



# ADVENTURE SAVAGE SOUTH GEORGIA

*Steve Brown sails and skis in storm force conditions as he pays  
homage to explorer Ernest Shackleton*

Words: Steve Brown Pictures: Bjorn Riis-Johannessen

Once the largest whaling  
station in South Georgia,  
Grytviken is now abandoned



**BELOW LEFT:**  
Evidence of South  
Georgia's whaling  
past at Prinz Olaf  
harbour

**BELOW RIGHT:**  
Reunited in death  
– the graves of Sir  
Ernest Shackleton  
and Frank Wild

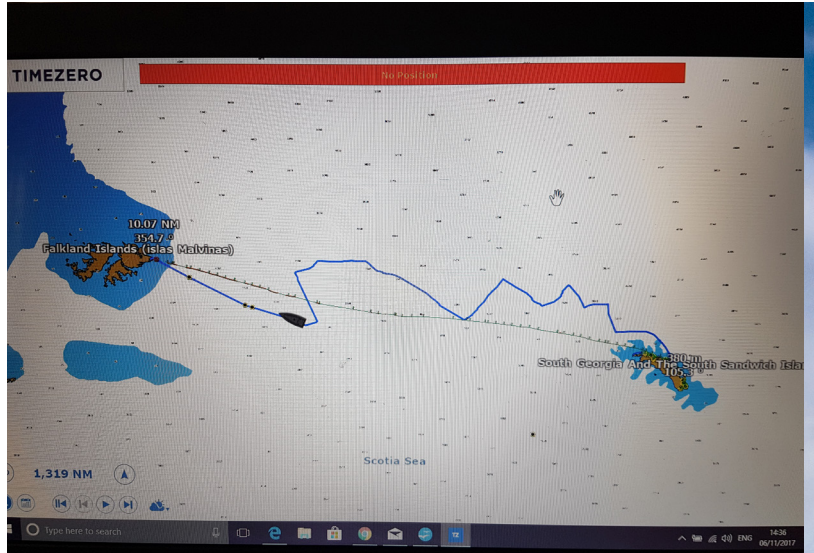
We had left our overnight anchorage in Ocean Harbour under blue skies and light winds, but this was South Georgia where conditions can change from one minute to the next; challenges and adventures lie around every headland. We really were doing 8.5 knots under bare poles in 45 knots of wind with 65 knot gusts and 3-metre waves coming out of St Andrews Bay. The GRIB files had forecast only 20-knot westerlies.

Cruising this savage island had always been included in my plan to sail to both the Arctic and Antarctica on board my ice-strengthened Bestevaer 60C Aero rigged schooner, *Novara*.

It has been a steep learning curve over the last five years, but behind me lay the fjords of Baffin Island, a difficult and ice-choked North West Passage, the wonders of Alaska and the inside passages during the great salmon run. We'd spent hours inside a feeding frenzy of humpback whales, encountered countless dolphins, sea lions and birds over the Monterey Trench and whale sharks in the Sea of Cortez. *Novara's* hull has also cut through the waters of Ecuador, Easter Island, the Chilean Channels, Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. All had played an important part in preparing us for what lay ahead, South Georgia – the toughest of the lot.

The anchorages on South Georgia are subject to fierce williwaws, at times reaching 100 mph plus. A yacht can never be left unattended as these winds spring up quickly and so I had gathered an experienced crew, including veteran polar sailor, Bob Shepton to explore one of the most remote and harshest places on earth.

As he commented: 'I happen to have sailed in every ocean of the world but I have never come across a



place so persistently vicious as South Georgia.' We knew it would not be easy, despite *Novara's* sturdy credentials.

I was also on my own personal pilgrimage to visit the graves of Sir Ernest Shackleton and his stalwart right-hand man Frank Wild, who is buried alongside the explorer. Shackleton died aged 47 in Grytviken on his way back from his fourth Antarctic expedition. Wild, who had asked to be buried 'next to the boss', died in South Africa. His grave was lost for many years before it was found and Wild was re-united with his friend and fellow explorer.

