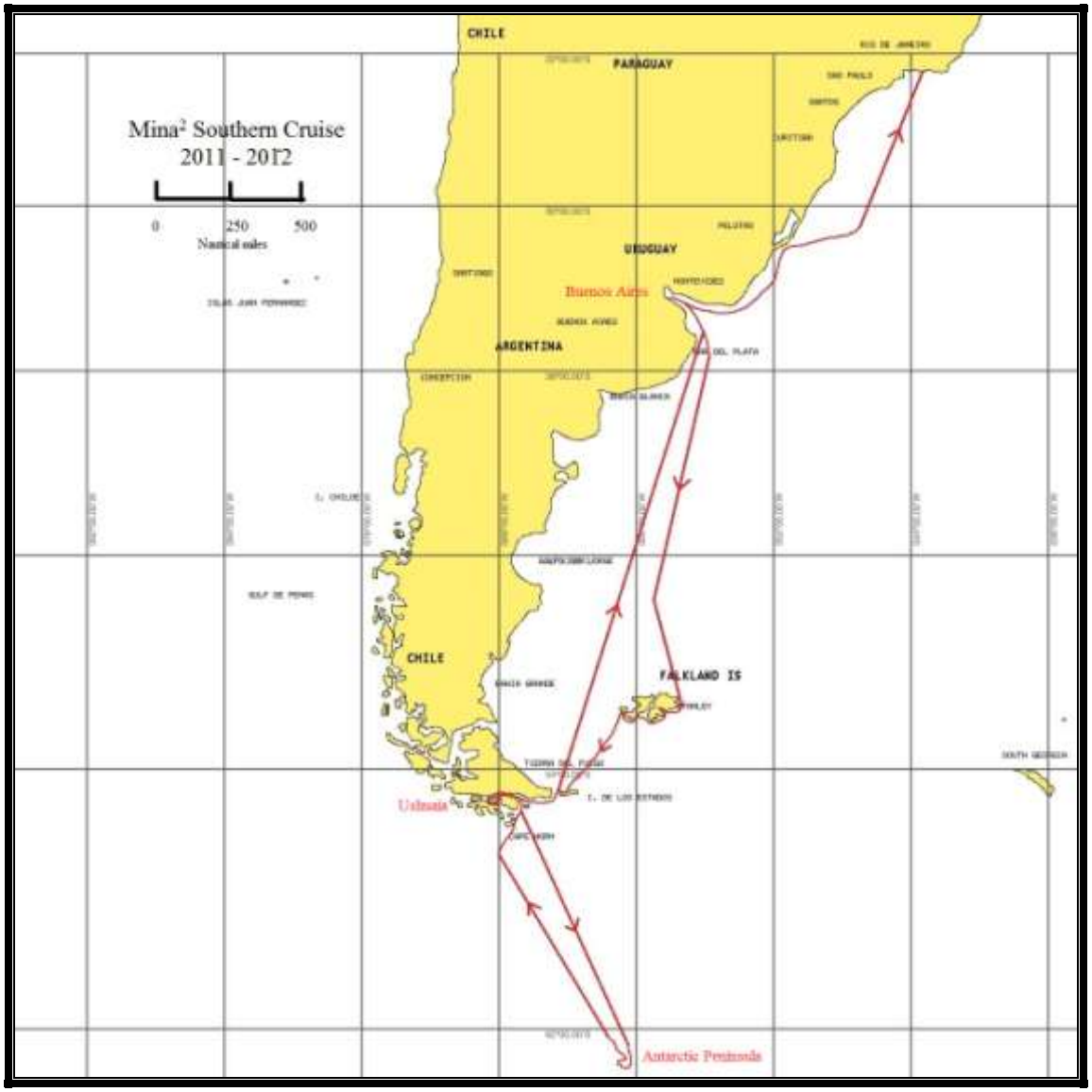
From The Land Of Ice To The Land Of Fire

Mina^2's Antarctic Cruise 2011/12

by Tim Barker



Scott used to say that the worst part of an expedition was over when the preparation was finished. After three years of planning, and in a state of near exhaustion, I hoped he was right as *Mina*^{2} nosed her way through the muddy delta of the River Plate and turned her bow south to fulfil a dream.

