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## THE DIVING ISSUE



CRUISING ANTARCTICA | SOUTH AMERICA GUIDE  
YACHTING PHILANTHROPY

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# BOTTOM OF THE GLOBE

WORDS CATH CARLSEN  
PICTURES CATH CARLSEN,  
WINSTON JOYCE-CLARKE &  
BIG FISH/AQUOS YACHTS

A MERE HANDFUL OF YACHTS HAVE MADE IT DOWN TO THE DEPTHS OF THE ANTARCTIC TO EXPLORE THE UNIQUE AND SOLITARY LANDSCAPE, INCLUDING M/Y *BIG FISH*, WHICH MADE HER WAY DOWN FOR A VERY WHITE CHRISTMAS LAST YEAR.

The opportunity to explore the South Shetland Islands was a dream come true for any yachting enthusiast. Just six months earlier, owner Richard Beattie was sharing *Big Fish's* maiden voyage with the crew back in New Zealand. Mentioning Antarctica casually in conversation instantly conjured up thoughts of isolation, serene beauty, a challenging environment and diverse marine life. It didn't resonate back then that *Big Fish* would definitely make the voyage down to the bottom of the globe.

Equipped with a naturalist, ice pilot and twice the normal provisions on order, we landed at King George Island. Known as the "International Arrivals" island because of its tiny airport overlooking a Russian Orthodox church. The small commonwealth of research stations including China, Chile, Ecuador, South Korea, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Poland, Russia and Uruguay certainly added credibility to its nickname.



Spotting the first iceberg. That's when it became a reality. After two-and-a-half days cruising down highway Drake Passage, the freezing breeze in our hair, we had crossed the border. This iceberg protruding out of the ocean was our official welcome sign to Antarctica.

Comforts of normal life had received their goodbyes back in Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego. Everyone had called home wishing friends and family a two-week-premature merry Christmas and happy New Year. Over the next month, at the bottom of the world, our three different groups of guests would be our "paperboys", bringing news from the outside world.



Planning the trip had been no walk in the park for Captain Winston Joyce-Clarke and the entire *Big Fish* crew. Extra safety drills; the long shopping list of additional clothing and equipment (lest we forget the long johns); 24-hour navigation; testing the vessel's heating system and ensuring the watermakers wouldn't freeze over; then, lastly, keeping food fresh. These all had to be carefully considered. >

> A landscape of white was ever present. Elephant seals outstretched on a giant 'berg as *Big Fish* meandered past to its next destination; not your typical Amalfi Coast backdrop. Our itinerary slowly moved into an odd "milk run". The lifestyle of daily shore excursions led by our naturalist, Kara, to explore the flora, fauna and meet some of the scientists who call Antarctica home for over four months in summer. The Brit group welcomed our guests to their home at Port Lockery on Goudier Island, with questions to answer and stories to share on spending summer down in Antarctica. Life for a researcher back in 1944 at Port Lockery was carefully preserved in the museum. In return for their hospitality, invitations for a cocktail and warm shower were extended to the Brits and very gratefully accepted.



It would still be daylight outside, yet the clock read 4am; if you hadn't checked your watch you could have easily guessed it was 2pm. There were clear skies and on the odd occasion you could see the moon. Inquisitive guests wanted to stay up and see if it ever grew dark outside. The dead lights were our saviour, not just from a safety point of view but a reassurance between day and night and time for bed.

I won't lie; life in Antarctica did have its challenges. Rioting in Chile brought closure to the public airport in Punta Arenas. Starting a charter with no fresh provisions was a challenge Chef Jonathan "JT" Tubby never anticipated. But our guests stressed that they were happy to eat anything, as it didn't matter, they were just thrilled to be in Antarctica. By day five fresh produce was out. The words pasta and rice were stuck on everyone's lips. Until the saving grace, we encountered an expedition ship heading back for the mainland of Ushuaia and the considerate captain donated all leftover produce (in return for some of our NZ wine) so *Big Fish* could carry on its voyage.

