
Journeys



Jim Curran *Karakol Lakes from Kongur* 2005
Oil on canvas



SKIP NOVAK

Strictly for Aficionados

A South Georgia journey

Our kit was secure in the pulks and the pulks, in turn, were anchored by our firmly planted skis. It was high time to break down the tent. The katabatic wind was hitting the wind scoop with punishing gusts from all directions. Out on the col it was impossible to stand and it must have been blowing a sustained 70 knots. We collapsed the tent on to the snow and withdrew the poles, then rolled up the flysheet, always being careful to have body weight holding the whole mess down. But it only took a second's lack of concentration for the inner to inflate like a giant beach ball and levitate itself out of our grip with a frightening force. Julian was dragged partly up the slope and I had a split second hysterical thought that I would see my mate launched in full flight down the Spenceley glacier and out to sea. We looked at each other, incredulous, both of us no doubt remembering how we always laughed in an 'I told them so' manner when we heard about expeditions losing tents on the island. It would never happen to us experienced hands of course, but we had been hoist by our own petard. Luckily Crag and Richard had the adjacent snow cave just about hollowed out to fit the four of us in . . .

A drift like a ship far offshore in the South Atlantic, the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia is arguably one of the least travelled destinations for mountaineers, despite its manifest attractions. The island has prolific wildlife, a whaling past, and a savage alpine terrain historically underpinned by the Shackleton saga. Climbers ruminate over it often, but seldom embrace its challenge. Significant expeditions can be counted on two hands since George Sutton's private survey party in the 1950s climbed the easier peaks. With the exception of the highest and dominant massif of Mt Paget (9625ft), which rises right out of the sea, the principal summits have had only single ascents, and there are many unclimbed and unnamed peaks in waiting.

South Georgia's remoteness makes access a costly business, but the real reason the island has seen little mountaineering activity is that its reputation has preceded it. On the receiving end of the storm tracks that funnel through the Drake Passage below Cape Horn, the weather is generally so ferocious there is only a slim chance of getting up anything. A typical 35 or 42-day expedition includes the likely scenario of spending 10 of those days retching into a plastic bucket on the sea passages, the only way of getting there being by private sailing yacht from the Falkland Islands. And then there is the sojourn at base camp, if you can get one established, waiting for windows

of opportunity that are measured in hours instead of days. If there is trouble on the mountain, self-rescue down to the coast is clearly understood. Frankly it is an area for aficionados.

Enter Julian Freeman-Attwood, Crag Jones, Richard Haworth and myself, all veterans of many trips to the island by sea in search of a view. The plan, had we been together in one place, could have been sketched, *a la* Shipton and Tilman, on the back of the proverbial envelope. Instead, via email from four points on the globe, we agreed simply on a rendezvous in Ushuaia in late December 2004 to join my 54-foot steel sloop *Pelagic* that had a convenient gap in the charter season; bring own tents, skis, pulks and gear. And we decided at the outset: no sponsors, no films, and no trekker/punters along to help pay the bills.

Our aim was to complete a ski traverse along the length of the Salvesen range that dominates the southern half of the island. Rather than the inevitability of getting bogged down under a single summit target while waiting for the weather to break, we would keep moving with all our gear on pulks, following the relatively easy, undulating terrain characteristic of this more heavily glaciated end of the island. We could cherry pick any unclimbed summits along the way if we happened to be in the right place at the right time. The journey – 15 to 20 days off the boat – would be the main focus and if we managed to get up something it would be a bonus.

Expeditioning implies difficulties along the way, even before the big ones of the mountains themselves are encountered. For the Himalaya, the tummy bugs in Delhi have first to be negotiated, or maybe your paperwork is somehow not quite in order. When 'sailing to climb', the bugbear is the boat and the sea voyage. To get to the island we had to sail over 1000 nautical miles. It only takes one rigging pin to shear and the mast will go, or a serious engine problem could render the boat incapable of navigating inshore. So we always labour under a certain anxiety when under sail, with our climbing project hanging in the balance. The trip could be literally scuppered.

Julian, Crag and I, along with a French couple Jeromine and Laurent who volunteered as crew, left Ushuaia in the Argentine section of Tierra del Fuego on 31 December bound for Port Stanley. Arriving after two uneventful days of mainly motor sailing, we picked up Richard to complete our gang of four and also Dion Poncet who would skipper the boat while I was on the mountain. Dion grew up in the Falkland Islands and has been visiting South Georgia all his life. His knowledge of the coastline is second to none. We knew he would be a strong addition to the team as the drop off was critical. Nor, as it turned out, was the recovery an easy operation.