Our five-month cruise was to take us 7000nm, crossing 72 degrees of latitude from Buenos Aires to the Falkland Islands and, via the Beagle Channel, past Cape Horn to Antarctica. Should we return safely, we then planned to cruise the Chilean fjords of Tierra Del Fuego before taking *Mina*^{2} back up the South Atlantic to over-winter in Brazil.

Our first leg was an eight-day, 1200nm passage to the Falkland Islands. I had been joined by my sister Linda and her husband John, both veteran trans-ocean sailors. I certainly got the opportunity of catching up on lost sleep as we were obliged to motor for the first 40 hours through windless seas. In our waking hours were entertained by an increasing amount of wildlife as we spotted the occasional penguin and were visited by Dusky Dolphins. At one point we were surprised to see a seal following us, porpoising in our wake - something we had never seen before. The sky was full birds: several species of Shearwaters, the fast-jet pilots of the seas, joyously skimming the waves with their wingtips, whilst flocks of the pretty black and white Cape Petrels skittered to a halt in the water beside us before taking off as one to wheel around and land again on the other side of the boat. Albatrosses glided effortlessly overhead and, ominously, we also saw a couple of Wilson's Storm Petrels.

By day three we were romping south in a good north-westerly breeze. As we progressed through the Roaring Forties the nights were becoming noticeably shorter and the water temperature noticeably colder. But whilst the nights might have been shorter, with no moon and the now overcast skies they were as black as pitch.

At 2330 on the sixth day out, 250nm NNW of the Falklands, we were hit by a classic South Atlantic cold front. Like a mallet. Within 30 seconds the wind had backed 90° to the southwest and increased from 30 knots to 60 knots. The next 36 hours was a bit of an endurance test. The wind never dropped below 45 knots and was often well over 60 knots (by how much we don't know - we discovered that our wind indicator doesn't register anything over 60 knots). We had to keep pushing on for fear of the wind and the current pushing us to the east of the Falklands - a place you don't want to be unless your next stop is South Africa - so we were crabbing as close to the wind and the enormous waves as safety would allow.

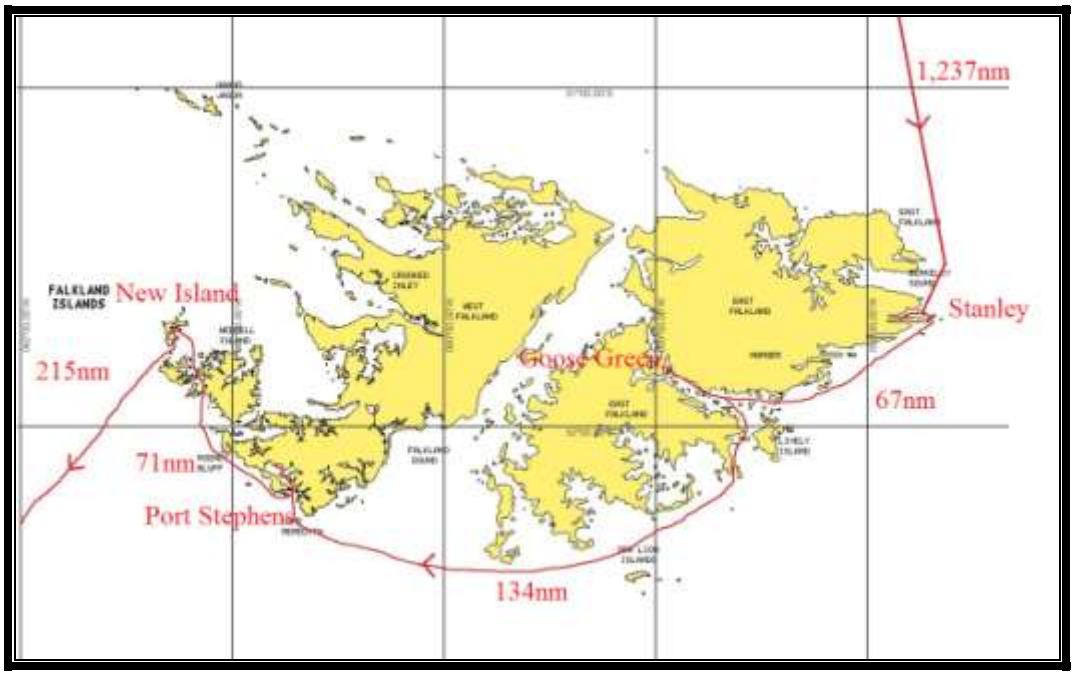
So it was with some relief that, with a now dying wind - a mere zephyr of only 30 knots, we made our way into Stanley harbour and tied up. Within minutes a Land Rover arrived with an HM Customs Officer, and a man in civvies who introduced himself as the Chief Medical Officer. He pointed towards the cruise ship lying at anchor in the bay. “I’m afraid to tell you that there has been an outbreak of Novovirus on that cruise ship. The Islands are therefore restricting entry until tests have been carried out. I will need a stool sample from each of you. Would now be convenient?" We were open-mouthed. “Now?" I

