
Shackleton Crossing - ASG 60 - 2015

Report by : Tarn Pilkington

Date : 18/3/15

Voyage Dates : 1/2/15 to 19/2/15

INTRODUCTION

Aurora Expeditions has been guiding the Shackleton Traverse of South Georgia for over ten years. The principle aim of the expedition is to provide a unique perspective of Shackleton's route whilst maintaining a high level of safety for all involved.

The current Aurora success rate for completing the entire crossing is around sixty five percent.

Team

Leader : Tarn Pilkington (New Zealand)

Assistant Guide : Kevin Nicholas (New Zealand) and staff member Ben Maddison

Participants

Peter Koltai (USA), Harry Agnew (AUS), Eleanor Agnew (AUS), Andrew Agnew (AUS), Gareth Rees (UK), Alec Spiller (AUS).

Daily Summary

4th-8th February - Team member training at Gourdin Island, Paulet Island and Brown Bluff in Weddell Sea area.

Day 1- 9th - Arrive King Haakon and travel to Crean Camp via the Murray Snowfield.

Day 2 - 10th - Crean Camp to Fortuna Bay and overnight on ship.

Day 3 - 11th - Fortuna Bay to Stromness.

Weather Forecast

The weather forecast indicated that a cold front preceded by a north west flow would cross the area the following morning early and deliver a small amount of rain. This was to be followed by strengthening northwest winds turning west north west in a disturbed westerly flow situation for several more days. Small fronts were forecast out to Friday with sea level winds forecasted to reach thirty knots on Tuesday.

KING HAAKON TO STROMNESS – THE “SHACKLETON ROUTE”

The ship arrived at King Haakon at 7am. Our intention was to follow the standard low route (Shackleton Route) up the Murray Snowfield, descend into the Crean Glacier from the Tridents, and exit via the Fortuna glacier to Fortuna Bay over two or three days. Reports from a previous expedition and from the South Georgia Government suggested that it had been a low snow year and the weather had been very warm over the last months. With this in mind we were expecting very open conditions similar to our 2011 crossing.

The team departed the King Haakon beach at 805am. Conditions on the Murray Snowfield were very good with very few crevasses and the going was straightforward and direct. The weather was clear and became sunny and very warm by mid morning. A north westerly wind of 15 knots was forecast for most of the day but winds remained light. Lenticulars and mares tails were observed during the day indicated that the forecast for a front to pass over the island Tuesday was probably going to be correct.

The descent from the tridents to the Crean Glacier via the second pass south of the standard pass was used again. It was more crevassed this year but relatively easy going. The centre of the glacier is threatened by small seracs and a small amount of debris was encountered. This required us to move quickly down the remaining section to the flats below. Winds remained light but cloud came in requiring us to navigate to the standard Crean campsite. The campsite was reached in 8 hours.

Good views were had from the Tridents across the Crean and conditions looked very similar to 2012 where we experienced good snow cover in depressions on the far eastern side.

From 2am on the morning of the 10th we had low cloud and moderate rainfall which eased to a drizzle by 7am. Low cloud rolled in and out all day requiring navigation at times but this was interspersed by some good views allowing us to view and choose the best depression avoiding convex crevassed areas. The nunatak was reached in cloud and a building north west wind in just over three and a half hours.

On the lee side of the Nunatak the cloud broke giving great views to Fortuna Bay and most of the descent route. The glacier was in very good condition and allowed fairly direct travel to our turning point above Fortuna bay. We descended very easily on a ramp of snow through the compressed area “the pinch” on the left side of the glacier which descends to the bay exactly as we did in 2011 and 2012.

We spent the night aboard Polar Pioneer in Fortuna Bay and on the 11th completed the crossing to Stromness following the new designated route.

Gritviken was visited the following day with the obligatory toast to Shackleton held at his grave side.

SAFETY MANAGEMENT

Client experience and screening

The participants were further screened and trained in the Weddell Sea area to ensure fitness and skill levels were sufficient. Supplementary training involving glacier travel, self arrest, personal gear management, ice axe and crampon use and tent erection were completed at Paulet Island, Gourdin Island and Brown Bluff.

