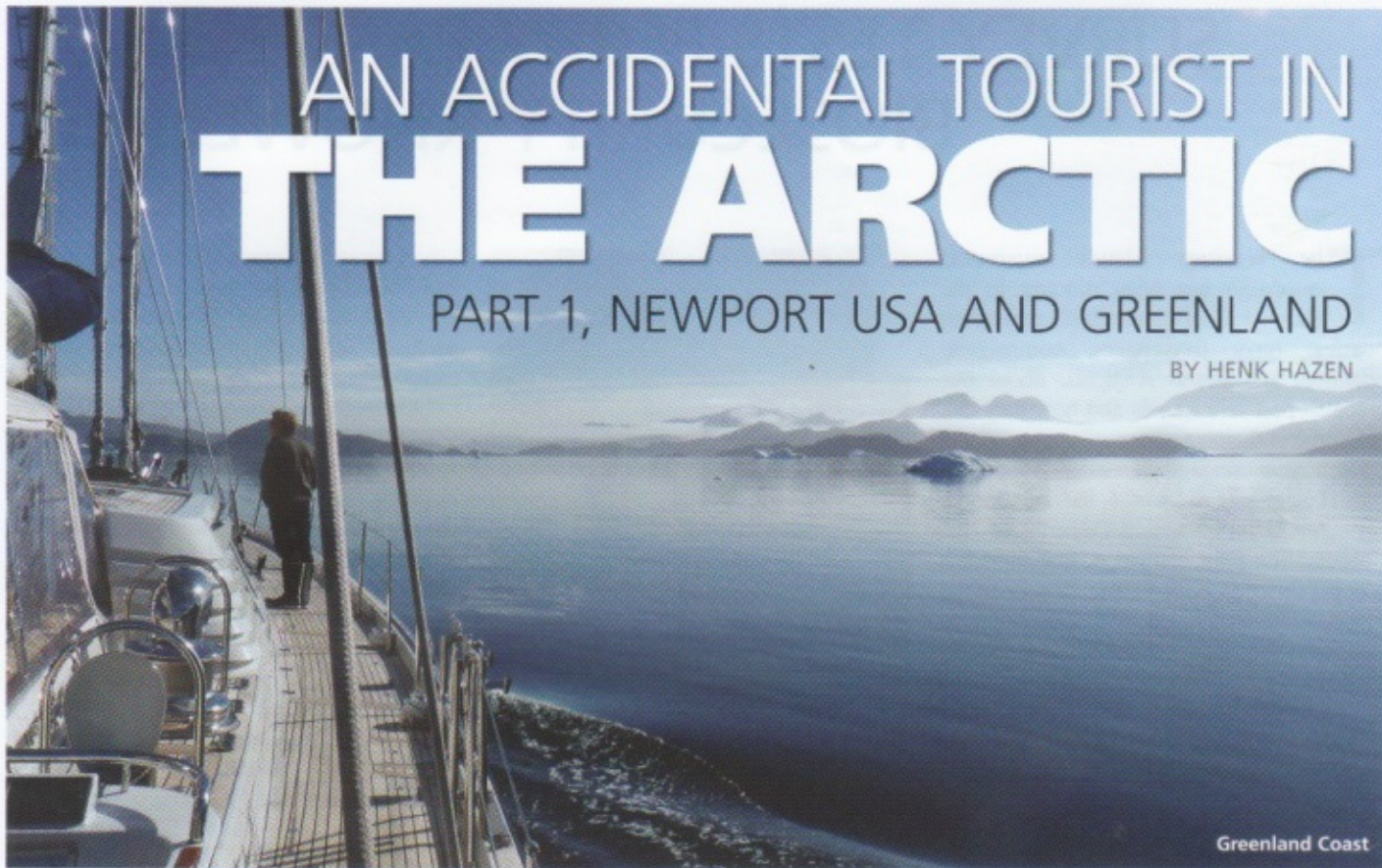


# AN ACCIDENTAL TOURIST IN THE ARCTIC

PART 1, NEWPORT USA AND GREENLAND

BY HENK HAZEN



Greenland Coast

The story of a seasoned Southern Ocean sailor onboard a superyacht through the North West Passage.

**W**ell, we are finally on our way, heading for the North West Passage, very, very exciting! We cleared the island of Newfoundland entering the Labrador Sea, where we encountered our first iceberg, good stuff! Currently pounding into a 30 knot northerly we have had some good sailing in the last few days. The boat points high into the wind and goes along at a good clip when there is a bit of wind, a great sailor.