asked "Are you being serious?" "No" he said, breaking into a broad grin, "I'm joking. My name is Dr Barry Elsby. Welcome to the Falkland Islands".

Barry is the Honorary Local Representative of the Cruising Association in the Falklands - not an arduous role he said, as we were only the third member yacht who had passed through in 22 years. He was of invaluable help during our five days of hard work in Stanley: the usual stuff of repairs to be organised, gas bottles to be replaced, refuelling etc. For an expedition into the ice of Antarctica, you also need an awful lot of extra kit, and we had to prepare and stow a metre square box of equipment I had had shipped down from the UK.

We also managed to cram in a bit of sightseeing and a fair amount of socialising, not least with Lars and his crew from *Dawnbreaker*, a handsome Swedish 64 foot aluminium yacht, the only other amateur yacht in the Falklands. Lars was on the same trajectory as us and we were to bump into each other on numerous occasions over the following months. Our frequent meetings invariably involved long nights followed by even longer hangovers.

We had less than two weeks to explore the islands and knowing that part of this time would be spent stormbound in this windy archipelago, we had decided to go south-about the islands and concentrate our itinerary visiting just three locations: Goose Green, Port Stephens and New Island.



My wife Maria is Argentine and we had spent 1982 glued to the television and the rolling news of the Falklands conflict 24 hours of the day. So places like Goose Green and San Carlos Water were indelibly stamped on my memory. They were places I wanted to visit, to pay my respects to the young men from both sides who had lost their lives in this

desolate but beautiful outpost. The Falkland Islands are challenging cruising grounds made very much easier if you have with you the Bible of the area "Falkland Islands Waters" written by Ewen Southby-Tailyour. Because of his intimate knowledge of the beaches and waters of the Falkland Islands, Ewen played a crucial strategic role with the British task force. I had been in touch with Ewen for information before I left ("Basically it's all in the book Tim, but never anchor in kelp and, if you shoot an upland goose for the table, immerse it in a bucket of vinegar for 24 hours - it will then be delicious"). He had asked me, if I were sailing down Choiseul Sound, to pour a tot on his behalf to six of his men who lost their lives when their landing craft *Foxtrot Four* was attacked by Argentine aircraft. On the afternoon of 28 November, we hove to at the exact spot and observed a minute's silence in their memory whilst six libations of whisky were poured into the cold grey water.

A couple of hours later, we tied up alongside the jetty at Goose Green. We didn't have to book - we were apparently the first yacht to visit the settlement in more than six years. We stayed in Goose Green for four days and, during our time there, we visited all the battle sights including San Carlos Water and the spot where Colonel "H" Jones was killed. We also visited the Argentine military cemetery, many of the head stones sadly marked *Soldado Argentino Solo Conocido Por Dios* (Argentine Soldier Known Only Unto God). It was sombre and moving.

Having been stormbound at Goose Green for an extra day, we bade our farewells on 1 December, and headed for Port Stephens some 130nm away on the south side of West Falkland, where we arrived at lunchtime the following day.

Port Stephens is an isolated 50,000 acre sheep farm owned and managed by Peter and Ann Robertson. We were the first yacht to visit them in a couple of years. The settlement overlooks a large, stunningly beautiful almost landlocked bay with rolling hills opposite, leading up to cliffs with nesting Rockhopper penguins and spectacular views over the deep blue and turquoise waters of the South Atlantic. Behind the sand dunes of a totally unspoilt bay there was a colony of nesting Gentoo penguins who waddle backwards and forwards to dive into the surf, zipping around in pursuit of fish. No wonder Peter refers to Port Stephens as "God's Own Country". We spent a truly memorable couple of days there in uncharacteristically warm, sunny and windless weather.

