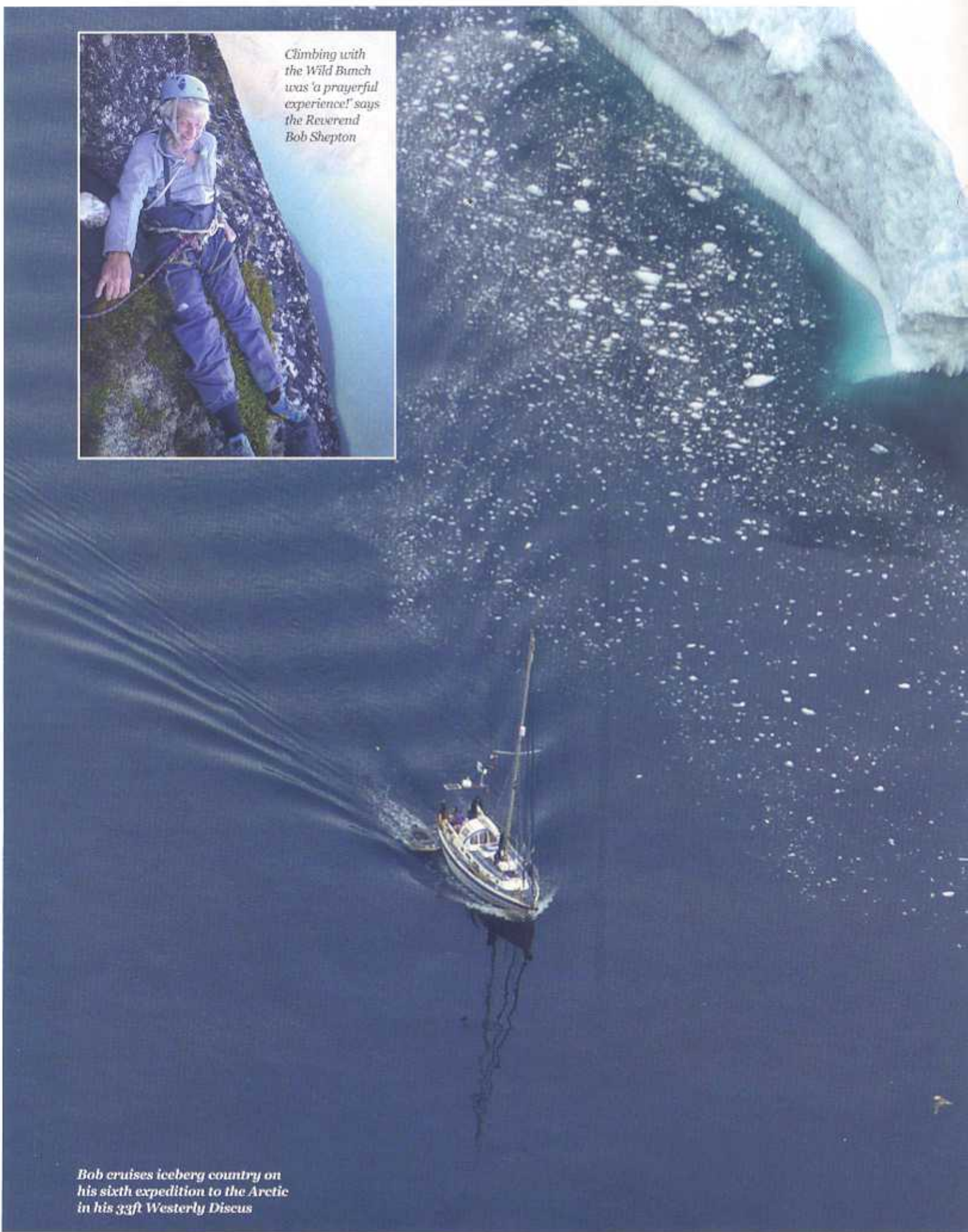


*Climbing with the Wild Bunch was 'a prayerful experience!' says the Reverend Bob Shepton*



*Bob cruises iceberg country on his sixth expedition to the Arctic in his 33ft Westerly Discus*

# Man of ice and fire

**B**ob Shepton, author of this month's cruising adventure story, *High seas and mountains* (p68) started sailing comparatively late in life, in his forties. As a teenager he did his National Service as a Royal Marine, joining something audaciously named the Commando Cliff Assault Wing, which sparked his interest in climbing. After university he studied theology and for a time was a young curate in Weymouth, where he discovered Dorset's unclimbed sea cliffs at Lulworth and Portland – taking the church youth club climbing. Was it the bird's-eye view of passing yachts that then gave him the sailing bug?

