

Ice poles and crew in action
Lancaster Sound

AN ACCIDENTAL TOURIST IN THE ARCTIC

PART TWO CANADA, DUTCH HARBOUR ALASKA

BY HENK HAAZEN

The story of an ancient Southern Ocean Sailor onboard a superyacht through the North West Passage.

We were finally stopped by the pack ice while travelling along the north side of Lancaster Sound. We had tried working our way through the pack for a while but then decided to anchor in a small bay for the night in the hope that the northerly winds would carry the ice south, clearing the northern coast. This worked well and we were able to move again in the morning.

Most of the people onboard including the owner and the cook are Italian, and we eat in an Italian restaurant for lunch and dinner. The table gets set if at all possible, and I'm becoming a dab hand at laying out the silver ware, so the next clients onboard *RV Tiama* should be warned that there is going to be a whole new standard coming up for the next charter season... or not?!

Occasionally I make the mistake of putting the knife and fork on the wrong side, but I reckon it probably pays not to get too good at some things.

We all get together for 'aperitifs' at seven every night weather permitting. This is cocktails and snacks followed by a proper sit down dinner with wines and dessert spread out over a nice period of time into the evening. None of this sitting down quickly to get your food down with Italians, no, we have a good time and a chat I can tell you. It is tough, like living the good life in Italy, only to be transported back to the high Arctic as soon as you go on deck; a fantastic combo and way to go.

We have been blessed with the weather. *Billy Budd* is a great sailing boat even in light winds but there has not been much

wind, hence a lot of motoring and the need to refuel in the remote town of Resolute. This outpost is more of a camp than a town and a few things have changed since I was here last. There are a lot of new houses and overland expeditions to the North Pole use Resolute as their last "big town" in the Arctic, which has two hotels and a small supermarket.

There is no wharf and to refuel we have to take the boat as close as possible (40 metres) to the shore at high tide, and then the fuel truck backs up on the beach with a long hose. This was an interesting exercise in seamanship, especially with a light onshore breeze, and our skipper carried it off in good style without beaching the boat, although I think he might have had to change his knickers afterwards.

Due to the lack of ice we have been able to circumnavigate Somerset Island, travelling down Prince Regent Inlet and through Bellot Strait which was clear of ice, and then back north via Peel Sound into Parry Channel. The last time I was here, exactly seven years ago, Bellot Strait and Peel Sound were full of ice and we had to turn back as there was no way of getting through the NWP.

We, and this is the royal we as in fact it is Cristina who decides, are now thinking of taking the Northern route which seems almost possible. This means travelling west into Parry Channel and then southwest via Prince of Wales Sound. The last time a sailing vessel was in Prince of Wales Strait was in 1851, *HMS Investigator*, with the slightly rogue Captain McClure who more by accident than design, discovered the final stretch of the NWP. They got stuck in the ice having to overwinter for two years in a row and were rescued by a sledging party from another ship that found them while looking for the lost Franklin expedition. *HMS Investigator*, however, never made it through Prince of Wales Strait.



Refuelling Resolute bay



Winter harbour Melville Island

Cristina is a hands-on superyacht owner and likes to take the wheel, especially when we get in a tight ice situation. She is a good helmsman, although it is interesting trying to give her instructions when you are high up in the mast looking for a passage through the ice flows.

Normally onboard my boat, people follow my suggestions and steer to port when I say go to port, but Cristina is a woman used to making up her own mind and when she sees an opening to starboard she will boldly turn that way, regardless of what I have to say. I think she would get on well with my wife and daughter.

While travelling west in Parry Channel we finally got stopped in our tracks by a big ice field with some multi year ice flows in it, stretching all the way across Parry Channel. We had to back track to a small bay on Bathurst Island, waiting to see if the ice might clear. It is amazing how quickly the ice situation can change from one day to the next, and it is easy to see how you can get into trouble up here.

In the morning the ice charts looked more promising and after an inquiring visit by a polar bear with her cub, we set off, this time detouring far south and circumnavigating the worst of the ice pack. In the evening we arrived in Winter Harbour, Melville Island, made famous by Admiral Parry who overwintered here on-board the *Hecla* in search of the North West Passage. There is a big sandstone rock in the otherwise featureless landscape which has engravings dating back as early as 1819 from the various expeditions that have wintered or visited since. Obviously, being here and touching the stone is a bit of Holy Grail in some quarters, maybe there are a few ghosts hanging around the place. There is also a more recent abandoned hut with some nice old wooden boats in need of a bit of tender loving care.