The windless weather persisted, so our 70nm passage to New Island on the western tip of the Falklands was under motor. The landscape at the west end of the Falklands is altogether more dramatic than the low lying hills of East Falkland with high sheer cliffs plummeting from the many headlands into the sea. Even in these benign conditions the swell crashed into the sheer faces of rock sending spray shooting many metres up the cliff faces. This coastline in a storm must be awe-inspiring.

New Island is a world-famous private nature reserve accessible only by helicopter (unless you arrive by yacht). It is occupied only in the summer by a handful of wildlife scientists who research the considerable variety of fauna and flora including a unique rookery where three different species of bird all nest hugga-mugga together (Rockhopper

Penguins, King Cormorants and the enormous Black-browed Albatross). Going for a walk here, you are simply surrounded by wildlife. Linda, who was taking notes of the different species we saw, could hardly keep up.

***Mina*^{2} at anchor at New Island**

Our next challenge was the 215nm crossing from the Falklands southwest to Staten Island which is the south east tip of South America. It would take about a day and a half. This is the direct course of the vicious depressions that sweep round Cape Horn - not somewhere you want to get caught out - so we were lucky to see a weather window appearing and on 10 December we set sail, enjoying a fast reach in 25 to 30 knots.

Staten Island is the dying gasp of the Andes, separated from the South American mainland by the 15nm-wide notorious Le Maire Strait. The island is uninhabited, 30 miles long and 6 miles wide, lying east-west with a heavily indented coastline of fjords from which rise lofty mountains. It makes a spectacular landfall. Our time was limited, so we selected Puerto Hoppner as our one and only destination on the island. Puerto Hoppner is not a port as you would know it - just a well protected bay. Well, two bays actually - a large outer bay at the bottom of which is an extremely narrow gap - the boat's width and just a little bit more - which leads into an inner bay which is about half a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. Within the inner harbour is a small island behind which we anchored. No swinging room, so we inaugurated our four brand new 100m lengths of polyprop by tying ourselves to trees on the shore. During the course of our Southern Cruise I have visited some of the most remarkable anchorages in the world, but this was

without doubt the most awe-inspiring any of us have ever experienced. Surrounded by high mountains with waterfalls cascading through the virgin trees and mossy scrub, it was a natural amphitheatre of unspoilt tranquility and beauty.

The perfect anchorage? - Puerto Hoppner, Staten Island

Getting in there was one thing - getting out another. The next leg was to negotiate the ship-eating Le Maire Strait where 10m standing waves have been reported, and make our way into the Beagle Channel and Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world. The timing to get the tides right were critical, but meant we had to leave our perfect anchorage on a rising tide. About 500,000 square metres of water has to pass through the 15m gap guarding the entrance to the inner bay every six hours. At the time we left it was by no means at full flood but it was scary enough (OK, we were a little late). Think of white-water rafting your yacht uphill and you have the picture. I gunned the engine and went for the gap. Our SOG slowed as we hit the torrent until we were barely moving, inching our way through the maelstrom. Finally we got through and shot into the outer bay like a cork out of the bottle. Now for the Le Maire. In the event, it was almost uneventful. Yes, there was the most unusual, almost weird, sea motion but we were compensated by having an extraordinary display of aerial acrobatics by a large school of Peale's Dolphins who escorted us the entire 20nm length of the Strait.

We arrived in Ushuaia a week before Christmas, and Linda and John returned home to the UK for the festivities, leaving me in Argentina to prepare for the trip to Antarctica. Immediately after Christmas I was joined by my son Peter, Richard Close-Smith, Venetia

Kenney-Herbert and a young scientist, Ewan Edwards, who had worked for two years on Bird Island in South Georgia and was desperate for another Southern fix.
At 1000 on 1 January 2012 we slipped our lines in Ushuaia and headed east down the Beagle Channel, first clearing into Puerto Williams on the southern side of the Channel, before heading south, bound for Cape Horn and Antarctica. The Great Adventure was on.

Antarctica must be the dream of all sailors, but one of the reasons why so few amateur yachts go there (about half a dozen a year) is because it is quite difficult to get to. The conditions in Antarctica can be challenging enough but arguably the most dangerous part of the trip is passing Cape Horn and crossing the infamous 500nm Drake Passage - the windiest and roughest passage of water in the world. As Charles Darwin wrote in 1834 "One sight of such a coast is enough to make a landsman dream for a week about shipwrecks, peril and death." Landsmen and amateur yachtsmen alike.

