

Call of the *Wild*



A Case for Cruising the Earth's High Latitudes

By Steve D'antonio

A real trawler returns to its home harbor at Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland. The harbor was nearly closed off by a lava flow in 1973, it was saved by a local fisherman who staved off the flow with fire hoses.

When I ask folks where they intend to cruise (and I ask the question often), “someplace warm” is frequently their response. I’ve done my share of tropical cruising and it’s difficult to deny: The tropics instill a sense of calm and contentedness that is unmatched. The sun’s warming rays can be transformative. Wearing fewer clothes feels good, and being able to swim and dive at will is simply glorious.

There is, however, another type of cruising that few experience, cruising the high latitudes—in the boreal zone, and rarer still, the far southern regions.

“Isn’t it cold there?” they ask, and this includes my wife, an avowed tropical cruiser.

Indeed, in many cases the weather can be very wet, very windy and unpredictable, but it’s not always bad. For example, summertime in the Antarctic Peninsula was, in my experience, warmer, drier, sunnier and generally more pleasant than winter in my native Virginia, which tends to be gray, damp and frequently bone chilling. I typically don’t sunburn easily, but I suffered the worst sunburn of my life in Antarctica.

I made my first high-latitude jaunt in 1996 aboard a 47-foot cutter rigged sloop. At the time, I was managing a boatyard in North Carolina. The original proprietors sold the operation about eight months after I’d started. The new owner was an experienced hand and had ample business savvy, but more often than not we simply didn’t see eye to eye on how a yard should be run. I began to entertain thoughts of leaving and debated internally the potential pitfalls—how leaving a position after less than a year would look on my resume, breaking the lease on the house I was renting and the arduous task of moving, again (the bulk of the 26-foot moving van I had rented was filled with tools, a motorcycle, classic car parts and other single guy gearhead regalia).

Then a call came through, my secretary said, “from someone named Simon.” “Simon,” I thought, “I don’t know anyone named Simon.” In fact, it was Simeon. Simeon was a customer at a yard where I once worked as a mechanic. I’d had many long discussions about boatbuilding, design and repair with him and we’d become close friends. I had cruised with him on a few occasions on passages to New England.

FIRST, NEWFOUNDLAND

Now retired, Simeon was an anachronism in many ways and as salty as they come, a former Wall Street investment banker and frustrated 19th century seafarer. Complete with a “crush” skipper’s cap, well-worn canvas duck trousers and rigging knife adorned with a braided lanyard and monkey’s fist, he looked as if he’d come straight from central casting. He and his dog had virtually become part of the yard crew, often spending weeks at a time working on his beloved boat during winter lay-up periods.

It seemed that just about everything Simeon owned was an antique or looked that way. While the boat wasn’t old,

it looked it, with lots of brightwork, polished brass, tanbark sails, oil lamps and shelves stacked with great, hardcover and often very old books, most of which were of the nautical genre. Simeon was a strong advocate of vessel reliability. He was fond of saying things such as, “your boat should be as dry as a bottle” and “I want to be able to take Paloma and turn her upside down and shake her, and nothing should fall off.”

After an exchange of pleasantries, Simeon said, “I’m sailing to Newfoundland this summer, I could use crew.” Simeon was very independent, and I don’t think asking for help was his style. Thus, it wasn’t so much of a question as a statement: The vessel needs crew, and you need to do something about it. Without nearly enough thought, I accepted. High latitudes had exerted a magnetic pull on my imagination for many years. It was an opportunity I didn’t intend to miss.

Several months later, after giving my notice, and packing up and storing all my possessions, I found myself sailing north toward Nova Scotia. As the water changed color from green to cobalt blue, and dropped in temperature, fog became our constant companion, as did dolphins, whales and fishing vessels.

Reviewing my logbook and journal, the number of navigation and weather references, and the challenges thereof, makes them impossible to ignore. The local vernacular has many references to navigation challenges, such as “sunker,” a Newfoundland term whose definition leaves little to the imagination—smooth, semi-submerged rocks that lie in wait

for unsuspecting mariners to find them, often with disastrous results. “Tickles” on the other hand are channels that are passable, but only just, tickling the sides of your vessel as you pass through them.