The clients for the SG crossing were capable and completed the crossing with no problems displaying sufficient fitness and competent mountain movement. This was the most inexperienced group we had guided to date and I saw it necessary to put on a third guide on to assist.

Vetting client applications also remains crucial in the success of this expedition. The process for this years crossing again included a personal phonecall between the Technical Adviser and all applicants. This helped ensure that actual experience and currency on resumes were valid. Three of the applicants were required to undergo further training and screening and their guides supplied attestations regarding their suitability.

Client equipment

The equipment clients brought along was satisfactory and a thorough gear check was undertaken early in the voyage.

Expedition Equipment

Stoves – A new MSR Reactor was missing so it was replaced by an older Doite cooker.

I have inventoried all the SG crossing camping equipment and it is well marked and seperated from the other camping gear in the front hold. This equipment should only be used for the crossing.

Tents - Two Mountain Hardwear Trango tents were supplemented again with my personal Macpac Olympus tent . A pole was broken and it will be necessary to try to get replacement poles for two tents. In the interim we can use poles from the third tent to give full sets for the other two.

Tent repair kits were made up containing extra sleeves, joiners and duct tape.

Cooking/Food – There was sufficient gas butane cannisters on board. The new MSR reactor stove ran well in calm conditions but was a real struggle in windy conditions later on Tuesday. A better screen system is required for this and will be investigated post expedition.

Enough food was taken for four days as per the permit requirements. This included double serve dehydrated meals brought from NZ for all participants for two nights, and a single serve for the third night. Sandwiches and snack food was taken from the ship with chocolate and meusli bars purchased in Ushuaia.

Water was obtained on the Crean Glacier at the campsite and was also found running at the Nunatak.

Communications

A Satellite phone with spare battery was carried for communicating with the ship with schedule times at 6AM and 6PM. I recommend that when guides contact the ship outside of scheduled times that they ring the Ship number and not the Ship office number. This ensures that the bridge can relay information to Aurora staff. The phone is loaded with contact numbers in the internal phonebook function. Reception is mostly good on all sections of the traverse.

Three Icom VHF handhelds with spare batteries were carried.

A PLB was carried as a backup device.

Navigation

I purchased a new Garmin 64s using Garmin's "Birdseye view" image of South Georgia. Although the image is not high resolution, it is sufficient to accurately display information and navigate with. Two other GPS systems were carried which interfaced with the 1:100,000 BAS Map. Compass declination adjustment is seven degrees west.

A synthetic canvas map with a Google Earth image at a scale of approximately 1:25,000 was used again. It is easily rolled up and stowed in a jacket and is completely weather proof. The same map was posted on the office whiteboard with GPS coordinates for all waypoints.

Contingency

The low and high routes are planned in detail but the latter was ruled out as an option due to the weather forecast.

There is accurate information on the exit to Possession Bay but we still have insufficient information regarding the exit to Antarctic Bay. From the last four visits I am convinced there are two options on the true right both of which will need confirming as viable from either the ship in Antarctic Bay or actually descending to view the terrain. Given the weather this year we decided to move quickly to the Nunatak instead of scoping options.

Weather information

Weather information was being sent daily from Tomas Holik in Buenos Aries and from a guide in New Zealand. This was supplemented by the Grib files already available on the ship. The Metvuw.com forecasting website provided us with reasonably accurate timings on the passage of fronts and forecasted precipitation totals.

OTHER

Office communication

There is considerable time spent liaising with the office and clients. We should look at streamlining the process and the number of people involved. Dropbox could be a means to better manage required information.

Travel

All the travel arrangements worked well. It was great that Anthony booked all ticket classes to include two bags as this avoided extra bag fees of sixty dollars per local NZ flight.

Climbing Equipment aboard ship

The inventory and carabiners on hand do not match up and new purchases are required. The rest of the equipment was accounted for and in good order.