

Mina² Antarctic Recce

Transcription of Blog

8 February to 3 March 2011

This is The Not The Mina2 Blog

Date: 08 February 2011

Position: 54:48.35S 068:18.21W Ushuaia, Tierra Del Fuego, Argentina

Yet another milestone. In all the years of dreaming and planning I have read so much about Ushuaia – like Balham, the Gateway to the South. Today I flew into this, the southernmost city in the world. Well, it calls itself a city but it is barely a small town, less than a mile across and about three streets deep. Established in 1870 by British missionaries it was a frontier town then, and it is a frontier town now. Looking across the Beagle Channel and just north of Cape Horn and the Southern Ocean, it is probably the windiest city in the world as well. But today it was dry (almost), warm (almost), and only a little breezy. A good day for Ushuaia.

I am here to join *Pelagic Australis*, a professional expedition sailing yacht, for a three-week trip over to Antarctica as a reconnaissance, and to gain some ice experience for the possible crossing of *Mina2* this time next year.

First surprise of the day was at the airport in Buenos Aires where a young lady accosted me. It happens all the time of course, but this one said “Are you Tim Barker?” which was unusual in Buenos Aires at 0900. It turned out to be Laura Parish, First Mate of *Pelagic* and partner of *Pelagic*’s skipper Miles Wise. So the research started here and poor Laura was bombarded by me with questions for the whole of the 3 ½ hour flight.

I was met at the airport by Roxanna Diaz, the Yachtsman’s Friend in Ushuaia. She and her husband had been sailing around the world together for 15 years before settling here in Ushuaia where Rox has made it her life’s mission to sort out all and any problems that any visiting yacht may have. Everyone depends on her. She left me at my hotel which she had booked for me and left me to explore the town (it doesn’t take long).

Surprise of the day number 2: everyone says how beautiful is the setting of Ushuaia, but I hadn’t realised quite how beautiful. It is stunning, I am in love with the place already and I can’t wait to bring *Mina2* down here.



The majestic Beagle Channel



**... with a wrecked ship as a reminder of the conditions that can exist here.
Note the spectacular snow-clad mountains in the background**

After a wander around town, I ended up at the yacht club where a small selection of serious looking yachts were tied up including *Pelagic Australis* where I had a very quick lookaround and met the crew who were busy preparing the provisioning for the cruise.



The yacht club pontoon



...and the first photo (of many) of *Pelagic Australis*, my home for the next three weeks

With the Falklands / Malvinas almost within sight of Ushuaia, the folk here are still more than a little touchy about the issue, and in prime position on the waterfront is a monument to the conflict and a declaration that they will return.



Malvinas monument ... and part of Argentina's navy

Tomorrow afternoon I join the boat properly and we will take her 25 miles east down the Beagle Channel into Puerto Williams in Chile where the rest of our companions will join us ready for the off on Thursday afternoon round Cape Horn and into Drake Passage, the roughest and windiest stretch of water in the world.

I was rather hoping for some quite extreme conditions for the crossing so that I could experience in the relative comfort and safety of this massively strong yacht with her experienced professional crew what a good blow in Drake Passage is like. However, I've been checking the weather forecasts and rather disappointingly at the moment it looks as if we may have no more than a modest breeze for the crossing. But the conditions here can change in five minutes and, as the Chinese say, "Be careful what you wish for!"

P.S. Enjoy the photos – after tomorrow when I leave Argentina I become bandwidth challenged and my blogs will only have the occasional photo until I return in three weeks.



A Routemaster – the third surprise of the day

All hands piped on board – ready for the off

Date: 10 February 2011

Position: 54:56.10S 067:37.125W Puerto Williams, Chile

Yesterday evening we cast off from the pontoon in Ushuaia to travel 25 miles west down the Beagle Channel to Puerto Williams in Chile, where the rest of my fellow shipmates were to come on board.

As a highly lucrative money making exercise, the Argentines introduced a rule whereby no boat bigger than 50 tons (which is about a 70 foot yacht) can leave or enter a harbour in Patagonia without a pilot on board. Chile have recently tit-for-tatted and have applied the same rule. The owners of 70 foot plus yachts are either owned by wealthy individuals or they are professional charter boats, like Pelagic Australis. The pilot comes on board for about 20 minutes, needs to do nothing (because the pilotage into both Ushuaia and Puerto Williams could be mastered by a three-year old), and then is taken off by the pilot boat. So it is a farce but a pricey one, as the cost is phenomenal. To leave Ushuaia and enter Puerto Williams the pilotage fee was about £5,000. Unbelievable.

But not my problem. I was in seventh heaven. The day had been incredibly warm with a temperature of about 27°C – normally it is about 12° at this time of year. The locals, who are all conditioned to wear thermals and quilted jackets every day of the year were exposing their pale skins to the sun for the first time in years. We left the harbour with the sun low on the horizon throwing a beautiful soft yellow light onto the beach tree and conifer lined hills behind. Above the tree line, snow still lay in pockets on the mountains. The Beagle Channel

is more wild and beautiful than I thought possible, and for me, this first small step on the adventure to come was quite emotional.



Leaving Ushuaia

We arrived in the very small naval base town of Puerto Williams as the light was failing (about 2200) and tied up alongside the famous “*Micalvi*” an old rusting ex-munitions ship which now acts as a floating club house and pontoon. Most of the yachts here are professional high-latitude expedition boats or the private yachts of some of the world’s best known adventurers. I was in (for me) exalted company. The benchmarks for all these extremists are all a quantum higher than they are for other mortals. Anywhere else and a wind of 30 knots is pretty strong; 40 knots is very strong and a 50 knot wind is almost never experienced without a loosening of the bowels. For these brave heroes, they hardly consider a 40 knot gale to be a proper sailing wind, and they don’t really raise an eyebrow at anything less than about 60 knots. They talk nonchalantly about sailing over to South Georgia, the Falklands and Antarctica in the roughest seas in the world like it was trip down to Tesco’s. Drinking whisky with some of these guys in the spacious saloon of *Pelagic Australis* is pretty humbling.



The “*Micalvi*” – world famous yacht club at the bottom of the world

Pelagic Australis has a full-time professional crew of three. Miles Wise is the skipper. A very laid back but highly experienced and professional sailor, this will be his fourth trip to Antarctica. His first mate (and partner of about seven years) is Laura Parrish and the second mate is Dave Roberts. They are a great bunch in command of an immensely strong boat which gives one a very comfortable, safe feeling.



Miles on board *Pelagic Australis*



Laura receives a late Christmas present and Dave Roberts – Second Mate

Laura was delighted this morning to receive a Christmas present through the post. It had been posted to the Falklands in December but arrived two days after *Pelagic* had left. It then went to Punta Arenas before being forwarded to Puerto Williams awaiting her arrival.

The guests other than myself are Charlie, a successful American businessman who has sailed all sorts of boats for most of his life, two Germans Nicolas and Jochin – Nicolas owns a 62 foot Hanse back at home and has sailed with *Pelagic* before. And finally four Russians, Almir, Mikhail, Alex and Eugenio. Almir speaks goodish English; Mikhail a very small amount and the other two none at all. Alex and Eugenio like to spend their time shooting

bears and catching fish. They have never sailed before. I hope they know what they have let themselves in for. So an unusual mix and it will be interesting to see how the crew dynamics and bonding turn out.

We leave this evening at about 1830 (2130 UK time) making our way out of the Channels overnight and we should be passing Cape Horn at first light before heading south into the infamous Drake Passage. God, I'm excited.

Across Drake's Lake

Date: 11 February 2011

Position: 56:31S 066:00W 50 miles SE of Cape Horn

At 0700 this morning after making our way 100 miles through the channels of Tierra del Fuego, we passed Cape Horn and headed into the dreaded Drake Passage. As one would expect having passed through the Roaring Forties and now being well into the Furious Fifties, the winds have been ferocious and the seas mountainous and dangerous – NOT!

In fact, disappointingly, we've been motoring the entire time so far with winds light to moderate (10 – 25 knots), unusually from the south east which is roughly the direction we are going in, so not very helpful. Unfortunately we didn't have the thrill of seeing Cape Horn as it was about thirty miles to our West but we're all hoping conditions will allow us to see the Horn close up as we pass it on our way back.