But things are made easier these days with much more reliable weather forecasts and the ability to pick them up at sea, so weather windows can be identified and exploited. Nevertheless it is inevitable that you will get a slapping either going out or, more likely, coming back. So it is not without some trepidation that such an adventure starts.

By the standards of Drake crossings, ours was good, i.e. uneventful. The strongest winds we experienced were 45 knots for a few hours just south of Cape Horn, and the rest of the time it was 20-25 knots mainly from the southwest.

After three and a half days we were passing to our starboard Smith Island, rising out of the Southern Ocean like a cathedral 2000 metres high, the sentinel to the South Shetland Islands, and on our port side an enormous tabular iceberg that looked almost as large as Smith Island itself. The following morning we passed through Neptune's Bellows, the narrow entrance to Deception Island and dropped our anchor in Whalers Bay. We had arrived in Antarctica and it was a moment to celebrate. I took a bottle of champagne from its storage space in the bilge, but found we had to put it into the fridge to bring it *up* to a drinkable temperature.

Celebrating a safe arrival in Antarctica

Deception Island is the rim of a still active volcano which last erupted in 1969, the anchorage being inside the flooded caldera. Once the base for much of the Antarctic whaling fleet, the remains of the old whaling station made for some fascinating exploration, whilst Chinstrap Penguins patrolled the beach alongside sleeping seals.

Before we left Deception Island we motored the 10nm round the perimeter of the bay, stopping off at Pendulum Cove where we saw steam rising from geothermal springs on the beach. Time for a bath, and Peter and Ewan "volunteered" to strip off for a swim. They said that whilst they were floating in the top few inches of water it was luxurious, but the moment they put their legs down, it was a heart stopping 2°C.

We still had a further 100 miles to sail across the Bransfield Strait to the peninsula, a stretch of water that can be as treacherous as the Drake itself, and the following evening after a lively crossing and our first sightings of Humpback whales we arrived at Enterprise Island. This is the closest you get in Antarctica to a marina, insofar as you get to tie alongside something, in this case the hulk of the *Governoren*, an old whaling supply ship in whose hold at low water you can still see piles of harpoon heads.

After a day exploring the island by dinghy and in our recently acquired and utterly brilliant inflatable kayak, we motored most of the way to Cuverville island, 28nm further

south. One of the misconceptions of the Antarctic peninsula is that there is a constant gale blowing. Whilst the high plains of the Antarctic continent may be one of the windiest places on earth and the Drake passage may be the windiest stretch of water, the peninsula itself is not. You can get terrific storms there with 60 or 70 knots of wind, but much of the time there is no wind at all and most of the time you are under motor.

Cuverville Island was the first place where we had to man 24-hour ice watches to shove clear the large bergy bits that wandered around with wind and tide, threatening the boat. Cuverville is home to the largest Gentoo penguin colony on the peninsula. The crew went ashore to visit the colony, and whilst I remained on the boat on ice watch I saw four men in orange dayglo suits appear from behind a headland and wander along the beach towards me. It was completely surreal and I wouldn't have been more surprised if I had seen four Martians. And they were as surprised to see me as I was to see them. They were Chileans who had come in their rib from their base at Waterboat Point 12nm further south and we were invited to come and visit them when we were passing.

Gentoo penguin

Richard returned to the boat nursing a badly crushed finger which got smashed under a falling rock. Richard, being a hero, thought nothing of it but we got the wound cleaned and bandaged, my main concern being that it would become septic. However this was avoided with daily re-dressing of the wound. Luckily it was the only medical incident we had on the trip.

Richard has his crushed finger re-dressed

We departed Cuverville after a couple of days and as we left the bay, we were approached by a pair of Minke whales which escorted us for about one and a half hours as we meandered our way slowly through the ice. They slipped past the boat time and time again and led the way for us at the bow of the boat, occasionally rolling onto their sides, waving their flippers and taking a close look at us through their beady eyes. It was one of the most magical moments of our time in Antarctica.