It wasn't long before he swapped church pulpit for yacht cockpit, buying his first boat, *Faraway*, a 32ft converted Admiralty pilot cutter, in 1978. His early cruising adventures with his wife, Kate, and their five children, were 'one per cent boredom and 99 per cent terror'.

Cruising and climbing have been Bob's twin passions for the last 50 years. He has been a full-time youth leader in London's East End and chaplain to two schools. 'Outdoor pursuits' were always the glue that cemented his philosophy. In 1981, he bought a 33ft Westerly Discus, *Dodo's Delight*. In 1986, his school was the first to sail across the Atlantic and back, and in 1993 he circumnavigated the globe with ex-pupils, sailing 38,000 miles in 22 months. Bob is the only person to have twice been awarded the Royal Cruising Club's prestigious Tilman Medal.

Now 76 years old, Bob has made six expeditions to Arctic Greenland and Canada. Apart from her bulletproof sprayhood, built by his son, *Dodo's Delight* looks like many other Westerly yachts. You'd never guess the original *Dodo* was burnt to the waterline by a diesel heater fire in 2005, while Bob wintered in the Greenland ice. You'd never guess her mainsail was once repaired by an Eskimo with the only Singer sewing machine in Greenland. But then Bob keeps everyone guessing about his next adventures. ▲



Paul Gelder, editor



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PHOTOS: BOB SHEPTON

*Paul Gelder*

Greenland has a 'gallery' of surreal iceberg 'sculptures', like this one in Disko Bay

# High seas and mountains

Bob Shepton describes an intrepid cruise in Greenland with an international crew of mountain climbers whom he nicknamed 'The Wild Bunch'

**T**he prospect of sailing in Greenland in ice without an engine was not very attractive. Yes, the whalers and old masters used to do it all the time, but remember, many of them never came back. I had left my boat, *Dodo's Delight*, a 33ft Westerly Discus, at the boatyard in Aasiaat for the winter so it was rather stressful when I returned and the engine would not start. Then the alternator would not work. Eventually we thought we had

solved both problems. Little did we know.

'I cannot believe you have world-class mountain climbers on your boat this summer,' wrote a crewman from last year. My international team comprised the Favresse brothers, Nico and Olivier, from Belgium, Sean Villaneuva O'Driscoll, of Irish, Spanish and Belgian ancestry, and an American, Ben Ditto. 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 'The Wild Bunch'. They enjoyed that.

They duly arrived in Aasiaat by plane and immediately took over the Greenland National Day celebrations at the boatyard party, entertaining staff with their musical instruments and song. Next day we went for an afternoon's sail, literally to learn the ropes, as two of them had never sailed before. Then we set off on the passage to Upernavik, which proved arduous for us all, especially the two novices.

We motored across Disko Bay, turning the engine off and sailing when a breeze sprang up. Thereafter the engine would not start and we had to sail whether in strong winds or calm – with the occasional iceberg looming suddenly out of the 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 icebergs create an interesting passage near Upernavik