It's now become quite chilly, hovering about 10°C and with the chill factor I've certainly needed to be experimenting with my new wardrobe of merino wool thermals, hats and gloves. The sky is leaden grey with no sign of the sun and it is drizzling. We have a very long two metre Southern Ocean swell.

So pretty miserable you might think. Well not actually. *Pelagic Australis* has been designed for high latitude sailing and most of the time those on watch are lounging around in the large, comfy, cosy wheel house with enormous panoramic windows. So not exactly being exposed to the elements – it will be different on *Mina2*!! We're expecting (and certainly hoping for) the wind to go west later today, so we can start sailing properly, but the forecast is for the winds to remain relatively light (for these waters) until Sunday when we are expecting a gale from the east.

Our hope is to pass the South Shetland Islands (go on, get your atlas out!) to our east, through Boyd Strait and then to make our way south east to Deception Island which is actually the horse shoe-shaped caldera of a still active volcano (last erupted in the 1970's). But the idea of hammering into a gale and big seas for 35 miles doesn't appeal, and also Deception Island is not a good anchorage in a strong wind, so we may heave to (basically, just stop the boat and bob around) just northwest of the South Shetlands and sit the gale out for 12 hours or so before continuing. Our ETA is therefore more likely to be Monday morning.

As far as the temperature is concerned, whilst a lot more chilly than it has been, it will get a lot colder still. There is a line in the water around Antarctica where the warm waters of the Atlantic and Pacific meet the icy waters of Antarctica. This is the Antarctic Convergence and when you pass through it both sea and air temperature plummet, so out with the balaclavas and another layer or two will go on until I will look like the Michelin man.

Meanwhile, I've got the bird book in one hand and the binoculars in the other identifying all the new (to me) Antarctic birds. This morning I saw my first albatross, a magnificent Wandering Albatross, one of the biggest birds in the world with a 12 ft wingspan. Since then

we have seen Black Browed Albatrosses, Sooty Shearwaters, Wilson's Storm Petrels (sweet little birds that rush around rather than gliding like the others) and Antarctic Skuas. Plenty more to come.

Furious and Screaming Conditions in Southern Ocean

Date: 12 February 2011

Position: 59:48S 063:38W - more than half way across

In a couple of hours we pass through the 60th parallel of latitude and officially we enter Antarctic waters. No vessel can enter without a permit which, in the case of *Mina2*, will mean going through an exhaustive process with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office lasting several months. The rules to which permit holders agree are numerous and any contravention taken extremely seriously. This is all part of The Antarctic Treaty, a multinational agreement to maintain and preserve this, the last great completely unspoilt wilderness in the world.

One of the rules is that we can no longer throw ANYTHING overboard – even organic biodegradable waste we will have to store until we return north of the line in a couple of weeks. Another consequence of passing over this line of latitude is that we leave the Furious 50's and enter the screaming 60's, but the only thing Furious and Screaming round here is me. I won't say it's like a mill pond as we still have the long majestic oceanic swell which is always around, but we do not have enough wind to sail. I signed up for this damned trip so that I could experience the fury of the Drake Passage for the first time on an immensely strong boat with an immensely experienced crew. So far we managed to get the sails up for a blissful 10 hours yesterday when a breeze sprung up from the west, but apart from that we have been and continue to motor.

However we could be getting a little action later. A strong easterly is forecast to build this afternoon and last until tomorrow evening. Our first Antarctic gale. One characteristic of a gale in these parts compared to temperate or tropical climates is that, being much colder, the wind has greater density and is therefore stronger than a warm wind of the same speed. And cold it is getting. Yesterday the sea temperature was about 8°C but we have now gone through the Antarctic Convergence (see yesterday's blogs for details) and the sea temperature is now down to about 2° or 3°C, so the chill factor in a strong wind will be fantastically low. Time to pull out the balaclava and get the over-mitts on. Also, if one falls in the water in these temperatures you have about 2 or 3 minutes before you would fall unconscious from hypothermia then drown. That is longer than it would take to turn the boat round and rescue you, so Miles, the skipper, has now forbidden any falling overboard.

Not that there will be any alcohol-induced falling over. *Pelagic Australis* is a dry boat when on passage and this has probably been the longest period without alcohol passing my lips since I put myself on a diet a couple of years ago. I told Miles that *Mina2* was also a dry boat, normally between about 0300 and 1000.

Let me tell you a little bit about life on *Pelagic*. There are three professional crew and eight guests (including me). Being an expedition and not a luxury cruise we are not waited on but we are encouraged to participate. So we all stand watches and help sail the boat, putting sails up and down and pulling on the ropes. We are divided into three teams or watches, each watch led by one of the professional crew, and two or three guests. We are on watch for three hours then are off watch for the next six hours. This is the same system I have on *Mina2* and it works extremely well. I am on Miles' watch with Jochen, an elderly German who is a lovely friendly guy who sadly speaks very little English. So that leaves plenty of time for me to wear poor Miles down with endless questions about everything to do with cruising in this challenging playground.

We all share cooking and washing up duties, and *Mina2*'s faithful crew members, not to mention the DS, would be amazed to see me up to my elbows in suds on a regular basis. It makes a very pleasant change for me.

There are six double cabins each with two bunks and I am sharing a cabin with Charlie who is an American who does all sorts of action stuff like diving and flying, together with sailing.

Provisioning for a three week trip for eleven people when you can't exactly pop down to the local corner shop if you've forgotten something is an exact science, but Miles, Laura and Dave are old hands and have it down to a fine tee. Fortunately their last cruise was over to the Falklands so, apart from stacks of local produce, there is also an almost inexhaustible supply of marmalade, Colman's Branston, brown sauce, Yorkshire Tea, Kit-Kats and other invaluable British supplies. This is supplemented by enormous hunks of succulent Argentine beef, cratefuls of various fruit and veg and, finally, two entire lambs which are strapped to the rigging – in these temperatures they last for weeks.

Given the cold temperatures, meals are of the solid variety – homely stews, warming soups, roast meat with lots of potatoes etc. Lots of calories to keep the cold out. *Pelagic* is built for high latitudes (i.e. cold places) so there is no fridge or freezer. What would be the point when the outside of the fridge is colder than the inside? At the back of the boat down below, there is an enormous saloon next to the galley, and a large table around which up to 15 people can eat together when we are at anchor. When we are at sea, food is provided in bowls to eat off your lap wherever you happen to be. In the saloon is a diesel burning heater that pumps hot water round one or two radiators by the cabins and this keeps the temperature down below up to about 10° to 15° - chilly by normal standards, but fine if you are dressed for it.

I'm now going to get my head down for a quick kip ready for the boisterous conditions that are forecast. More to follow...

A Gale at Last – and a Culinary Cock-Up

Date: 13 February 2011

Position: 62:40.0S 061:45.5W – within sight of the South Shetlands

Well, the boisterous conditions which we had signed up for have at last arrived. As forecast we have been sailing in a northeasterly gale for the last few hours. The seas are big but, at the moment, not the Southern Ocean monsters we've all read about. We are sailing south east so the wind is on the beam and we are screaming along at over 10 knots with a small staysail and three reefs in the main. Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant!!!!

But I can't tell you how cold it is. Well, actually I can – it is 1.5°. Add to that a gale of icy wind and the chill factor is phenomenal. Go out into the cockpit without gloves on and your fingers are completely numb in minutes in the driving sleet. Quite a contrast to the 30° plus I was suffering from in Buenos Aires just five days ago. It sure is a different world – an Antarctic world.

But it's worth going out into the cockpit, gloves or no gloves. The boat has been surrounded by a flock of the prettiest Cape Petrels. Small black and white birds that wheel and turn close to the boat, hovering occasionally to paddle their dainty webbed feet in the water before soaring once again. They only come out, apparently, in stormy conditions (where the hell do they go when it isn't stormy?)

I signed off my last blog saying that I was going to have a kip before the action started. No sooner had I closed the laptop lid when Laura bounces in and says “I hear you’re cooking dinner tonight. What are we having?” I’d completely forgotten. Hey, ho – who needs sleep anyway?

