasail.com/curious](http://blog.mailasail.com/curious) for the full story of those four years, or [www.sy-novara.com](http://www.sy-novara.com) for their more recent adventures.*

*All the photographs are courtesy the Novara archives other than where credited. Much of the route covered in the following account can be followed on the plans on pages 30 and 118.)*

With the completion of our four-year circumnavigation and the arrival of multiple grandchildren necessitating a change in our cruising lifestyle, it was time for Trish and me to look to the next phase in our lives. The opportunity to combine my love of the mountains with a part-time cruising life, and to visit some of the remote places I had read about as a kid – to follow in the footsteps/wake of people like Nansen, Amundsen, Shackleton and Tilman – would be a dream come true, and so a new plan took shape. Mitigate the effects of age and altitude, explore and climb from sea level!

My search for a boat suitable for high-latitude cruising had begun well before we had completed our circumnavigation and had ranged far and wide, but with *Curious*, our Oyster 56, as yet unsold, I was unable to make any progress on any of the half dozen or so boats that I thought might fit the bill. Still, it kept me busy and helped build up my knowledge of what would be important. Then at the end of 2013 things fell into place, a deal was done to sell *Curious*, and *Novara* was bought, all within the space of a few weeks.

An aero-rigged, Bestevaer 60C schooner, designed by Gerry Dykstra and built in Holland by Damstra, *Novara* is quirky and unique. Commissioned by her first owner for high latitude cruising she has many of the attributes that I was looking for, and after a ten week refit with the help of CEO Susan Howland and the fantastic team at the Wayfarer Marine boatyard in Camden, Maine, *Novara* would be ready to go.



*Novara ready for launching. The little fin visible under her quarter is one of a pair of dagger boards which improve tracking downwind when the centreboard is raised*



*Trish stands in front of Novara at Wayfarer Marine in Camden, Maine*

But go where? Head south to Patagonia, Antarctica and South Georgia? Northeast to Norway, Lofoten and Svalbard? Or north and into the famed Northwest Passage and the ghosts of Parry, Franklin, Cook, Amundsen *et al*?

Decision made – north it was to be – friends Phil, Terje and Ding were recruited, a plan developed and contacts established. A search for an updated list of successful Northwest Passage transits led me to John MacFarlane, who had been compiling information on behalf of Nauticapedia [[www.nauticapedia.ca/](http://www.nauticapedia.ca/)] in British Columbia. When I asked why

the list stopped in 2006 he told me, ‘that although a notable maritime and personal achievement, a successful transit of the Northwest Passage was no longer historic!’ A quick look at the current list bears this out – 126 vessels through in the 100 years following Amundsen’s first transit, and almost 100 in the next eight years! With no masters to satisfy, no fame or fortune to be sought, we were going anyway. Not by the usual route, however, following the north-going current along Greenland’s west coast. We would sail up the east coast of Baffin Island and against the Labrador current – Greenland could be left for later.

Amongst many new friends made during our time in Camden, Regional Rear Commodores Doug and Dale Bruce, together with old cruising friends and OCC members Bill and Jo Strassberg, convinced me of the benefits of OCC membership and *Novara* proudly flew the Flying Fish burgee as she left Penobscot Bay.

With summer approaching and the sea ice beginning to recede, there was no time for any meaningful sea trials following the refit. We would have to shake down any bugs and learn to sail *Novara* as we headed north. With beautiful anchorages, historic



*Fishing boat and iceberg off St Anthony, Newfoundland*



*Novara's motley crew – Steve, Terje, Ding and Phil – at Nain in Labrador*

sailing communities and welcoming OCC members and Port Officers, the journey from Maine to Halifax, Nova Scotia and on to St Anthony, Newfoundland was notable for some great sailing conditions and short, relaxed days.

Labrador was an altogether different kettle of fish. Flat calms and fog obscured the coastline throughout the passage north, and it wasn't until we were well into the crossing of the Hudson Strait that we caught our first glimpse of the rugged coast in our rear view mirror. The overnight passage was uneventful, and with a detour into Cumberland Sound and north to the National Park headquarters at Pangnirtung crossed off once we realised that the Inuit hamlet was 110 miles away and it was 170 miles to the head of the fjord! It was our first taste of the sheer scale of Baffin Island, the fifth largest island in the world.

