

THE TRAVERSE OF SOUTH GEORGIA, 1999

by Grant Dixon



Captain Cook landed and claimed the sub-antarctic island of South Georgia for Britain in 1775, but he didn't think much of the place:

"The wild rocks raised their lofty summits till they were lost in the clouds and the valleys lay buried in everlasting snow. Lands doomed by nature to perpetual frigidness, never to feel the warmth of the sun's rays, whose horrible and savage aspect I have not words to describe."

In contrast, Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, who died and was buried there in 1922, is alleged to have considered that, "if God ever took a holiday he'd go to South Georgia". I'm firmly in the Shackleton camp, so when a message on my answering machine from Sydney-based Angus Finney proposed a trip to attempt a traverse of South Georgia last year I jumped at the opportunity.

South Georgia is the largest and most rugged of the sub-antarctic islands. It is located about 2000 kilometres east of Cape Horn, in the cold waters south of the Antarctic Convergence. The island is about 180 kilometres long and between 7 and 40 kilometres in width. Two mountain ranges comprise the spine of the island. Thirteen peaks exceed 2200m in elevation with Mt Paget (2934m) being the highest. More than half the island is covered by permanent snow and ice and many of the more than 100 glaciers descending to sea level.



The climate is cold, wet and windy, but the coastal areas are a haven for wildlife. Large colonies of King penguins, with their large size and orange throat, are the most spectacular animal on South Georgia, forming huge colonies. Elephant seals, including blubbery three-tonne bulls fighting for their harems, cows with

dark, big-eyed pups, and the sausage-like weaners occupy the beaches in spring and early summer. Antarctic fur seals, fast, agile and aggressive, are also claiming territories at that time. Large numbers of seabirds; albatross and petrels being the most prominent, breed on the island and cruise the adjacent seas.

Shackleton, with companions Frank Worsley and Tom Crean, was responsible for the first interior visitation of South Georgia, in 1916. However exploration was probably not high in their priorities as they crossed the island in an epic 36 hour trek, having just sailed for 17 days in an open boat from Elephant Island, to fetch help for the rest of their party stranded in Antarctica.

Other parts of the interior have been explored since, with Duncan Carse's four survey expeditions during 1951-57 particularly notable (the current map is still based on this work). Several of the major peaks have also been ascended by mountaineering expeditions. But nobody had previously attempted a traverse of the 180 kilometre long island, which seemed a great way to see the place.

The traverse was undertaken by Australians Angus Finney, Jay Watson and myself, and Englishman Pat Lurcock (almost a South Georgia local, given he had the enviable job of working out of South Georgia as Marine Officer for seven years). But the trip really started long before we set foot on South Georgia. Application to the Falklands Islands government for permission to attempt the traverse, preparation of the yacht Tooluka in Australia, in which we sailed to South Georgia, packing of food and equipment which would be stowed on the yacht and various planning all commenced months previously.

Not the least of the pre-traverse component was sailing Tooluka from Australia to South Georgia. Owner/skipper Roger Wallis and Jay took a long 77 days to cross the Southern Ocean to Tierra del Fuego, experiencing uncharacteristic easterlies and some very rough weather en route. The remainder of the group met the yacht in Ushuaia for a further 12 days at sea before finally reaching South Georgia.

We had chosen spring for our traverse attempt as the best compromise between available daylight and extensive snow cover, the latter facilitating efficient travel using skis and minimising crevasse problems on the glaciers, or so we hoped. We also hoped that it would be early enough to avoid confrontations with territorial male Fur seals, which take over the beaches by early summer

I discovered I was not a great sailor soon after we left the relatively sheltered Beagle Channel. Nevertheless I had recovered by the time the first icebergs appeared on the horizon and a couple of Fin whales, rather larger than the 14 metre yacht and only metres away, kept us company for half an hour, a highlight of the voyage. Icebergs became so numerous we were forced to heave to at night to avoid collisions, but we finally made landfall on 8th October.

The following day we sailed into King Edward Cove to unpack the yacht and sort our gear for the traverse. The tiny cluster of buildings is the only settlement on South Georgia and the residence of a very small garrison, a hangover from the 1982 Falklands war. Soon after we arrived we were invited to the officers' mess for dinner - very civilised!

