

## Greenland Sailing

The prospect of sailing in Greenland without an engine was not nice, because of the ice. But surely the whalers and old masters used to do that all the time? Yes, but remember, many of them never came back.

I had left my boat, *Dodo's Delight*, at the boatyard in Aasiaat for the winter (Yachting Monthly May 2010) so it was rather stressful when I returned and the engine would not start, and then the alternator would not work. Eventually we thought we had solved both problems. We little knew.

'I cannot believe you have world class climbers on your boat this summer', wrote a crew member from last year. Ignoring the obvious unintended personal slight, my international team this year comprised the Favresse brothers, Nico and Olivier, Belgian, Sean Villaneuva O'Driscoll, Irish, Spanish, Belgian, and Ben Ditto, American. World class? Well, we would see. After viewing their website and seeing all those high fives and yells on completing their climbs I had dubbed them merely 'The Wild Bunch' – and to keep them in their place of course. They enjoyed that.

They duly arrived in Aasiaat on the plane and immediately that afternoon took over the Greenland National Day celebrations at the party at the boatyard, entertaining the staff with their musical instruments and song. Next day we went out for an afternoon's sail, literally to learn the ropes as two of them had never sailed before, and finally put out for the passage to Upernavik, waking the retired local judge who had just returned from a two year Atlantic circuit in his yacht to say our farewells on the way out.

It proved a rather arduous passage for us all and especially the two novices. We motored across Disko Bay. There was breeze at last so we turned the engine off and sailed. But thereafter the engine would not start and we had to sail whether there was wind, however strong or not at all, and there was the occasional iceberg, sometimes looming suddenly out of mist. It was particularly frustrating in the dead calms, of which there are many in Greenland, and Sean was heard to comment 'This must be the low point of the expedition'. I only hoped he was right and there would be nothing worse. It took us five days to sail the normal two day passage, with the final indignity of having to sail very slowly through a lot of icebergs in full view of the settlement of Upernavik, and then

having to negotiate coming alongside the wharf on sail alone. 'Well, you wanted to learn to sail, lads, didn't you?'

Solving the engine starting proved embarrassingly easy; the alternator did not. But obviously the team wanted to get quickly to the climbing so I bought a portable generator which was far too big and heavy for a small boat but was the only one available, and we set off for the big walls of the area. They started with two clear cut dihedral and crack lines on the cliff we call Red Wall, at the southern end of the Sortehul. They stepped off the boat up against the cliff, into the dinghy moored at the bow, and so onto the rock to start, and completed the 350 metre and 400 metre extreme climbs in one big thirty hour push. The only problem was to save weight they had not taken a radio with them so when finished they had to walk all the way round the fjord behind the headland to where I had anchored the boat. The first I knew of it was when Sean swam, in the nude in Greenlandic waters, across to the boat in the early hours next morning. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I was asleep'. 'Not at all, I wanted to swim'.

Their next foray was on another dramatic big wall nearer Upernavik. I dropped them off by dinghy this time, and then returned to Upernavik to try and solve the alternator problem. After three or four days of investigation it turned out that both alternators I had on board were defunct, and I had to buy a new alternator – at Danish prices! But at least we could now charge the batteries via the engine.

Having everything working may well have lulled me into a false sense of security. When I returned to see how the lads had got on, it looked as if it was the bottom of the tide in the pleasant cove below their encampment, and so I anchored close in. It wasn't, and we took the ground. But this was no problem, though the boat did heel over more and more. However this only gave the Wild Bunch opportunity to jump off and swing through the air on the topping lift before releasing to splash into the sea. It also gave the opportunity to introduce the crew to the art of getting off a bank as the tide rose, laying out a kedge and winching off into deeper water with the lads bouncing up and down on the bow. I was secretly pleased it all worked, though I have to admit this was not the first time I have had to do it in my career.