By good fortune we were cooking roast chicken – a bit of a speciality of mine. We should have had the chickens the evening before, but they were found to be still frozen. There were three chickens for 11 hungry adventurers and I was to serve it with my famous roast potatoes, glazed carrots cooked in butter and steamed broccoli. An ambitious project, but I was quietly confident - I have cooked roast chicken with all the trimmings literally hundreds of times before. As they came out of the oven, it looked a triumph – all crispy brown. I started carving the breast of the first of the chickens and said to Laura, “This chicken’s very bony – there’s hardly any meat on the breast at all”. Laura glanced over and said “That’s because you’ve cooked it upside down – you’re carving its back”. The other two chickens were the same. How could that have happened? I was mortified. Laura tried to comfort me by saying it was easily done – Chilean chickens, being in the southern hemisphere, grow standing on their heads.

As it happened the breasts, which had been quietly stewing in their own juices, were as succulent and moist as any I had cooked before, so no harm done. Indeed I might cook chickens on their backs all the time from now on.

+++ BREAKING NEWS +++

I’ve just been called up to the pilot house (I’ve been typing in the snug of the saloon below). Just on the port bow is a rocky island. Snow Island, our first sighting of the South Shetlands off the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. What a moment, after all the years of dreaming, we have nearly crossed Drake Passage. But it’s not over yet – the gale we’re in is forecast to last another 12 hours. Sadly Deception Island is probably not an option – it would be untenable in these conditions. The alternatives are another 50 miles away. Time will tell. I’ll let you know

You Asked For It, Tim – And You Got It

Date: 14 February 2011

Position: 64:39.0S 062:57W – off the Antarctic mainland

The gale I rashly asked for turned into a severe gale, Force 9. The seas got bigger and bigger. 3 metres – 4 metres – then 5 metres high. It’s not exactly The Perfect Storm stuff, but probably bigger than anything I’ve been out in before. The wind speed was 40 knots and occasionally more. At its peak it was 49 knots – about 55 mph. We had the wind from the northeast on our port beam, the 4th reef in the main (which leaves a sail about the size of a pocket handkerchief) and the small staysail at the front. *Pelagic Australis* is built for these conditions and she takes storms in her stride. When tucked away in the pilot house it is comparatively comfortable. But when you have to go on deck to shorten sail or whatever, it is indescribably cold. Sea and air temperatures are close to freezing and the snow lashes your face like a knife. *Pelagic Australis* is a proper boat – no namby-pamby push-button electric winches here. It’s all hand grinding and the loads are terrific so it requires a bit of puff. After a couple of minutes exertion, breathing in drafts of this freezing cold air, it seems like someone has scoured out your lungs with a wire brush. And once you return to the warmth of the pilot house (at 8°C the warmth inside is only comparative!), your cheeks and ears tingle and your fingers burn exquisitely as they thaw out.

We had entered the South Shetland islands to the north of the Antarctic Peninsula between Snow Island and Smith Island (hope you’ve got a good atlas). Once past Snow Island, in

order to make Deception Island we had to round up into the Bransfield Strait and head northeast, sailing as close to the wind as possible. As you are taking the wind and waves head on, everything seems more violent. After an hour or so of this punishment, Miles, our skipper, decided to heave to and stop the boat for a while until the wind moderated. Now just bobbing up and down, riding the waves like a duck, everything seemed a great deal more tranquil (but everything is relative!).



Hove to in Force 9

There was a real desire by all of us to get to Deception Island, and a real determination by the crew to get us there. It is one of the “must-do’s” for any yacht visiting Antarctica and it is quite unlike anything else on the peninsula. There aren’t many places in the world where you can literally anchor in the crater of an active volcano surrounded by the snow-clad mountains, swimming in the hot springs along the shore. But it is not a good anchorage in strong winds and, as the gale was showing no sign of abating, late yesterday evening the decision was reluctantly made to abandon the plan to visit the volcano. We turned south again to head into the islands to the west of the peninsula itself.

With such strong easterlies, Miles was concerned that ice would be blown into our path through the Gerlache Strait. At this time of year there are a couple of hours of darkness at night and if you hit a big bit of ice at speed it could sink you (as the Titanic found). So with the wind having now moderated at last, we edged slowly through Dallman Bay in between Brabant Island and Anvers Island, heading for Port Lockroy. Visibility was very poor with mist as dawn was breaking. All of a sudden, Miles hurtled past me, grabbed the wheel and changed course. “We wouldn’t want to hit that, would we?” he said. Out of the mist, straight in front of us and less than a quarter of a mile away loomed an enormous, magnificent iceberg.

Speechless in Antarctica

Date: 16 February 2011

Position: 64:49.4S 063:29.1W – Port Lockroy

The mist slowly lifted as we cruised through Dallman Bay. All of a sudden we were surrounded by majestic mountains on all sides covered with snow. Glaciers come down to the cold waters edge ending in cliffs several hundred feet high of solid ice. Enormous chunks break away with a resounding crash and the ice breaks up into “bergy bits”. They are biggish and easy to see. It is the “growlers” that are more difficult. These are the bits that float a few inches above the surface. With 7/8ths below the surface, they could do serious damage if hit at speed, so a constant watch is held as we motor along.

All of a sudden there is a cry: “Whale – whale!!” On our port side about 200 metres away we see a blow of spume rising into the air as a whale blows. Then the distinctive small fin of a humpback. It’s back arches and its fluke rears into the air before it dives. But then there is another blow – and another – and another. We are amongst a pod of at least four of these enormous whales. It is humbling to be in the company of these awesome, magnificent mammals.

The whales are not the only distraction. Dozens of Gentoo penguins race past the boat, porpoising in and out of the water. Then a fur seal pops its head out of water to take an inquisitive look at us. The waters here are heaving with wonderful, exotic wildlife.

We entered Port Lockroy and anchored in 14 metres in the middle of the large bay, putting out an enormous anchor and 80 metres of chain. After what ended up as a challenging, exhilarating sail across Drake Passage, we have at last arrived in Antarctica and there’s not a dry eye in the house. But plenty of dry throats. No alcohol has been consumed for the last four days and there is something to celebrate. Dave gets the Zodiac rubber dinghy into the water and selects a block of clear glacier ice that’s floating past, heaves it into the Zodiac and brings it back to the boat for the G&T’s and whisky. An anchor nip to remember!

Port Lockroy was the first scientific research station to be established in Antarctica. Set up by the British in 1944 on Goudier island in the middle of the bay, the base was permanently manned until 1962 when it was closed. It is now an Historic Site turned into a fascinating museum, all the huts restored to how they would have been in the 1960’s complete with the original tins, bottles and boxes of food that were left here. It is manned during the summer months by a British Antarctic Heritage Trust team of four personable young ladies lead by Station Head Nicky. The station is still (as it always was) a British Post Office and, rather surreally, post cards and stamps can be bought and posted in the souvenir shop that has a selection of mementos, most of which I ended up buying. Been there – got the T-shirt!

Port Lockroy is visited by virtually all yachts and cruise ships that make it over to Antarctica. Last year they had 47 yacht visits, about 30 of which would have been multiple visits by professional charter yachts like *Pelagic Australis*. So only about 15 private yachts brave the Drake Passage each year. Perhaps next year *Mina2* might be one of them. Who knows.

The anchorage is without doubt the most stunningly beautiful I have ever been in. Surrounded by high mountains, crystal white except for patches of dark granite on the vertical cliff faces, glaciers edge their way down the steep slopes constantly grumbling and rumbling and ending at the waters edge from where they calve off enormous chunks, hundreds of years old, that crash into the water with a roar. The sky was almost clear and the sun, almost warm if you were out of the icy cold breeze, cast brilliant shadows on the ice cliffs.

We are only about a hundred miles from the Antarctic Circle. A month ago it was mid-summer here and it never got dark. Now you get about three hours of darkness and as the sun

went down we were treated to a spectacular sunset behind the Lockroy station. How I wish you could see the photos, but you'll have to wait.

Early the following morning as I was lying cosily in my sleeping bag down below, the boat suddenly started rolling dramatically. I sprang up on deck to find Miles, Laura and Dave already there. An exceptionally large fall of ice into the harbour had caused a mini-tsunami and a large single wave was making its way out of the bay.

