



Welcome

Welcome to the 66th edition of Oyster News, which we hope you enjoy.

As usual many thanks to the owners whose contributions appear in this issue and to those of you who are considering writing something for a future edition.

While I was in Scotland for the Fife Regatta I telephoned Owen Parker, who had been struggling with cancer, and invited him to the Oyster Regatta prize giving in Cowes. Sadly, just three weeks later, Owen passed away and missed our event in Cowes by a few days. Owen was an outstanding ambassador for the sport of yachting and for the marine industry, having represented Lewmar since the 1960's. Not only was he a real gentleman, but above all he was passionate about sailing and will be remembered for his uncanny knack of predicting Solent winds and of course for his time as sailing master aboard all of Sir Edward Heath's *Morning Clouds*.

On another tack, just before this issue of Oyster News went to press, I went to Sunday lunch, laid on by Hannah Stodel's mum to give her daughter and the other two crew, Stephen Thomas and John Robertson a send off before leaving for China and the Paralympics Games, representing Britain in the Sonar class. The commitment and confidence of this crew is immense and I am really proud of Oyster's role as their sponsors over many years. They, I mean we, are really hopeful of a medal this time.

Once you catch the sailing bug it's a disease for life for which there is no cure. Forget the doom and gloom of the economy and go cruising, all the better if it's an Oyster, but go anyway, life's too short not to.

Richard Matthews
Founder and Chairman
Oyster Marine

Stop Press

Congratulations to Britain's Olympic Sailors
Once again the worlds best!

Ben Ainslie	Finn	Gold
Paul Goodison	Laser	Gold
Iain Percy & Andrew Simpson	Star	Gold
Sarah Ayton, Sara Webb & Pippa Wilson	Yngling	Gold
Bryony Shaw	RSX	Bronze
Nick Rogers & Joe Glanfied	470	Silver

Congratulations also to the RYA and every member of the Team GBR Olympic Sailing - We're proud of you all!



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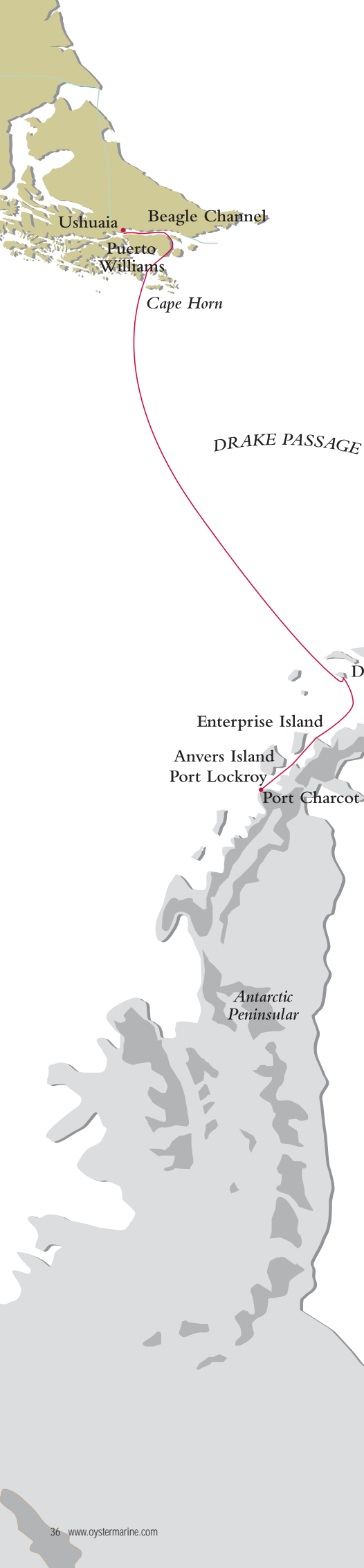
70 JUST LAUNCHED



South, south, south...

by Mariacristina Rapisardi, Oyster 72 *Billy Budd*





There was great excitement as our aircraft neared the very southernmost tip of the earth; we spied a strip of water: could it be the Beagle Channel or the Straits of Magellan?... It was Beagle, Ushuaia, a big bay and a plethora of smaller ones. Or at least that's how it looks from the air. Somewhere down there was our Oyster 72, *Billy Budd*. I tried to pick out her mast with its two blue stripes but we were too far out.