We left a time capsule/note behind inside a small brass tube following an old Arctic tradition. By now midnight has shades ►

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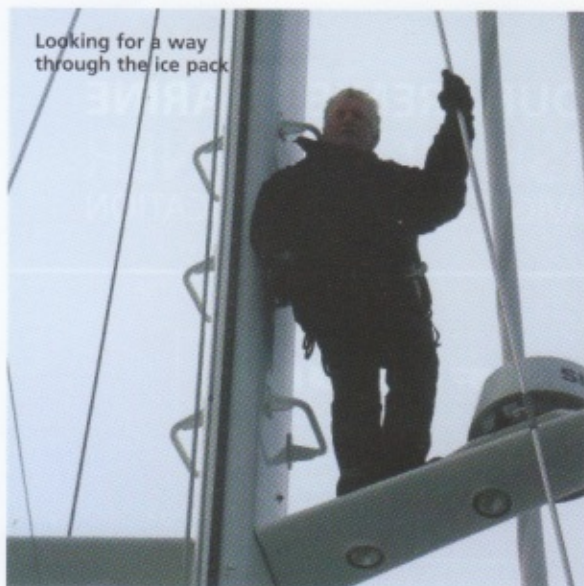
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Looking for a way through the ice pack



Herschel Island beach

of darkness and there is ice forming on deck overnight - maybe it is time to get out of here.

The next day we finally started heading south again towards the entrance of the rarely travelled Prince of Wales Strait. There was some ice at the entrance and then we came across a long skinny bit of open water for a few miles until another barrier of 3/10 ice slowed us down again. This is still a workable density but only just, and needs lots of manoeuvring with the occasional nudge against a stubborn ice flow. As usual, Cristina did a lot of the driving, which is just as well as we do occasionally crash hard into the ice, probably doing a bit of damage to the paintwork; it is nice to have a strong aluminium hull.

The channel is 180 miles long and we managed to get through it in a single day, working hard. By now we are a good team and everybody gets involved, with one person up to the first spreaders or hoisted to the top of the mast looking for leads through the ice flows that are blocking our path. One of the big advantages nowadays is the ability to receive relatively up to date ice charts, giving some indication of which side of the 10 mile wide channel promises less ice, or maybe patches of open water. Of course the wind and current situation can dramatically change in a few hours, but the ice charts together with good weather info proved invaluable to us.

The ship has an Iridium and Inmarsat high-speed internet link, so we can download files directly. If you start doing this sort of stuff then it is handy to have a bit of a budget, as it is not cheap.

After a short stretch of pretty dense 4/10 ice at the southern end we were released into the Amundsen Gulf and became the eleventh vessel and the first sailing vessel to make it through Prince of Wales Strait, an amazing yet sad record and another indication of the impact that climate change is already having. The day is getting nearer, that this remote and isolated part of the world is exposed to the full onslaught of our society, and as a species, we have a record of messing our planet up big time.

This year about a dozen small vessels/yachts have been making their way through the NWP. Up until this point we were

well behind most of the other boats, but now all of a sudden by going through the Prince of Wales Strait we are in front of everybody. We only just made it through the strait, it was packed full of ice again the day after we passed so it is not quite plain sailing yet.

We stopped for a night of R and R at Cape Parry on the Canadian mainland. This is the site of a North American, Star Wars missile early warning station: a full-on military installation with big walls, helicopters and of course, radio silence. They obviously did not want us to crash their party.

After not seeing other vessels for weeks there seemed to

be boats and people everywhere. A friendly Mackenzie River tug with four huge cargo barges behind was followed by two big cruise ships. After some friendly radio chatter, our skipper managed to convince the officer of the watch on the *Hansatic Explorer* (111 crew and 145 passengers), to find a bottle of gin, put it in a couple of plastic bags and throw it over the stern. We picked this up after some deft manoeuvring by the skipper to the amusement of the passengers on board the cruise ship.