But a trip lacking in fresh produce was easily forgotten with the abundance of marine life. Daily calls on the radio from Deckhand Kim Bernard: "Humpback whales! Starboard aft!" Then "Five orcas port side midship!" Had the boat rocking and rolling from side to side as Canon long-lensed cameras were snatched from their cases mid-rush to capture the once-in-a-lifetime photo. >





> In true *Big Fish* style, our guests had to receive the full “Antarctica experience”: launching into minus-two-degree water for a photo with an iceberg as a backdrop, hearing the screams of fright at the burst of cold just as the camera clicked and then being able to say you’ve done a Polar Plunge. All followed by mulled wine, a growing-cold sausage and a refreshing trickle of snow (this was how to experience a barbecue in the height of an Antarctic summer) or sharing a Dirty Martini shaken with iceberg ice. It was all part of the *Big Fish* experience.

CW from above: *Big Fish* plays hide and seek in the ice; fooling around on the aft deck; the brave, including Cath, take the Polar Plunge; immersion suits provide a little protection for the less steely nerved.



For many of the Antipodean crew, this was our first white Christmas, spent in a location as magical as it was challenging. But to say that *Big Fish* did it – a credit to the entire crew that we completed a voyage down to the bottom of the globe – that was the most rewarding. >

**Cath Carlsen** is ex-chief stewardess of M/Y *Big Fish*. She is now a full-time Londoner on her next adventure.

## › TCR SPOKE WITH *BIG FISH*'S CAPTAIN WINSTON JOYCE-CLARKE ABOUT THE PLANNING, EXECUTION AND BEHIND-THE-SCENES TEAMS INVOLVED WITH THE YACHT'S ANTARCTIC TRIP

### What is the most important preparation for an Antarctica trip?

It's the human element more than anything else, and knowing your yacht inside out; you need to have a crew and a boat that are in synch. The crew needs to be confident with the vessel they are on, with each other and with their abilities to tackle anything that comes their way. Only 15 to 20 per cent of Antarctica is charted, so most of the navigation you encounter is old school, without anything more than radar, soundings and charts. If you rely on your GPS and electronic charts then you are going to be in trouble. The reality is that you are back to dead reckoning and basic navigation relatively quickly, plus the inclement weather. Everything you are used to, 100% weather reporting and accurate charts, does not exist.

### How dependent on weather and other external factors were you?

The only way you can make it work, in taking a 45-metre boat south of Cape Horn, is if you are absolutely 100 per cent lucky with the weather, which we were. There's a large proportion of it that you can prepare for, but then there's a huge element of good fortune when it comes to conditions. If you see the video footage of *Clelia II*, an 88-metre cruise ship that had her bridge windows knocked out a couple

of weeks before we arrived, you can see the sort of summer weather that can be encountered in the Antarctic. None of this is to be taken lightly. We managed to slip through the eye of the needle in terms of the frontal systems passing by. We were very fortunate.

**The logistics must be complex, too?** All *Big Fish* had done before she got there was one Pacific crossing and half a circumnavigation of South America. I couldn't have done the trip without Rob and Tim of EYOS Expeditions assisting us with logistics, permitting rights and lending us the right personnel. At this point, I could make all the preparations myself if I had a year to plan, but we were coming off the starting blocks with a brand new vessel, trying to do as much as we could with her before the first year was through. Most vessels don't do their sea trials down in Antarctica! The reality is, regardless of how capable your vessel may be, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) dictates that the vessel has to comply with the flag regulations of the skipper onboard. I had to be passed by the British branch of the administration within IAATO to be able to get the vessel to Antarctica and that means having

the logistical support and back up of a company that has already done circumnavigations of Antarctica and the Arctic. We wouldn't have been able to get the paperwork through to start with without having the support of a reputable company like EYOS. Maybe if we had done it a month later we would have come unglued and damaged our equipment, but as far as having a good nav team, having good support from the EYOS team, having an ice pilot like Uli Demel. Our trip hugely benefitted from having Uli, he was amazing, really adaptive and accommodating, considering he was comparatively on a smaller yacht. Good preparation put us in the right place at the right time and we had a wonderful experience out of it.