Bob and Nico, enjoy the return leg down the Torsukatak, South Greenland

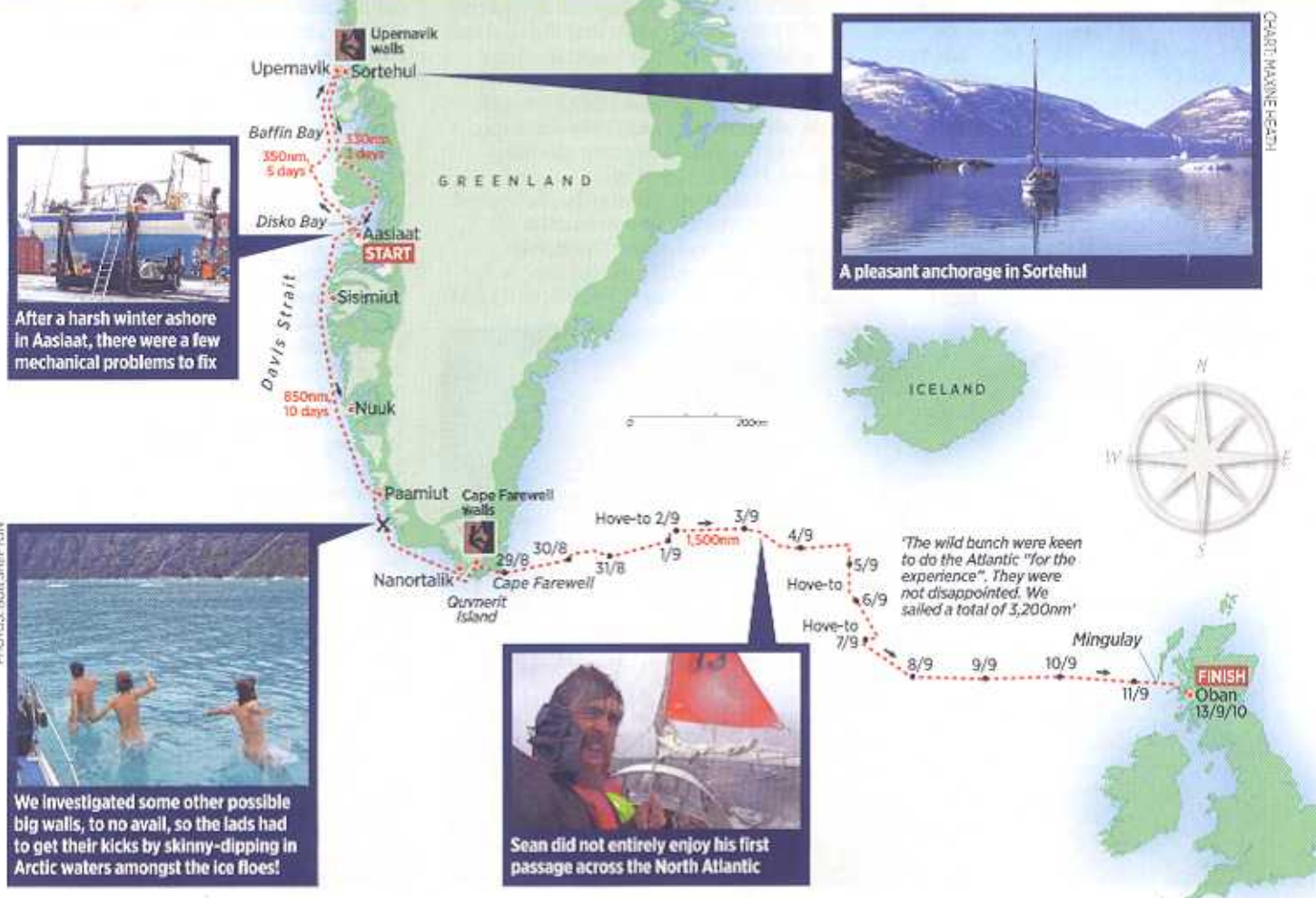


CHART: MARINEGRAPH

PHOTOS: BOB SLEPTON

PHOTOS: BOB SHEPTON



*There are no tide tables for Greenland!*

*'This gave the Wild Bunch an opportunity to do Tarzan swings on the topping lift before releasing to splash into the sea'*

two-and-a-half-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, then coming alongside the wharf under sail alone. 'Well, you wanted to learn to sail, lads, didn't you?'

Solving the engine starting proved embarrassingly easy. Not so, the alternator. But the team wanted to get climbing so I bought a portable generator and we set off for the big walls (steep rock faces) of the area. The climbers started with two clear-cut dihedral and crack lines on the cliff we called 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 350m and 400m extreme climbs in one big, 30-hour push. To save weight, they had not taken a radio with them so when they finished they had to walk all the way round the fjord behind the headland, where I had anchored the boat. The first I knew of it was when Sean swam to the boat in the nude in the early hours next morning. 'Sorry, I was asleep!' I said.

'Not at all, I wanted to swim,' he replied. 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 one – at Danish prices! But at least we could now charge the batteries via the engine.

