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Summer? No, Thank You...

By Mariacristina Rapisardi, Oyster 72, *Billy Budd*

Billy Budd has been down South for almost a year. She arrived at Puerto Monte in September 2007 and we explored the Chilean coast in November and December before pushing on to the Antarctic in February 2008 and then to the Beagle Channel.



So what next? Where could we take her before heading off to South Georgia in January 2009? Simple, of course... the Beagle Channel in winter, that's July and August in these parts.

When we arrived at Ushuaia Airport I asked our taxi driver whether anyone ever sailed the Beagle Channel in winter, he said "no, absolutely not! The Channel is cold in winter and sometimes even freezes over. It snows. Why bother?" Winter-time in Ushuaia, he said, meant skiing in Cerro Castor or staying at home warm and dry, waiting for summer to come round again.

Yes, sure, but we wanted to try it all the same. I suppose sailing the Beagle Channel in winter was just something we had to do to cap our two years down South. So we began to organise the trip and think about which friends we should invite along.

We always take two Italian couples with us on our *Billy Budd* adventures. We choose who to take depending on where we are going, of course; the more relaxed friends for warmer seas, the sportier, more outdoor types for the tough seas, and mountain lovers where there is any climbing or skiing to be done.

But who could we choose for the Beagle Channel voyage? We had to look to our sportier, hardier friends, of course. Whoever came along would have to be able to endure the bitter cold and extreme solitude and not be worried by ice.

And so with unerring logic, we chose two friends that had spent every summer of their lives on the beach, stirring only from their sun loungers for quick dips in 30 degree seas, plus another two that hadn't ever been aboard a boat before!

What possessed us you might ask? Who knows? One night at dinner we put it to all four and instead of getting the expected and immediate "No, thanks all the same but we're actually busy around then..." we received an enthusiastic and emphatic "Yes no problem...we're packed and ready to go!"

There is nothing quite so difficult as trying to retract an invitation that's been accepted. And so we found ourselves with two couples champing at the bit to cast off for the Beagle Channel but blissfully unaware of what that would involve after a lifetime of sultry Italian summers.

This marked the start of months of sheer panic for me. How would I cope with them? How could I explain that it would be cold; very cold, dark, very dark; windy, very windy; and wet, very wet? That we'd have to turn off the heating at night and that they'd be waking to temperatures of 5/6 degrees in their cabins each morning, without even mentioning what the bathroom would be like! How could I explain that they were absolutely forbidden to fall overboard or get into the inflatable without a life jacket, and that when we went ashore we'd be surrounded by snow, snow and more snow?

In the end, after various dinners involving long explanations and hefty doses of psychological terrorism, we decided there was nothing more we could do. If they really wanted to come, then we'd have to take them with us. First however we had to clothe them properly and ensure they bought all the vital gear that spending the winter on a boat in Patagonia would demand. Then we got together a collection of various board games, playing cards, CDs and DVDs to help pass the long southern evenings.



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We had a lot of very short days and long hours of darkness ahead of us. In fact, we’d have to anchor very early in the afternoon and wouldn’t have anything to do until cocktail hour or dinner time.

My husband and I arrived on *Billy Budd* first, a week ahead to get an idea of how things really stood and to prepare the boat for our friends’ arrival. We landed in Ushuaia on a typical winter’s evening. The streets were snowy and the lights bright – it felt like Christmas but was actually 15 July.

We pulled our skis out from under our bed and the following day set off to try out the pistes of Cerro Castor. To our great surprise we found chair lifts, ski lifts, perfect, modern beautifully maintained pistes, gorgeous snow and, to our delight, not too many other skiers. The rental system was impeccable and there were even a few quite good restaurants too. All that and fantastic warm sunshine to boot!

We were introduced to a local guide, Pablo, by Gregg and Kerry, two great sailors that keep a boat at Ushuaia. In summer they do a bit of chartering to pay their bills and then

spend the winter working on the boat, preparing it for the following season. Pablo is Argentinean but had spent many years working as an Alpine guide in Switzerland. We hired him at once and went off looking for some good off-piste skiing - which we found, of course. And excellent it was too!

We cast off for Cape Horn. We had to go via Puerto Williams and get permission from the Chileans, something that’s more and more difficult to do with each passing month. This time they gave us ten days to get there and back but refused us permission to anchor.

We sailed off in that direction, stopping off at Caleta Martial (where we anchored!) for the night. The following day, however, the wind was very high as was the sea. The result was that although we tried to get near the Cape itself, we soon realised that we’d never be able to land in the tender. We had to turn back. A real pity as this was the third time we’d come to the Cape without managing to get our name on the illustrious list of folk that had managed to land there.