*Novara's* super strong construction, centreboard design and forward-looking sonar would be put to good use to explore Baffin Island's deeply indented coastline, enabling us to poke our noses into remote corners and find hidden anchorages. The first night on Baffin Island I wrote:

'THIS IS WHAT WE CAME FOR ... UNEXPLORED ANCHORAGES, SPECTACULAR SCENERY AND POLAR BEARS. CLEPHANE BAY IS ONE OF THE SMALLER FJORDS/BAYS ALONG THE COAST BUT EVEN SO THE SCALE OF BAFFIN ISLAND IS BEWILDERING. THE RIVER THAT RUNS INTO THE HEAD OF CLEPHANE BAY IS OVER 40 MILES LONG ... IF WE ONLY HAD MORE TIME!'

In fact, with the weekly ice reports showing a late melt further north, and boats that had followed the Greenland coast now sitting in Dundas Harbour waiting for conditions to improve, we did have a little time to explore.

Another long day sail took us to a good, secure anchorage 15 miles north of Cape Dyer, and by keeping close to the coastline we had the benefit of a north-going counter-current. It was now 4 August, and perceived wisdom suggested we should be at the northern end of the island and not still below the Arctic Circle with lots of coastal ice in between.

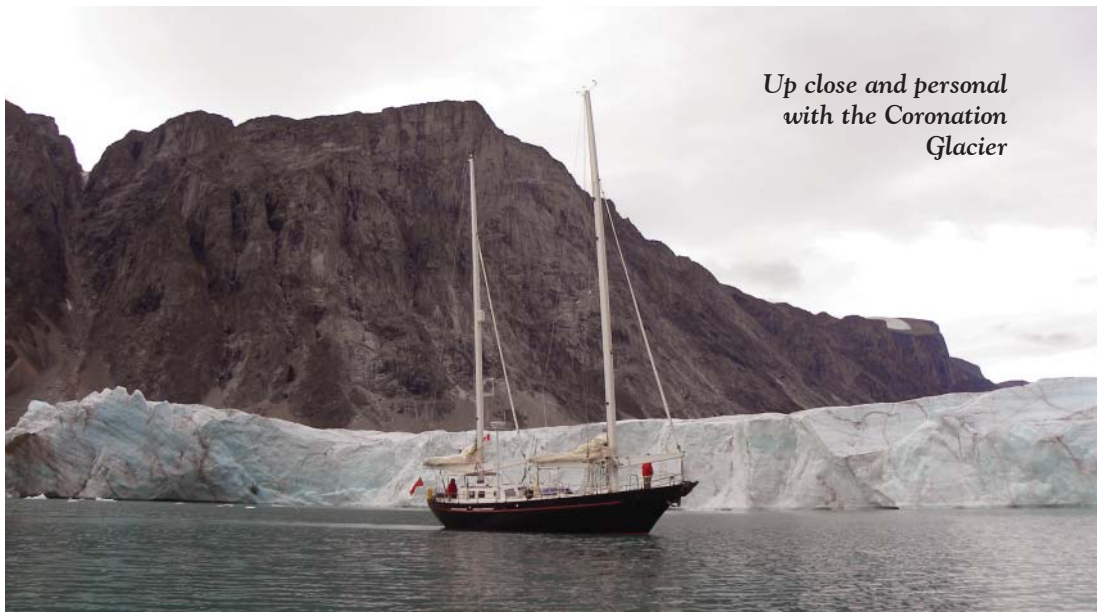
Despite updating and testing both systems our Iridium and SSB e-mail capability had ceased to function. This called for another early start, as we wanted to reach the Inuit village about 90 miles north of Cape Dyer in time to get internet access and download weather and ice files as well as e-mail family and friends.

There were a lot of large ice-floes aground at the head of the bay, and we motored through our first real patches of brash ice as we left. We continued under engine, with the hills rising sheer from the sea close to port. Out to sea was ice as far as the eye could see – we thought this was the ice tongue that had been clinging to the coast from about 30 miles south of Qikiqtarjuak to 100 miles to the north. It was mainly of 7/10ths and 9/10ths ice, and was studded with icebergs to add to the vista. The only information we had was via sat phone, and Fred (our shore support) told us that this ice tongue, almost 60 miles across, had started to break away from the coast so if we hugged the shore we could get into Qikiqtarjuak from the south ... fingers crossed. We wouldn't know if we could get out to the north until we saw the latest ice charts. The ancient mariners had no such technological luxury, but on our way north we passed an aluminium speedboat full of fishing tourists with a local Inuit guide. He told us that the route to the north was opening up and by hugging the coast we should be able to avoid a long detour.

