



I'LL NEVER FORGET THE DAY... I cruised to the edge of the ice pack

STEVE D'ANTONIO: *Sailing within 512 nautical miles of the North Pole, my team set the record for the highest latitude reached by a recreational power vessel*

The ice field that stretches out before the bow elicits in my heart a sense of dread. It's the first time during the passage, in which I am to circumnavigating the Svalbard Archipelago, that I have any concern for the safety of the vessel, or myself. I'd signed up for this voyage because I have an unquenchable passion for high latitudes; it's a yearning that has taken me to Antarctica, Greenland, Iceland and now the most northerly continuously inhabited island chain on Earth, Svalbard. I now wonder if I've gone too far...

Six hours after leaving our anchorage at Kinnvika, *Migration*, the Nordhavn 68 I'm aboard, is in a grey fishbowl. In all directions, a pewter sky meets a slate-grey sea like a seagoing treadmill. We keep passing the same featureless scenery. There are no large landmasses; we've gone off the chart, literally, and are forced to switch software, though it's hardly necessary because on our present heading, save the ice, there's nothing between us and Alaska, a hemisphere away.

Migration edges further north and visibility improves; we are no longer in a milky morass as we pass the last vestiges of the Sjuøyane (Seven Islands), small pinnacles of rock with creased mossy green vertiginous slopes, which are home only to countless nesting birds and an automated weather station. The most northern, Rossøya, at 80°49'N, a skerry devoid of any vegetation, serves as Norway's farthest north toehold; we leave it, and all signs of civilisation in our wake. Cruisers have reported being unable to progress beyond this point because of heavy pack ice. This year, however, reports place the pack significantly further north. Using a chart we download at the scientific community of Ny-Ålensund during our stop there a few days ago, we plot a course that we believe will take us to our rendezvous with the polar ice pack.

Around 11 hours after getting underway, *Migration's* crew sights the first vestiges of the polar ice cap, a slew of bergy bits and growlers dotting the horizon. Conditions are deceptively calm. Our red bow pennant flutters in a 13-knot breeze, seas are less than a foot.



Migration reaches her most northerly position

Looking astern, like a horizontal ray of sunshine, the white line of the pack's margin is visible in all its brilliant glory

The magnetic compass reads 335°, while the true heading is 44°, a variation of a staggering 69°, a function of our proximity to the magnetic north, rather than geographic, pole.

We first encounter drift ice at 3.30am. The pack ebbs and flows in density and *Migration* threads her way through it for hours, pushing ever further north. The sea surface remains placid with fog; visibility is roughly 3/8 of a mile, sea surface temperature has dropped to 1°C, while the air is 0°C; light sleet falls. With her stem bumping up against the ice, at 5.15am local time, *Migration* reaches her most northerly position, or at least as far as her master is willing to go, 81°27', just over 500 nm from the North Pole. The crew poses for a photo on the bow, after which we launch the drone to memorialise the event. After recovering the drone, we turn *Migration's* bow south to once again thread our way through the pack and back to Svalbard. Within a few minutes, we encounter ice

where there was none before – our northbound track is already impassable and the frozen sheet has drifted in, closing it off as tight as a bank vault. We try another route. A knot begins to develop in my stomach. I have the faintest inkling of what Shackleton's men aboard the *Endurance* felt when beset in the Austral ice pack.

Called 'ice blink', an iridescent white haze hangs. It's brighter where pack ice is denser or covering the dark waters on which it floats. We use this feature to look for ice-free water. After what seems an eternity, we find a promising lead that's parallel to but east of our inbound route, and with this exit strategy established, the tension level in the pilothouse drops perceptibly. Looking astern, like a horizontal ray of sunshine, the brilliant white line of the pack's margin is visible in all its glory. From this vantage point, it is resplendent. **MBY**

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