We left from Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, having secured our yacht visit and expedition permits from the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

**FROM HISTORY TO HIGH SEAS**

Our first stop in South Georgia was in Possession Bay, before *Novara* and her crew continued to King Edward Point, home to the British Antarctic Survey. As the first boat to visit after the winter months, we received a warm welcome, making many new friends and learning a great deal about their work.

Nearby Grytviken was fascinating, with its restored old buildings and museum charting the history of whaling days. The old whaling stations on South Georgia at Grytviken, Stromness, Prinz Olaf, Husvik, Ocean Harbour and Leith Harbour gave us an appreciation of how important whaling was to the newly industrialised world and why the slaughtering of whales seemed boundless.

In order to abide by our permit regulations we were unable to head straight to King Haakon Bay, the landing place of Shackleton in May 1916 on the island's western side, we decided to flip our planned trip on its head and pointed *Novara's* bow south. An easy day sail took us into Ocean Harbour, anchoring close to the old wreck and visiting another whalers' cemetery ashore. The following day gave us the first of many encounters with kelp and it took some time to clear the anchor.



**It was a shock when the seal popped up as one of the crew tried to step ashore**



Once free, we started for Gold Harbour, enduring the 65 knot gusts and 3m waves coming out of St Andrews Bay.

We anchored behind Gold Head in the north of the bay but concerned that a wind shift would put *Novara* close to the rocks on a lee shore, I moved her across to the centre of the bay. It was less sheltered but I judged it to be a safer bet. Sure enough the wind shifted into the south-southwest and built to a steady 45 knots with much higher gusts. With the anchor alarm set and one man on anchor watch we planned to settle down for the night when a 75 knot gust broke out the 45 kilogramme anchor and 85m of 12mm

chain. We spent a wild and wet hour recovering the anchor and motoring back into the bay to reset it.

From then on we always used two 45kg anchors in tandem, connected from the shank of the first to the head of the second with 10m of chain. A buoy and a recovery line also marked the first anchor. We then slept reasonably soundly each night.

#### ABORTED MISSION

We continued sailing south, each day exploring the bays and glaciers but with the aim of visiting Drygalski Fjord and spending time in Larsen Harbour, one of the very few safe anchorages on the island's southern end.

We also planned to put a ski team on to the Salomon Glacier to attempt some of the peaks of the Salvesen Range, but our first attempt was thwarted by a big swell and surge on the beach. The following day brought better conditions. With three men safely ashore we moved around to a very tight anchorage in Cooper Bay in case the team had to abort their planned crossing to Wirik Bay. We set shore lines from the dinghy, unaware of the large leopard seal that had taken an interest and kept appearing alongside the dinghy; it was a shock when the seal popped up as one of the crew tried to step ashore.

We had quite a few encounters with leopard seals during the trip and frequently heard them 'singing' under the boat at night. They had a varied range of



**ABOVE LEFT:** Skip Novak's Pelagic Australis. All boats need cruising permits for South Georgia

**ABOVE:** A curious leopard seal

**LEFT:** *Novara* is set up for high latitude cruising with two self-rotating carbon fibre masts with integral booms





**ABOVE:** The narrow inlet of Larsen Harbour provides welcome shelter

**BELOW:** Veteran polar sailor Bob Shepton practises his ski technique

sounds from grunts through to high-pitched trilling, and we came to the conclusion that they were trying to attract mates. This was confirmed by the British Atlantic Survey team at King Edward Point who also said that they used the hull to amplify the sound as they do under the ice in Antarctica.

On board we experienced a wild, windy night in Cooper Bay but nothing like the conditions endured by the ski team. After a calm and rare sunny day the winds built prior to them making camp and they had to build snow walls and somehow pitch the tent in 55 knot winds!

They awoke to blue skies and light winds the following morning but at the 0800 scheduled satellite link we informed them gale force winds were forecast.

Plans abandoned, they retreated down to Wirik Bay where we picked them up and headed further north to a more secure anchorage to hunker down and sit out the storm.

A few days of settled weather then followed, and in clearer skies and light winds we motored back north

to St Andrews Bay, which is home to 250,000 breeding pairs of king penguins.