Our small aircraft landed and we excitedly made our way to the boat. There were seven of us altogether: my husband and I, the usual two friends who've now 'put down anchor' on *Billy Budd*, two Alpine guides and a ski instructress from Courmayeur.

This time we hoped to make it to 66 degrees South even though it was late in the season. By February the ice would normally be starting to make its way northwards. We knew what that meant in the Arctic, we had to get going as fast as possible. We had a month to do the whole trip in. We hoped that six or seven days would be enough for the trip to the Drake Channel and the rest of the time we hoped would be spent sailing down along the Antarctic peninsula.

On the day we were due to leave, a storm was forecast for Cape Horn with 60 knot winds; the harbour master in Ushuaia decided on a lockdown with no boats or ships allowed to leave the safety of port. So we settled in to wait. We got our skis, ski boots and ice axes ready: at the same time wondering if we really would be able to ski, climb and trek down there?

Towards evening the wind had dropped and the port reopened; we cast off in the dark, not that it made much difference with 700 miles of the Drake Channel ahead of us! In the end we got through the passage with the greatest of ease with the wind practically astern; one or two of us fell prey to seasickness but to be honest it was nothing like we had expected.

After three and a half days at sea we thought we must be nearing land; we couldn't see land, but we could smell... penguins! It was an incredibly strong smell that hit us well before we caught our first glimpse of terra ferma. This was partly due to the fact that *Billy Budd* was surrounded by thick fog. A light sprinkling of snow dusted the deck and gave the air much more of a zing than we got on our mountains back home.

We set foot on Antarctic soil for the first time in a bay dominated by the ruins of an old whale processing plant complete with huge boilers, shipwrecks, sheds and houses where the workers once lived. This is a site of archaeological importance so although we look, we're careful not to touch anything.

This was our first taste of adventure in the Antarctic: we found the Deception Island thermal springs and ended up swimming in a pool in which the water was... 60 degrees! The pool was only a couple of metres deep but the water was scalding hot and the air temperature remained Antarctic cold.



We cast off once again; and after a few dozen miles reached the peninsula. The weather was fabulous with the sun beaming down on us from a cloudless sky. We arrived at Cape Herschel surrounded by icebergs and gorgeous mountains. We quickly dropped anchor and prepared ourselves for our first ski excursion.

This turned out to be trickier than we had expected. There was an awful lot to get ready before we could head ashore – skis, crampons, ice axes, ropes – getting to the snow proved even trickier. The Antarctic coastline is steep to the point of being inaccessible in some spots; we used crampons and ice axes to get up to a plateau from where we could get started on our long ski trip.

Obviously we stayed tied together by ropes and harnesses; there were huge crevices everywhere and worse still they were dusted with snow so we couldn't really see them. Luckily though, we had our mountain experts with us so they very calmly helped us pick our way through.

Our first descent on Antarctic snow was marvellous, the kind of descent that you rarely get in the Alps – perfect curves on spring snow on a warm, sunny day.

Our night at Cape Herschel was far from peaceful, with too much ice and too many icebergs none too gently grinding against and slamming into *Billy Budd's* hull. We cast off again early in the morning bound for Enterprise Bay, a tiny harbour where we anchored by a half-submerged wreck.

This was an incredibly calm spot sheltered from the winds by gorgeous mountains. We took advantage of the wreck, the sun and the warmth to embark on our first dive in Antarctic waters. After struggling into our dry suits, which weigh 16kg a piece, and donning hoods, gloves and masks, we finally slipped beneath the surface of the sea...and saw nothing but icebergs and the wreck! No fish, no penguins, nothing.

The weather started to change and it began to snow. *Billy Budd* was soon blanketed in snow. It fell off the mast and the boom and filled up the cockpit. The deck became an ice rink.

Despite the weather we continued to the Lemaire Channel, Port Charcot and Mount Scott in turn and with every night and day that passed we came across more and more of the most famous channels, fjords and bays in the Antarctic. Each one has its own history of explorers, single-handed sailors and boats that have spent the winter iced-in in these secret coves. We now saw penguins, penguins and more penguins - elegant Gentoos, blue-eyed Adelies and cute Chinstraps.