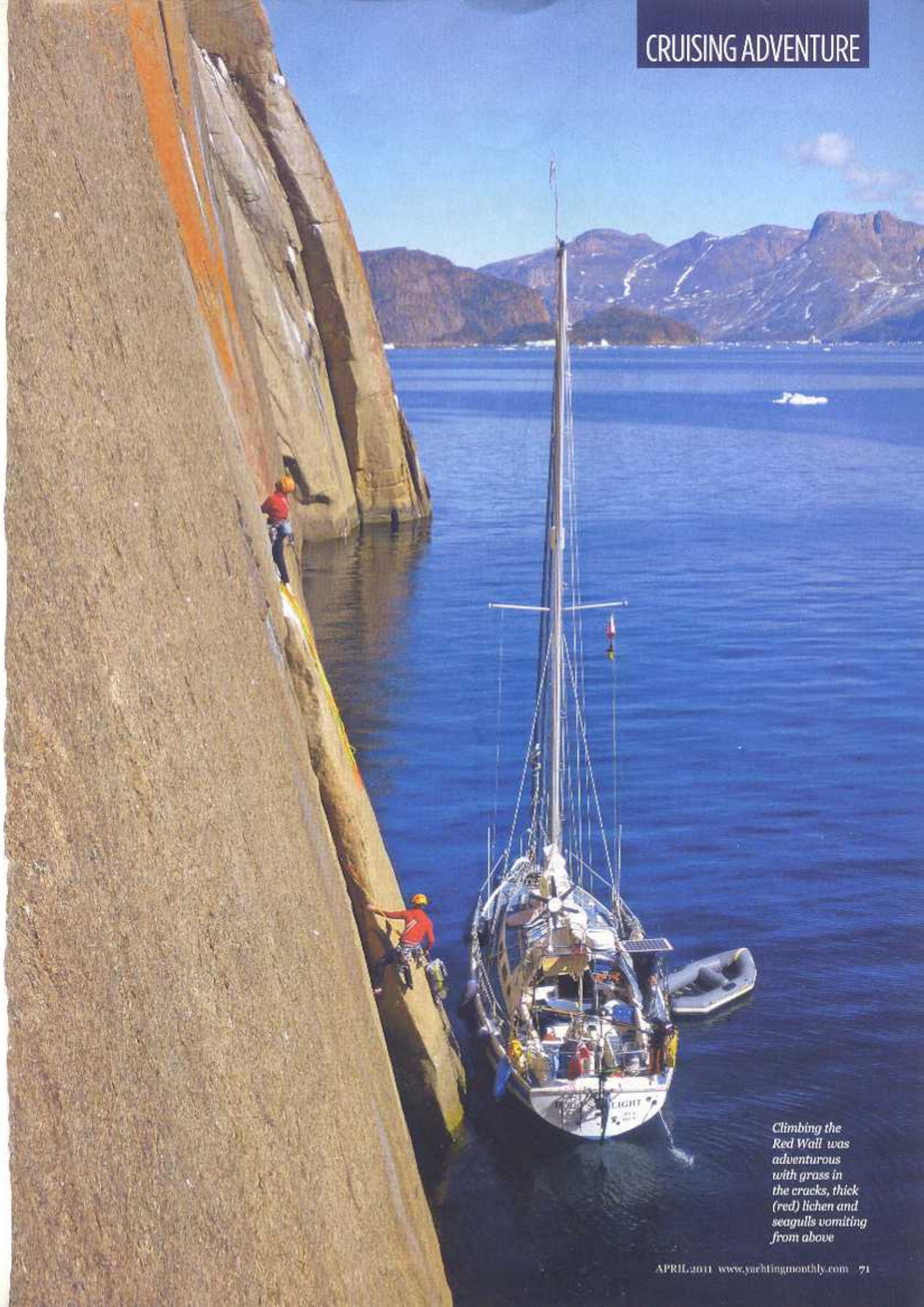
Having everything working may well have lulled me into a false sense of security. When I returned to see how the lads had got on, they had succeeded. It looked as if it was the bottom of the tide in the pleasant cove below their encampment, so I anchored close in. It wasn't, and we took the ground. But this was no problem, though the boat did heel over more and more, rather alarmingly. This gave the Wild Bunch an opportunity to do Tarzan swings on the topping lift before releasing to splash into the sea. It also introduced the crew to the art of getting off a bank as the tide rose, laying out a kedge and winching off into deeper water as the lads bounced up and down on the bow.

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, 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: 850m and 19 pitches of a sustained extreme standard.

They stepped straight off the boat, moored on a couple of cams (climbing rope 'anchors') in cracks alongside the sheer wall. The first crack line required a lot of 'gardening' of grass and earth as they climbed. It was the first time the Garden of Eden had been planted on my boat. It took them 10 days to complete the