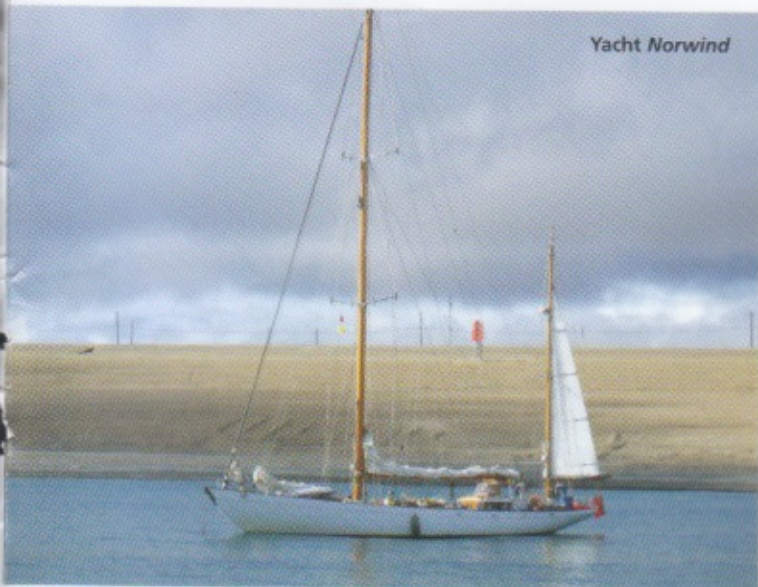
One of the few deep water anchorages on this bleak and shallow Western Arctic coastline is Herschel Island. This historic place once had three Inuit villages on it before it was corrupted by the whaling fleet in the late 18th century. The whalers used to overwinter in Pauline Cove so they

could set off hunting in early spring. In 1890 an estimated 1500 people overwintered on Herschel Island and by 1907 following the collapse of the whaling industry, no boats overwintered.

The weather in the Arctic was very kind to us; not too much wind in the high Arctic but you need big fuel tanks up here. It was interesting to meet some of the other boats/yachts that are doing the same trip and to see the different styles. Some people have obviously spent a lot of time and money getting their boats ready for this environment. There are also small fibreglass yachts here that I would hesitate taking outside the Hauraki Gulf.

One beautiful 70 foot classic wooden yacht *Norwind* lost its anchor due to the failure of the chain stopper. The half coupling





Yacht Norwind

on the prop shaft also gave up the ghost, marooning them on the edge of the pack ice south of Bellot Strait. This is when you realize how remote an area this is. With no real repair facilities, they managed to patch the half coupling but they could only run the engine at low revs. They never recovered their anchor and chain and had to limp the rest of the way towards the nearest settlement of Cambridge Bay in the hope of finding a machine shop of some kind and an airport for logistical support.

Just before turning the corner at Barrow Point to start heading south we came across some small belts of hard, old ice. This gets interesting at night as by now we had a few hours of semi-darkness combined with poor visibility making the ice a real threat to navigation. The smaller bits of dense, multi-year ice are called "growlers" in the pilot book and are aptly named.

Heading south into the Bering Sea we came across three offshore oil rig supply vessels: more proof that the big oil companies are out to get that last bit of oil as the ice cap is melting.

We arrived in Dutch Harbour in the Aleutian chain on the first of September, where the trip through the North West Passage really ends: 6400 miles in two months from Newport to Dutch Harbour. All in all, a very nice trip on a good boat with a nice bunch of people, and a great boat owner, thank you *Billy Budd* and *Cristina*!

I had had the itch to do this trip for many years, and now I've had a good scratch at doing it. Maybe good enough not to have to come back unless there is some worthwhile environmental protection work for us to do here.

Today, a hundred years after the collapse of the arctic whaling industry, there are 10 oil exploration vessels overwintering at Herschel island waiting for spring to start, looking for the new black gold following the ancient pattern of rape and pillage and who cares about the future environment anyway? Being here myself on what is essentially a pleasure cruise, observing all this commercial activity, it feels as if the world has shrunk considerably. The Poles are, or were, the last bits of the wild and frozen worlds on our planet, and it is busy here.

As much as I have dreamed of doing the NWP for years, there is something of a bittersweet taste left after having now done it. It was even more beautiful than I had imagined, but now I have also seen how fast this beautiful wilderness is melting and what we stand to lose. On the sweet side it makes me feel even more inclined to do something about saving it, so that future ancient mariners can also experience this once in a lifetime trip.