**How did you deal with guest expectations on a trip with so much red tape?** In conditions like Antarctica's, they don't allow people to windsurf, paddle board and all the watersports that we are used to be doing onboard a yacht, the things that clients expect to be able to do. The restrictions are there because IAATO doesn't want to lose visitors; they are keen to make sure they don't have to mount an enormous rescue operation. So it's hard in terms of client expectations to tell them that they cannot do the things they would be used to doing somewhere else, like the Bahamas. But there were days when we were down there when the weather was crystal clear and perfect where it would have been great to be able to try out kayaking or paddle boarding. There is an understanding that you



have to come to with your clients that you are acting in their own interests of safety. It is very difficult to acquire permits. One of the trips we had tried to put together, which actually didn't come to fruition, was for a group of divers. Even with extensive dive experience on the part of those to come down, they couldn't give us enough background history in ice diving or diving in extreme cold conditions for IAATO's requirements. They had tonnes of diving experience all around the world but no real ice diving experience.

### What was the highlight for you?

On the third trip, the clients had an unbelievable weather break. We were iced into the Lamare Channel one day, in emerald blue skies with crystal clear ice and leopard seals surrounding the yacht, sitting, waiting to be pushed back into the open water

again. That was the most amazing morning we spent down there.

**Would you cruise in the Antarctic again, and if so, what would you do differently?** I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Operating in places like this is completely addictive, as far as wildlife goes, the experience of being in an extreme environment. There are only so many palm trees that you can count along a perfect shoreline. The only thing I would change is

that I would make sure that we spent longer in Antarctica. We saw 2,400 miles of the Antarctic Peninsula in six weeks and we had a good insight into the place. But there were a lot of times when all you had to was sit still and let Antarctica come to you, absorbing your surroundings.

**For an extended version of Captain Joyce-Clarke's interview, visit [thecrewreport.com/bigfish](http://thecrewreport.com/bigfish)**

## TIM SOPER, EYOS EXPEDITIONS ON PERMITS

All activities in Antarctica including science, exploration and private travel must be approved and permitted through the Antarctic Treaty System (ats.aq). Any yacht, commercial or private, visiting the Antarctic must obtain the correct permits for both the vessel and the activities to be undertaken (landings, skiing, scuba diving, tender cruises etc). This can be a lengthy process so applications should be started well ahead of a planned voyage. Companies such as EYOS Expeditions can guide you through the process or make the application on your behalf.



## > HIGHLIGHTS OF ANTARCTICA

WORDS **TIM SOPER**

A typical voyage to the Antarctic Peninsula takes about two weeks, but longer itineraries over three weeks may also visit the Southern Ocean islands of South Georgia and the Falklands, home to huge colonies of king penguins and albatross. For those with less time, or who would prefer to avoid the open ocean crossing, the voyage can be shortened to seven to 10 days by

chartering an aircraft to meet the yacht in the Antarctic. Because of its protected status, advance permission is required to visit the Antarctic and special conservation and pollution-prevention measures must be adhered to. Any vessel considering a voyage here must ensure it is well prepared for the special challenges presented by this extreme environment.

### ANTARCTIC SOUND & THE WEDDELL SEA

Known as Iceberg Alley, Antarctic Sound is at the very north-eastern point of the Antarctic Peninsula, where large tabular icebergs drift north from the Weddell Sea. Land and visit Adelié penguin colonies at Paulet Island, Brown Bluff, Devil Island or elsewhere in the area.

### THE SOUTH SHETLAND ISLANDS

As well as King George Island, where guests embark, an ideal itinerary will take in other islands. These islands are the very northern extent of Antarctica, on the edge of the Drake Passage, and are rich in wildlife. Visit penguin colonies and hope

to find seals and seabirds around the islands. If weather conditions permit, guests can take the overnight passage to Elephant Island, where Sir Ernest Shackleton's Endurance expedition awaited rescue.

### DECEPTION ISLAND

Deception Island is the flooded caldera of a volcano, which last erupted in the 70s. As well as fascinating geology and history, the island is home to one of the largest chinstrap penguin colonies. This is also the warmest place to take a swim in Antarctic seas, as the waters are slightly warmed by the hot rocks below.

### THE DANCO COAST & GERLACHE STRAIT

On the western side of the Antarctic Peninsula, spend several days exploring the numerous islands and channels of this breathtakingly scenic area. On the islands visit gentoo penguin colonies and an active scientific research station. Cruise among icebergs with the Zodiacs, and pass immense glaciers and ice cliffs. Sites that can be visited include: Paradise Bay, The Errera Channel, Neko Harbour, Port Lockroy, Cuverville Island, The Lemaire Channel, Petermann Island, Booth Island, Pleneau Island and the Penola Strait.

**ICR**

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