PRICE OF ADMISSION

The fog was so thick (I know, it sounds like the beginning of a sea yarn) that it condensed as heavily as rain on one’s clothing. It was often wet, rainy and cold and our diesel heater did yeoman’s duty keeping the vessel and crew dry and warm. When we did meet other vessels, as soon as their crews saw our Charlie Noble, the heater’s smoke stack, they were immediately envious, and we usually obliged by inviting them aboard to dry out.

When the sun did shine, it was glorious—a word I used time and time again in my cruise log.

The journey was a mere three months. It was too brief as far as I was concerned. There were segments that were undoubtedly unpleasant, when I was seasick, wet, cold and wondering why I was there. A passage from my log describes

An exceptionally clear afternoon in the Faroes.

Another possible opener: The author’s quest for the perfect puffin photo was satisfied near a small island in Iceland’s Reykjavik Harbor.

the conditions:

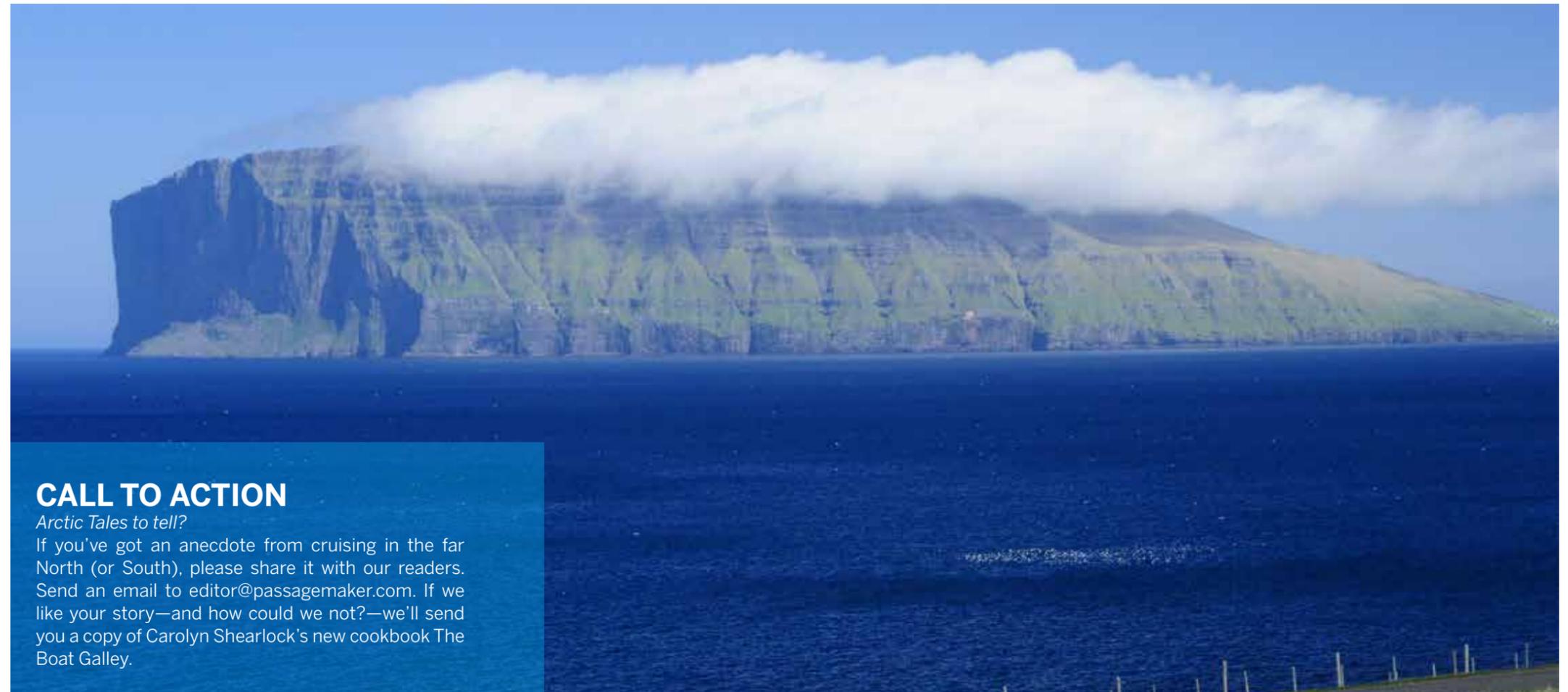
“Departed McCallum this morning, weather still foggy and gale forecast, bound for Francois Bay, conditions on the way were not good, thick fog and the most unsettled sea I have ever experienced, 6- to 9-foot waves and dreadfully steep. I was navigating and on radar watch. It was not a fun job.”

