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 stayed off the flow with fire hoses.
When I ask folks where they intend to cruise (and I ask the question often), “somewhere 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 after about eight months after I’d started. The new owner was an anachronism in many ways and 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 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 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.

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 as old as he or looked that way. While the boat wasn’t old, it looked it, with lots of brightwork, polished brass, teakbark 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!”

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ENDS OF THE EARTH

Ultimately, Paloma found a snug spot to lick her wounds. We looked well protected so we put the helm hard to starboard and made our way toward the refuge.

Lighting is everything. In high latitudes sunrises and sunsets take on new meaning, and are a windfall for photographers.

LONELY WATERS

Fewer people also mean things tend to remain undisturbed, where they wait 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 tin.”

In The Faroe Islands, it’s not unusual for people to come aboard your boat, uninvited, at all hours of the day or night or 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 about 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. I’ve never had a piece of 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 a quaint 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 doros 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, stroked 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 and transitions of purple into magenta. 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 changed. 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.