

ANTARCTIC ADVENTURE

Few boats are capable of making the long, dangerous passage around Cape Horn but two

FPB owners battled storms and icebergs to experience this magical cruising ground

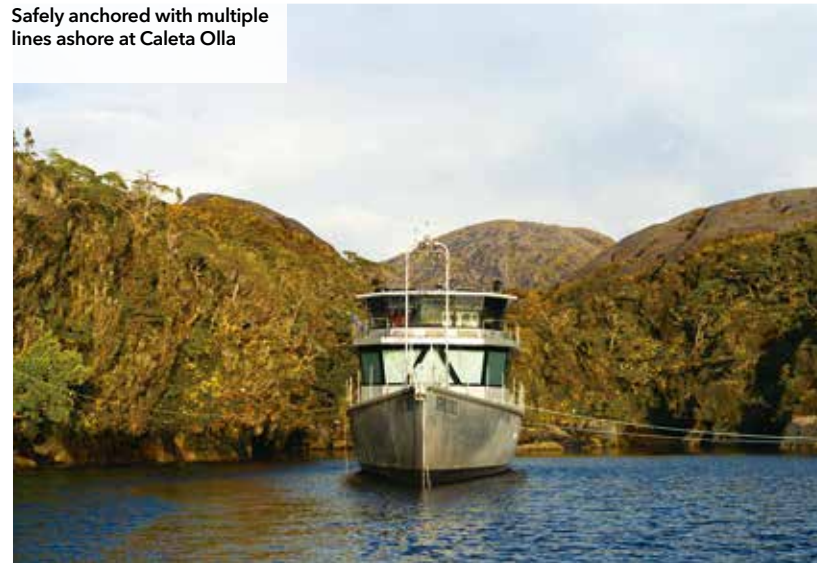
It was blowing 35 to 40 knots yesterday when we arrived at this beautiful little anchorage in the Beagle Channel at the extreme southern tip of South America. Shore lines are in order, like most anchorages here. Our procedure is to unship and launch the large dinghy with two sets of 3/4in poly shore lines, shackles and rigging strops to tie around trees or rocks on shore. On the way in, Jim runs a 5m depth contour in the tender while we set up a track on him using ARPA so we have a safe working depth contour. The charts down here are mostly inaccurate or lack depth information.

While Jim is running to shore in the dinghy to set up the first and most important shoreline, we drop our big 150kg Manson anchor and back down toward shore against the wind as we let out chain, all while watching our scanning sonar for obstacles. By the time we have 60m out in 15m of water, Jim has tied off the first shoreline and run back to the boat. Once cleated off, we are secure, so the pace is more leisurely as we set the second shoreline at a 30° angle to the first.

In some of the anchorages around here we have had as many as six lines out in addition to the anchor. When it's blowing with gusts of up to 60 knots you sleep much better at night knowing you are sitting in a little V-shaped notch in the shoreline with just 10m between you and the shore on three sides.

We are watching the weather and planning our passage down the Beagle Channel, Canal O'Brien and Canal Ballenero that includes a couple of long runs where we are exposed to the Southern Ocean before reaching safe harbour at Brecknock. Strong prevailing westerlies and rachas (katabatics) can make this stretch quite rough. Once we set off there will be few, if any, good anchorages where we can find protection.

Safely anchored with multiple lines ashore at Caleta Olla



Our destination is Puerto Natales in Chilean Patagonia.

High mountains and glaciers surround us, extending down from the Cordillera Darwin ice field. Fortunately none of them reach the anchorage. There are several other boats in the anchorage and they join us aboard *Iron Lady* for the evening. One of the great pleasures of cruising is spending time with other cruising folk.

These are accomplished sailors all. Some have done both the Northeast and Northwest Passages, spent 18 seasons going to Antarctica and have even over-wintered in the ice. They are currently hauling scientists around doing various research projects. The other yacht is French and they currently only have reverse gear, but that hasn't slowed their journey down. You have to stand in awe of such people.