After breakfast, Dave launched the Zodiac and took us off, out of the bay and round to a point with a low granite ledge where we piled out onto the icy foreshore for a hike. We were not alone. There was a Gentoo penguin breeding colony all around us. The penguins were sitting on their nests of pebbles that they had laboriously constructed a few weeks before, cementing the whole lot together with their poo. The smell was overpowering. Nestled at their feet were little balls of fluff crying out for their breakfast of regurgitated krill that the doting parent would vomit into the tiny little beak. In the wild, survival starts on Day One, and interspersed amongst the nests were dark brown Antarctic skuas looking for one of the parents to be distracted long enough to grab a chick for a tasty snack.

The site was also shared by a couple of Fur seals (same family as Sealions). Whilst the penguins took no notice of us as we wandered through them, the seals can be highly aggressive and they can move fast, roaring as they rush towards you. Laura's eyes lit up. "Oh, we're just about to be charged by a Fur seal. How cool is that!". Laura is not one to be easily fazed. Go to YouTube and search for something like "BT Challenge 2000 Rough Weather" and you will see a clip of the racing yacht LG Flatron sailing in hurricane force winds during their round-the-world race. The pretty girl constantly being wiped clear off the deck by enormous waves is Laura. She loved every minute of it. No wonder she considers a Drake Passage gale a walk in the park!

We walked through deep snow over a ridge and down to a little bay where there were a couple of huts, one British and one Argentine. These used to be shelters for scientists on field expeditions. Whilst no longer used for that purpose they remain unlocked and fully stocked with food and fire wood as an emergency refuge for anyone who might need it.

***Pelagic Australis* is in Paradise**

Date: 17 February 2011

Position: 64:54.2S 062:51.9W – Paradise Harbour

Yesterday morning we weighed anchor for the 37 mile passage to Paradise Harbour on the mainland of Antarctica to the east of the Gerlache Strait. The brilliant sun of the previous day had gone and the decks of *Pelagic Australis* had a dusting of snow as we slowly piloted out of Port Lockroy, dodging all but the smallest lumps of ice. Ice is heavy stuff. Give or take, a cube a metre square weighs a ton, and only 1/8th of it is above the surface. A ton of hard stuff hitting your bow at 4 knots can make a serious dent, or could bend your propeller beyond repair, so any ice is treated with great caution.

As we motored south out of the Peltier channel, we saw a couple of Humpback whales blowing, and several Crabeater seals lying on iceflows having a snooze, lazily looking up to give us an inquisitive stare as we passed. Overhead skimmed a couple of Antarctic shags (also known as blue-eyed shags amongst other names). Antarctica is beautiful in the sunshine. But today it is cloudy – raw-cold with a bit of sleet and snow. But it is just as beautiful. Whatever the conditions (and, given the rapidity with which the weather can change here, I'm sure we've got lots of other weather conditions to look forward to) this surreal place is like a beautiful woman that changes from one exquisite gown into another.

Paradise Harbour was named by the whalers who came here at the end of the 19th century. Even those hardened men knew paradise when they saw it. Not a harbour as you would know it, but a large bay enclosed by mountain islands. Once inside you are completely surrounded by towering mountains, glaciers and enormous ice walls. We tied in in the southern bay of Base Brown, the Argentinian scientific research station. Almost always, you can't simply swing to your anchor in Antarctica, but you have to tie long 100 metre ropes to rocks on the shore, often two from the bow and two from the stern. This process is long, rarely taking less than an hour to snug yourself in. After the usual excellent dinner on board, we noticed that a lot of ice was coming into the bay. This can create problems or damage if a large bit hits the boat or gets snagged in the mooring lines. So Miles decided that we would have to stand ice watches each of two hours. My watch was the easy one from 0600 to 0800, during which I was shoving car sized bits of ice away with a long pole.

The Antarctic peninsula is a re-emergence of the Andes, the spinal bone of mountains that runs the length of South America, so it is mountainous. And as with mountains in high or cold parts of the world they are covered with hundreds of feet of ice – snow that has been compacted over centuries. These glaciers then flow at a microscopic pace down the mountain valleys ending abruptly at the seas edge in ice walls hundreds of feet high. Sitting quietly at anchor, there is a constant rumbling like thunder and you can see enormous avalanches of snow tumbling down the steep cliffs high up on the mountain. Periodically there is a thunderous crash like artillery fire and an enormous chunk of ice falls away from the face of an ice cliff and crashes into the sea. An iceberg is born.

Leopard seals are the big predators round here (together with Orcas – Killer Whales – which we have yet to see). The Leopard seals have a set of vicious teeth. Their favourite snack is penguin. Apparently, they grab the penguin, slicing its skin with their teeth. A couple of whiplash shakes of its head and the penguin is completely skinned, and its body swallowed in one gulp. You can tell when a Leopard seal has been snacking from the penguin skins left floating on the water, a pathetic reminder of what seconds earlier had been a charming and comical bird.

Leopard seals are also inclined to try and snack on rubber dinghies, so the Zodiac is always lifted on deck overnight and is never left unattended in the water by the shore. Nor is *Pelagic Australis* ever left unattended. Someone always remains on board to fend off any heavy ice that approaches and to be prepared to pump up the spare dinghy to rescue the shore party if they get stranded. Lose your dinghy, and swimming back to the boat in these freezing waters isn't an option!

Yesterday we got the Zodiac out and went round the headland to the Argentine scientific station, Base Brown where we were met by the station head, Carlos Bunge. Armed with our walking poles and gaiters, we climbed a steep hill behind the base where we got staggering views over Paradise Harbour. This cruising ground is largely through the islands lying off the mainland and Base Brown is one of the very few places where you can step onto the Antarctic mainland. Miles produced a bottle of champagne to celebrate our landing.

The professional charter yachts all have a book of “mud maps” of anchorages which they have constructed. The islands are poorly charted and these are essential aides to know where best to anchor and avoid the many uncharted rocks that lurk beneath the surface ready to rip your keel off. Like in the days of the early explorers, these volumes of hand constructed charts which have taken years of painstaking work to create are incredibly valuable to their owners and they are jealously guarded. In the afternoon, Dave and I went out in the Zodiac round to the small north bay at Base Brown so that I could have a go at creating my own mud

map. Having sketched out the shape of the bay and noted where all the visible rocks are, we then went up and down in the Zodiac making a note of the depths. Great fun!

On the way back, Dave suggested we go and look at some beautiful ice caves carved into the ice cliff. We were approaching the ice cliff, pushing the Zodiac through the thick ice when there was an incredible roar and a vast chunk of the ice cliff, about the size of Wimbledon village crashed into the sea very close to the ice caves. A tsunami of water came rushing towards us but happily it had dissipated into a long swell by the time it got to us. We decided that perhaps a visit to the ice caves could be left for another day!

I really, really want you all to know how indescribably beautiful this extraordinary place is, but I have had difficulty in sending blogs with pics, so I will try and send the occasional pic as a separate blog.

What happened to the Mountains?

Date: 19 February 2011

I have to be honest – we've not been as lucky with the weather as we could have been. Yesterday morning we were to leave Paradise Harbour and head south to the Lemaire Channel. Otherwise known as Kodak Valley it is a narrow stretch of water (about a mile wide) surrounded by what are considered to be the most spectacular and photogenic mountains on the peninsula.

But first we had to untie the long lines secured to rocks near the shore. I was handed a pair of fisherman's waders and, suitably attired, Dave took me in the Zodiac to stand thigh deep in the freezing water ready to cast off.

Some boats come down here and enjoy weeks of uninterrupted sunshine. Not us. The day was very grey with flurries of sleet sweeping through the anchorage. Once we got out into the Gerlache Strait we found we were in blizzard conditions with a stiff Force 9 wind from the northwest. This was rather more than forecast. The sea wasn't a problem as all the waters here are protected by the surrounding islands, but visibility was appalling. Strong winds tend to push ice into the narrows of the Le Mair Strait making it at best difficult to transit, if not impossible. As the strength of wind was not forecast, we weren't sure whether it was going to get even worse or if and when it was to abate. If it didn't abate, tying into an anchorage would be near impossible and there aren't any convenient places down there to swing to the anchor. And in these conditions we wouldn't even be able to see the spectacular mountains let alone revel in their beauty. So after an hour or so, Miles wisely but disappointingly decided to abort and head back to the safety of the large anchorage at Port Lockroy. The anchor went down just after lunch and the afternoon was spent lazing around in the snug comfort of the pilot house or saloon reading, chatting or, in my case catching up with the blog and editing the hundreds of photos I've taken.

