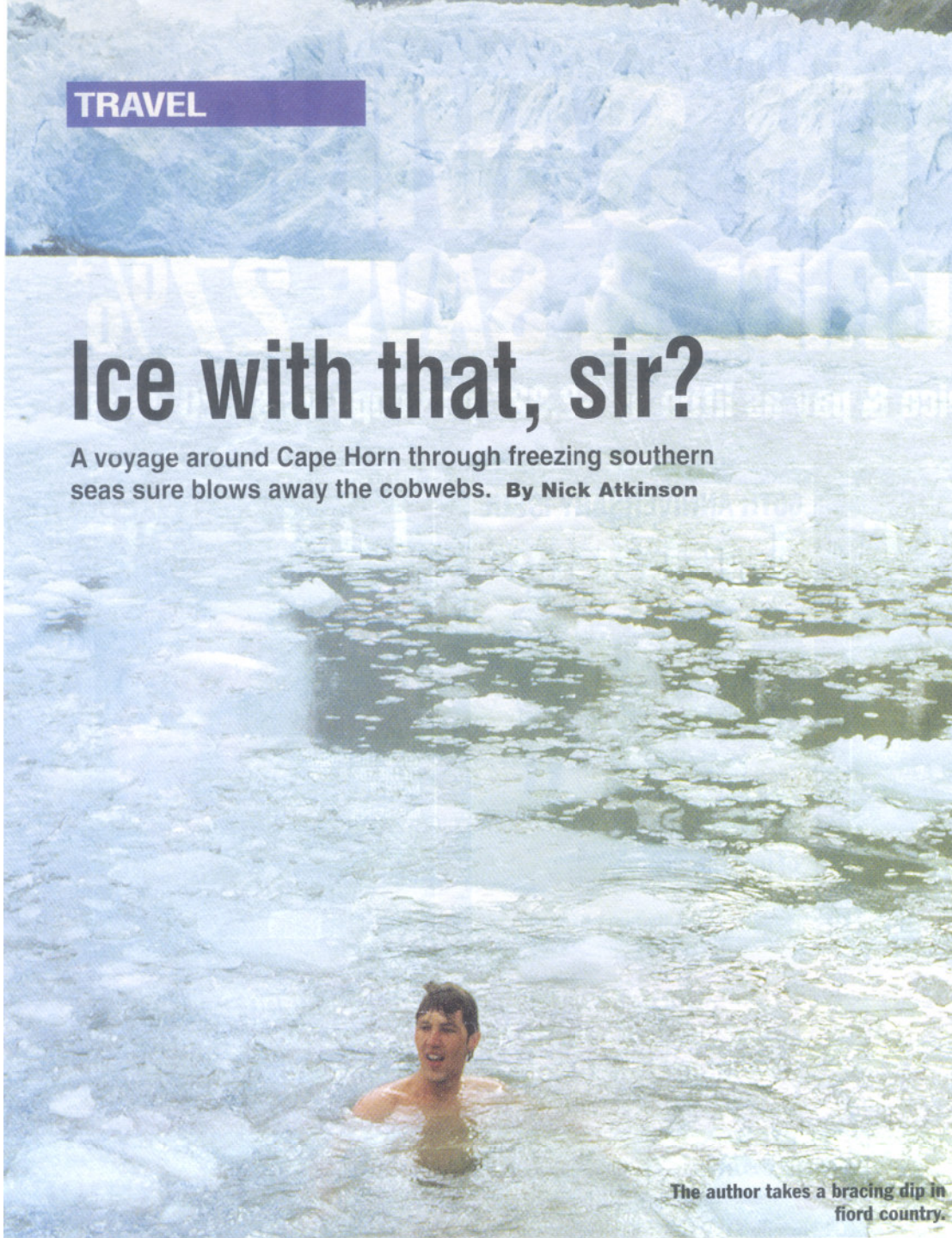


# Ice with that, sir?

A voyage around Cape Horn through freezing southern seas sure blows away the cobwebs. **By Nick Atkinson**



The author takes a bracing dip in fiord country.

**A**fter Supergroove, Max TV and *The Drum* all failed, I thought that it was time to strike out on my own. It was time to risk all. Life, loved ones and what had been called a promising future in the media would all be jeopardised for some kind of hot-headed lust for adventure. I wanted a long journey. The travel was to be the object, the mission.

I had read plenty about the west coast of Chile. The southern portion of this otherwise desolate coast is extremely mountainous. A 2000km-long archipelago confuses and fascinates anyone who has gazed at a map of coastal Patagonia. Densely forested fiords wind and bend through canyons to arrive at ice-blue, tide-washed glacier faces.

Tierra del Fuego is the largest island of this region, bordered to the north by the Strait of Magellan and to the south by the Beagle Channel. It lies at 55° south – the Andes' last gasp before they are submerged at Cape Horn for 800km to resurface as the Antarctic Peninsula.