But the tour de force of their climbing in this area was the first ascent of Impossible Wall. I have had my eye on that wall for many years now but have never had a team strong enough to climb it before, hence the name. Their route was simply the steepest and hardest climb on the wall, and probably in the whole area, 850 metres and nineteen

itches of a sustained extreme standard. It was the first time the Garden of Eden had been planted on my boat: they stepped straight off the boat moored on a couple of cams in cracks alongside the sheer wall, and the first crack line required a lot of 'gardening' of grass and earth as they climbed, which then landed on the boat. It took them ten days to complete the climb with three different 'camps' in portaledgees suspended on the wall on the way up, though three days were spent in one of these owing to bad weather. This was no problem; they played their musical instruments included in their haul bags and composed new songs!

Nico was heard to remark afterwards, 'I think that must be the greatest adventure of my life so far', and hopefully these landmark climbs will help to open up the huge potential of this area to climbers in the future.

Having at last picked them up from the back of the mountain, and drunk a toast in champagne together celebrating their success, we retired to the only safe anchorage in the Sortehul at its northern end. We were joined there by friends in their smart 54 foot Discovery yacht *Saxon Blue* which Rich Haworth of High Latitudes had just skippered from Iceland, and later some kayakers from Wales, with whom I had also been in touch previously, arrived in the same inlet. We all enjoyed a very pleasant evening together on *Saxon Blue*, entertained of course by my team with music and song. This became a feature of this whole expedition. Later we met up with Andrew and Maire in *YoungLarry* in Upernavik on their way to the North West Passage, and then *Ariel IV* in a remote anchorage also bound there, and each time my team entertained the assembled company royally. But it turned out that Maire was also a music teacher and she taught them to play the spoons; thereafter I kept finding bent spoons round my boat. Incidentally I may well have seen more yachts in Greenland this summer than I have seen in the previous years put together – not entirely welcome to those of us who selfishly want to keep paradise to ourselves!

There had been an interesting interlude whilst they had been on the wall. I took myself off to survey some other possible big walls further in towards the icecap. As usual in Greenland the distances were further than expected, and there turned out to be only one possibly interesting big wall anyway, but I did find a beautiful remote keyhole anchorage. The only problem was that I had attached a tripping line to the anchor the sea bed being an unknown quantity, and in the still conditions somehow the line and fender acting as a buoy became entwined with the prop. I remembered a previous year when I had cleared the prop by having the boat close inshore so I did not have to dive fully with a tank, but how to get the boat there? In the end I pulled up the anchor and motored the boat gently

via the 2HP outboard on the Avon dinghy tied alongside, to some rocks on the shoreline. My troubles were not over. Diving dry suits often have the zip at the back and there was no way in spite of all sorts of contortions that I could zip this up on my own, and I had to duck underneath the water from the rocks with the zip still open. 'Oh that's dangerous' I was told later. I can confirm that, as at the very least it was almost impossible to climb back on board even up a ladder with my legs full of heavy water. But I had managed to clear the prop.

Another aspect of exploring in Greenland also became apparent. On two occasions I nearly hit isolated rocks in deep fjords, the water going from 100+ metres to 4, 3, 2 metres in a matter of seconds. Either they were in the wrong place on the charts, or my boat was in the wrong place on the chart plotter!

But it was time to go south. First to Aasiaat to collect gear we had left, and prepare for the long haul to the southern tip and then the Atlantic. The five hundred plus miles south to the Kap Farvell area proved somewhat arduous as there was either no wind or it was always 'in our faces' - in Greenland there is often too much wind or none at all - and it included a rather unpleasant evening making our way in heavy swell through big bands of ice - growlers, bergy bits and bergs - streaming out of the Sermilik glacier and fjord south of Paamiut. We investigated some other possible big walls, to no avail, so the lads got their kicks by skinny dipping in arctic waters amongst the ice floes! After calling at Nanortalik for stores and fuel - we had had to motor all the way - and reading past expedition reports at the Tourist office, we made our way to the Kap Farvell area.