The talk inevitably turns to Antarctica. While we laugh and compare notes about the anchorages and our experiences down there, there is a shared sense of community that only comes from those who have been and know it firsthand. ▶

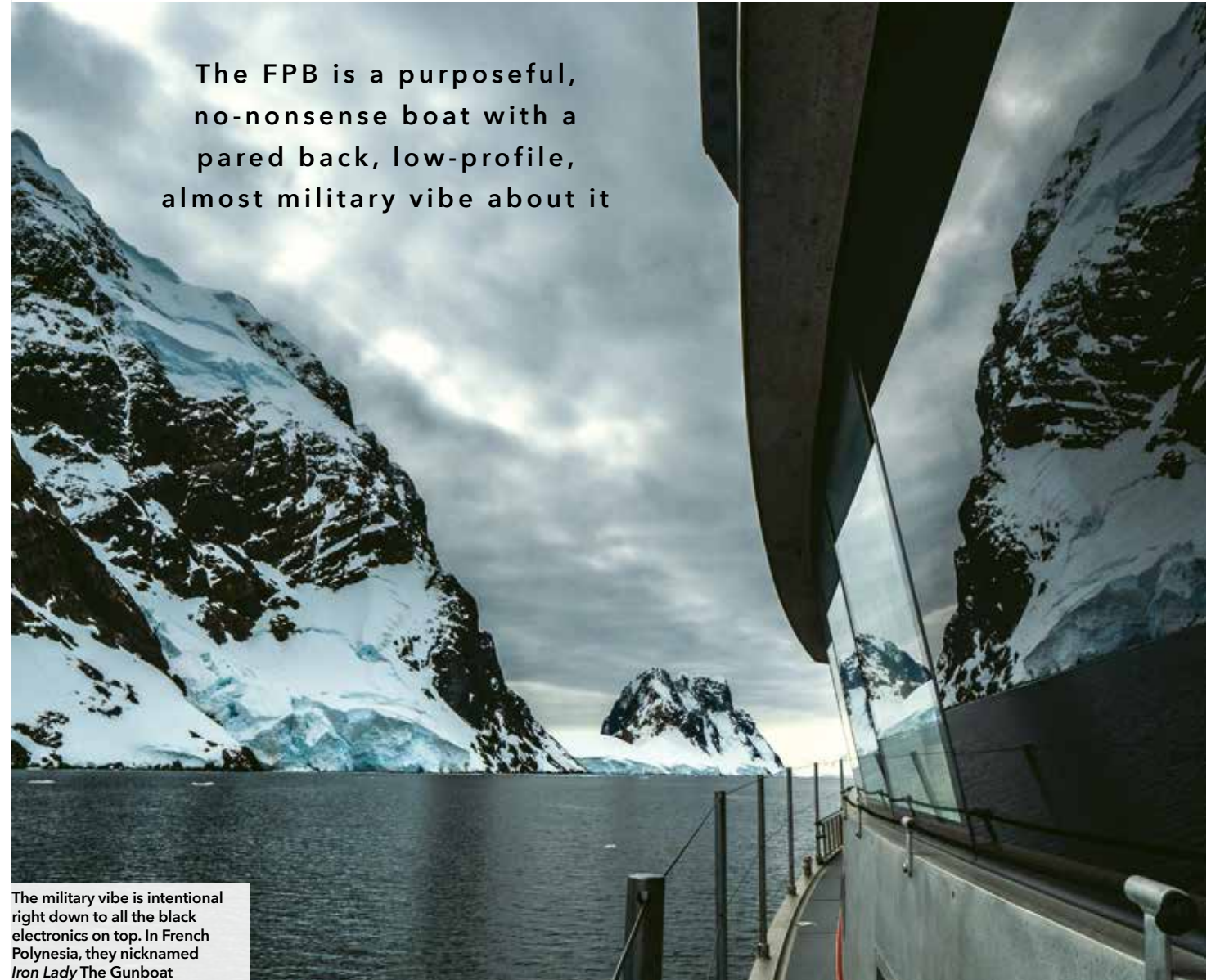


Waiting for a weather window at Brecknock



Steaming south toward the Lemaire Passage

The FPB is a purposeful, no-nonsense boat with a pared back, low-profile, almost military vibe about it



The military vibe is intentional right down to all the black electronics on top. In French Polynesia, they nicknamed *Iron Lady* The Gunboat



North Entry to the Lemaire Channel



Anchored for the night off the Arturo Prat Chilean Armada Station

Beneath the laughter and stories about the near disasters are the real ones. They were rolled twice in the Drake Passage and were iced in for long periods in Antarctica when the weather went against them. The names and the places are the same, we were just more fortunate.