Although not necessary, it is advisable always to begin a trip to South Georgia from Stanley. As a consequence of the Falklands conflict in 1982, South Georgia was separated from the Falkland Islands Dependencies and is technically a stand-alone overseas territory called the Government of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. This makes the Foreign



93. *Pelagic* at anchor in Larsen Harbour. Rich and Dion ferry the first load of gear to the snout of the Philippi glacier. (*Skip Novak*)



94. Crag Jones and Rich Haworth carrying heavy loads on the beach in Larsen Harbour. (*Skip Novak*)



95. Camp Six on the Spenceley Col below the summit of Mt Baume (6272ft), the day after the failed attempt. The buttress climbed is lower right. (*Skip Novak*)



96. Crag looks out from the snow cave, with Mt Baume (6272ft) on the left and Mt Pelagic (5680ft) on the right. (*Skip Novak*)

Office in London the official overseer, but the bulk of the day-to-day administration continues to be by a commissioner from Stanley. With the pressure of cruise ship tourism on the island increasing, the government recently began a permit procedure for land-based adventurers requiring yacht support. If you spend one night ashore you fall into the category of an 'expedition' which means an application must be filed. A committee (consisting of Crag Jones, Jerome and Sally Poncet, Stephen Venables, myself and others) vets the applications and makes recommendations regarding the primary issues of environmental impact and ability to carry out the expedition safely and have the ability to self-rescue. Needless to say, we were successful in the application process!

Pub crawling is *de rigueur* in this town of 2000 odd inhabitants, but our socializing was limited to one night to crawl and one night to recover. After buying a few steel garden spades at the greenhouse in Stanley, along with sacks of potatoes, carrots and boxes of fruit imported from Chile, we lashed our regulation mutton carcasses to the backstays and set sail. It rarely blows from the east and a downwind 'sleigh ride' is almost guaranteed.

Idleness is a large part of voyaging under sail, especially if you have a good autopilot. Cooking, eating, reading and occasionally taking in or shaking out a reef is usually all there is to do when on watch. Of course the map of South Georgia was stared at endlessly, like a crystal ball, and when speculation on the mountain route was exhausted we tested each other on Tilman and Tintin trivia of which Julian is the mastermind. On day four we made out Cape Disappointment through the mist at the south end of the island. The headland was named by Captain James Cook who landed on the island in 1775 and took 'possession' of it on behalf of his king. Cook sailed south along the north-east coast, convinced he had discovered the Antarctic continent until he rounded the cape and was surprised to find only open ocean.

Larsen Harbour, our start point at the southern end of the island, is more fjord than harbour, culminating in a narrow, shallow section at its head between steep rocky walls. From a recce in the dinghy I saw that the snout of the Philippi glacier had receded considerably. When I was last on it in 1988 we could walk up easy snow slopes right from the shore. Now it began with a gravelly moraine overlaying steep blue ice which meant a short relay to get our gear on pulk-pulling ground. Satisfied with the plan, we returned to *Pelagic* and continued sorting the equipment ('If you take the round of cheese, I'll take the salami, OK?'). The four of us would be in two tents and each be pulling a Snowsled pulk and carrying a small rucksack.

Next morning we made the first haul up to level ground at 1000ft, stashing our load in a rock gully and scuttling back down. It began to snow and blow a bit, and even though it took less than three hours to gain this position, knowing the weather here you could not help but wonder if we would ever see the gear again. We had one more slap-up dinner on the boat, then on 13 January waved Dion, Jeromine and Laurent 'au revoir' and made the

second and final pull to establish ourselves on the Philippi snowfield. The weather looked threatening and we decided to use a wind scoop as the obvious place for Camp One. This filled quickly with spindrift during the night and we took turns digging out, though with the wind blowing a good 40 to 50 knots a half buried tent is no bad thing. We spent the next day tent-bound wondering if we would ever get started.

Early on the 15th the wind abated and after four hours of extracting ourselves and our gear from enormous snow drifts we were up and running, shuffling rather, across the head of the Philippi and Graae glaciers, more or less undulating level ground. We were very clear about being roped up four in a line at all times other than when skiing downhill. If one of a party of two had gone down a slot, the combined weight of man and heavy pulk would probably drag the other down. With a three-man deadweight we felt very secure. We also attached prussic loops from the back of our pulks to the rope, so in the event of a fall, the weight of the pulk would hopefully be off the climber. We were even smart enough, when we remembered, to have the medical kit in the caboose.

The next four days – two days on the move and two tent-bound – were accomplished in whiteout conditions. Pulling on the damp surface was hard work. Wind was light but visibility nigh on zero so we navigated purely by compass and GPS position overlaid on the old Bomford/Carse map. Swapping the lead, the first man at times could barely see the ground in front of his skis in the soup. If the second could see him, he would steer the leader on a compass course, shouting him left or right. Only a rare glimpse of higher ground would reinforce our assumption that we were in fact heading up the right glacier.

Camp Four was on a plateau underneath Mt Starbuck, one of our unclimbed targets – but we never saw it until days later from afar. Unclimbed peaks score one, climbers zero. Tent-bound days were spent chewing down the salami and the cheese while arguing about the correction we should be applying to our GPS positions so they would agree with the map. Staying dry and comfortable is the key to surviving, let alone operating in the generally damp maritime conditions. Meticulous camp protocols must be observed and it usually took several hours to dig in and become established, and not much less to pack up. Thus our effective hours on the march were never more than six or seven which was enough for our mature party.