A few steps back, you might wonder how I got to be on board. Long story as they say, but the crux of the matter is that I became friends with the boat's owner Cristina when she chartered Skip Novak's boat *Pelagic Australis* seven years ago for an attempt at the NWP while I was working as the mate. This time she invited me along on her own boat as the "high latitude expert" (whatever that might mean).



Mariacristina Rapisardi, The Boss  
at Devon island with Muskox

So I flew into LA on the July 5, and after a long absence from the USA I had forgotten how friendly and approachable everybody is. I had also forgotten how big the meals are, I ordered what I thought was a light lunch at LA airport and a huge bowl arrived, and I had to leave half of it behind. Before I left home I promised that a skinnier me would arrive back in New Zealand at the end of this trip.

We arrived on board the good ship *Billy Budd* in Newport RI at 0200 and started work at 0800, lots to do, so much for the expected easy going superyacht life. It is true what they say, the bigger the boat the bigger the problem. It is all very similar to the maintenance problems on *RV Tiama* at home, but everything is magnified and more complicated, and of course bigger, including the numbers on the invoices.

We went out for a test sail on the first day, trying out new equipment. Most of the gear worked well with some minor hiccups; a good skipper and crew with everybody chipping in where needed and there is a good spirit onboard the boat.

We are moored in "superyacht city": too much of a good thing. Yes, beautiful boats, floating works of art, money no problem, who said there was a recession on? But at the same time it is a bit excessive, you could feed half of Africa on the money that is thrown away on some of these boats. At least *Billy Budd* is operated like an expedition yacht and although she is very flash, one is allowed to walk through the boat and touch the handrails.

We departed Newport on the July 9, on a nice day. The skipper has kept everybody busy with safety drills, he has made me the Safety Officer and also asked me to look at all the ship's procedures documenting how she is run. So I have been putting my RYA/Coastguard instructor's hat on and together we have been busy writing up safety drills, master standing orders etc. The skipper Clive seems easy going and open to input, which is wonderful.

From reports it looks like the ice is retreating early this year, at least on the East side of the Arctic, which is good for us trying to make it through the NWP but, it is not good news for the planet if

we can navigate the NWP easily. We will see in a few weeks time how this pans out.

We have seen a few whales, they look like Southern right whales, but surely that cannot be right. Right?

Interestingly, I heard today that BP Oil has stopped construction work on the Liberty drilling project in the Alaskan Arctic/Beaufort Sea, the western approach to the NWP, due to safety concerns. This is great news for a change. I was involved working for Greenpeace, with a similar offshore oil-drilling project in the Beaufort sea called Northstar about 10 years ago, where we set up an ice camp called Sirius close by, to try and stop BP building an artificial island 25 miles offshore to carry out directional drilling under the seabed. Nice to see that the Liberty drilling project has come to a grinding halt for the moment. Let's hope it stays that way.

We arrived in Sisimiut, Greenland, on September 18, it has a nice harbour and the town is on a hill side. It is all very colourful and looks sorted in terms of roads and basic living services. The shops are well stocked and the crew including myself left a fair few krone behind buying souvenirs and more warm clothing. I even bought a sealskin hat which I can see might become a bit controversial once back in NZ.

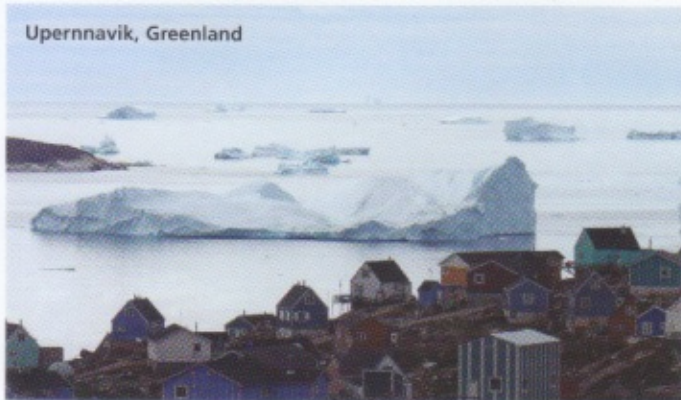
I can feel myself falling for Greenland. The country is inspiring in its size and set up, with a population of only 55,000 people and so far they all have been friendly. There is a good feel about the place, although there are also some slummy looking apartment buildings. Everybody seems to have a small runabout boat and there are lots of old wooden Danish fishing boats around in various stages of repair. Most of the wooden boats are coming to the end of their working life and are being replaced by bigger steel and aluminium vessels. The land itself is wide open country: wonderful stuff! Greenland is actually green at the moment. I always thought



there was ice everywhere but on the west coast there is grass growing in the short summer months. We did a good hike in the hills for a day, the locals say that winter and spring are the best time to be here, everything is still frozen and you have beautiful days so you can travel everywhere by snowmobile, and there is lots of hunting.