I’m sure I was sick as well but didn’t bother to record that observation. However, there were also moments of indescribable beauty, both visual and psychological. The moment where I became truly smitten with the boreal land and seascape is as vivid to me today as it was when it first occurred.

Making our way along the rock strewn—and on that day both windy and fog bound—south coast of Newfoundland



credit here



CALL TO ACTION

Arctic Tales to tell?

If you’ve got an anecdote from cruising in the far North (or South), please share it with our readers. Send an email to editor@passagemaker.com. If we like your story—and how could we not?—we’ll send you a copy of Carolyn Shearlock’s new cookbook *The Boat Galley*.



we threaded our way into a keyhole-like opening, through steep granite cliffs into a place called Hare Bay (it's shaped like a pair of rabbit ears). As described above, the conditions were atrocious and the crew needed relief. On the chart it looked well protected so we put the helm hard to starboard and made our way toward the refuge.

The thousand-foot cliff faces were not visible through the mist, despite the fact that the opening was a scant 2/10 of a mile wide. As we entered the fjord-like passage, relying heavily on our radar, it became brighter and the visibility improved. Within half a mile the transformation was nothing short of remarkable: the sun shone, the air temperature rose, our spirits lifted and mercifully, the vessel ceased its incessant rolling.

ENDS OF THE EARTH

Ultimately, Paloma found a snug spot to lick her wounds. We set the anchor, floating in fresh water with a hue similar to rosé, at the base of a boisterous waterfall. With the terrain so rugged and towering and the isolation so thorough, it was impossible to even receive radio signals. For all I knew, the world no longer existed, there were no "outports" (the Newfoundland word for a waterfront settlement) visible, not a single light shone, no dogs barked, this was the ends of the earth.

TWA Flight 800 had crashed off of Long Island on this night, yet we would not find out until we finally sailed out of this communications black hole. I brought my sleeping bag on deck that night and fell asleep under a billion stars, watching the masthead describe arcs through the Milky Way.

From that day onward I've made it my mission to venture to high latitudes as often as possible. There is an attraction. The formula is one I've thought about on many occasions and it's easily quantifiable. Since that first foray, I've made my way to Antarctica, Iceland, The Faroe Islands and back to Newfoundland, and I'll continue to do so for as long as I'm able.

If you like the hustle and bustle of civilization, city lights, a large array of organized attractions and restaurants from which to choose, high latitudes probably aren't for you. If, on

Lighting is everything. In high latitudes sunrises and sunsets take on new meaning, and are a windfall for photographers. Port Lockroy in the Antarctic Peninsula.

the other hand, you relish the solitude of being alone, alone with nature, alone with a picturesque landscape or alone with wildlife, then high latitudes are the place to be.

As a journalist, consultant and professional communicator, it's difficult for me to be introverted. Much of my life is punctuated by boat shows, lectures, meetings and business dinners, but given the choice, I'm a closet isolationist. I prefer to curl up on a settee with a good book on the history of the diesel engine or a discourse on a Napoleonic War naval battle, or take a quiet walk on a deserted stretch of beach with nothing but a few cameras and my thoughts. The fewer people the better.

Fewer people often means more wildlife, particularly birds, and I simply adore birds. I've spent hours gazing skyward in these regions marveling at the sheer volume of life on the wing. On one occasion I cruised by a series of sea stacks, off the south coast of Iceland and I was simply agog with the hundreds of thousands of gannets circling their skyscraper roosts. I became so entranced, attempting to photograph them that I forgot all about being seasick. There are few places where bird life of this sort can be seen.

On other occasions, I've sat down next to albatrosses and have been brought nearly to tears, overcome with their majesty, not to mention their absence of fear of me. While there are exceptions, cruising to places where there are fewer people affords one more of these opportunities.