We were made welcome by the people of Qikiqtarjuak – other than a fuel tanker assisted in by a Canadian icebreaker we were the first boat into Qik that year. Like each of the Inuit hamlets we visited it is well-served by air links (although flights are very expensive),

#### ***Re-fuelling in the tiny harbour at Qikiqtarjuak***

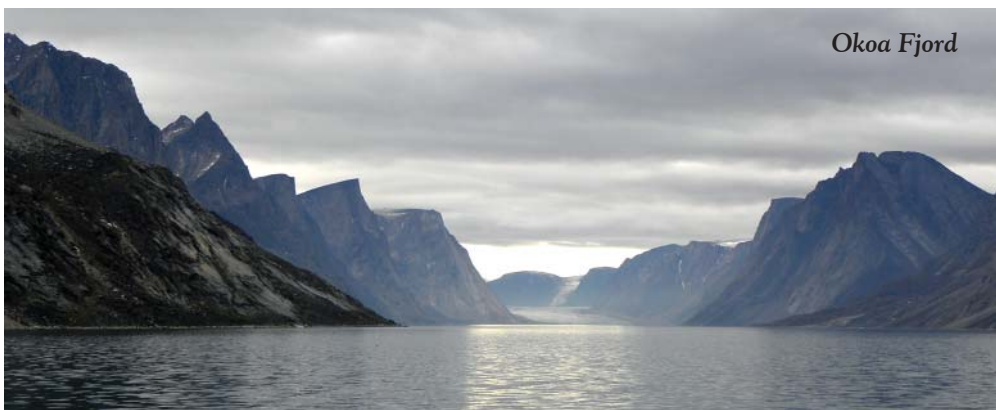




medical facilities, a community-owned supermarket and a small hotel where we were able to get internet access and a good breakfast the following morning.

Armed with the latest ice charts we were able to see that our route along the coast was blocked north of Cape Hooper by a combination of first year fast ice clinging to the coast and a large tongue of multi-year ice extending far offshore. So we left Qik the following morning and headed back southwest into Coronation Fjord and up to the glacier at its head. We found a shallow patch at the base of a stream where we anchored in about 15m with good holding, surrounded by high rock walls and within touching distance of the glacier. The following morning we took the opportunity to get up close and personal with the ice and take some great shots of *Novara* under the glacier's 150ft calving face ... after which we headed back to Qik for the night.

I have a real dislike of obtaining diesel in 20 litres cans and ferrying them back to the boat in the dinghy, so once again we put *Novara's* attributes to good use and were able to inch our way into the very small harbour at Qik and go alongside a 30ft temporary floating pontoon to refuel. We were mobbed by local kids, who were invited on board for a look around and handouts of chocolate, before we headed north and into Okoa Fjord for the night.





*Novara playing tag with  
a couple of small chunks of sea ice at Clyde River*

After motoring up to the face of the glacier we again used the technique of looking for alluvial flats created by the run-off from streams and rivers to find a suitable place to anchor. The weather was settled, and the scenery spectacular with huge rock walls on both sides, and we dropped anchor below a deep gulley with a small hanging glacier high above. With conditions deteriorating we went to our bunks with one weather eye open, to be awakened just after midnight by thunder, lightning and torrential rain. Our gulley had become a torrent, the water running through the boulders beneath us sent vibrations through the boat and, realising it would be somewhat ironic for a mountaineer to be avalanched in his boat, we decided to raise anchor and find a safer spot.

Our second anchorage out in the islands proved no more reliable as a sudden change in wind direction put us on a lee shore, so once again we upped anchor and headed north to find a spot on the south side of Cape Hooper. Strong winds created big downdrafts from the high mountains, giving us an uncomfortable night with the skipper up hourly to check things out. By 0400 we had had enough, and left once more to try to head north. Ice and strong headwinds blocked our way, however, so we retreated to the far more snug anchorage in North Harbour on Cape Hooper. With our ice charts now three days old we put in a call to Fred, our Iceman, who told us that there was a way through to the north. Unfortunately his information was 18 hours old and did not take into account the strong westerlies that had developed overnight.