We had no other choice but to be patient. While we were there the Chilean Navy hailed us over the radio. >

OWNER REPORT



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We are well used to getting these calls as the Navy tracks all boats mile by mile and demands continual updates on their positions. This time, however, they were calling to invite us to anchor in the Caleta, off their lighthouse – it was too windy and rough, they said, for us to keep going. We neglected to point out that it was they that had forbidden us to anchor in the first place but instead thanked them and said we'd keep going. After all, was *Billy Budd* or was she not, a sailing yacht?

And so we returned to Ushuaia and spent the last few days before our friends' arrival skiing. We also met up with all the new buddies we'd made over the last year. All of the boats at Ushuaia were battened down for winter at that point in the season. No one does any chartering or ventures out in the channels that time of year. So instead they all came to dinner aboard *Billy Budd* and we went over to them on their boats. It felt like we were all part of a small floating village in which everyone knew everyone else and people kept each other company by chatting away about the sea and sailing.

But then, at long last, the big day arrived and with it our four friends. They emerged from Ushuaia Airport wrapped up in the winter woollies they'd left Italy in and looking a little lost but thrilled to arrive and raring to go. And go we did. We sailed, once again, via Puerto Williams, where we paid a quick visit to the museum where a local scientist gave us a talk on the Fuegians and their lifestyle, before finally we cast off for the Channel itself.

The sun was beaming down and it was neither warm nor cold, as we arrived into Yandegaia, where Jose and Anne keep several horses. This marked the start of the holiday of our dreams. The following morning, we mounted up at 9am in the bitter cold. Luckily, however, the sun was still shining and we began our ride across the glacier at the bottom of the valley, a 12-mile trip through snow at least 40cm deep. The surroundings were stunning: frozen mountains, rivers, trees, impenetrable forests... it was like being in a fairytale. >





That evening we got back aboard and set off to fish for 'centolla' king crab for supper. Fishing was allowed at this time of year and the water was teeming with them. Having centolla for dinner was something we'd done before but a totally new experience for our Italian friends. We spent two days at Yandegaia, which is just gorgeous. We were berthed beside a boat owned by two Dutch people – they told us they'd been there ten days and had no intention of moving.

We, on the other hand, did and so we continued on through the Channel. We arrived at the Caleta Sonia lighthouse where the lighthouse keeper, his wife and two children were expecting us. We'd met them in April when we discovered that they supported the Italian football team, Roma, and so we brought some t-shirts and baseball caps for the children. They were delighted but were actually expecting something else too: to be invited aboard for some of our spaghetti. So we ended up stopping for a long leisurely meal and lots of stories. These people spend up to a year at a time all alone at the lighthouse. A few ships pass occasionally but yachts hardly ever do and even then they never stop. The family is in radio contact with the Navy but other than that they are completely on their own. They are so isolated in fact, that before sending them to the lighthouse the Navy insisted they all have their appendixes removed – they just couldn't run the risk of a serious infection in such a remote and inaccessible location.

We cast off once again and finally got to the glaciers: Italy, France and Germany. In the meantime all of our board games stayed in their drawer and no one made any attempt to take them out. The days were short, true, but it only got light at about 9am and darkness fell again at 6pm. That didn't leave a whole lot of time to get bored. Showering, chatting and an aperitif brought us up to dinner time after which none of us could keep an eye open. Perhaps it was the cold, the place or the winter, but we would all get unbelievably sleepy and be tucked up in bed incredibly early every night.

We moved from cove to cove, glacier to glacier. Tying up was always complicated, but we already knew that would be the case. First we had to run a minimum of two lines ashore, then anchor, then reverse the boat to position it properly. We had to look for the right depth and the right trees to tie on to. A complicated job that sometimes took over an hour to complete. But at that point we were well versed in all the secrets of getting this task out of the way as quickly as possible; everyone had their own specific role and we all worked quickly to get the boat right so that we could go ashore.

The landscape was magnificent but rough. There was a lot of snow this year, more than normal, and it was fresh and powdery. This meant we had to use snow shoes or skis.



"We left a strip of sea in our wake as we made our way through the frozen water like an ice-breaker. Hats off to *Billy Budd*!"

It was cold too so we had to pile on the clothes. We also had to take a rucksack everywhere. We didn't really know where we were going so we had to take a portable GPS, sat phone, VHF radio and some food with us at all times. Needless to say, not getting lost was a priority.