The weather turned so ugly we were no longer able to explore the mountains, our trips were confined to long walks near the shore and to visiting the penguins. We obviously never touched the birds. For a start they won't let you any nearer than two metres before they back off a foot or two, making it quite clear that they want to maintain a certain distance. >

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South, south, south... continued

Many of the penguins were still very much chicks, staring at us curiously, walking around and hopping along after us on tiny feet, skittering down snowy slopes and tumbling head over heels which was a really funny sight! We saw thousands of penguins. It truly is incredible how many penguins can fit on to a single beach and how they can cluster so closely together. Our encounters with them continued and evolved with each passing day.

We'd often find an adult just staring at us, probably asking itself who or what we were. It would then follow us and almost seem like it wanted to get onboard the boat. But then it would decide that its native land is more hospitable than *Billy Budd* and swim away with great dignity.

To us however, *Billy Budd*, always seemed very warm and welcoming: the stove in the saloon is fantastic and when we lit it in the evenings it would raise the room temperature up to 20 degrees. It was a little chillier in the cabins, particularly our aft cabin. Temperatures fell to three or four degrees in the mornings but our skipper Clive had the ingenious idea of connecting the towel rails in the heads to the batteries (rather than the generator) so that they were deliciously warm which also meant we could actually dry some clothing. Because the truth of the matter is, we were always wet. The continual snow showers didn't give us time to dry off our clothes, oilskins and, most importantly, our gloves.

Our journey continued in the Lemaire Channel and we headed for Port Charcot; the sailing was just the same – no wind, the sea was calm and we were surrounded by icebergs. On one iceberg we caught a glimpse of something dark. Was it penguins? Seals? We edged closer to see what kind of animal might be stretched out so calmly on this flat iceberg. Then we noticed there was a large creature swimming around the iceberg heading for the boat and we suddenly realised what it was... a leopard seal!



At long last a sighting of the famous leopard seal that everyone had told us about. This hungry, aggressive seal can apparently attack tenders and devour hundreds of penguins; in short it is the polar bear of the south. It was big too, it swam towards *Billy Budd* and what we experienced then was the most thrilling spectacle of our entire journey; the seal began a strange dance around the boat, diving and resurfacing. It swam around the bow, surfaced at the stern and then appeared to start attacking the hull, hurling its enormous mouth and razor sharp teeth at *Billy Budd*. But then at the very last second, it would veer away, barely caressing the boat with its enormous three-metre-plus body.

Meanwhile the other animal stretched out on the iceberg, another leopard seal, didn't move, merely raising its big head giving us a bored look. We couldn't understand what this strange dance/attack meant. Perhaps the seal was trying to defend its iceberg. Perhaps it was its home. Maybe the seal on the iceberg was a female and the one in the sea a male. We all had our own theories but none of us are animal experts and so our questions stayed unanswered.

Nevertheless, after this strange encounter I decided I wasn't interested in diving any more and Clive agreed. The idea of meeting the big leopard seal underwater didn't appeal one bit, even if the experts claim they won't attack humans. You just never really know.

This was far from the end of our leopard seal adventures. One not so pleasant experience was during one of our disturbed nights amid the icebergs, we were hit by a particularly annoying one that began repeatedly pushing *Billy Budd* whilst we were trying to asleep.

At Port Charcot we met with Jerome Poncet and his guests aboard his boat *Golden Fleece*. This was a very important meeting for us as he is a great sailor, one of the foremost seafarers in these southern seas. We invited him and his friends to dinner. It turned out that they were there working for the BBC and looking for killer whales whose highly evolved and fascinating social life they wanted film.

They told us wonderful stories of their adventures and the animals they've come across. They told us tales of how long they had to stay in the water to snatch just a few moments of interesting film and how difficult it is to find just the right shot and then slot it in a wildlife documentary. They'd been in the Antarctic a month already and had nothing to show for it. It seemed that there were no killer whales or at least that they're keeping out of sight if they were around.

As we journeyed south we encountered more and more ice with each passing day. Nights were less than peaceful and we often had to get up to move small chunks of ice clunking against *Billy Budd's* hull before they could cause any harm. We used a hook to push the smaller chunks away but we had to get out the tender when things got more difficult.