Heading out we encountered ribbons of ice. We were able to cross the first few of these, getting into clear water each time, but as we pressed on they became more frequent, the ice was packed more densely and the clear water choked with brash. After a few encounters with ribbons made up of floes ranging from the size of dinner tables to football fields we decided enough was enough, and headed back to our safe anchorage somewhat chastened but – having broken through a few of the ice ribbons

by riding up on the floes and breaking them in two to create a passage – more confident than ever of *Novara's* safety and strength in these conditions.

Another call to Iceman Fred told us that the latest ice charts showed that the older, thicker ice had broken away and headed south, and that the 'fast' land-ice was breaking up. It was this thinner 'fast' ice that was flowing in ribbons out of the bay and out to sea. We were just 18 hours too early, and the following day re-crossed the now ice-free areas we had so much trouble with the day before and headed on a direct course to our next waypoint off the Henry Kater Peninsula. It was unbelievable how 100 square miles of ice could break free and disappear from view within just a few hours, driven by wind and currents into the Davis Strait. There were still some remnants of the fast ice out to sea, and in the morning sun this ice created something of a mirage, appearing to be an endless line of high ice walls when in fact it was chunks of ice and bergs creating a multi-horizon effect which deceived the eye. The same phenomena had deceived Parry in the early 1800s when he thought he saw land in front of him in Lancaster Sound. If he had listened to two of his officers, who disagreed with him, he might well have carried on and been the first to transit the Northwest Passage almost 100 years before Amundsen!

Motoring across Home Bay with the remnants of the 'fast ice' ribbons, we encountered lots of increasingly large bergs en route to Cape Raper. In the fading light and increasing fog we arrived off the Inuit hamlet at Clyde River at 0300, having covered 139 miles in all. After a good night's sleep we headed to the small North Hotel to get internet access for e-mails, ice reports and weather files.

We had expected to be the first boat into Clyde River, but were not surprised to find that the remarkable Bob Shepton had sailed his Westerly Discus *Dodo's Delight* from Greenland and had left to explore Sam Ford Fjord. I had heard on the mountaineering grapevine that Captain (The Reverend) Bob might head to Baffin Island after spending some time with a big wall climbing team in Greenland. Sam Ford Fjord was to be our next planned destination, so we hoped to meet up with him there.



***Sam Ford Fjord panorama***

It was 14 August and we were supposed to be in Pond Inlet by now, but the coastline is so incredible we could not pass by Sam Ford Fjord without stopping to take a look. The Fjord is almost 60 miles long from its head to the entrance, and the middle 25 miles have some of the most incredible rock/mountain scenery I have ever seen. We



*Dodo's Delight beneath the towering cliffs in the Citadel anchorage*

searched three possible anchorages deep into the fjord and close to the big walls that we knew the crew of *Dodo's Delight* would be interested in, but saw nothing. In the third we found only deep water, but as I turned the boat to leave I spotted a mast beneath a huge wall of rock over 3000ft high, with massive loose flakes threatening the tiny boat below – the 33ft Westerly Discus, *Dodo's Delight*! It would be an understatement to say the anchorage was marginal, even with *Novara's* excellent ground tackle.





*Novara and Dodo's Delight at the Citadel anchorage*

We hailed them as we motored slowly by, Bob and the boys emerged on deck and promptly invited themselves over for coffee, following which we invited them all for dinner. Shaun, Ben, Nico and Ollie – ‘The Wild Bunch’ – are world-class big wall climbers and have found a soul mate in the Reverend Bob Shepton, a legend in the sailing and climbing world and still going strong in his 80th year.

Their 2010 trip to Greenland won them the coveted Piolet D'Or for putting up a number of leading-edge routes in great style, and a great team spirit that saw Bob establish a new first ascent and be included in the climbing award. The boys are renowned for their singing and song-writing as well as their climbing abilities, and all came aboard to give a virtuoso performance. A truly memorable night!