Playing with the Minke whales - a magical moment

We arrived at Waterboat Point and tied into a small bay alongside the Chilean base. The peninsula is an archipelago of islands running alongside the steep sided mountains of the Antarctic mainland and Waterboat Point was one of only two places where we were able to step onto the mainland of the white continent. When we went to visit the Chileans, we were rather hoping to be offered luxuriating hot showers, but that hope was dashed when they told us that they were rationed to no more than 8 litres of water a day for washing and showering. Outside, the base is surrounded by a colony of nesting Gentoo penguins which included three very scarce pale leucistic penguins.

Our next stop was to be Port Lockroy but we were first going to visit the Argentine "Base Brown" in Paradise Harbour. As we approached the base, coming round a small peninsula we were delighted to see our good friends on the Swedish yacht *Dawnbreaker*. As we had not had an opportunity of filming *Mina*^{2} under sail in Antarctica, we dumped Peter and Ewan on *Dawnbreaker*'s deck weighed down with camera equipment; hoisted the sails and gave a couple of turns round the bay whilst the cameras whirled and clicked.

***Mina*^{2} in Paradise Harbour**

After the photo-opportunity, *Dawnbreaker* and *Mina*^{2} stood off Base Brown whilst the crews went ashore and up the steep hill behind the base which affords sensational views over Paradise Harbour, one of the most spectacular bays in Antarctica.

We were disappointed to find Base Brown unmanned this year, so with Argentine hospitality being off the agenda we made our way out of the bay to Port Lockroy. This large, well-sheltered bay is the only place on the peninsula where it is possible to lie to one's anchor without having to tie in. On Goudier Island in the entrance to the bay is the old British scientific station "Base A", restored and now run as a museum by the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust. Marking the centenary of Scott's Antarctic expedition, we were to present a tribute on behalf of the Royal Cruising Club to their former member Lawrence Oates who died so heroically on his way back from the South Pole.

So the following morning, whilst Ewan stayed on board on ice watch, the rest of us went ashore to be greeted by the UKAHT team where, standing in front of the historic Bransfield House, the presentation ceremony took place. The framed tribute now hangs on permanent display in their museum.

This year there was more ice on the peninsula than there has been for over 40 years. We had been hoping to get as far south as the Argentine Islands but to get there we had to pass through the Lemaire Channel, known as Kodak Valley for its astounding beauty. No vessel, not even the heavily built Antarctic cruise ships, had managed to penetrate the ice so far this season. But the ice can come and go very quickly depending on wind and tide conditions. We were here and we wouldn't be coming back any time soon so we had to give it a try. We set off, motoring in a very light wind. As we approached the entrance to

the Lemaire Channel, a bank of fog rolled in and, at the same time, we suddenly found ourselves surrounded by a sea of large growlers - they seemed to appear from nowhere. To add to the drama a one metre swell started rolling in from the Southern Ocean through a gap in the islands so that the large growlers were all sliding around and crashing into each other. It was all getting extremely dodgy. We decided to abort the expedition but we still had to get out of the threatening ice. If we got caught between two sliding growlers we could be in serious trouble. To add to the misery it was now snowing heavily and it was becoming increasingly difficult to see through my glasses. Visibility was now down to less than 100 metres as we peered through the veil of fog trying to see a lead wide enough to get through. It took about 20 minutes to extricate ourselves from the ice, one of the most tense 20 minutes of my sailing career.

Tense moments for the skipper negotiating ice in the fog and snow

During this last push south we passed through 65° south which combined with my trip to the Lofoten Islands in Arctic Norway in 2004 meant that *Mina*[2] and I had sailed through

135 degree of latitude, by no means a record when measured against the achievements of other members of the Club, but satisfying nevertheless.

But there is one record we might be able to claim. Having returned to Port Lockroy, the following day we awoke to find clear blue skies and a light but steady breeze. Doumer Island lies just to the southwest of Port Lockroy and is a five mile long and two and a half mile wide mountain range, nestling in the jaws of Wiencke Island. We decided to attempt to circumnavigate the island under sail alone via the Peltier Channel. It was a glorious gentle sail, passing the enormous Thunder Glacier on Wiencke Island and then tacking slowly back and forth up the channel surrounded by a spectacular range of mountain peaks. As nobody sails in Antarctica (either the wind is far too strong or, most of the time, there is no wind at all), I like to think that we were the first boat ever to sail round Doumier Island. It was bliss.

First circumnavigation of Doumer island under sail?