AROUND CAPE HORN

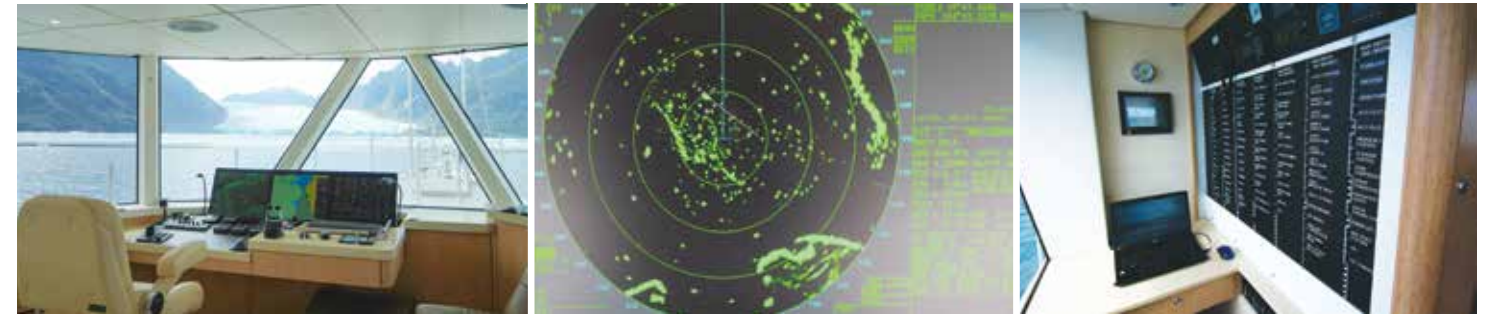
After coffee aboard their yacht the next morning and parting wishes, we head out to try our hand at fishing in the bay but the wind is still too high. Plan B is to gather driftwood for a beach fire tonight. After dropping off the wood we go for a walk along the shore. In the afternoon, the sun comes out and Deb and I stretch out on the shore, reading and soaking up the warmth of its rays until we both drift off to sleep – we are still catching up on all the sleep we lost in the Deep South.

Near the end of our return passage through Drake, we were so tired that we stood watch with two people instead of one to help keep each other awake. The weather window on the Drake had closed as we approached the shallows around Cape Horn. Steep, confused 4m seas, gale force winds, and leaden grey clouds spitting snow and rain made the huge, bleak rock that is Cabo de Hornes look even more formidable. Jim and I came on watch at midnight and brought the boat in to Puerto Williams at 05.00 amidst 30-knot winds and snow – a fitting end to our passage.

Having completed passages across the equator and now around the horn, I am of course entitled to wear the sailor's traditional pierced gold earring. Deb put a rather abrupt end to that idea!

Sadly, our planned beach fire will have to wait as the rain sets in at 1800, hardly surprising given that the area averages almost 3.5m of rainfall per year. On the way back to the boat in Caleta Olla, after our shore nap, I get a chance to look closely at the ice damage to our antifoul sustained during our adventures down south. We are down to bare aluminum all along the water line – badges of courage on our dear *Iron Lady*, who took such good care of us in the hostile conditions.

As I look at her, my thoughts turn back to the genesis of the idea that led to this voyage. Back then it was an abstract and



LEFT *Iron Lady's* lower helm MIDDLE Radar picture in the ice RIGHT *Iron Lady's* ship's office, electrical and systems' panels



Group photo of *Iron Lady*, *Grey Wolf* and crew near 65° South

distant dream with no realities attached to it. I studied Pilot Charts, cruising guides and the Admiralty Sailing Directions. It all seemed so exciting – a great adventure without any situational awareness attached to it. And that can be a dangerous thing.

As the date approached for our actual departure, I began to study weather patterns around the Horn and in the Drake Passage. The closer we came to our actual departure, the more the formidable history and names of these places began to weigh on me. The reality set in, this was far more ambitious than anything my wife and I had ever attempted. She was scared and I had to work hard to hide my own concerns from her.

The moment arrived and after the frantic last minute preparations in Puerto Williams and a celebratory last dinner at the Beaver Café (not its real name – it just had a stuffed beaver in the window), we set off in company with FPB 78-2 *Grey Wolf*. At midnight, we silently watched as the Cabo de Hornes light faded behind us. It was now very, very real. It was reassuring to see *Grey Wolf's* lights out of the window and to chat with them on the passage. Some of the crew played battleship over the VHF – I am pleased to report that they sank *Grey Wolf* whilst we only sustained minor damage!

The Drake, as forecast, was kind to us but two-day passages are difficult – at least for me. You never quite get into the rhythm of being at sea before it ends. We were standing watches of three hours on, nine hours off. You'd think nine off is enough to rest, but at sea there are other tasks to attend to.