I've got quite a lot of minutes worth of credit on the satphone, so I've been enjoying the rather surreal luxury of calling on most days the Absent Downstairs Skipper back in Buenos Aires, trying to share with her as best I can the extraordinary experience of this adventure. Yesterday I also gave Selina and Peter (my daughter and son) a call as well. It was great talking to them.

This morning we made a very early start (0600) to try once again to get to Lemaire Channel. Not quite as bad as yesterday, but the weather remains grey, cold and miserable, so fingers crossed. We hope to end the day even further south at Vernadsky which is the Ukrainian research station. The scientists at Vernadsky are renowned for their hospitality and I'm told

that they try and get through their research programme in the winter so that they can devote the summer to serious partying with visiting yachts. It will be Saturday night and we have four Russians on board who are very much looking forward to chatting with their fellow Russian-speakers and sampling some of their home-brewed *garyelka*. Could be quite a night – if we get there.

The Iceberg Graveyard

Date: 19 February 2011

Position: 65:14.976S 064:15.935W

We set off from Port Lockroy for one of the highlights of the cruise – a trip down the Lemaire Channel. Otherwise known as Kodak Valley it is arguably *the* most spectacular stretch in this amazing area. As we left the anchorage it started sleeting. As we headed for the channel, the sleet turned to heavy snow. The channel is one mile across and visibility was down to less than half a mile. As we motored down the entire stretch of the channel we could barely see the shore on either side, let alone the beautiful towering mountains on either side that we could only guess were there. With a bit of luck we might get to see it on our way back ready for the tough passage back across the Drake Passage to Chile. But if we don't – next year on *Mina2* ??

In the Lemaire Channel there are two spectacular peaked mountain's known locally as Una's Tits, allegedly named after the wife of a Governor of the Falklands. The ex-Governor must be delighted to have his devoted wife remembered in this way. Sadly we saw neither tit. Many of the names of the islands, mountains, channels and creeks on Antarctica are named after the early explorers, or their ships or countries. Mount Shackleton, Endurance Reef, Uruguay Island etc. The more sycophantic of the explorers named great chunks of Antarctica after their sponsors or members of their royal families, like King George Island. But there are many islands which are descriptive of their geographical features like Snow Island, Low Island, Three Little Pigs (group of three islands) and so on. Some names paint a grim picture of the conditions for the early explorers: Desolation Island, Despair Rocks and Destruction Bay. Others are named for the wildlife that abounds like Skua Creek in which we are currently tied in. Finally there are those names which are just plain odd. I bet there's a painful story behind Port Circumcision .

After the disappointment, as far as we were concerned, of the Lemaire Channel, we entered a large bay that is commonly known as the Iceberg Graveyard. A feature of the winds and tides in the channels surrounding it mean that loads of vast icebergs wander in here then have difficulty in getting out. So here you find numerous icebergs wandering around in every stage of melting decomposition. They are of every size; every weird shape and every hue of white and blue and every one stunningly beautiful. Some had enormous ice arches carved in them by the pounding of the sea. Others had capsized and had sea-etched striations at crazy angles. But it wasn't just the icebergs. *Pelagic Australis* stopped and dropped the Zodiac and the two inflatable kayaks (brilliant way to mosey around in peace and quiet – must add one to my Christmas wish list). In the complete tranquillity of this almost spiritually mystical place we were surrounded by seals awkwardly launching themselves from the water onto the many horizontal low platforms of the icebergs and chilling out whilst penguins porpoised through the water on the way back to their chicks ashore with a stomach –full of yummy regurgitated krill. Having had such low expectations for the day because of the poor visibility, it turned into one of the most memorable days of such a highly memorable cruise.

Having run the batteries flat on our cameras, we motored the short distance to Vernadsky, the Ukrainian scientific station in Antarctica. We found that another charter yacht – friends of Miles and the crew – had beaten us to the favoured anchorage so Dave and I went off in the

Zodiac to recce the peaceful alternative, the charmingly named Skua Creek. Why was it called that? We were to find out.

Vernadsky used to be a British scientific station which we passed over to the Ukrainians about 15 years ago (for a consideration of £1, I'm told). It is in a perfect position to measure the ionosphere and the ozone layer. In fact it was the research carried out here by the British that discovered the hole in the ozone layer which has given us all so much concern. (You will be relieved to hear that I was told by the resident ozonologist that it has now almost completely closed). Aside from their research, the Ukrainians are renowned for their partying. From 2100 to midnight all visiting crews are welcome to come and tour the station and then adjourn to the cosy bar, complete with a selection of ladies bra's festooning the walls (the scientific team here are all males). The atmosphere was lively, enhanced by the staff noisily karaokiing Ukrainian songs and drunken scientists attempting to pot balls on the pool table. Memorable.

Under Siege

Date: 20 February 2011

Position: 65:14.976S 064:15.935W - Vernadsky

The work involved in tying the boat in with four 100 metre ropes tied to rocks at each corner, which you have to do almost everywhere here, takes up to a couple of hours and the distances of 40 miles or more between possible anchorages (there are probably less than a couple of dozen on the peninsula) means that you want to arrive comparatively early. Because if, for instance, you find your anchorage full of ice and have to move to the fall-back option it could be another four hours before you get there. Try doing that every day, and you would be on the move the whole time – no time to relax and take in the wonder of the scenery and to study the abundant wildlife. So we tend to travel one day, tie in then spend the next day there before moving on the following day.

So yesterday was a chilling out day in Vernadsky. It is very different to previous anchorages. The Argentine islands are not massively mountainous like, for instance, Port Lockroy, but they are a group of low-lying islands which makes it easier for walks.

But first up was a peaceful kayak with Niko, one of the two Germans, through the islands and ice bergs. With no outboard engine to spoil the peace, we would paddle up to an ice flow and be within a few feet of Crabeater seals relaxing in a pool of their own pink shit – an indication that they are eating a lot of krill, the shrimps that abound in the Antarctic waters and are the staple food source at the bottom of the food chain for seals, penguins and whales.

Then we went ashore and visited the Wordie Hut. Named after the chief scientist in Shackleton's expedition it was the original building of the British scientific station here. Well not the original building – that one was swept away by a tsunami in the middle of the twentieth century. Unlike the hut at Port Lockroy which is evidently a museum (and a very good one) the Wordie Hut has been left exactly and simply as it was, everything from books, food, typewriters, felt socks and cooking utensils all in place as if the scientists had just popped out for a walk. Quite spooky in a way.

I walked back over the hill alone through the snow to the anchorage. At the top of the hill you get a wonderful panorama of the low-lying Argentine Islands to the north and west and on the other a stunning view east across the Penola Strait to the mountains of Graham Land and the wide glaciers that sweep majestically down to the sea. Looking down to the south was *Pelagic Australis* lying peacefully in Skua Creek with Skua Island beyond. As I headed towards the boat I soon realised why the creek and island were so named. The place is full of

Antarctic Skuas. Large brown birds with a wingspan of nearly five feet, they are a bit like very big crows. At this time of the year they are rearing their chicks and are aggressively defensive. Everywhere I went I appeared to stray into the territory of their unseen nests. A Skua would line me up and fly straight at me at head level, its piercing eyes staring me out as if viewing me down a gun sight. Only at the very last second would it veer away, just a foot or two from impact, just as the next Skua was lining me up from a different direction. We humans are the uninvited intruders here and the code of behaviour of visitors is strict. No closer to any animal than five metres. If you are causing any animal distress by approaching too close to their young, then you back off. No beating them off with sticks. But in my case it was impossible to know where the nests were, so I was stumbling along holding my ski stick in the air as the Skuas buzzed me from every direction.

