



# SKIING THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

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I'm skiing in a blue and white hued world, making turns down a 40 degree slope, 3000 kilometres from New Zealand. This is the Antarctic Peninsula, and there are 600 vertical metres and an iceberg-laden ocean, smattered with seals and penguins between myself and our 60 foot yacht. As I'm skiing, I start a small avalanche which a member of our group unwittingly skis into. The slide pushes him down the slope, towards the 1 degree ocean, around a corner and out of sight. "Stop," I yell to the others above as I take stock of what just happened.







Three weeks on a leaky boat

Our group of nine mostly Wanaka and Dunedin skiers (Nat Craig, Nick Ker, Hamish Wixon, Geoff McKeown (Christchurch), David McConnon, Fraser Harding, Graeme Moginie and Victor Saunders (Scotland) had met two weeks earlier in Argentina's southern most city, Ushuaia. Nestled at the edge of the Beagle Channel, Ushuaia is a small tourist city, similar to Queenstown, and shouldered by the Martial mountain range. This was in February, 2011 and we were about to embark on the journey of a lifetime.

From Ushuaia we caught a one hour water taxi ride to the Chilean town of Puerto Williams. Just before we arrived into Chile, the driver took a radio call and turned to us and yelled something in heated Spanish before making a U-turn and heading back to Ushuaia. One of the group members translated the phrase to mean "the propeller has fallen off", which was later confirmed as "I forgot the paper work."

We eventually arrived into Puerto Williams and met Jochan and James, our skipper and first mate/cook. Our crew loaded onto the Santa Maria Australis: the 20 metre aluminum ketch that would be our home for the next three weeks. The Drake Passage has a formidable reputation for having horrendously dangerous seas so it was with a little trepidation that we set sail for Antarctica. The seas peaked at about 4 metres and with a consistent 15-20 knots of wind we were cruising at a lovely 9-10 knots for

the first few days. Many of the group were 'feeding the fish' over the back of the boat, no mean feat when you have to first clip into a safety harness then lean dangerously over the cold Southern Ocean as the boat pitches and rolls. During the sailing, there was a roster for the watch of two hours on and seven off where your duties included looking out for other boats or icebergs and adjusting the sails.

After four full days at sea we spotted land; magnificent glacier-covered mountains cascading down to the sea, rich deep blue oceans, the odd fur seal popping its curious head up, schools of penguins, humpback whales and most importantly, exciting-looking ski slopes. We spent a few more hours motoring through brash ice-filled channels into an area called Port Lockroy, then sorted skis and gear before enjoying a restful night's sleep in calm waters.

The next morning we shuttled all of our gear to shore, avoiding as much penguin poop as possible and donned ski boots and touring skis. We also tied into a climbing rope in case of crevasse falls and started up the slopes, excited to be moving at last. We climbed up a few hundred metres and took off the skins and skied down the glacier towards the ocean. Skins on again, we shimmied up towards Jabet Peak, stopping on a shoulder to look down into the Neumayer Channel we'd sailed through



Top: Skiing all the way to the beach  
Bottom: A well earned glass of wine

the day before. Before we could get going again, the cloud came in so we decided to ski back towards the yacht.

Picking out ice cliffs and crevasses is challenging in bad visibility so I had to take care out front, weaving my way down the sun-affected slopes, making as many turns as possible. The cloud continued to thicken so we carried on back to the yacht, happy to have gotten some good turns in.

The weather the following day was pretty wet, so we headed south through the Lemaire Channel, also known as Kodak Alley for its steep sided mountains which plummet almost vertically into the 100 metre wide passage, clogged with icebergs and sunbathing seals. The rain had eased by the time we'd tied up the boat in Hovgaard Island so we went to a nearby penguin rookery and took a few hundred photos of the cute, but extremely bad-smelling little critters.

The next day was worse weather again so we relaxed and read books, but in the afternoon the weather improved enough for us to go for a tour up Hovgaard Island. Up into the cloud and heavy snow we went, quickly gaining 200 metres. We skied north away from the yacht, right down to the ocean in sensational corn snow. Yelping and hollering as we descended, we disturbed a nearby group of birds who dive-bombed us to warn us away from their nests.