We were immediately struck with the difference. At Upernavik it had been big sea cliffs, here the terrain was Alpine in character. We made five first ascents. The first two were on a remote wall and unnamed peak after a five kilometre walk in (carrying all that gear) from the boat anchored rather precariously on a lee shore in the Torssukatak. To quote Nico 'Two classic, clean, direct lines on excellent rock'. They then traversed the ridge to the peak and kindly named it Shepton Spire. Another two routes were completed at the northern end of Quvnerit Island. One of these may have been done before (a bolt was found) in which case this was the first completely free ascent without using any artificial aids. Foolishly the skipper also allowed himself to be persuaded to do a new route with two of them. At 500 metres and extreme difficulty it was too long and too hard for an old man. I was exhausted, and named it Never Again! - 75 seems a good age to retire from that sort of thing, again!

We made our way down Prins Christian Sund, hoping to enjoy Danish pastries at the Weather Station at the far end. We were not disappointed. We prepared for the Atlantic which the Wild Bunch were keen to do 'for the experience'. They were not disappointed either. The weather forecast was not encouraging. Always keen to encourage my crew, the night before I believe I said 'In twelve days times we should be in Scotland - or dead'. They enjoyed that. And 'By the way this is my thirteenth Atlantic crossing - lucky you are not superstitious'.

It was a tough passage. When we put out next day, mindful of Post Tropical Storm Danielle tracking by Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, we did not turn south but kept at 61° N. But there was high pressure over Scandinavia, Britain and Europe and the depressions could not get through. We found ourselves endlessly tacking, long ocean tacks, along this parallel against strong easterly winds, and then Danielle turned north and spun up past us trailing her skirts of heavy line squalls and banshee shrieking in the rigging, and later another vigorous double depression turned north over us too. But we were well snugged down by then, hove-to on both occasions, with inner foresail rolled to near storm jib and trysail. In all we hove-to four times, but one of these was the skipper being lazy as being a bit older now he doesn't like this crashing against the seas and explosions when you fall off a wave, and on another occasion we had to stop to tighten the nut holding on the wheel and also the steering cables down below as too much play had developed in the steering. It was difficult as we did not have all the right tools but fortunately we were successful.

At last we were able to work south and persisted in this even when it appeared we were in danger of going west of south. Would we ever reach those westerlies further south depicted on the weather faxes? They were a long time coming, but at last we picked up a following wind and bowled along broad reaching or running before goosewinged, making good progress towards Scotland, at last. With all that crashing and now rolling the bookcase with all the books fell off the bulkhead narrowly missing Ben's legs in the bunk below, and there was an interesting interlude one night on the Rockall bank with a big fishing boat which we presumed was slowly dragnet fishing. With all those lights it is difficult to pick out the relevant navigation lights but eventually we saw both port and starboard and knew we were crossing its bows. They flashed us with a searchlight a couple of times but we did not know whether that was saying 'OK we have seen you'. Or 'Get out of the way'. They did not call on the VHF. We put the engine on just in case, and eventually

we saw it pass safely astern of us. Occasionally the skipper ordered some rolls in the genny or a reef in the main – these Mediterranean sailors used to short trips perhaps seemed to want to sail flat out all the time regardless of what it might be doing to boat or crew! Finally there was Mingulay ahead, and we took the time to inspect the cliffs of Mingulay and Pabbay as there was an idea it might be ‘cool’ to do a climb immediately after having sailed across the Atlantic. We anchored for the night off a pleasant sandy beach on the east side of Mingulay sheltered from the strong westerlies, and were intrigued with a huge colony of seals lining the waterline here and moving up and down with the tide. The next morning the skipper overruled the possibility of climbing, feeling we should make progress as the synoptic chart looked as if there might be strong winds coming, and we had a fine run across the Minch and past the Cairns of Coll, just, before anchoring in Loch Drumbuie rather than piloting down the Sound of Mull in the dark with a crew who did not know it. Next day as we approached Oban and later in the harbour we were greeted with a full gale. Welcome home!

But this had nothing to do with the fact that this was their first but my thirteenth crossing, the date was the 13<sup>th</sup>, and a large number 13 for some unknown reason is the sail number on my trysail. No. no we are not superstitious....