As is my wont, I was standing the 03.00 to 06.00, and 18.00 to 21.00 watches. Simon, aboard *Grey Wolf*, told me I should exercise my rights as owner and select something other than the graveyard watches. Actually, for me, the 03.00 to 06.00 watch is my favourite. The boat is asleep and I have the air, wind and sea to myself.

The sun in the Deep South starts to rise at 04.00 and when the weather is kind it is a glorious sight. I sit on the matrix deck with my favorite music

The formidable history began to weigh on me - this was far more ambitious than anything we'd attempted

playing, waiting for Suzie to bring me a cappuccino at 06.00. At times like this, all seems right with the world.

It wasn't an easy passage though. The long slog from home to southern Chile was pretty tiring and the lack of sleep had caught up with me. The Nelson Passage proved to be a wake-up call with 35 knots of wind over an opposing current and large standing waves generated by the deep Southern Ocean entering the shallow water of the passage. *Iron Lady* struggled against the wind and our normal cruise speed dropped from 10-plus knots to 5 or 6. Our first warning of what was to come was the spray that hit the windows on the Matrix deck. The overhead hi-modulus lifelines strung around the Matrix deck as a precaution were now a necessity when moving about.

We made Yankee Harbor around 03.30, adrenalin still pumping around our exhausted bodies until it dissipated at the sight of a beautiful sunrise that highlighted thousands of Gentoo penguins on a ridge overlooking the harbour.

Aboard *Grey Wolf*, we toasted our arrival with Shackleton reproduction Scotch, a fitting tribute to him and his epic journey, a celebration tempered only by the knowledge that Antarctica had yet to reveal her darker side.

ICE ATTACK

After a briefing on wildlife encounters and the various dos and don'ts, we all went ashore. It was magical walking among thousands of penguins and seals who were totally unafraid of our presence. Outside the harbour, humpback whales played in the

Bransfield Straight. We took the dinghies to the head of the bay where a massive glacier was calving bergs into the sea. Fortunately, the winds were blowing all the bits back toward the glacier. Finally, the adrenalin wore off and we all crashed out. The precautionary ice watches we stood seemed unnecessary as the night passed without incident. Unbeknownst to us, that was soon about to change.

The next day was filled with more exploration of Yankee and a trip to Half Moon Bay aboard *Grey Wolf*, although some of our crew stayed behind to man *Iron Lady* and rest. I should have done the same. The first warning sign came as we tried to make our return. *Grey Wolf* was blocked by ice from getting back into Yankee for several hours. Lane managed to launch *Iron Lady's* RIB and dodge the ice to retrieve me and Deb. Our kids have nicknamed the RIB *Beer Can* due to its aluminium hull but thankfully at 4mm thick it's considerably tougher than a drinks can and every mil is needed here.

A look back at my personal log of the day brings all the memories flooding back.

"Off to bed early but the sound of the engines coming to life wakes me up around 01.00. Looking out the port light, the view is unfamiliar. Instead of the penguin colony, I now see the sand spit that guarded the harbour – and lots of ice – big and potentially damaging ice. Lots of activity aboard *Grey Wolf* as I come on deck."

The wind had shifted 180° and was blowing gale force. All the ice that had been pinned up against the glacier was now



Whaling station ruins at Deception Island



A day hike ashore



Antarctic sunrise



Rafted up in Skontorp Cove. Note how the ice has accumulated along an arched shoreline strung across the bay



Pete and Deb Rossin



Daughter Kim manning an ice pole on the foredeck

This was a place of staggering, stark and unimaginable beauty and scale



bearing down on us with the both boats on a lee shore. We raised the alarm and all hands came on deck to man the ice poles.

Thoughts of disaster sprang to mind. We could live without a stabiliser fin, I have done that before, but what if a berg damaged a rudder or prop? That would be bad – really bad.

The ice attack lasted until 03.00. When it finally passed us it floated to the sand spit to our stern and remained pinned there. Plans called for an 08.00 departure to Deception, but that wasn't to be either. The wind shifted again and all the ice that was on the spit now came back towards us. We started the engines at 06.00 as ice chased us out of the harbour.

STARK BEAUTY

The full impact of Antarctica was now becoming clear to me. This was a place of staggering, stark and unimaginable beauty and scale. It was also a place that would only reward you with its beauty if you were prepared to deal with its ultimate reality. It is a brutally hostile place that is unforgiving of any carelessness.

And so it was for us. We loved and were awed by Antarctica's beauty and scale but we completely respected her unforgiving nature and acted accordingly. Others we have talked to who have visited the place have said much the same. You must prepare for all eventualities but there are occasions when even that is not enough. Mistakes here can have very serious consequences.

