

SOUTH GEORGIA – ALTERNATIVE SHACKLETON TRAVERSE 2022



For the co-leaders Skip Novak and Stephen Venables this was unfinished business. In 2014 we led an expedition to make first ascents of Poseidon, Thalassa and Tethys, intending then to continue traversing the Esmark, Kohl and König Glaciers to Fortuna Bay. A big northerly depression put paid to those plans and we reversed our route to Possession Bay. Later that year a team led by Phil Wickens did succeed in making the full traverse from King Haakon Bay to Stromness, following the 'high level route' which Frank Worsley indicated on his sketch map as a possible alternative to the more direct route he took with Crean and Shackleton in 1916.

Although most of this terrain was explored and mapped by Duncan Carse's expeditions in the 1960s, Wickens' team was the first to link up all the passes. We were keen to make the second linkup for a number of reasons. Despite visiting South Georgia many times over the last thirty years, neither Skip nor I had ever been onto the Kohl Plateau. And, having repeated Shackleton's classic traverse five and four times respectively, we liked the idea of an alternative traverse, on higher ground, avoiding the tedious descent from the Trident Ridge and better suited for ski touring.

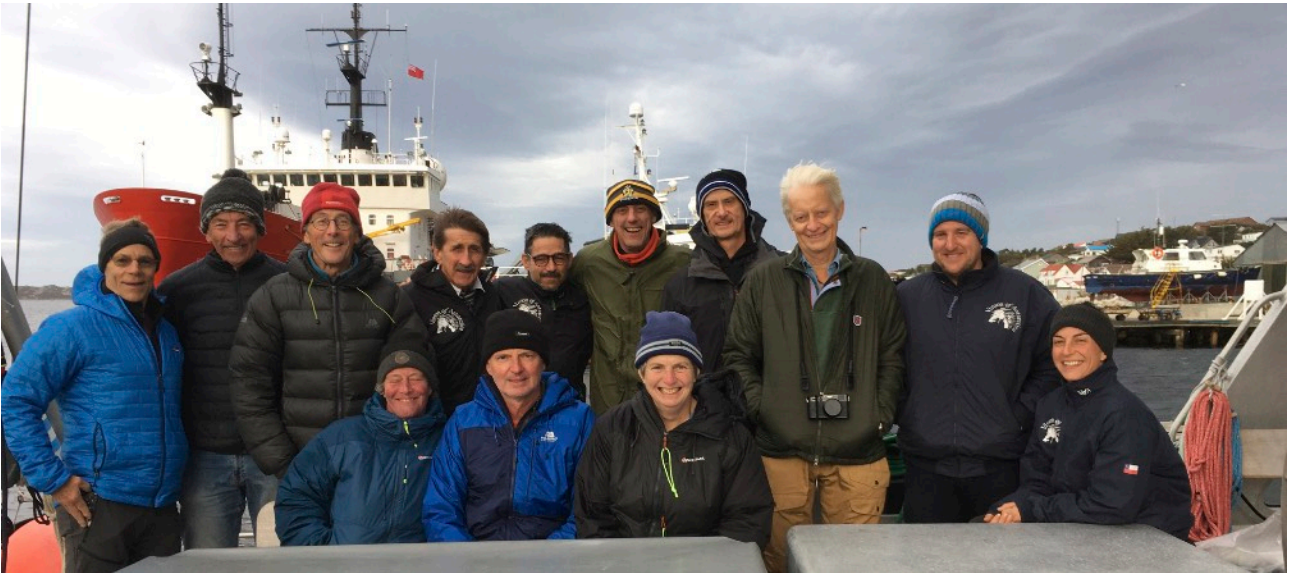
The expedition was planned originally for 2020, postponed to 2021 due to Covid, and then postponed a further

year to September 2022.