This meant we could only continue our journey by day, merely managing part of the way we planned as the weather was so bad. It snowed a lot but it was neither too cold nor too warm, just wet. The worst thing about this kind of weather was that we were only able to >

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catch very occasional glimpses of the mountains. Their lofty peaks would suddenly appear, high and inaccessible.

When we reached Vernaski, the Ukrainian Antarctic station, we had reached the southernmost point of our voyage. That evening we drank a toast in the world's most southerly bar where Caterina, our young ski instructress, proved a major hit with the base's scientists and staff who challenged her to a vodka drinking competition!

The next morning we made our way north again, to Port Lockroy, a large bay with a museum that attracts tourist ships. We anchored in a nicely sheltered fjord, but had to move because the wind turned and ice began coming in. It even reached as far as the bay, so Clive spent a sleepless night checking that *Billy Budd* didn't get surrounded and damaged by mini icebergs and growlers.

The skipper of the boat *Pelagic Australis*, which was anchored near us, hailed us over the radio at one point when he was woken by larger chunks of ice hitting his boat. The weather was dreadful, the barometer hits its lowest point – 960 mb and there was a 60-knot wind! So we stayed aboard and only went ashore to visit the museum where we made a few purchases.

The locals said that the weather had been particularly bad so far this year with very little sun, high winds and squalls. Which was a pity but it also gives us the perfect excuse to visit another time!

Sadly we had to start thinking about our return journey and checked the weather bulletins. We had to get to Ushuaia by February 28 at the very latest and we couldn't risk being slowed or stopped in our tracks by a squall in the middle of the Drake Channel. Our plan was to leave the Antarctic around February 23rd or 24th but the Gribs was forecasting 60 knot winds for the 23rd – that means big seas and waves – and in the Drake Channel.

So we set off from Port Lockroy at dawn on the morning of the 20th. We discovered that our radar wasn't working so stopped off at Melchiorre Bay, where a base is located, though now closed, to try to fix it. Anchoring was tricky as the wind was high and the sea rough. Richard and Clive climbed the mast to try to find out what the problem was but there was nothing they could do. So we set off for the open sea with an 800 mile trek ahead of us, hoping that it wouldn't be too rough.

It was rough but not overly so, just enough to do the trick. Perhaps it was our emotions, the fact that we had to leave so quickly and the forecast of storms in two days, taking their toll psychologically as some of the crew fell prey to a bout of severe seasickness. It was almost a bow sea. Even though the waves weren't too bad they really slammed the bow and with each slap the already pale faces got paler. It's wasn't exactly pleasant for the rest of us either as every time the bow slammed into the sea, a shudder ran through the entire boat from stem to stern, before it started all over again.



Those of us not too seasick took the watches. We tried to cook a bit – the usual risotto that we rustle up on long crossings. But hardly anyone had any appetite for it. Three days dragged or flew by – depending on who you asked.

We approached Cape Horn by the evening our second day. The Gribs forecasted a 65 knot winds for 09.00 the following day so we tried to go as fast possible and finally we dropped anchor in Caleta Martial on the island of Herschel at two o'clock in the morning.

The sea was now as calm as glass, there wasn't a breath of wind and the sweet smell of land drifted towards us on the wind. We toasted our return to dry land and then headed off to bed in a boat that was still at last.

We awoke the next morning in a 69.8 knot wind and our friends turned pale with dismay, all too well aware that if we'd been a few hours later, we'd be at Cape Horn where the winds by then would have been reaching 105 knots...not a pleasant prospect at all.

It was far too blustery to go ashore or even put the dinghy in the water. So we were all stuck aboard again. Those of us who'd been looking forward to a bit of sunshine and a walk on the beach were a bit down, but we all knew that's just how changeable it is in these parts. To prove my point the following day was wonderfully warm and sunny. We went ashore to the beach at Caleta Martial and climbed a small mountain covered in brambles and bushes; one of us fell asleep in the sun on the beach whilst the others photographed flowers and saplings.

The ice and cold are behind us now. But we'll be back – that's a promise and we'll be venturing even further South next time...