Across the bay lay the rusting ruins of Grytviken, South Georgia's first whaling station, established by the Norwegian Larsen in 1904. Six others were subsequently built, but all were essentially closed by 1932. Grytviken hung on until finally closing in the early 1960s.



Several days later we landed at Elsehul, a steep-sided inlet at the northwestern end of South Georgia. This end of the island is quite rugged, relatively low elevation and free of glaciers. Hence we undertook this section on foot, utilising snowshoes and crampons where necessary. We started by climbing up into the wet mist above Elsehul, then scrambled along precipitous, rime-encrusted Paryadin Ridge until we reached an isolated summit (at least there was no more up). Here we turned southeastward to commence our traverse.

This part of South Georgia is characterised by cloudy wet weather, and the often poor visibility and limited detail on the available map resulted in a number of false leads being followed and some backtracking during the first few days. This was a bit demoralising at the time, particularly given our heavy packs and muscles weak from the inactive time at sea.

It took six days to reach Salisbury Plain and the route was certainly varied. We traversed tussock, snow and beaches. We scouted steep bluffs, snow-covered inland, black and rotten on the coast, searching for routes down. We crossed narrow snow ridges and broad glaciers, becoming temporarily lost in a



crevasse field in the mist on one occasion. We traversed slimy boulders between cliff and sea, where I recall slipping and my heavy pack propelling me face first into a rock pool.

Several kilometres of beach walking, passing Elephant seals with pups, King penguins and glittering stranded ice fragments,

finally brought us to a broad, snow-covered outwash plain. Salisbury Plain is one of the largest King penguin rookeries on South Georgia and my first experience of such a spectacle. Thousands of dark dots were scattered across the snowy plain each comprising individual birds.

Beyond Salisbury Plain the glaciers become more extensive and largely interlinked. It was therefore possible to travel these ice highways using skis, with two of us hauling lightweight sleds. Ten days food was carried for this section as we envisaged that being pinned down by poor weather was rather likely, given our proposed route traversed glaciers and icefields along the spine of South Georgia. However two days of stunningly clear weather, and long hours on the move to make use of it, allowed us to make it to our next cache site at the ruined Husvik whaling station in only three days.

We crossed the country above Shackleton Gap under clear blue skies below rime-encrusted peaks, sea mist wafting down King Haakon Bay far below. More than 83 years before Shackleton and his five men had finally landed down there. The three weakest then sheltered under the upturned whale boat while Shackleton, with the two others, made their dash for Stromness whaling station and rescue.

Late the following day, as we pushed on across the high and exposed Kohl-Larsen Plateau, lenticular clouds started to form over the Alladyce Range to the south, harbingers of the rather unpleasant third day's weather. Thigh muscles screamed as we struggled to edge our skis and slow our wind-driven descent of the Neumayer Glacier, with the mist and flat lighting making it impossible to gauge the condition of the ice and snow glacier surface. Frequently one of us would trip, or be blown, to the ground. Then, it would be a struggle to get upright again before the others hurtled out of sight into the mist.

We made it to Husvik, but not before having to negotiate a crevasse field to get off the glacier, and rested in the shelter of an old British Antarctic Survey hut. This was particularly welcome because, that night at King Edward Point, now only 20 kilometres away (as the petrel flies), the wind gusts exceeded 80 knots - not a pleasant night for tenting on the Neumayer Glacier.

The section from Husvik back to Grytviken crossed varied terrain and was undertaken partly on foot and partly using skis. We crossed the lower Neumayer Glacier, which involved route finding through crevassed and broken terrain, then Angus and I climbed a ridge overlooking the Geikie Glacier. En route we first



experienced South Georgia's fearsome winds. Out of nowhere would come a blast capable of blowing us away if we didn't instantly drop to the ground, hunched over ice axes driven into the snow, and all the while being peppered with ice pellets. But as suddenly as they had appeared these winds ceased, and the clouds rose like a curtain to reveal the magnificent view of the Geikie Glacier tumbling into the green waters of Mercer Bay far below with a backdrop of icy peaks rising to 2000 metres.

The Geikie Glacier had only been crossed once previously, in 1954, and the section crossed had since disappeared as the glacier retreated. We therefore expected it might be the crux of our traverse. However above the terminal icefall a series of terraces and gullies seemed to provide a way through the areas of crevasses and seracs to a snow gully which would then provide access to the ridge above the Lyell Glacier, our route back to the coast. This turned out to be the case, but the coastal traverse to reach the glacier proved rather more challenging.