LONELY WATERS

Fewer people also mean things tend to remain undisturbed, where they await your discovery. In a small cove on Newfoundland's eastern coast, the bleached ribs of a long ago beached vessel rested on a rocky shore, silently supervised by stands of balsam fir trees. I suspect they hadn't been touched

by human hands in decades. There's something comforting about this sort of stability.

Despite fewer people in high-latitude locales, the lack of quantity is often made up for in quality, with interesting and unusual (to we who dwell at low latitudes) characters. For instance, in most ports in Newfoundland it's difficult to finish making lines fast to a town wharf before three questions are asked, "Where'd you come from?" "How much did she cost?" and "Do you need a car? Take mine, I'll leave the keys on top of the tire."

In The Faroe Islands, it's not unusual for people to come aboard your boat, uninvited, at all hours of the day or night to ask, "Where was she built?" Faroese are extremely friendly and helpful. However, they have an interesting trait that can be unsettling until you grow accustomed to it. If you make eye contact and smile, you'll receive nothing but a blank stare in response. It's the first time in my life I've ever experienced this behavior.

A friend and I walked into a car rental agency in Torshavn, the capital of the Faroes and inquired about renting a car, asking "Can we rent a car?" "Yes," said the man behind the counter, followed by a silent blank stare. I asked, "Can we get a diesel?" To which he responded, "No." After a few more questions the clerk warmed up and was thereafter very talkative. This exchange was not unusual.



High latitudes tend to be less forgiving places where life does not come easily. If you want to survive the winter, both literally and metaphorically, you have to lay in supplies, food and fuel, or at least you did at one time. This tends to shape the character of the folks who live in these regions; they are tough and resourceful, although often in a quiet and unassuming sort of way. Those of us who live in more populated regions are accustomed to operating within what I call the safety net, where resources are often so dense they may have a hard time deciding who is responsible for a rescue operation.

In more remote locations, however, life is far different. It's simply natural for them, for instance, to set out in small boats to fish or carry out other work in harsh conditions, sometimes with little in the way of safety gear, and little prospect for rescue should a problem arise. This tends to breed a sense of independence and self-reliance—traits that are easily understood and admired by cruisers and fellow seafarers.

Food in high latitudes is often an adventure in and of itself,

at least for visitors. Being the adventurous type, I'll try nearly anything, fermented or "rotten" shark, whale, moose and seal flipper pie. However, I draw the line at smoked puffin, they are just too cute to eat. Because of the cooler temperatures, calories often take precedence over form.

While in a small restaurant in an equally small Newfoundland seaside village I ordered something called poutine, a dish that originates from Quebec. It's a concoction of French fries (often double fried, as if frying once isn't bad enough) topped with cheese curds and heavy beef gravy. The preferred condiment is molasses. Need I say more?

Few would argue that the seafaring skills of those living in high latitude destinations are among the best in the world. They have to be as the marine environment there demands the most in the way of boat-handling and navigation skills. These are folks whose lives are often inextricably linked with the sea. As a result, their vessels are often very sensible, well built, seaworthy and reliable. From open dories to large ships, their masters are often very proud of these vessels and their skills, with good reason.

HEAVENLY LIGHT

Finally, from a photographic point of view, the light in high latitudes is simply sublime. There's an axiom among photographers, the first and last hour of the day are the most desirable times to shoot. These are the "magic hours." In high-latitude summers those precious magic hours are extended, depending upon how far north or south you may be. While cruising in Antarctica, I fondly recall my first extreme latitude perfect light experience.

I emerged from my cabin after a nap, strolled out on deck and was confronted with the most awe-inspiring sunset, seascape and landscape I had ever witnessed in my life. It turned distant snow-covered mountains shades of crimson I'd never seen before, while a glass smooth sea reflected it all over again.

I raced back to my cabin to retrieve my camera gear, flew back on deck and fired away. An hour later the scene had remained all but unchanged. The shades had altered slightly, turning deeper and the shadows were slightly darker, yet not much had been altered. Time had essentially slowed down allowing me to capture more images.

If you still aren't converted, if you remain a warm weather cruiser who points their bow toward the tropics at every opportunity, I'm not offended. The fewer folks cruising high latitudes, the more likely they will remain just the way they are.

Steve, PassageMaker's technical editor, owns and operates Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting. (stevedmarineconsulting.com), providing consulting services to boat buyers, owners and the marine industry.

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