*Landing climbers for another first ascent in Torssut, near Upernavik*



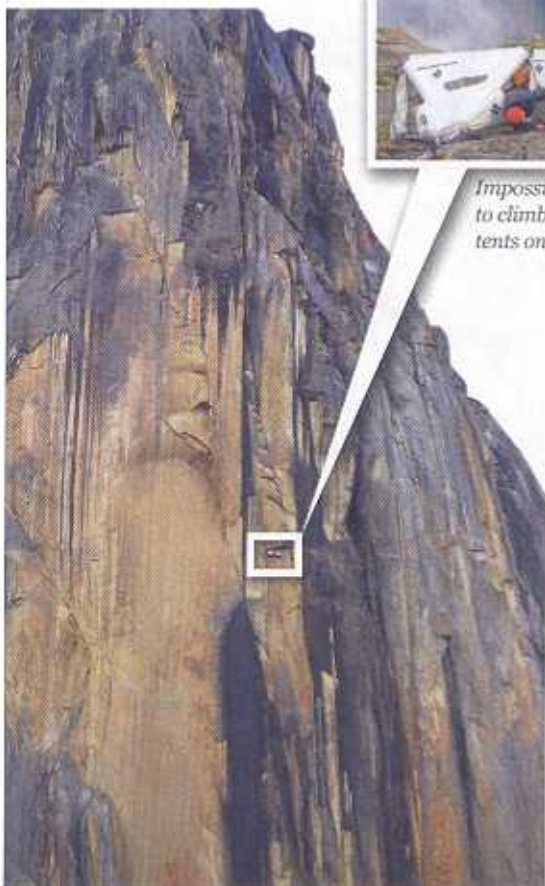
*Climbing the Red Wall was adventurous with grass in the cracks, thick (red) lichen and seagulls vomiting from above*



PHOTO: BOB SHIPMAN

Starting the ascent of Impossible Wall, the boat held alongside with cams (climbing rope anchors)

climb with three 'camps' in portaledges (hanging tents) 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 (mandolin, accordion, penny whistle and mouth organ) and composed new songs! Nico remarked to me afterwards, 'That must be the greatest adventure of my life so far,' and hopefully these landmark climbs will open up the huge potential of this area to climbers in the future.



Impossible Wall took 10 days to climb. They slept in hanging tents on the rock face

Having picked them up from the back of the mountain and drunk a champagne toast to celebrate their success, we retired to the only safe anchorage in the Sortehul, at its north end. We were joined there by friends in *Saxon Blue*, a 54ft Discovery, which Rich Haworth of High Latitudes, an exploration advisory company, had just skippered from Iceland, and later some kayakers from Wales. We enjoyed a

pleasant evening on *Saxon Blue*, entertained of course by my team with music and song. This happened again when later we met Andrew and Maire in *Young Larry*, a 44ft gaff-rigged steel yacht, in Upernavik, and then with *Ariel IV*, a 50ft Swedish steel yacht, in a remote anchorage. Both were on their way to the Northwest

Passage. Maire, a music teacher, taught my team to play the spoons. Thereafter, I kept finding bent spoons around my boat.

Another aspect of exploring in Greenland became apparent. On two occasions, I nearly hit isolated rock towers in deep fjords, the water going from more than 100m to 4m, 3m, 2m 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 chartplotter!

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 500-plus miles south to the Cape Farewell area proved somewhat arduous as there was either no wind or it was 'in our faces' – in Greenland there is often too much wind or none at all – and included an unpleasant evening making our way in heavy swell through big bands of ice streaming out of the Sermilik glacier and fjord, south of

Paamiut. We investigated some other possible big walls, to no avail, so the lads had to get their kicks by skinny-dipping in Arctic waters amongst the ice floes! After calling at Nanortalik for stores and fuel, we made our way to the Cape Farewell area.

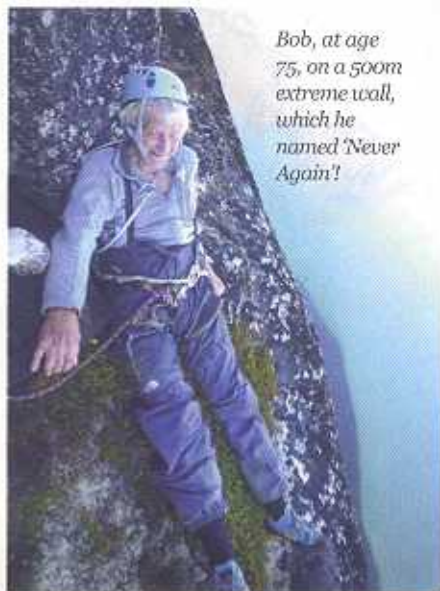
We were immediately struck with the difference. At Upernavik it had been big sea cliffs, here the terrain was Alpine in character. We made five first ascents.