Clearing in with the boat was a non-event. Nobody was really interested and we never saw Customs. There is a ship reporting system for vessels over 40 feet, but this is more for safety reasons and the tracker that is on *Billy Budd* satisfies the Danish navy in that respect. I guess that with such a small population it would be hard for a stranger to hide in the country. Almost as bad as back home in New Zealand where you cannot "pass some wind" in ►

Upernavik, Greenland



Bluff without everybody in Auckland knowing about it.

Upernavik is the largest northern settlement where there is a big supermarket, airport and plenty of diesel, hence the presence of a few expedition boats in town at the moment. One of them, *Vagabond*, just came in after over-wintering for nine months further north to do some ice studies. Other yachts are also working here, one of them *Arctic Tern*, has a World Wildlife Fund crew on-board doing research in the area.

We sailed 400 miles up the coast from Sisimiut to Upernavik. Fog, fog and more fog thick as pea soup, with icebergs scattered all around. Icebergs and fog must be best mates as they hang out together a lot. Last night the sun dipped below the horizon but it doesn't get dark anymore, which should have made watch keeping easier, except for the fog. Occasionally it lifts for a few minutes and a grandiose view opens up with beautiful snow topped mountains and stunningly shaped icebergs scattered around us all lit up in the red midnight sun – an ice dreamy far away fairy land. And then the fog is back again closing everything in with 200 metres visibility and the beautiful icebergs become dangerous floating objects only visible on radar. We have had to do a bit of dodging around them which keeps you alert on watch – not too much chatting going on.

We stop at the Devils Thumb, also known as Kuvdlorsuag Island, and then we are ready to cross Baffin Bay. After an uneventful 48 hour crossing, again with plenty of icebergs mixed in with thick fog, we arrived at Coburg Island, Canada with the midnight sun giving the icebergs an amazing alpine glow.

From there we started day sailing, anchoring in a different location every night, working ourselves steadily westwards towards Lancaster Sound. The owner, Cristina, likes to explore as much as possible, going ashore at every opportunity taking everybody with her including the crew, where time permits.

We always take two rifles ashore. There are more polar bears in the Canadian Arctic than in Greenland. This seems to be the case for other wildlife as well, as we saw some muskox (a very

prehistoric looking hooved beast), walrus, beluga whales and some narwhals.

This trip is as much about exploring the Arctic as getting through the North West Passage. Cristina has spent four summers cruising in the area and could have travelled through the NWP a few times in the past but choose not to, choosing instead to explore more of the High Arctic. I think she has got the Arctic bug big time but I'm hoping that we are not goofing around so much that the passage closes again before we get through.

For any vessel attempting to navigate the NWP, the crux is weaving your way through an archipelago of islands in the central section, which, up until recently, only opens for a relatively short period of time, sometimes only for a few days in early August. Now it seems as if things are changing and one long term ice observer has told us that he has never seen so little ice in the area and that the ice is behaving in a totally different manner compared to other years.


I guess this might enable us to get through, while at the same time exploring as much as we can. But as mentioned before, it is bad news for our planet as the Arctic is the time clock by which climate change is measured, and it seems to be ticking way too fast. If it gets so warm that the permafrost starts thawing then run away, climate change is here.

Entering Lancaster Sound is really the beginning of the NWP. This is where in the eighteenth century, most of the famously stubborn English explorers started to encounter the real Arctic ice pack. The best known of those was undoubtedly Franklin, whose ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, with 128 men onboard, disappeared and were never heard of again. Only one piece of paper was ever found giving some indication of what happened to them; this is a story that has fascinated generations of explorers.

Our first landing in Lancaster Sound was at Beechey Island where there are three graves belonging to some of Franklin's men. For the subsequent rescue ships sent to look for Franklin, this was the first clue of what might have happened to the expedition. The graves are still here. It is a very desolate island and ironically, that desolate island is now one of the most visited places in the Arctic.

During our short stay, there was one other superyacht here, the *Katharsis* from Poland, as well as three French archaeologists camping ashore. In spite of these modern day researchers and explorers, the place remains special and you get a bit of a feel for how it used to be for those men from earlier times who would sometimes spend four years overwintering in the area on wooden ships, either looking for the NWP, or searching for the lost Franklin expedition.

There is some truth in the saying "wooden ships, men of steel" and in our time, "steel ships men of wood"

So from here, westward trying to get through the hard part of the NWP. Cheers, Henk Haazen 

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