### IN SHACKLETON'S FOOTSTEPS

The good weather continued so we sailed along the east coast to Possession Bay to attempt an ascent of the Shackleton Gap from Assistance Bay. Bob Shepton, 82, had already ascended the gap, a mountain pass which connects King Haakon Bay to Possession Bay, on one of our earlier training days.

Frustratingly, the three to four days of settled weather for the ascent didn't materialise. Bob rightly pulled out of the attempt and it was left to Bjorn, Alex and I to make the trip in truly awful conditions, ascending to the Shackleton Gap and descending down the Konig Glacier to Fortuna Bay.

Conditions have changed considerably since Shackleton's time; many of the glaciers have shrunk and are now badly broken and crevassed. Bjorn had descended the Konig in 2014 and had a short walk out from the glacier's snout to the shore. He was astonished to find that we now had a 2.5 mile walk out, carrying skis, 10kgs in our sacs and the 20kgs in our haul bags.



**Conditions can change from one minute to the next; challenges and adventures lie around every headland**

**RIGHT:** The return journey to Port Stanley took 10 days due to storms

**BELOW:** The crew found many of the glaciers had shrunk



With time now running short we had to start thinking about the return journey to Port Stanley. The weather was bad and offered little hope of change so we worked our way north, visiting the albatross breeding sites on Prion Island, overnighing in Rosita Harbour and Right Whale Bay before moving on to Elshul from where we hoped to depart, but the wind and waves, blowing directly into the anchorage, made it untenable. We had also sustained some damage to *Novara's* aft mast base plate and so returned to Grytviken to lick our wounds, make repairs and wait for better weather.

It wasn't to come and the return journey added more than 150 miles to our five-day outward passage and took 10 days, with 42 hours spent trailing our Jordon Series Drogue and running southeast away from the Falkland Islands.

Once safely alongside in Port Stanley we reflected on our amazing trip, with the awe-inspiring wildlife and scenery, the rich whaling history and the island's links with Shackleton and his men, which added another dimension to the passage.

We concluded that South Georgia is tough. It's not easy to get to and even harder to get back from, but if you make the effort then an unforgettable adventure awaits.



## SAILING TO SOUTH GEORGIA

### Boat preparation

This is critical for a trip to remote South Georgia where conditions can be extreme. Complete confidence in the boat and crew is essential, as is a high degree of self-sufficiency.

It is advisable to sail with enough fuel to motor sail the return leg, just in case, and to have enough spare equipment and tools onboard for repairs. Plan your heavy weather tactics and the best method for riding out a storm. Crew should be trained to deal with a medical emergency. Carry sufficient First Aid and medical equipment.

My Bestevaer 60C Aero rigged schooner, *Novara* is set up for high latitude cruising in extreme conditions, which meant I only needed to carry an extra 200 litres of fuel for our South Georgia trip.

She has two identical, self-rotating, freestanding carbon fibre masts with integral booms. The two large fully battened, roached mainsails each have three reefs to create a flexible sail plan and the storm trysails are also permanently rigged and sit in the stakpaks on the booms.

Yacht visit and expedition permits from the Government of South Georgia ([www.gov.gs/visitors/how-to-visit](http://www.gov.gs/visitors/how-to-visit)) are mandatory ahead of a visit.

Most yachts start and finish their trip from the Falkland Islands, where there is a small sailing community trying to develop marine facilities. Good, clean fuel is

available, and Port Stanley's two main supermarkets offer a wide range of provisions. Specialist boat spares are hard to find although they can be delivered direct to Port Stanley via the weekly LATAM Airlines flight.

Most yachts make the trip to South Georgia in late spring or early summer (which is between September and November) and then head south to the Chilean channels or Antarctica. It is indeed possible to make the trip later in the year and use favourable conditions to head north to Argentina, Uruguay or Brazil.

The passage to South Georgia is usually a straightforward downwind leg; however, the return is a hard slog to windward due to the constant series of weather systems sweeping up from Cape Horn.

### STEVE BROWN

finished a four-year circumnavigation on his Oyster 56, before buying *Novara*, an ice strengthened Bestevaer 60C schooner in 2014. He has sailed a series of high latitude adventures including an east-to-west transit of the North West Passage and sailing the Chilean channels to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Later this year they will return to Maine to complete a 33,000 mile circumnavigation of the Americas.