So distracted was I that I failed to notice the large fur seal lying near a rock. I almost trod on him when he reared up and roared at me, bearing his vicious teeth. Fur seals will bite you if you threaten them, and the treatment is worse than the bite. Fur seals do not brush their teeth and their mouths are a fertile breeding ground for every bacteria known to man. If bitten, infection would be assured unless you literally scrub out the wound with bleach and a toothbrush, presumably whilst clamping a piece of leather between your teeth and having some smelling salts to hand for when you pass out with the pain. Then it's a course of strong antibiotics and hope for the best. I leapt back ready to leg it, but the moment I moved away he settled back to his interrupted snooze.

Una's Tits Exposed At Last

Date: 22 February 2011

Position: 65:03.686S 064:01.934W – Port Charcot

The previous day at Vernadsky we had enjoyed brilliant, warm sunshine – the second such day since our arrival on the Peninsula. As we left Vernadsky yesterday morning to start heading north, it was overcast but the weak sun was doing what it could to burst through. We headed up Penola Strait when suddenly we spotted a whale blowing ahead. As we motored slowly towards it we saw that it was a pod of several Minke Whales. We floated amongst them as they blew two or three times before diving down (the Strait is nearly 400 metres deep) for another shed load of krill, rising back to the surface a few minutes later. One of them gave us a treat by spy-hopping – poking its head clear of the water, which is apparently pretty unusual. At times we were as close to about 50 metres from these enormous mammals. We stayed with them for more than half an hour and as we continued to make our way north we spotted a couple of much smaller whales which Laura identified as Dwarf Minkes.

As we approached the Lemaire Channel (Kodak Valley which had been invisible through the low cloud on our way down) the sun broke through the dissipating cloud and revealed the simply spectacular valley between enormous mountains in all its glory. It took a while transiting the Channel as we had to make our way through fields of brash ice and some larger growlers, but this allowed us time to fill up our SD cards and exhaust our camera batteries. I must have taken hundreds of photos and video clips. At the end of the Channel, the vista opened up to reveal the famous twin peaks. Una's Tits had at last revealed themselves.

We motored a little further north and turned to port for the planned anchorage in Port Charcot. The word Port is used extremely loosely here. No industrial wharfs and ships unloading their cargos here. Indeed you would be hard pressed to identify the three small nooks that constitute the "port" from more than a quarter of a mile away. We were dismayed to find that all three nooks were filled with small burgs and therefore unusable. We went round the peninsula to see if there was room in the only other small nook and were further disappointed to see a mast sticking up. Someone had beaten us to it and our options were

running out. However, it turned out to be Steve on his charter boat *Xpedition*. He and Miles are old friends (Steve was previously the skipper of *Pelagic Australis*) and over the VHF radio he invited us to snug in alongside him.

In less time than usual we had all our shore lines out and *Xpedition's* Zodiac came whipping round the headland to report that they had spotted a Leopard seal climbing onto an ice flow in the little nook round the corner. We quickly got into our Zodiac and went ashore to walk round to the nook. There, lying on the floe was a splendid example of this extraordinary animal. Its body and flippers look much like any other type of seal. But its head! Enormous and looking like a cartoon dinosaur. Occasionally it had a yawn to reveal an enormous gape, pink throat, and a vicious head of teeth. As these are probably the most spectacular and most scarce of the seals in this region, it was a powerful moment for all of us to see such a wonderful specimen at such close quarters. Again, the pics will have to wait until I get back.

Date: 23 February 2011

Position: Secret location

Early yesterday morning and *Xplorer* slipped away with a rearrangement of our various shore lines. The weather had deteriorated and was cold, wet, windy and miserable, but nevertheless I was looking forward to going ashore to sit amongst the largest penguin colony I had seen so far. It contained not only the ubiquitous Gentoo penguins but also a couple of Adélie penguins and an example of a Chinstrap penguin as well. But there was a higher priority still, and that was to finish my blog for the day.

I was doing nothing more strenuous than typing another dull account of engagements with whales when twang – my back disc decided for the first time in a couple of years that this would be a good time to slip a bit and trap a nerve or three with rather painful consequences. I am prone to the occasional back problem and therefore travel with the full armoury of back braces and a killer cocktail of drugs. The drugs turn my body into a comparatively pain-free lump of jelly so long as I am horizontal, but they also turn my brain into a lump of jelly as well. Once I had made my painful way down below to my bunk and swallowed the potent combination of pills, I drifted into a slightly hallucinogenic coma. My credentials as being a macho sailor preparing for this challenging cruise in my own boat next year was being somewhat compromised but nevertheless everyone was very kind and sympathetic. But if you have to spend the day in a drug-induced coma, this shitty inhospitable day was the one to choose.

We stayed overnight at Port Charcot and left this morning to head further north in readiness for the return crossing of Drake Passage in a couple of days time. I was now just about able to get out of my bunk without passing out, but I was still moving very gingerly and not able to make any useful contribution to the workings of the boat.

One of the occupational hazards of tying the boat in with four or more very long lines is the possibility that one of them will foul the propeller as they are hauled in. This morning, for the first time in Miles experience, this hazard became reality. Quickly the anchor was dropped, and thankfully held, whilst everything was sorted out. This involved Miles in the unenviable task of donning semi-dry suit, goggles, gloves, boots and aqualung and going down underneath the boat to sort it out. Without this gear, he would be dead from hypothermia within about three minutes in the freezing water. He cut away the offending length of rope and like the true pro that he is, came back on board like he'd just been in for a Mediterranean dip and started issuing instructions to weigh anchor and make our way out of the tricky anchorage. What a hero!

Meanwhile it was time for my next dose of narcotic pain-killers and valium and I slept very peacefully whilst *Pelagic Australis* punched her way into the freezing chop through horizontally driven snow. Snugged up in my bunk I was the only comfortable person on board. We tied in in a wonderfully protected nook to the south of a small island. This perfect haven is not widely known and its location so jealously guarded by those in the know, that I am unable to give its position in this blog. This snug anchorage was to be our jumping off point for the return journey across Drake Passage, but first we had to wait for a vicious low-pressure system to pass through. And vicious it was. In the early hours of the morning the wind rapidly increased and outside of the anchorage the seas began to build. By breakfast time the wind was howling. One of the few things that doesn't work on *Pelagic Australis* is the wind speed indicator which packs up when the wind increases to more than about 50 knots. For most sailors this would be irrelevant as they would experience wind speeds of that strength only once in a blue moon. But here, down in the "Screaming Sixties" it is not so uncommon. Suffice it to say that after the indicator packed up in the mid-50 knots the wind continued to get stronger and stronger. Even though *Pelagic Australis* was almost completely protected apart from the top of her mast, we were still heeled over at a crazy angle. Outside the anchorage, the air was completely white with spume being whipped off the tops of the waves. By our reckoning this was a full Hurricane Force 12. Only Miles and Laura had ever experienced such awe-inspiring wind before. We were relieved that we weren't out in it.

By midday the wind had abated and we (except for me, as my back was still extremely vulnerable) went through the long process of releasing and winding in all of the seven long lines we had secured to rocks on the shore, deflating the dinghy and stowing it below with the outboard, and battening down everything on deck. At last we were away and heading north through the islands to the open Southern Ocean and home.

But Antarctica was to give us one last memento of our fantastic time here. As we passed through the islands we saw pod after pod of Humpback whales at close quarters going through their whole repertoire to bid us well on our dangerous passage home. Fluke after fluke rose to wave us goodbye; their enormous flippers slapped the water and their enormous heads, dripping with krill, reared above the water in a final salute. It brought tears to the eyes of many of us. I had tears in my eyes for other reasons. In the excitement, I had missed a step coming down a companionway and had jarred my already chronically damaged back. So whilst everyone ooh'ed and aah'ed at the cavorting whales I somehow managed to make my way to my bunk where I collapsed feeling sick with pain.

For the next 36 hours I didn't leave my bunk, dosing myself up on the Killer Cocktail of drugs that blissfully released me from the agony by sending me into a coma for eight hours at a time and allowing my back to relax and heal itself.