So, you can imagine my surprise when I came across *Tiama*. I was squelching across the mudflats of Coxs Bay in Auckland with my jeans rolled up. The modern 15m cutter *Tiama* was a new arrival on the flats, so I hailed the skipper. My smile widened as he told me his plans. Interrupted only by the whistling kettle, Henk Haazen unrolled charts of the Patagonian coast. I was keen and the date was set.

Some months later, we eased off from Westhaven Marina with our crew of eight. A cheer went up. We were bound for the Horn!

We hoped to stop at the Chathams if the wind was fair to top up the water tanks and relieve the yacht, if necessary, of any crew members with second thoughts.

Chundering, whales and a faint aurora punctuated the five nights sailing to the Chathams. We dropped anchor in Waitangi Bay that evening and luxuriated in the stillness. An eager policeman really wanted to stamp our passports as he had never had the chance to use his stamp. As a gesture of gratitude, he ferried us to the pub in the police ute and we proceeded to drink like sailors. Somehow it was revealed that I was once in a rock band, and the next discovery was a copy of our debut album in the pub jukebox. Ouch. I had forgotten how loud and

hard rockin' "Scorpio Girls" was.

After two nights at anchor, we set off again for the Southern Ocean. The wind rose and in a few hours it was gusting 60 knots (well over 100kph). I felt ill and *Tiama* seemed cramped and squalid for the first time – the toilet had spilt its contents during a particularly violent lurch.

We were to be at sea for 36 days. I had done similar stretches on yachts before, but that was cruising from anchorage to anchorage. This landless slog was going to be hard nuts by comparison. Our course was to take us through the point on the globe that is further from land than anywhere else on Earth (approximately 47° south and 120° west), yet, at sea with the horizon only a few kilometres away, I never had a feeling of infinite space or isolation.

There were scary moments alone at the wheel when looming grey masses of ocean poured over us. At night in a gale we sometimes had to turn the powerful deck lights on to fix some snag. This gave the curious impression of being on a Hollywood film



set with the yacht heaving on hydraulic jacks. Out in the blackness we could almost imagine, beyond the pool of light, a grip standing high on a scaffold emptying buckets of water in front of an industrial-strength fan.

We ate ridiculous dinners perched around a lurching table. Albatross were our constant companions and clamminess our constant enemy. To shed our cocoons of bedding at four in the morning to face a raging wet southerly never lost its edge, but the yarns with those on watch became more illuminating as we ran down our longitude. I constantly missed my girl back in New Zealand and overcoming that longing was the real challenge of the voyage.

We rounded Cape Horn on my 24th birthday. A flurry of snow blew past, as if someone had opened the door to a chicken coop, and a school of dolphins showed us the way into the intricate Beagle Channel.

A day later we motored into Puerto Williams on a very rare windless day. Up a river mouth to the west of the town (really nothing more than a naval garrison), a large old warship lies aground and half-submerged. This grey relic houses the yacht club bar in one of the old cabins still above water and we made fast to the rusting hulk.

The only other seaworthy yacht at Puerto Williams at the time was an eight-metre fibreglass vessel called *Berserk*. Its sole occupant was a 21-year-old Norwegian called Jarle. He was bound for the ice-strewn fiords of the Cordilera Darwin – a place I had long fantasised about – and he wanted a few companions to help with the sailing and photography. Jarle had painted “Born to be wild” below the water line of *Berserk* so that when the little yacht heeled over this slogan became visible. Although he had sailed single-handed from Norway to Cape Horn, he had never found a way to take a picture of the underside of his yacht.

Dan, Davy (fellow Kiwis from *Tiama*) and I were keen to join this punky Viking and we were to depart without spending 48 hours ashore.

We set off after receiving the necessary zarpe (Chilean permission to embark), and spent the next eight days in a furious tacking battle. The Beagle Channel runs east-west and we were heading west, straight into the stiff prevailing wind. In eight days we made 130km and on our most unproductive days we only made a couple of hundred metres after hours of futile tacking.

The Pia Fiord was our goal. This uncharted fiord is officially off limits for some unknown reason, although it's possible that the Chilean Armada are just worried that the falling ice will endanger a small pleasure craft.

It was getting tense on *Berserk* as our food began to run out. Our modest bread ration was stale and the bucking fibreglass shoebox that we occupied was losing its charm.

We entered Pia Fiord the next day, its two arms home to no fewer than eight tide-washed glaciers. The ice began to thicken as we beat our track up the Pia. Soon we were slowly shovelling through it, our plastic bow steadily losing paint. After we had ploughed about as close as we dared to a particularly large tottering ice face, our Norwegian skipper was dropped onto an iceberg to pose for the cameras, wearing his Viking horns and national flag. Jarle then headed for shore in the dinghy. While he grovelled and tripped through the lumpy ice morass, we three Kiwis made cocoa, reclined and soaked up the scene. Three tumbling glaciers were constantly calving into the sea, while unnamed peaks wreathed in mist leaned over us in our tiny icebound hull. It was silent except for the occasional thundering of ice when part of one of the glaciers fell down.

Was this a noble goal? Was it worthwhile? Were these past two months a futile attempt to outdo our fellow man? Personally, I think we just wanted to have an adventure. We wanted to see something beautiful. ■