The forests were dense with no real reference points. They quickly closed around us with nothing but trees and more trees everywhere we looked, so we'd immediately lose sight of the boat, the sea and the mountain tops. Even the tracks of our skis and snowshoes would often be quickly swept away by the wind or covered up by fresh snow. So we had no real alternative but to keep the GPS to hand and save the route. It was either that or tie bits of coloured string to the trees – however, I think the GPS is a much more reliable and modern alternative!

We found some small frozen streams that we could walk on, following the tracks of the guanacos. If they were able to walk on them, then why couldn't we? Though come to think of it, how much would the average guanaco weigh? All this meant that we were able to get to places that would have been completely inaccessible in April, February or December. It's much easier to walk on ice, than through the 50cm of mud we'd have faced at any other time of the year!

Our Italian friends were rendered speechless by the whole scene of course. And not because they were frozen to the spot either, they were simply blown away by the incredible surroundings.

Sunny day followed sunny day. It was cold but the sky was incredibly clear and the mountains looked etched in the distance. They were 'only' 2,800/3,000 metres high, but that's 3,000 metres literally from sea level – the equivalent of a 4,000 metre mountain. The mountains France, Italy, Darwin and Bove would peep out now and then from their

wreaths of clouds if the sky was particularly clear.

An impressive sight indeed with snow scattered on their steep rocky slopes like icing sugar. These great mountains exuded an increased aura of power and energy. We could see very, very clearly just how un-climbable they were. We finally understood how Cerro Torre got its fearsome reputation.

We were constantly on the lookout for animals too but they were probably all hibernating. Apart from a few seals, we saw a guanaco that ran off the minute he caught sight of us, and we saw a fox that followed about a metre behind us and wouldn't leave us alone. But that was it. We didn't see any other boats or ships after Yandegaia apart from a single fishing boat whose crew swapped some 'centolla' for a couple of bottles of wine and some cigars.

The cold was relentless but we were fine once we were in the boat. The reflex stove worked brilliantly as did the heating which we only put on at night. It snowed a lot, clothing the landscape completely. Some mornings we'd wake to find 20cm of newly fallen snow on the decks and surprise, surprise...the sea frozen around us! We felt like heroes, the ice was, of course, only a few millimetres thick but there was still enough of it for us to have to smash it from the bow or the inflatable. We left a strip of sea in our wake as we made our way through the frozen water like an ice-breaker. Hats off to *Billy Budd*!

Billy Budd really came into her own when we got near to the glaciers. At Ventisquero, the last glacier in the first part of the Channel, there was a lot of ice and a strong current. I'll never know how we managed to get permission to go there, – maybe the Navy made some kind of mistake. We were near the rocks and the shore but luckily in deep water where the ice didn't seem as thick. However, two or three of us still had to stand on the bow to push the larger chunks of ice out of the way. >





"This is how we spent three enchanted weeks in the cold and sun, managing tough but do-able shore trips, sailing and tying up and watching glaciers emerge from the distance."

We were moving at less than a knot but we only had a fibreglass bottom so even if we'd wanted to, we couldn't have pretended we were an ice-breaker. Eventually though, navigating the fjords near the glacier became impossible and we had to turn back.

This is how we spent three enchanted weeks in the cold and sun, managing tough but do-able shore trips, sailing and tying up and watching glaciers emerge from the distance. Until, that is, we had to return to Ushuaia as our holidays came to an end once again.

Back in Ushuaia, the other boats awaited and we took our four Italian heroes skiing at Cerro Castor to give them a taste of the southern hemisphere's pistes. We went to dinner with the crews of the other boats too: four Dutch, various New Zealanders and Americans but no other Italians apart from ourselves.

Our holiday ended with a 10am flight to Buenos Aires. In all our time aboard *Billy Budd*, we hadn't opened a single game or watched a single film. We'd barely even had time to read the books we had on board. We'd sailed a lot, seen a lot and lived a heck of a lot! Our friends returned to Italy enchanted by a world so very different from their own, by the unique, fascinating people we'd met, people that told stories that sounded like children's fairytales but were actually very much their own.

We, on the other hand, returned to Italy determined to come back to the *Beagle* in winter once again. It was just too majestic not too at least one more time. In the meantime, however, we'll be getting both ourselves and the boat ready for another great adventure...this time to the remote, sea and wind-lashed mountain isle of South Georgia.

And *Billy Budd* will keep on sailing.

Photos: Courtesy of Mariacristina Rapisardi and Giovanni Cristofori