We had been in contact by email with the US scientific base at Palmer Station, 20nm to the west of Port Lockroy on Anvers Island and they had invited us to visit them the following day at 1400 hours. As we were on our way, we received an email from the station head advising us that the creek where we had hoped to tie up had an iceberg sitting in it and there was "quite a lot" of brash ice in the bay. We arrived to find that for half a mile off the base, the brash ice was so thick we could have walked across it to the base. I was paranoid about damaging our propeller on big blocks of ice so we lowered the dinghy (I had had an ice cage built for the outboard motor) which went ahead of *Mina*^{2} as we ploughed our way through the pack. In the event we decided not to tuck ourselves in the creek behind the iceberg as, should the conditions change, we might never be able to get out, so we went and anchored in a shallow bay about a mile away; tied the boat in

with a couple of long lines and then, leaving Venetia on board on ice watch, the rest of us went into the base by dinghy.

Brash ice and an iceberg en route to Palmer Station

We were flattered to see that on the base's flag pole, alongside the US and Antarctic flags, they had put up a British union flag in honour of our visit. We spent a fascinating couple of hours being shown around their facility.

After several days of very light winds, that night a 45 knot wind kicked in from the northwest. We had an anchor down and two lines from the stern tied to large rocks. The most windward of the two lines managed to pull itself right under the large rock to which it was attached and became free. We now had the full force of the gale on our beam, being held by just one rope. We scrambled the A-team (Ewan and Peter) who screamed off in the dinghy in extremely windy and choppy conditions and re-secured the loose line and laid another line as a precaution. But that wasn't the end of the drama. A whole line of very large bergy bits were now heading towards us at a rate. The first one grounded itself before it reached us; the second passed in front of us but the third, the largest of them all, about 2 1/2 metres high and weighing probably over 100 tons, passed between us and the shore straight on to our already bar taut lines. Again the A-team shot into action. On deck, just as the berg was reaching the first line, we freed sufficient slack to enable the boys to flick the rope over and along the berg. One down and two to go. The second line was also freed, flicked and re-secured but there was insufficient time to free the last line. The berg caught the line which I had to cut. It whiplashed free across the water, was retrieved by the boys in the dinghy and then made fast again to the boat. It was not a relaxed night and the wind continued to blow hard throughout the following day.

A Leopard seal - killer of Antarctica - shows its teeth

But with the passing of this weather system, a window appeared which gave us a good opportunity to get back across the Drake. So the moment the wind abated we set sail, passing through the beautiful Melchior Islands and, with a tear in my eye, headed NNW out into the Southern Ocean.

Our time in Antarctica had been unforgettable. No matter how many books you read, photographs you see or Attenborough documentaries you watch, this unique environment defies description. It is a place you have to visit yourself, preferably on a small boat and, ideally, on one's own small boat. It is a place you have to see, to hear and to *feel* : the roars of avalanches thundering down the steep mountains; the groans of the glaciers as they grind their way millimeter by millimeter down to the sea and the cracks like artillery fire as enormous slabs of ice calve off the ice walls to create another iceberg. The intimate contact we had with the extraordinary wildlife was an awe-inspiring and humbling experience we will never forget. And there is no doubt that the difficulties of getting here and the consequent isolation of the place added to the sense of adventure. But to retain these memories, first we had to get back …

The first two days of our return across the Drake was good, with the F7 wind coming from the WSW which enabled us to put in a bit of westing to the point where we were technically in the Pacific ocean. There, the wind died, veered to the northwest and filled in again, blowing F8-9 with us heading NNE towards Cape Horn. We rounded Cape

Horn in the sort of conditions that Cape Horn should be rounded - in a screaming F10 50 knot wind and big seas. But as it was in the middle of the night we saw nothing of the iconic rock apart from its light blinking through the driving rain and spray. But it wasn't a place you wanted to hang around and wait until dawn. Having passed the Horn we then had to head up west of north into the still-strengthening wind and make our way through the channels. But progress was murderously slow, motor sailing into the wind which by now had increased to 55 knots, managing to make less than 3 knots over the ground. We decided to dive into one of the very few anchorages in the area about 10nm north of the Horn. It was still pitch dark and even with a mega torch visibility was nil in the driving rain. We nervously edged into the bay under radar and depth sounder alone. We judged as best we could when we were in the middle of bay and in seven metres of water let out almost all of our 100 metre chain. I stood anchor watch for what remained of the night and at daybreak was relieved to find ourselves out of the kelp and away from the rocks. The storm continued to blow for another 24 hours and, once abated, we weighed anchor and made our way 100nm back to Puerto Williams before heading up the Beagle Channel to our final destination of Ushuaia. We had made it safely back and were greeted on the dockside by a much relieved Downstairs Skipper, Maria, who had been convinced that during this expedition she was going to lose not only her husband but her son as well.