Our skills at dealing with ice-filled anchorages improved with experience and time. We used our small 5G radar to set up guard zones and track the larger bergs. We learned to use the engines and bow thruster to dodge and push away ice whilst at anchor. Our daughter, Kim, became the resident expert with the ice poles. Our dinghies became tugs to lasso and drag or push the larger bergs away. We also found that our floating poly lines could be strung across bays between us and the glaciers (they all had glaciers except Deception, which made up for it with

high winds and poor holding in volcanic ash) to keep the ice at bay. If the winds and tide were right, the ice would accumulate on the line and then drift off on the change of tide leaving us unscathed. When it was safe to do so, we would raft together and share ice watches so that both crews could get more rest.

There were experiences that were exhilarating and spiritual. Our passage down the Lemaire, having been only the third and fourth vessels to do it this year, was such an event. The drone footage we have from that passage and the whales along the way still brings tears to my eyes. Kudos to *Grey Wolf* and *Simon*.

The brief time we spent there in Charcot Harbor, south of Lemaire, revealed the perils as the ice closed in on us during our return. I think poor *Iron Lady* suffered most of her antifouling ice damage there.

WHALE OF A TIME

There were so many other highlights. On a flat calm day we saw four humpbacks playing on the surface so we launched our dinghies and slowly motored over to them on a parallel course. They seemed to be as curious about us as we were in awe of them. For about 30 minutes they swam under and around, so close that we almost could have touched them. One juvenile raised its head out of the water within a few metres of us and seemed intent on studying us. I have never had an encounter like that before.

We were welcomed at various stations, including the



TOP: A cruise ship near Neko Brown gives a sense of scale
ABOVE: Beer Can on iceberg tug duty



Playing with icebergs



Family of killer whales

The drone footage we have from that passage and the whales along the way still brings tears to my eyes



Chilean Armada station at Waterboat where we spent the day. We visited the southern-most post office in the world at Port Lockroy, which was an ionospheric radio research station. It has been completely restored as a historic site. We visited Deception, with its ruins from the whaling trade where the flooded caldera ran red from the blood of 500,000 slaughtered fur seals and thousands of whales. We shared unusual anchorages like Enterprise, where cruisers tie up to an old sunken hulk.

There is just so much that goes with a voyage like this. Deb and I have been boating for more than 50 years with around 40,000 nautical miles beneath our joint keels in the last 10 years, and nothing we have done before comes close.

Places with legendary names now seem somehow more familiar. The Antarctic Peninsula, The Drake, the Horn, the Straights of Magellan, and the Beagle Channel are all magical and demanding but most of all, Antarctica.

Puerto Williams is said to be the southern-most city in the world at 54° and 55 minutes south. Our journey took us to the bottom of Lemaire Passage at 65° and seven minutes south where our passage further south was blocked by 8/10 ice. That is some 625 nautical miles south of Puerto Williams.

It was reassuring to have a sister boat along for this voyage. *Grey Wolf* was our constant companion and it felt lonely watching her lights disappear on the Drake as they made for the Falklands and we made for Puerto Williams after our time together exploring Antarctica. Our cruise was made better and safer cruising in company with another



capable vessel. There was plenty of friendly banter. Thanks Peter (AKA Captain Iceberg) for the guarantees of ice-free anchorages that virtually assured we would get crushed! And what was that business of calling me Captain Impatient just because I got tired of you stopping to see every penguin in Antarctica, or re-naming *Iron Lady* as *Drag Queen* because we dragged a few times due to prodigious balls of kelp on our anchor?

STRANGE BREW

Everything about Antarctica was intense. I wouldn't trade the experience for anything. To those who want to go, it will be like nothing you have ever done before or after. But if you do go, prepare like you have never prepared before. Find another capable vessel to join you. Antarctica will reward you with its wonders but you must be willing to pay the price it demands.

Steve Dashew, the designer of *Iron Lady* and the FPB series expresses it far better than I can. "Really excited for you now that you have the exquisite landscape experience to combine with wildlife, big ice and adrenaline. But guard against addiction. That is a heady brew you are drinking in and once free of the risk

factor, when the rush of the adrenaline fades, you are going to crave more. Good thing you've got an *Iron Lady*." Indeed Master Dashew. Indeed. However, I would have to include *Grey Wolf* as our companion.

Permits are required to cruise Antarctica. It is a rigorous process that both crews fully complied with. For more about FPB boats contact Berthon on +44 (0)1590 673312 or visit www.setsail.com