Date: 26 February 2011

I came to about 12 hours ago to find that during the night the wind had picked up again to more than 50 or 60 knots and the seas had been very big. I had been oblivious to it all. But when I returned to the deck once more the wind had moderated; it was a glorious star and moonlit night and perfect sailing. Today, the sun is shining, the albatrosses have returned to escort us across Drake Passage, the water is a deep, deep blue, and the sea and air temperature has increased to a positively balmy 4-5° C, the wind blowing at a pleasant 20 knots. Perfect conditions.

But it's not over yet. We are about one third of the way across and we are expecting a low to pass through tonight and tomorrow which could bring some boisterous conditions and 50 knot winds again. We shall see.

Approaching the Horn

Date: 27 February 2011

Position: 58:04S 65:44W

I feel rather manly and heroic looking at our GPS display which shows “Waypoint: Cape Horn”. It is only men of steel, and Laura, who get to see this. We are heading north, about 150 miles south of the great symbolic lump of rock at the bottom of South America, the most fearsome of the southern capes, the very thought of which loosens the bowels of lesser men.

This return passage across the Drake has been good and bad: good, because apart from the 60-knot screamer right at the beginning of the passage, running with the wind behind us at 10 knots, at night, and with all probability of coming across some hull-ripping ice, the wind has been kindly in strength, blowing between 20 and 30 knots (a mere zephyr in these parts). The stiff winds that had been forecast for last night have so far failed to materialise. And whilst Miles the skipper might have been losing his hair with anxiety during the scary run at the start, I felt altogether more relaxed, largely because I was snoring away in a drug-induced coma throughout it all. The not-so-good part of the passage has been the direction of the wind which has remained stubbornly from the north and northwest the whole time. This is roughly the direction we need to go, so we have been motor-sailing into the wind the whole time.

There has been a good Southern Ocean swell about 4 metres high and periodically this will coincide with a smaller breaking wave and *Pelagic Australis* will launch herself off the top and crash down into the trough with a spine-jarring shudder. And when your spine has a nerve trapped in it, the effect is interesting. It's like doing your back in, then being told to jump off a 10 foot wall onto concrete every five minutes. Notwithstanding, the back is slowly improving and this morning for the first time in days I am suffering no pain.

A big difference on this passage compared to the passage south nearly three weeks ago is the comparative lack of birds. On the way down we were constantly accompanied by albatrosses, Wilson's Storm Petrels and Cape Petrels. In deed, the Cape Petrels were flying around in such numbers on the way south, we were almost having to beat them off with sticks. This time, however, apart from the appearance of the very occasional albatross, we have seen very little.

We have been eating fantastically well, as we have done throughout the entire cruise. One thing that has surprised me is the sheer quantity of food we've been putting away. I reckon that my calorie input has conservatively been 50% more than normal but, notwithstanding, I have definitely been losing weight (mind you, after the copious sweet delicacies of six weeks in Buenos Aires I jolly well needed to lose a bit of weight). Apart from breakfast of porridge and toast we have always had two very wholesome meals a day. Typically lunch will consist of a filling and nutritious soup or stew with doorsteps of bread and butter. And none of your emptying cans into a pan and heating it up – everyone homemade from fresh ingredients. In the evening it will be even more calorie-punched and substantial. In theory we all take it in turns to prepare the food and we have had some really excellent regional specialities like bortsch (with lamb) made by the Russians, and a brilliant sausage stew of Polish origin made by Niko the German. At the other end of the spectrum was the failure of the upside down roast chicken and roast potatoes cooked by me (I've not been asked to contribute since). In practice, however, most of the cooking is done by Miles, Laura and Dave on top of their numerous other responsibilities of planning, navigating, sailing the boat, routine maintenance and cleaning, and making sure that our every waking moment is fun-filled and adventurous. How they do it, I don't know. They must be exhausted but when we leave the boat, whilst they may well heave a sigh of relief, there will be no time for relaxation. A quick turn around

of cleaning, re-supplying and maintenance and they will be off again with another bunch of clients for yet another adventure. They're a really special team and they deserve and receive our enormous gratitude.

As a final attempt to give us yet another unforgettable memory they are trying to stage managing our passing of Cape Horn in daylight hours tomorrow morning. Let's hope they will succeed.

Change of Plan – *Pelagic Australis* Sails to the South Pacific

Date: 28 February 2011

Position: 58:04S 65:44W

The wind remained moderate but also remained stubbornly from the north which meant that we had to sail northwest. By 2100 yesterday evening we were well to the west of Cape Horn ready to take advantage of the anticipated change of wind direction. "Well" said someone "technically we are now in the Pacific Ocean – and the South Pacific at that". It was true. The technical division between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean is a line that falls due south of Cape Horn and we were well west of that line. Try though we might, we couldn't spot one coral-fringed atoll; no palm-fringed beaches and not one hula-hula girl wearing nothing more than a grass skirt and a couple of coconuts. What we saw were endless lines of magnificent Southern Ocean rollers and the occasional Wandering Albatross criss-crossing the waves. So I have now sailed in the Arctic, Atlantic, Southern and now the Pacific Oceans. All I have to do is persuade Miles to carry on a bit further and into the Indian Ocean and I'll have the full set.

As we sail north the nights are very noticeably longer but having crossed the Convergence, where the effect of the icy Antarctic water stops like a physical barrier, the temperature of air and water has soared from a searingly cold 2 – 3 °C to 6 - 7°C. We are almost down to shorts and T-shirts. But we are still on ice watch as some big bergs were reported to have moved well north.

Yesterday I was complaining about the lack of birds compared to our trip south. Well, they got the message and we are now at 0600 surrounded by positive flocks of albatrosses, petrels and shags.

At 1030 local time we sighted the feared and fabled Cape Horn to our nor' northeast and at 1200 we rounded the Horn under sail. This is something that I have dreamed about for decades. For me it was, quietly, an intensely emotional experience and it will take a little while before I will be able to express my feelings fully. I called Maria, Selina and Peter on my satphone to tell them – the three people who realise what this occasion really means for me.

But better was to come. On very rare occasions the swell – or lack of it – enables one to make a beach landing by Zodiac at the bottom of path that leads up to the lighthouse and the famous Cape Horn monument (photos WILL follow). Today was one of those occasions. We were greeted by the lighthouse keeper and his wife who, together with their son have a two-year stint living in one of the most dramatically desolate spots on the planet. They were charming; got us to sign their visitors' book and even stamped our passports with an official Chilean Cape Horn stamp – that'll be one to frame!

We are currently in the most beautiful anchorage in the channels to the north of Cape Horn to stay the night here and wind down after our return passage across the Southern Ocean. Tomorrow we will sail the last 80 miles to our final destination, Puerto Williams.

Too emotional to write more. What a day!!

Adventure of a Lifetime Ends in Crushing Disappointment

Date: 02 March 2011

Position: 54:56.10S 067:37.125W Puerto Williams, Chile

We made an early start leaving the beautiful and isolated anchorage in the Beagle Channel as the rising sun cast a stunning pink glow over the horizon. This was the final 80-mile leg to Puerto Williams after our epic cruise, and we all had mixed feelings: joy that we had returned safely after our return crossing of the Drake Passage, but sadness that this was the wind-down to our wonderful life-changing adventure together.

However, we had one further treat in store. In Puerto Williams is the famous Micalvi, the southernmost yacht club in the world. It is an old munitions ship that has been beached and it is alongside the ship that yachts tie up. The bar on the Micalvi is the focal point, where crews get leathered on pisco sours regaling each other with tales of their adventures to South Georgia, the Falklands, Antarctica or the Beagle Channel. I had read so much about the Micalvi over the years, and for me the inevitable party in the bar was to be the memorable conclusion of our fantastic trip. Not.

On our arrival we were told by the pilot that the club secretary / barman and his family had had to go to Punta Arenas for some medical check-ups and he had taken the keys with him. The club was closed. The news was a crushing disappointment and I was gutted.



The shut Micalvi

However the voluminous bilges of *Pelagic Australis* still hid the last remaining 75 cases of excellent Argentine and Chilean wine. The party was on. An added bonus was that *Pelagic Australis*'s agent had kindly donated a simply massive octopus for our dinner to supplement the steaks that we were to barbecue on the aft deck. At 8kg I was forbidden from lifting the octopus out of the bucket by the string tied round its head for fear of putting my back out again.