Although few on the team had much mountaineering experience, all were highly competent skiers and several had serious expedition experience. Steve Brown, for instance, has worked for many years in South Georgia and Antarctica for the British Antarctic Survey; Caroline Hamilton has led all women teams, including Zoe Hudson, to both North and South Poles. So we had a strong competent team, well qualified for an adventurous ski traverse in September, which seems to be the optimum month for South Georgia, in the austral spring: lengthening daylight hours but still with adequately low temperatures, good snow cover all the way from the beach, crevasses well bridged for safe glacier travel and the pleasure of landing on beaches not yet mobbed by smelly aggressive fur seals.



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SKI MOUNTAINEERING TEAM

Skip Novak & Stephen Venables – leaders
Philip Baum
Steve Brown
Chuck Gates
James Gibson-Fleming
Caroline Hamilton
Zoe Hudson
Sebastian Mottram
Jean-Pierre Nicolotti

VINSON OF ANTARCTICA CREW

Kenneth Perdigón – skipper
Mariana Espelón – mate
John de Wet

VOYAGE FROM THE FALKLANDS

We had the honour of being the first ski-mountaineering expedition to charter the new high latitudes Pelagic 77 yacht *Vinson of Antarctica*, boarding her at Stanley on September 10. After a busy day checking tents and pulks and preparing food rations for the Traverse, we set sail on September 12,



reaching South Georgia on the morning of September 16, to anchor first in Johan Harbour and then more securely in Undine Harbour. With strong southwesterlies forecast for the next three days, there was no chance of starting the Traverse immediately. So on September 17 most of the team enjoyed a day ashore – for several their first acquaintance with the seals and penguins – walking over to Elsehul and back, while Skip and Stephen did some final gear checks. The wind was stronger on the 18th and everyone stayed on board while the anchor was reset several times. However, on the afternoon of the 19th

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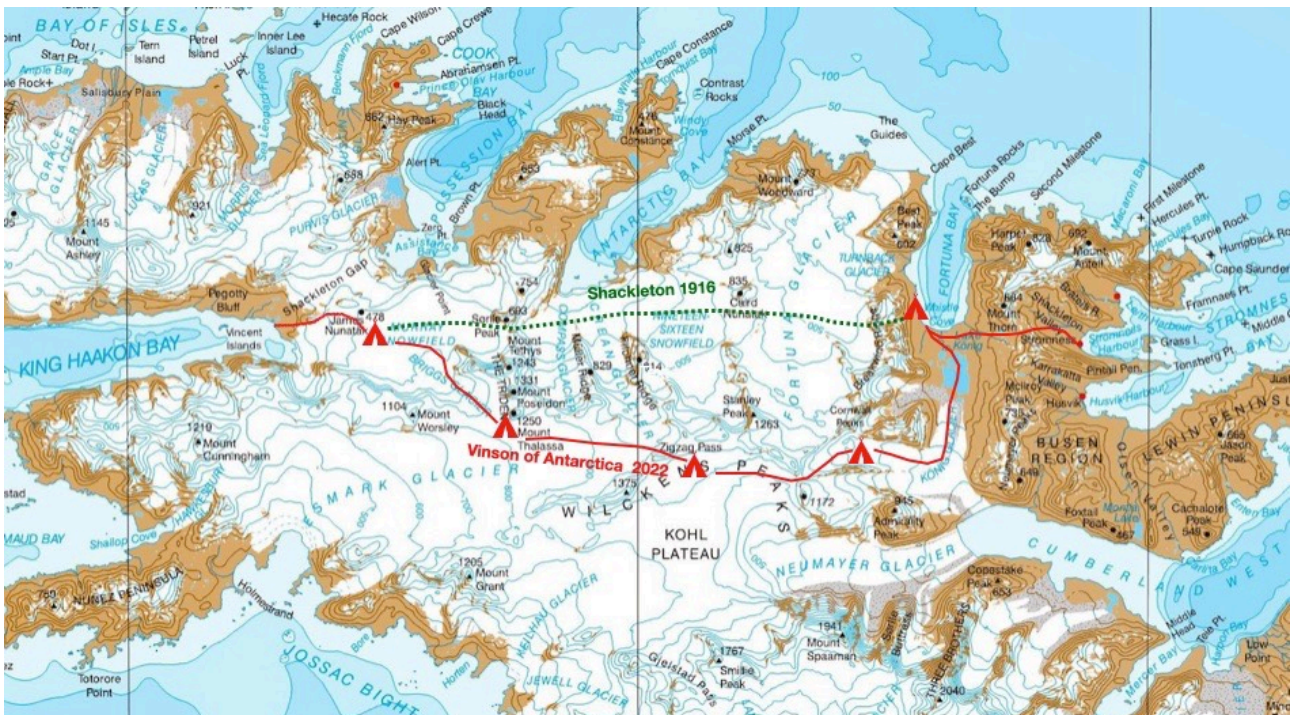
the wind relenting a little, giving us a magnificent sail along the coast to King Haakon Bay, where we anchored that evening just north of the Willis Islands.