*Nico, Bob, Sean, Ollie and Ben, aka ‘The Wild Bunch’*

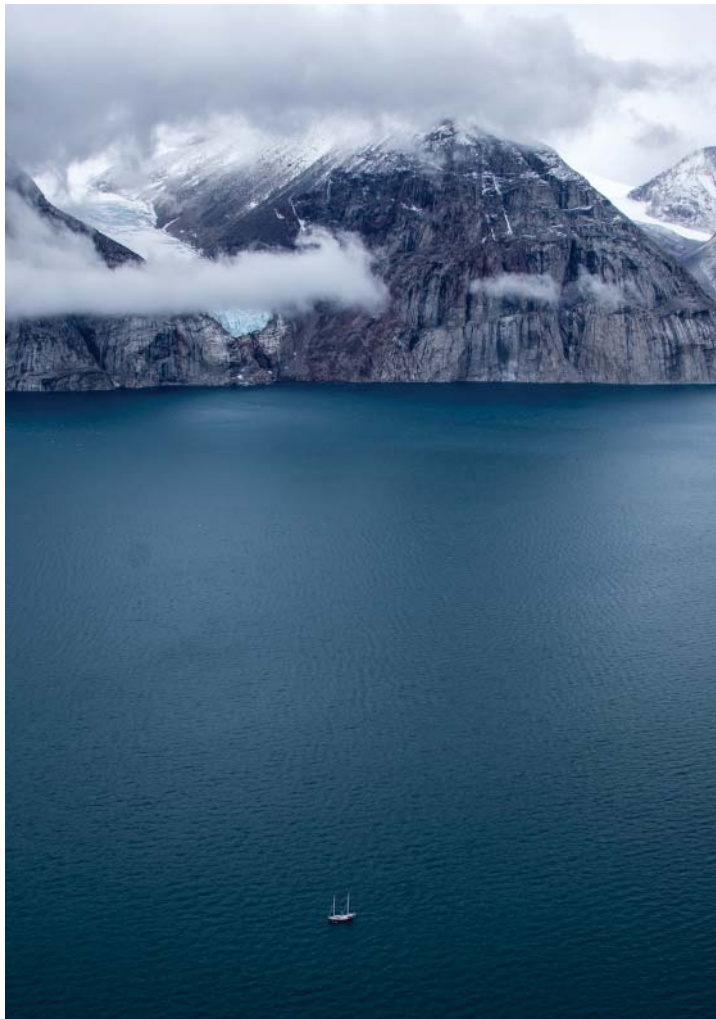


As we left the anchorage the following morning we saw Ben and Shaun two-thirds of the way up an intimidating new big wall route, having started the climb at midnight following our evening together on *Novara*. Ollie and Nico were on another big wall within the anchorage. A remarkable and talented group of young men.

Having used up all our spare days we now had to crack on and get north quickly. With a reasonably favourable weather forecast we planned to be in Pond Inlet by the evening of the 16th and then Beechey Island by the 21st/22nd. This would put us in place to make our attempt on one of the possible Northwest Passage routes. Heading north, we were roused on deck by a shout from Phil and I reached the cockpit in time to see the head of a very large polar bear

just off our stern. Phil had almost run it over, and the first he knew of it was the bear growling at him from alongside. So much for being on watch!

*Roadkill*



*Novara leaving the Citadel anchorage, as seen from high up on a new big wall route. Photo Ben Ditto*



As we approached Pond Inlet the sun came over the horizon in the north-northeast at just after 0300, towards the end of my last night watch. A spectacular start to a beautiful Arctic day – no wind, and mirror-like seas with whales and seals showing clearly all around us. The recent bad weather that had brought northeasterlies down from the high Arctic had covered the mountains of Baffin and Bylot Islands with fresh snow, with the dozens of glaciers standing out as they flowed down to the sea.

The day continued bright, clear and still and the journey from the Inuit settlement at Pond Inlet, along Bylot Island's south coast and up Navy Board Inlet was stunning. If Baffin Island is a rock climber's dream, then Bylot is an alpinist's Shangri-La, with hundreds of unclimbed mountains crammed into an island measuring around 60 miles by 60 miles. But ... it is a short climbing summer (new snow on 17 August), access is lengthy (by boat) or expensive (by plane), but for those willing to commit the first ascent rewards are considerable. I was also on watch as the sun set in the north-northwest at just after 2300. Had we been there a few weeks earlier it would not have set at all.

*Time to relax*



With no sign of an improvement in ice conditions in the main north/south passages the decision was made to head into Admiralty Inlet and visit Arctic Bay, the last of our Baffin Island destinations. Once again we made use of our shallow draft capability and nosed onto the end of the harbour mole to refuel. Baffin Island had more than lived up to our expectations, leaving us with a longing to return and explore, as well as many memories that will stay with us forever.

With over 3500 miles covered we still had the same distance to go, and it was now time to commit ourselves to the Northwest Passage – but that is another story altogether...