An enthusiastic welcome home!

After the Antarctic one might think that anything to follow would be a massive anticlimax, but how wrong can one be. Maria and I were to continue the cruise with six weeks exploring the Chilean fjords and channels of Tierra Del Fuego with friends,

together with our daughter Selina. To be honest, I'd been so focussed on the Antarctica trip that I really hadn't done any research on the channels at all. And what a fantastic surprise it was. The Beagle Channel splits into two just west of Ushuaia with the islands on each side consisting of mountainous ranges and deeply indented fjords with the most stunning glaciers. The hiking in the hills is world class and, with an abundance of whales, dolphins, seals, beavers and a much wider variety of birds than on Antarctica, it turned out to be an absolute paradise of magical anchorages and long walks. It really must be one of the best - if not *the* best - cruising grounds in the world.

***Mina*^{2} (if you can spot her) at anchor in Estero Coloane, Tierra Del Fuego**

Apart from an endless succession of absolutely spectacular anchorages, there were two particularly notable incidents. One morning we awoke to find *Mina*^{2} surrounded by orange balls of thousands of krill moving around the boat. These shrimp like creatures are the diet of the baleen whales. When we ventured out into the Beagle Channel we found it positively stuffed with Sei whales. At up to 64 feet in length and weighing in at 28 tons they are the third largest specie of whale in the world. We were surrounded by them, and we could see their blows miles up the channel in both directions. There must have been hundreds of them and it was an awe-inspiring sight.

The other excitement was when we were sailing up the Beagle Channel and were just about to disappear into a steep fjord when the VHF radio crackled into life. It was an extremely weak signal but it started off with the chilling words "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday …". The transmission was so broken that we neither picked up the name of the vessel, nor her position, but we understood it to be a yacht which had lost its rudder and was heading for the rocks. After a bit of to-ing and fro-ing on the radio we eventually established that it was John Williams, alone aboard his tiny 27 feet, 35-year old boat

Tramp - by far the smallest boat in the region - and which John had sailed single-handed from Norway. He was about 10nm away. No one else had picked up his call in this isolated region. We had a strong following wind and with all sails set and the engine going flat out we raced towards *Tramp*'s position. After about one hour we saw a tiny speck in the distance underneath the towering rocks of Isla Gordon. Her position was confirmed when we saw a red flare going up. We reached her in the nick of time, got a line to her and then towed her across the mercifully, and unusually, calm(ish) Channel into a fjord, inside of which *Tramp* would be well protected.

Towing John and *Tramp* to safety

A few days later I had to say goodbye to the DS whilst Andrew, the proficient son of friends of ours, and I were joined by Lawrence and Tom, stalwarts of *Mina*^{2}'s long passages. We took *Mina*^{2} 2,700nm up the South Atlantic to Brazil to overwinter her, with a pit-stop of a few days in Buenos Aires on the way. Opposite the Falkland Islands on our way north we were caught up by the same sort of cold front that had caused us so much grief on our way south, the big difference being that this time the wind was a lot less strong at 30-40 knots, gusting 50 knots and, more significantly, was from behind us. We hitched a lift on the front and enjoyed a fantastic helter-skelter roller-coaster sleigh ride up the South Atlantic managing day after day of 180 to 190 miles a day. Just brilliant. The final passage from Buenos Aires to Angra Dos Reis, in between Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo, was as frustrating as the first passage was exhilarating with a succession of head winds and calms but eventually, on 16 April, we were snugged down in the tranquil Marina Bracuhy and putting *Mina*^{2} to bed for the austral winter.

Our Southern Cruise was the culmination of many years dreaming, and had taken three years of planning and preparation. It was to push the boundaries of skipper, crew and *Mina*^{2} to the limits in some of the most remote and extreme cruising grounds in the world. But, in so doing, we experienced rewards that we never dreamed possible. This was truly the greatest adventure of my lifetime.