

Come out TO PLAY

Penguins, orcas and paradise islands: we talk to Captain Winston Joyce-Clarke about *Big Fish's* epic round-the-world trip

Words Charlotte Bailey



Big Fish owner Richard Beattie diving in Cocos Island

“**T**here’ll always be owners in the yachting world who have a thirst for adventure,” says *Big Fish’s* captain, Winston Joyce-Clarke. “My hope is that this project encourages people to think about their original passion for boating and exploring and travel to destinations they might have considered a bit too far for the average boat.”

Joyce-Clarke is between charters after an epic 16-month voyage around the world, during which he navigated the 45-metre expedition yacht through waters that would challenge much bigger boats. For the Aquos Yachts team, project *Big Fish* was about more than taking guests to extraordinary destinations. Captain Joyce-Clarke was involved in the early stages of planning, when he sat down with 37 South’s Allan Jouning and Jim Gilbert, commercial director for Aquos Yachts. “We thought if we could get a 45-metre boat to do what most people expect from heavily constructed 80-metre expedition boats, we’d be setting a new precedent for what can be done with a relatively small boat and a small crew.”

And they have. *Big Fish’s* maiden voyage saw the yacht cross the South Pacific, navigate a portion of the Amazon and experience the wilds of Antarctica.

“Antarctica was the pinnacle of our achievement,” says Joyce-Clarke (pictured right). “For a small motor yacht like *Big Fish* to be able to do a trip like that is remarkable.”



Although in general, according to Joyce-Clarke, he and his crew were “extremely lucky” when it came to the weather and conditions, difficult situations did inevitably arise. “Going down the Magellan Strait, we had 80 knots of wind one night,” he says. “By the time we had to cross the Drake Passage we had a two-day weather window, so that was sufficient time to be able to go across the strait, but it would have been a true challenge if we’d had to be on a schedule, like the commercial boats that operate down there. You can see video footage of the 88-metre cruise ship *Clelia II* – she got her starboard bridge windows blown out going across the strait before we got there.”

“Our experience goes as far as a blizzard, a horrendous three-day front that came across. We stopped for three days in Antarctica before going around the back of the front and heading up towards Cape Horn, where we arrived in glass-flat conditions.” Such weather windows, he adds, are key to a successful



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circumnavigation, as is knowing your – and your yacht’s – limits. “It’s the practicality of getting to know the boat and understanding the limitations of what you can do. It’s not going to go through absolutely everything. As far as the challenge of taking a boat around the planet goes, I think if you do it sensibly, without trying to beat the odds and not travelling out of season, you can do it quite reasonably.”

It helps, of course, that *Big Fish* is well equipped for that challenge. Unlike yachts converted from tugs or commercial vessels, she was conceived and designed as an expedition yacht built for long-distance travel. She only consumes 3½ tonnes of fuel per day: compare this to the captain’s last boat, a 60-metre consuming more than three times that. That it is ecologically (and, in some ways, economically) more sound than many is one of the boat’s defining traits: her granite decks remain unique in the superyachting world. Saving in some areas has been useful, as the ancillary costs for long voyages compensate, according to Joyce-Clark. “You’ve got tons of hours on your generators, on your mains. We’ve got around 4,500 hours on our main engines in 18 months. Most second-hand boats – six or seven years old – probably have half that number of engine hours.”

In addition, he says, the long voyages mean crew turnaround is high. “The crew that went down to Antarctica with me (who are still on board) didn’t have a day off in three months,” he says. “In the modern world of yachting, how do you compensate for that? From an operator’s perspective, I’ve seen a lot more people required for only a 45-metre boat.” Extreme conditions and not-often-chartered waters also require specialists to come on board. “It’s almost like having a racing sailboat team,” says Joyce-Clark. “You’re obviously going to need people who are going to assist with local knowledge in different areas. For example, you can’t go below 60° South without an ice pilot.”

In terms of marketing, *Big Fish* operates differently from most yachts. Instead of the guests choosing the destination, the operators plan it and invite guests to join them. “The idea is that we end up in a place that’s of interest, and we generate the concept of ‘come and join us on our travels with a cruise around the planet’. It’s different.”

A risky strategy it may be, but it works. The guest experience is vastly different from the usual charter experience in the Caribbean or Med. So what would the captain recommend to explorer yacht novices? “If you had two weeks in which to experience yachting for the



Top: The owner’s guests and crew try out the water toys in Marstrand, Sweden.
Middle: Breakfast on *Big Fish*’s sundeck.
Above: Orcas in the Gerlache Strait.



“You can anchor in LAGOONS that people DREAM about as the perfect charter anchorage”



Top: A spectacular Antarctic sunset.
Middle: The cruise offered the opportunity to snorkel with penguins.
Above: A curious visitor checks out the Zodiac.

first time in your life, I’m definitely on the sales pitch for the South Pacific,” says the captain. “I’ve been to French Polynesia a number of times and it’s always a highlight of travelling in the Pacific to be able to go anywhere around the Marquesas. They genuinely end up being the same as the postcards: there’s no disillusionment. The South Pacific has that mystery that people have been writing about for decades. You can anchor in bays and lagoons that people dream about as the perfect image of a charter anchorage.”

And if you’re looking for somewhere equally enchanting but slightly less tropical, Antarctica is Joyce-Clarke’s favourite place. “I think it’s a highlight of any cruising I’ve ever done,” he says, adding that the perfect day in Antarctica would be on board in the Lemaire Channel, with guests sitting in the hot-tub under blue skies, as leopard seals pop up and the ice closes in.

“The majority of people cruising in ice have done something like Alaska, and you just can’t compare them. Antarctica is a vast wilderness of ice and even the concept of a glacier becomes surreal: everything’s a glacier. In terms of rugged beauty, it really is exquisite. We went to beaches and snorkelled underwater with penguins, an incredible experience. Walking around on

land, the birdlife is right up close – you don’t even need a long lens to photograph it. Once, a pod of orcas used the boat as a practice range, swimming around it like we were all part of the same environment. That was pretty amazing! In the commercial world there are people who spend their lives travelling between the Arctic and the Antarctic, and it’s easy to see why they are so smitten with it. These places are really, stunningly beautiful.”

So what’s next for *Big Fish*, now at 44,000 miles? “The programme so far is Panama in January, then through Costa Rica, Ecuador, possibly a stop in the Galapagos, definitely a stop off in the Marqueses,” says Joyce-Clarke. “We’ll be at the two-year mark by May, so we’ll take it back down to New Zealand for some service work, then up to Fiji and the Coral Sea.”

For the crew as well as the guests, being on board is an opportunity to see the world from a unique perspective, and, says Joyce-Clarke, their enthusiasm is infectious. “There’s nothing more fun than being able to share with people the experience of what we’re getting out of these amazing places,” he says. And after the past year, is he excited about cruising again? “It’s the reason that life exists, isn’t it?” **SYW**
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