The weather was particularly bad – worse than most regular skippers had seen for a long time – so we headed south to explore an area with many first ascent and ski descent options. Creeping around in fog, with icebergs and rocks appearing out of the uncharted waters, we found our objective. However, the landing was threatened by a four story high, twin-arched and unstable iceberg. The weather was also not on our side so we headed north to the Ukraine base, Vernasky, and anchored. It looked to be clearing so we packed and set our sights on a challenging peak we'd seen a few days before, the 638 metre high, north-facing Demaria Peak.

Next day dawned clear, but a strong southerly was blowing and cloud surrounded the summit. Undeterred, we headed over to have a crack. The lone seal on the beach looked confused and curious as we unloaded our skis and three day rescue cache (in case the weather changed and blew up a swell or pushed in brash ice, stopping us getting back to the yacht).

Off we went, in improving weather, up the steep pitch of soft snow. It was hard work breaking trail and hot in the Antarctic sun. We were also in the run-out of avalanches from above so for the first two hours we didn't stop, climbing high above the icebergs floating lazily in Waddington Bay to a shoulder 150 metres from the cloud-covered summit. What to do? Carry on up or head down, we wondered.

Keep going up, we decided. It was too steep for a skin track so we hoisted our skis onto our packs and plugged steps up through a rock band and more soft snow to the corniced summit just as the cloud cleared. What a view!

You'd have to call the skiing variable, some good corn; some way too soft. But we weren't just there for the turns, rather for the smorgasbord of views and sensations. We were close to the bottom when I set the avalanche off on Nat, and once everyone had stopped above I skied down around the corner to see where he'd ended up and found him tucked safely under the rock. No big drama; this was to come later while sailing home.

The following day we attempted Mt Scott, but the one metre ocean surge prevented us from getting ashore so we turned our attention to the smaller but more sheltered Hovgaard Island. We skied four aspects of the 350 metre high mountain on near perfect corn, completing a good 1000 vertical metre day.

We all got used to life on the boat as we explored northwards to Paradise Harbour. When soft snow bridges over crevasses stopped us from getting too far on Mt Banck we continued northwards, exploring and enjoying the wonders of Antarctica. Whales swam the channels, fur and 'crab eater' seals watched us as we watched them and schools of penguins swam by, jumping out of the water as they swam.

Soon enough it was time to head back across the Drake and the skipper wanted to beat a storm forecasted for Cape Horn in five days time. So off we went at full speed and for the first twenty four hours all was well. Then at 1.00am on Day Two, we had to shut down one engine when the water pump broke, un-fixable. Back to sleep, not too much of an issue, we should still beat the storm, we thought. Then at 3.00am I woke to yelling. When I turned on my light, I was horrified to see the yacht filled with smoke. Fire! I threw on some clothes and rushed upstairs to see Nick monitoring the diesel fire that had blown out. No fire thankfully; just smoke.

But when we looked on deck the skipper and first mate were holding on for dear life to the end of the steel jib forward stay. It had broken off the deck and was swinging like an angry serpent. The heavy rigging was easily capable of killing someone or smashing the boat if it got free.

Victor and I tied into our lifejackets and went to help. They had managed to tie the jib off temporarily but the sail was still pulling roughly on it. Being out on the deck at night, in the Southern Ocean, in rolling waves and strong winds was pretty intimidating and it took several dangerous trips up the mast before we managed to retrieve the sail by swinging wildly out, holding onto it and then quickly being lowered, ripping it from the steel rigging.

This took almost four hours and with a major structural support of the mast gone we were down to one motor, at half speed, heading directly into the storm.

We made a beeline for Cape Horn and no one spoke of what we'd do if the last engine broke down in the storm. Thankfully the storm weakened, and the engine worked on tirelessly. After three more slightly tense days, we passed Cape Horn accompanied by a large school of dolphins in smooth seas. Our crew enjoyed a collective sigh of relief followed by a round of celebration drinks. We toasted to an awesome adventure with a fantastic group of people, in one of the most amazing and remote places on earth.

Opposite top: Checking out the view

Opposite bottom: Loading the precious cargo