We traversed a beach, then rock ledges virtually at sea level before a bluff forced us high above the sea. I elected to continue, scrambling nervously on steep rock with pack and skis before descending again with some difficulty. The others retreated, stripped and took to the water, emerging rather blue after several waist-deep wades.

From the Lyell Glacier, we crossed wet tussocky terrain then climbed to a low pass, looking forward to the ski descent beyond. But deep, wet snow rendered the descent to Grytviken distinctly unstylish.

After a day resting and restocking, we headed around the foreshore cobbles towards Moraine Fjord, giving the dozing Elephant seals as wide a berth as possible and fording a fast-flowing stream. The beach eventually narrowed, giving way to scrambling on steep scree and over unstable coastal bluffs. A highlight of this section was an encounter with a Light-mantled sooty albatross. This beautiful dark bird gazed inquiringly at me as I popped over the edge of its nesting ledge.

The Hamberg and Harker Glaciers reach the sea at the head of the Moraine Fjord and these turned out to be the most difficult glacier crossings of the trip. The latter in particular was very broken and

involved much route finding amongst seracs and crevasses whilst roped together. The problems were accentuated because we tackled this glacier rather tired and wet due to the previous evening's adventures, and in heavy rain, which together somewhat reduced the enjoyment value.

The previous evening incredibly strong, gusty winds roared down the adjacent glaciers as we attempted to set up camp, producing spectacular spray clouds and williwaws on the waters of the nearby fjord. They also blew away one of our erected tents, plucking it from the snow and carrying it into the depths of the Harker Glacier. We thus spent a rather cramped and damp night in the remaining tent.

After the glacier crossing, and a fortuitously fine day drying out, we undertook a long one-day push to reach our St Andrews Bay cache, and the spare tent. This involved a long ski up the Nordenskjold and down the Heaney Glaciers, and encounters with the strangely-warm fohn winds.

We plodded up the Nordenskjold Glacier separately, lost in our own thoughts. I looked ahead to see Angus inexplicably fall over. Jay, who was a little behind him, collapsed soon after. I skied on, wondering what they were playing at, until I too was flattened by an incredibly strong warm blast. This continued repeatedly, with us struggling to our skis and attempting to make some forward progress, whilst attempting to be instantly ready to brace with our stocks (usually unsuccessfully) at each gust.

The largest King penguin rookery in the world is sandwiched between the grey sand beach and the



Cook Glacier moraine at St Andrews Bay. It is a magnificent setting, the orange-necked penguins and their podgy brown chicks forming a constantly-moving mass before a backdrop of glaciers and snowy peaks. On the beach, the Elephant seal pups had been weaned by now so the battle-scarred bulls spent their time watching over,

and fighting to retain, their harems.

The final section of the traverse, from St Andrews Bay, travelled through the most remote part of South Georgia, much of it on the southwestern side of the Salvesen Range. This section involved traversing a series of large interlinked glaciers - the Cook, Webb, Ross, Brogger, Spencely, Novosilski, Graae and Phillipi Glaciers. It was therefore possible to tow sleds and carry plenty of food and equipment, as weather delays seemed likely.

In the event, we ended up covering extensive sections in near white out conditions, skiing on a compass bearing with dark shadows occasionally looming in the mist identified as various peaks or bluffs on our small scale map, but lost virtually no time due to poor conditions. Pure white Snow petrels appeared ghost-like from the mist at one stage and wheeled aerobatically around before bathing in the nearby snow.

We were treated to a fine day for the ascent of the long Spenceley Glacier. British mountaineer Stephan Venables, who visited the area on a climbing expedition, considered the Spencely Glacier one of the “best ski runs in the world” (he descended it after making the first ascent of Mt Carse). I reflected on this often as I slogged upwards, pulling the sled shared with Pat through the softening snow. Gazing at the views of the spectacular and rarely-seen



southwestern faces of South Georgia’s highest peaks during frequent rest stops was some compensation.

After one tent-bound day above Larsen Harbour, waiting for a final view and periodically digging out the tents, we descended past bent and angled icicles (on account of the strong prevailing winds) to the waiting Tooluka. Perhaps predictably, the following day was fine and clear. A nearby hill was climbed for a final view, over the south coast and the array of stranded icebergs offshore, before sailing back to Grytviken and preparations for the voyage home.

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