FINAL PREPARATIONS

As on all our previous expeditions, we planned to travel 'heavy', each person towing a pulk with generous fuel and food reserves, and a share of the three large heavy duty Terra Firma tents, each with double pole sets, reinforced groundsheets and flysheets and large 40cm snow valances. So we were prepared, if necessary to sit out a four or five day blizzard on the remote Esmark Glacier or Kohl Plateau. Given that heavy payload and the moderately elderly team profile, we were not intending to travel particularly fast. Add to those considerations the still strong wind, it seemed



a good idea to delay departure another day. So on the 20th we ferried all the gear ashore, making a depot a safe distance back from the beach, then going for a trial ski over to Pegotty Bluff, some of us trying out new skis and skins for the first time. After a thoroughly enjoyable outing we returned to *Vinson* for a final dinner on board and good night's sleep, before making an early start on the 21st. For medical reasons Philip Baum decided not to attempt the main traverse, but to stay with the boat and join just for the final leg from Fortuna Bay. So we would be a team of nine, with three in each tent.



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At the next stop Skip and Stephen posed heroically beneath Mt Poseidon which they had climbed in 2014. By mid afternoon we reached the col immediately southwest of Mt Thalassa. Apart from a short awkward boot round the rim of a windscoop, the crossing was straightforward and was followed by a gentle trundle down onto the Eskmark Glacier, where we stopped for our second camp.

DAY 3 – Sept 23

We woke to a sublime sunrise illuminating the southeast face of Mt Thalassa.

THE TRAVERSE

DAY 1 – Sept 21

A brilliant sunny morning, but the persisting wind made the surf landings difficult and gearing up a cold struggle with spindrift. Once assured that Kenneth and Mariana had got the RIB safely back on board *Vinson*, we set off, soon after 9.00 am, stopping to put on ski-crampons for the final steep icy climb to the col leading onto the Murray Snowfield. After a brief cold picnic stop we continued to the first flat spot, where we stopped early to camp. As usual, the three Terra Firma tents were pitched with double poles and with hefty 10 kg snow blocks on all the valances.

DAY 2 – Sept 22

Another beautiful day, with the southerly wind now dying away almost completely, and a perfect snow crust for easy pulk-pulling. We continued east up the Murray then veered southeast up the Briggs Glacier. During a break Jean-Pierre, the yoga instructor, entertained the team with immaculate headstands, ski boots pointed to the blue sky.



Another perfect windless day with the clear light making distances deceptive. It took two hours steady pulking to reach the slope leading to ZigZag Pass. The slope *did* require several zigzags and some precarious pulk-towing, with skins only just adhering to the hard steep crust. We were



rewarded by a glorious col summit view and a fine one kilometre trundle down onto the Kohl Plateau, where we stopped for our third and coldest camp, on another starlit night.

perfect visibility and sublime views down onto Cumberland East Bay. