

ICEBREAK



As the pack ice of the Northwest Passage shrinks, these once un-navigable waters can now be sailed. But as the Silent Sound and her crew discover, steering a route through huge chunks of ice is a dangerous mission.

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THE ICE WASN'T GIVING US MANY choices. Some floes were the size of a basketball court, while others were just small chunks melting in the sunshine. It hemmed Silent

Sound in against the shore, leaving a narrow gap for us to sail through. On one side, we had ice floes that could crush our hull, while on the other side lay Victoria Island, that giant mass in the middle of Canada's Arctic, where uncharted reefs and sandbars threatened us.

To the south of us two yachts were caught in the ice. They had chosen the traditionally safe route along the southern shores of the Northwest Passage, while we gambled and went north, trying to find a way around a giant plug of ice that had blocked our way for more than a week.

I had set off on my 40-foot sloop to sail 8000 nautical miles, or 15,000 kilometres, through the Northwest Passage. Our journey took us up the west coast of Canada, through the Arctic and down the east coast to Halifax. This feat was only possible because climate change was melting the sea ice that traditionally blocks this passage. Fewer people have sailed a yacht through these waters than have climbed Mt Everest. Along the way, we wanted to learn as much as we could about modern Inuit life and see how climate change was impacting this remote corner of the earth.

The first week of the expedition was idyllic as we sailed north between Vancouver Island and the mainland of British Columbia, sunny, with snow capped mountains, lush forests and quiet anchorages at night. It was hard to imagine that this was the beginning of an Arctic expedition. Then I steered Silent Sound west, across the Gulf of Alaska and into open seas.

Crossing the Gulf of Alaska took two weeks in unfavourable winds.

But the crew was settling into life at sea. Hanns, a professional sailor from Germany, relished rough seas and beating into heavy winds. He said little and did a lot, keeping Silent Sound trimmed and sailing her best. Tobias, a German medical doctor and amateur photographer, had also joined the expedition without sailing experience. But after a few days he had earned his sea legs and was taking the helm.

Each day we crept into higher latitudes, and finally crossed the Arctic Circle. Now the true adventure could begin. But very soon we had

more adventure than we wanted. When we set sail, the Arctic waters were still locked away beneath the ice, but by the time we had tacked our way through the Bering Strait and rounded the top of Alaska the ice was breaking up. Only remnants of the sea ice remained, but it was still enough to block our way.

Our first encounter with it caught us by surprise. First a small piece bobbed by, then a second and then we were in the thick of it. We had to drop our sails and start the engine to allow us to stop on a dime, reverse and carefully inch our way around the ice floes. Tobias looked for clear lanes of water from the top of the mast in his harness, calling out directions to the helm. If we were careless or luck turned against us, it could easily crush our fibreglass hull and sink the boat, leaving us precious little time to move from the frigid water into our life raft.

Soon it was not only ice on the horizon. Many of the ice floes had dark spots on them but as we drew closer we could see hundreds of walrus sunning their bulk on the ice pack, bellowing and belching. We sailed so close we could smell their stench and admire their yellowed tusks. For hours we wound our way between the floes as the walrus lazily watched our progress. One bull charged the boat, snorting as he halted his one tonne of quivering bulk only a metre short of our hull.

Soon the novelty of the ice and the walrus wore off, and the stress of driving a fibreglass boat through this minefield began to wear thin. Again and again we bumped into ice, the hull grating against the floes and leaving streaks of paint behind. Silent Sound was built for ocean crossings, but not for breaking ice. We had pulled her from the water and put her in a boat yard before leaving to add a layer of Kevlar, the material used to make bulletproof vests, to the bow. We hoped it would give us some extra protection against the ice. But even with the added protection, she was no match for Arctic sea ice.

Although guiding the boat through this minefield of ice was enough to give me sweaty palms at the helm, there was far less than there should be. Higher temperatures have meant that for the past few years the Arctic sea ice has virtually disappeared from the Northwest Passage. What was good for our progress on this voyage was ultimately bad for the planet.

But the warmer temperatures were good for more than just melting ice. We were sometimes

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

The Northwest Passage is the Arctic sailing route that links the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It is about 4,000 nautical miles long, measured from the Bering Strait in the west to where the Arctic Circle crosses Davis Strait in the east. Sailors spent centuries trying to find it, hoping it would become a short cut for ships travelling between Europe and Asia. Thick ice and a maze of islands blocked them time and time again. In 1845 Sir John Franklin led the most famous expedition to find the passage, but the HMS Terror and HMS Erebus were both lost, and their crews were never heard from again.

It wasn't until the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen came onto the scene, using a small boat and crew, that the passage was sailed from end to end. Since he did it in 1906 about 45 private yachts have made the journey. This includes nine transits in 2009, a record for a single season.

Shipping companies are still hopeful that it will become a commercial route, but so far these waters have remained too dangerous to make such traffic economical.

forced to take deck showers with sea water instead of wasting our precious fresh water supplies. Often the water temperature dipped to 0°C, staying in liquid form only due to its salt content. Once the stench of our bodies became too much to bear, we'd strip off and stand, shivering and naked, on the rolling foredeck. One bucket of seawater to get wet, a yelp, a lather and quick rinse and our weekly bath was done.

Just as some of the wizened Arctic hunters had told us, it doesn't matter how long you've been on the land and travelling the coasts, the Arctic keeps changing and she'll always find another surprise for you. Our next surprise came in the form of a bump, a lurch and then a dead standstill.

The morning sun was beating down on our heads as we motored the last few miles into Cambridge Bay. This was one of the biggest towns on our route, and I was eager to get ashore. I had charted a course into the bay using our GPS chart plotter, but I had been too hasty and had made a mistake. Tobias was at the helm and I was below decks when we hit the first rock. I ran up on deck and looked around, horrified to see we were outside the marked channel. He had been following my preset course and wasn't watching the buoys. Soon after the first bump came a second, and then we were aground.

—The tide was falling and Simpson Rock was getting drier by the minute. We swung out the boom for leverage and Tobias and I climbed on to it to move the boat, trying to get her off the rock while Hanns took the helm and tried to drive Silent Sound to safety. Reverse, forward, we tried to spin her, no luck. We dropped the dingy in the water and Hanns rowed out a kedgeree anchor to give us another point of leverage. We hauled on the chain with the windlass but it was no use

We sat on the reef, Silent Sound settling down on her port side as the tide fell. It was a beautiful summer day in the Arctic, and here we were, stuck just five miles away from port where cold drinks, phone calls home and mail from loved ones awaited us. The next tide came, as it always does, and we got the boat afloat and back underway, chastened by our delay.

We were about halfway through our journey with 4000 nautical miles to go but we faced one of our biggest challenges yet and it was one I hadn't counted on. Silent Sound's engine mounts had broken due metal fatigue. I was lucky, as the loose engine could have broken our driveshaft and sunk the boat.

Even with our good luck, I didn't like the situation. We were in a small Arctic town, tight on cash and even tighter on time. Outside the harbour was the ticking time bomb of sea

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ice – open now, but maybe closed tomorrow. Instead of a few days of rest and repositioning I now had to remount the engine with limited resources and little mechanical know how.

A construction company lent me the use of their shop and knowledge of their top mechanic, and Hanns and I began grinding, hammering and improvising. After a week of greasy, frustrating work Silent Sound was once again ready to set sail.

From Cambridge Bay we continued east, stopping in Gjoa Haven, which is named after Admunsen's boat, the Gjoa. For many weeks we had tried to convince hunters to take us out on the land with them, and now we'd found a family of hunters to take us along on a caribou hunt.

Three generations of the Atkichok family lead us out into the wild, with a wizened and powerfully built Jacob leading. "This is our grocery store," his son Silas said, sweeping his arm across the barren landscape.

After a long boat ride to their favourite hunting grounds they spotted some caribou and crept up to them for a shot. Moments later, after a barrage of gunfire, two caribou lay dead on the ground and the hunters celebrated.

They skinned and cut up the animals right there on the tundra, eating the kidney, liver and stomach lining raw. The enjoyed the



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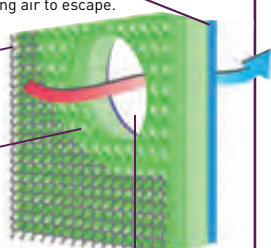
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delicacies with relish and offered us a taste, if we could stomach it.

Back at the Atkichok home they put chunks of caribou into a steel pot of boiling water. A steady stream of neighbours and relatives came to join the feast, and we ate the fresh meat with our hands, grease running down our chins. After the meal the traditional Inuit games began. Tests of strength, agility and memory gave us a small glimpse of the culture they were fighting to protect. It was after midnight when we said our farewells, rolling back to the boat with full bellies and a family of new friends.

Our next challenge was to take Silent Sound through a narrow sliver of water notorious for its vicious currents and crushing ice floes. Bellot Strait was first crossed in 1937, and we would be the 10th yacht through since then.

The Canadian Coast Guard had advised us as although the strait may be tricky, it would allow us to bypass an area that was still choked with ice. We were nervous as we set course for Bellot Strait, hoping that it would be kinder to us than it had been to sailors in the past.

But we ran into our worst navigation conditions yet. The fog fell like a thick blanket over the sea at night. By now the Arctic's endless summer days were past and the nights were becoming darker. The ice floes were not large but they still posed a threat to us. I learned that my night vision is appalling, by far the worst of the crew, and when I was on the helm Drew had to go to the bow to look for ice floes and call out directions. Often the ice was just metres away when he saw it, with me frantically spinning the helm to twist our way through. As nerve wracking as it was, it

GRIZZLED IN THE GUTS

The Open Passage Expedition team sampled a wide variety of traditional foods given to them by Inuit in the Arctic. This included seal, muskox, whale, caribou and fish. But it was the grizzly bear that left a lasting impression. The grizzly was turned into barbecued steaks and grizzly bolognaise. Weeks later, on the way home, the crew began to feel ill and fatigued. They soon found out that they had trichinosis, an infection caused by parasites attacking the muscles and other tissues. Humans can get the disease by eating the meat of carnivores such as grizzly bears. Pork can also carry the parasite. Other sailors in the Arctic that summer also contracted the disease by eating meat from the same bear. The crew have since been treated and have recovered, ready for their next gastronomic challenge.

Moral of the story: If ever you come across a bit of shrink-wrapped carnivore in your local supermarket meat aisle, probably best to push it aside in favour of some traditional grass-eating cow or sheep.

To read more about this adventure visit www.OpenPassageExpedition.com




was a beautiful, otherworldly sight. As the sun rose to burn off the fog, it glinted off the water and revealed the chunks of ice that were hiding in the murky darkness.

When we entered Bellot Strait it was rainy and foggy. The tide added five knots to our speed as we swept past the few ice floes that remained. To our relief, Bellot Strait was in a gentle mood. The biggest thrill of the day was sailing past Zenith Point, the most northerly point of the North American continent.

The winds picked up as we turned north

out of the Strait. Hunters in Gjoa Haven had told us that Creswell Bay, just north of the strait, was a breeding ground for whales and narwhales. We set course for the bay, on a tight reach into growing winds and choppy seas, a mistake that cost us days of progress. The temperature hovered just above freezing, with cold rain making it even more miserable. As we entered the bay the wind shifted and grew in strength. Silent Sound plunged in and out of the troughs, trying to claw her way upwind. At times we actually lost ground while the rough sailing wore on crew and gear. It took several days of miserable upwind sailing to reach Lancaster Sound, where we once again turned east.

After three months at sea the crew was tired and Silent Sound needed time in port for a litany of small repairs and maintenance. But the mood on board had changed. We had reached our furthest north and we were ready to turn for home. However, we were still above the Arctic Circle with 2500 nautical miles left to sail. Winter was coming, and storms would soon be raking their way across the Labrador Sea and North Atlantic. We had to make it to Halifax while we still could.

Our voyage was still far from over, and the coming weeks would bring storms and some of our most difficult miles, but we had done what many sailors could only dream of. We had sailed the Northwest Passage. 

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