Finally on the 19th we had better visibility, at least below us to the coast, and we slid, still roped, down to, across and up the other side of the Novosilski glacier, which alarmingly is marked on the map as a wind venturi. It was a strong pull up a gritty surface to Camp Five, not far from Spenceley Col from where we hoped to have a go at Mt Baume, an unclimbed summit marked as 6272ft on the map. Next morning, after a short pull we were beneath its north-east ridge, under calm sunny skies.

Camp Six was established in the middle of the col at 4120ft, operating on the theory that it is better to be in an open area in high winds rather than

up against any features suffering katabatics (down draughts). A short recce to the base of the ridge revealed a mixed section of snow and ice gullies on the lower buttress, which looked do-able, and after that it appeared to be plain sailing on snow to the summit rocks. The true summit was not evident from our perspective though.

A late start, combined with deep snow on the snow fan, meant it was mid-morning before we were established on the buttress. Soft snow and thin ice cover over slabby, ice-shattered rocks made it slow going and digging out belay positions also took time. After nine pitches, some of Scottish grade IV, with a lot of fussing about we exited on to a precarious position at the top of the buttress. The day was gone and it was clear that continuing would mean a bivouac near the top without bivvi gear and with water bottles empty. Only Crag was willing to risk a night in the open – at the top of a mountain, on the island of South Georgia, with no fluid. Adding all that together, we voted to retreat in spite of perfect weather conditions. It took four hours of abseiling in the dark to reach our skis and we slid back to the tent under a beautiful starlit sky, each with his own thoughts of what might have been.

Even worse, the next morning we awoke to sunny, stable conditions with the south coast of the island spread out below us. But we were knackered. So a perfect climbing day was spent drying out and milling around when, as it turned out, we should have been digging a snow cave. Peak 5680 on the map, just to the north of Baume and also unclimbed, was a must target – if the weather would hold fine for just one more day. So at midnight, with Julian opting to stay behind, the three of us skied down to its base and strolled up the mountain's corniced north-east ridge. It was an easy plod up a fine ridge, requiring a belay only when crossing a bridge over a deep crevasse that split the crest near the top. But by first light the weather had turned and the Martians had arrived. Pastel coloured, saucer-shaped lenticular clouds sailed over Paget and all the big peaks in the Allardyce and Salvesen ranges. The beginnings of a breeze were felt as we reached the summit at 6am and agreed to name it (unofficially) Mt Pelagic. The GPS height was recorded at 5960ft. We lingered for half an hour watching the clouds eerily evolve, then high-tailed it down, skiing into camp just as the big wind hit.

The next five hours was a struggle for survival, breaking down the tents, by then somewhat flattened, and moving everything over to the wind scoop where we would later lose the tent inner. At times it was impossible to stand and looking back on our track in the snow from the campsite it was that of a drunken man, taking three steps and then falling over. It took 24 man-hours to dig a cave, mainly in snow but also through bands of hard ice. (Remember those steel garden spades? Don't go to South Georgia without them.)

The cave was to be our comfortable home for the next four days while a real South Georgia hooly blew itself out.



97. From left Crag Jones, Dion Poncet, Skip Novak, Rich Haworth and Julian Freeman-Attwood at the beach camp at Royal Bay, South Georgia. (*Skip Novak*)



98. Dion and Laurent land on the beach at Little Moltke Harbour, Royal Bay to recover the first load. (*Skip Novak*)

On day 16, with gas and food getting low, we made our move and packed before first light in very cold conditions. The intention was to slide down the length of the Spenceley, hook into the Ross glacier and continue down it to the coast, in one long day. The 2000ft Ross Pass cleaves the island in two between the Salvesen and the Allardyce ranges and consequently is recognized as the windiest place on South Georgia. So our day's run was made with some trepidation. After an enjoyable unroped ski down the Spenceley in warm sunshine, we climbed a small ridge and dropped down on to the Ross, wasting no time given the rare, windless conditions. On the pass we saw the wind scoop used by Julian, Stephen Venables, Lindsay Griffin and others on the British Southern Ocean Mountaineering Expedition in 1990, when they spent 19 days in their famous snow cave. Julian admitted it was a silly place to have put it in the first place!

The skiable ice ended at about 1000ft above sea level, forcing us to cache the pulks and skis in a crevasse and continue on foot – or sometimes on our knees as it was blowing another gale and boiling black above us on the pass. Negotiating a convoluted lateral moraine, we made the beach by early evening and, after some searching using clues 'text messaged' to us on the Iridium phone by Dion, found the emergency blue 60 litre barrel he had cached amid rocks near a stream. Later that evening we had a major feed, the four of us cramped into a tent for three, surrounded by the usual throng of bellowing fur seals. Next day, in very windy conditions, we recovered the gear left up on the glacier, then returned in the Zodiac to the comfort of Base Camp *Pelagic*, following a tricky surf recovery operation that left us soaked to the skin. Everything had gone like clockwork. I can only describe this extraordinary adventure with good friends as an elegant example of 'sailing to climb'.

Summary: An account of a six-week 'sailing to climb' expedition to the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia in search of unclimbed summits. The sailing vessel *Pelagic* was the expedition's mobile base camp.