There was one small problem. None of us had ever prepared and cooked an octopus before. Dave, a strong lad, hoisted the enormous beast out of the bucket with one hand whilst reading in the other hand the instruction manual on “What To Do With A Dead Octopus”. Between his teeth was a sharp knife. “Shouldn’t an octopus have eight legs?” someone asked. “This one seems rather over-endowed”. It was true. This magnificent beast had a staggering 24 legs. Had we discovered the first vigintiquattuorpus? It was only when we cut the string round its head that we discovered we had, in fact, been given three octopi.



Dave with the first ever viginti quattuorpus – and instruction book

Dave was going through the manual:

“1. Turn the head inside out and discard all the contents”

We weren’t even sure where the head was, let alone see any way to turn it inside out until we worked out that they had been delivered already pre-prepared. So one of them was popped into the pressure cooker to comply with instruction 2: “To tenderise the octopus, boil for 1 ½ hours”. Shame we hadn’t read that bit before.

Meanwhile Dave got the barbecue going with the ship’s multi-purpose blow torch which is used for such diverse tasks ranging from re-welding broken bits of the boat together to browning the crème brûlée on our evenings of fine dining.

The barbecued steaks were divine and the wine flowed freely as the deck filled with the crews from the surrounding boats for our farewell party. A pudding of stewed octopus with lashings of Bird’s custard had somehow lost its appeal and was quietly forgotten.

The following morning, cradling our heads that were as tender as the octopus, Niko, Joachim and I packed our bags and bade a tearful farewell to Miles, Laura and Dave and our other

crew-mates for the 40 minute drive down the stunning coast road of Isla Navarino where we caught the fast boat ferry over to Ushuaia.



The coast road overlooking the Beagle Channel

We were greeted by Mrs Fixit, Roxanna who had rearranged our plane bookings back to Buenos Aires. At 1900 yesterday evening I rang the bell of Maria's mother's flat. The Downstairs Skipper opened the door and into her arms fell what appeared to be a foul-smelling bearded old tramp. The Antarctic adventurer had returned.

Antarctic Adventure – Summary, Accolades and Conclusions

Date: 08 March 2011

Position: 34:20.854S 058 30.784W San Isidro, Buenos Aires

I've been back in Buenos Aires for less than a week (well, actually, I'm back in Punta Del Este in Uruguay after a rather trying 2 ½ day passage on *Mina2* beating into strong head winds and a steep, choppy sea, but that's another story). I was on a complete high for a couple of days, but already my adventure to Antarctica seems like a wonderful surreal dream. Looking at the hundreds of photographs brings it all rushing back. A fantastic adventure that will stay in my memory for the rest of my life: crossing the infamous Drake Passage; the wonder and awe of the spectacular Antarctic coast line; navigating through spectacular icebergs; the birds, penguins, seals, whales; rounding (and landing on) legendary Cape Horn. It has all been unbelievable and, for me, a deeply moving and emotional experience. I am very fortunate.

However, the principal purpose of the trip was as a reconnaissance and familiarisation exercise to assess whether *Mina2* and I might be up for the trip next year. The professional crew of three of *Pelagic Australis* all worked tirelessly to make the cruise a truly memorable event for all of us. As a skipper myself, and having taken in some challenging long cruises in my time, I know how much work is involved in the planning, provisioning, navigating, sailing and maintaining the boat. On top of that is delivering an experience for one's crew (whether paying clients or guests, it is the same) that is as safe as possible whilst being interesting and challenging. The crew on *Pelagic Australis* did a simply brilliant job and I learnt a great deal from them (some past crew of *Mina2* would say and about time too).

But knowing my agenda of wanting to accumulate as much knowledge and information as possible, they were also incredibly generous with their time and expertise in talking about

and demonstrating the specialist equipment that one needs for an extreme trip like this; the techniques of how and when it should be deployed, and explaining the risks of sailing in these areas and how to minimise those risks. It has been invaluable knowledge and I have returned with literally pages and pages of notes.

So who are these paragons, Miles the Skipper, his partner Laura as First Mate and Dave as Second Mate?

Miles is a Yorkshire farmer by upbringing. Delightfully laid back (he is not a shouty skipper as my mother would say) he is very relaxed but at the same time constantly alert as to what is going on around him – with the weather, the boat, the crew, the environment. Immensely experienced he is a true professional in the way he runs the boat and inspires great confidence in his crew and guests (unlike some skippers *Mina2*'s guests could mention). One of the great treats for me on this trip was, for once, being able to completely relax, having to assume no skipperly responsibilities or suffer the occasional associated anxieties. I was in Miles hands and they were a safe pair of hands. Being a country lad he also has a great love of and knowledge of nature and wildlife which he passed on to us. It really enhanced our experience. Kind and generous he was also a great host. Brilliant guy.



Miles at the wheel as we leave the Beagle Channel



Popping the champagne on our landing on the Antarctic mainland



Preparing for a VERY cold swim to clear a fouled propellor

Laura is a perfect foil for Miles. A great partnership in every way. Constantly cheerful and chatty, Laura never stopped smiling – well, almost never. She nearly lost the plot on only one occasion, when someone trampled mud on her pristine sole boards minutes after she had scrubbed them immaculately clean (which she seemed to do several times a day). But it was only for a split second before composure and happiness returned. After which she went off with a bucket, screwdriver and rubber gloves, with a spring in her step and a smile on her face, to unblock the loo. I've never seen that before. Laura is without fear. She cut her teeth on the winning boat in the BT Global Challenge around-the-world-the-wrong-way race – and she loved every terrifying minute. If that is your benchmark, then nothing fazes you very much. It would be she who would be the first to rush down the deck in 60 knots of wind, icy green water smashing over the foredeck, to wrestle with a whiplashing torn headsail, pausing only to apologise politely for having trampled on you on the way (Benenden girl – impeccable manners). I mentioned in an earlier blog her classic comment on our first day in Antarctica, when walking ashore and we were confronted by some potentially dangerous Fur Seals: “Oh, we're just about to be charged by some Fur Seals. How cool is that?” And it was Laura who brought the essential and civilising feminine touch to our otherwise male community – a feminine touch that was so clearly lacking in Miles. She's an unassuming heroine bundled into a fun-loving, warm, and great personality.



Laura receives a belated Christmas present in Puerto Williams



Laura with a penguin and Dave



Cutting a shoulder off Dolly the Sheep for dinner

Then there's Dave. In his mid-20's, he had packed in a load of racing, and done deliveries of yachts professionally before joining Miles and Laura for the extreme cruises to South Georgia, the Falklands and Antarctica. So he was already a very experienced sailor. Whilst able and willing to do everything that needed doing on the boat (including cooking some memorable meals) he, as he saw it, specialised in the fun bits – tearing around in the Zodiac, climbing high into the rigging, picking out the clearest ice floating around for the G&T's etc. And he was never able to wipe the grin off his face wondering how he had found himself being able to do all of this, and was being paid for it as well. His youthful enthusiasm was infectious and he was simply enormous fun to be with.



Dave looking cool in the Zodiac



Looking cool in the rigging



Looking cool flaking the main

As a team they worked brilliantly well together. I learnt an enormous amount from all three of them and I owe them a great debt.

So will I be bringing *Mina2* down to Antarctica next year? Few private boats venture this far south. Sailing in these conditions is not a game. It is tough on the boat and tough on the crew. This is not a place for amateurs. And, having now seen it for myself, I agree. To come here I would have to be slightly deranged. *Mina2* is not ideal. She is made of glass – not metal. She has inadequate heating and insufficient insulation. It will be bitterly cold – far colder than on the specially built *Pelagic Australis*. But *Mina2* is a strong boat that I will make stronger. She will be equipped by me for the conditions to a professional level. And now I have had some experience of the crossing and the conditions in Antarctica, I will be able to go there with a great deal more knowledge and confidence.

One experienced sailor in Buenos Aires said to me “Antarctica. A beautiful place - but not a place to take a boat you love”. Well, I love *Mina2* as much as anyone can love a living and breathing composition of glass, resin, wood and metal. I have discussed the matter with her and she has told me that she would not forgive me if I *didn't* take her. So that's it. Game on. Whether we make it there (and back) – who knows, but the serious preparations start here.