The first two were on a remote wall and unnamed peak after a three-mile walk (carrying all that gear) from the boat, anchored rather precariously on a lee shore in the Torssukatak fjord. To quote Nico, they climbed 'two classic, clean, direct lines on excellent rock'. They kindly named the summit Shepton Spire and then traversed the ridge to the eastern secondary peak. Another two extreme routes were completed at the northern end of Quvnerit Island, not without incident when a big block came away and Nico took a 16m fall, ending upside-down and facing a 400m void stretching out below him. All was well but they were shaken, and stirred.

Foolishly, the skipper also allowed himself to be persuaded to do a new route with two of them. At 500m, it was too long and too hard for an old man, however expertly guided. 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. The weather forecast was not promising. Always keen to encourage my crew, the night before I believe I said: 'In 12 days times we should be in Scotland – or dead!' They enjoyed that. I added: 'By the way, this is my 13th 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 →



Bob, at age 75, on a 500m extreme wall, which he named 'Never Again!'



Anchored in the Torssukatak, near Cape Farewell – Alpine climbing terrain

but kept at 61°N. But there was high pressure over Europe and the depressions could not get through. We found ourselves endlessly tacking, long ocean tacks, along this parallel against strong easterly winds. Then Danielle turned north and spun up past us, trailing her skirts of heavy line squalls and banshee shrieking in the rigging. Later, another vigorous double depression turned north over us, too. But we were well snuggled 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 – being a bit older now, I don't like this crashing against the seas and explosions when you fall off a wave. 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. 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 goose-winged, making good progress towards Scotland.

Occasionally, I 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. 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 in Scotland as well as Greenland. 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 and moving up and

*'Always keen to encourage my crew, I said: 'In 12 days time we should be in Scotland – or dead'. They enjoyed that'*



*You nearly always have to heave-to on passages in the North Atlantic*

down with the tide. Next morning, I overruled the possibility of climbing, feeling we should make progress as the synoptic chart looked threatening and, indeed, we had a fine run across the Minch and past the Cairns of Coll, before anchoring in Loch Drumbuie rather than piloting down the Sound of Mull in the dark with a crew who were unfamiliar with the area.

Next day we were greeted with a full gale approaching Oban. Welcome home! But this had nothing to do with the fact that it was my 13th crossing, the date was the 13th of the month and a large number 13 was for some unknown reason stitched on my trysail. No, no, we are not superstitious... ▲

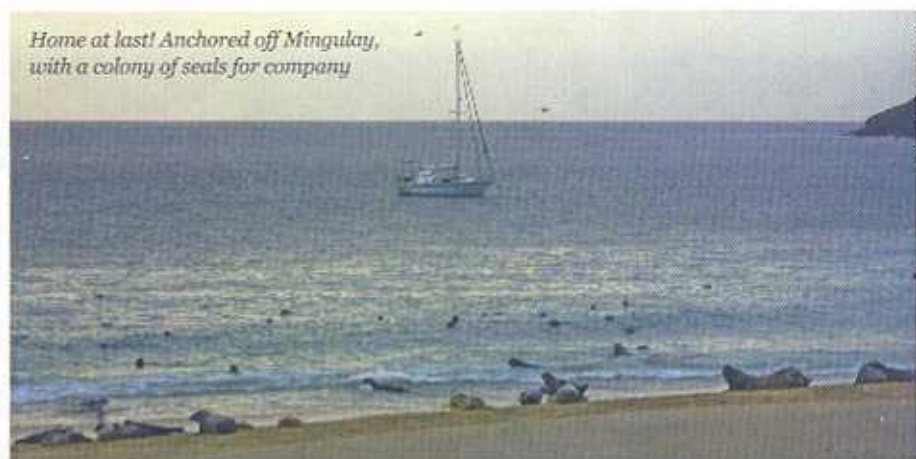
*We are very grateful to the Gino Watkins Memorial Fund for supporting this expedition. For more information, visit these websites: [www.bobshepton.co.uk](http://www.bobshepton.co.uk), [www.xpedition.be](http://www.xpedition.be).*

## Bob Shepton

Bob, 76, lives in Scotland with his wife. He has led six Tilman-type expeditions and has won the Royal Cruising Club's Tilman Medal twice. He has been a Royal Marines officer, a youth leader in London's East End and chaplain to two schools, from which he took pupils sailing, climbing and skiing. His voyages include a westabout circumnavigation in 1993-95 with ex-school pupils, via Cape Horn and Antarctica.



*Devil's Brew, a cobra embalmed in liquor – a present to Reverend Bob from the Wild Bunch!*



*Home at last! Anchored off Mingulay, with a colony of seals for company*

PHOTOS: BOB SHEPTON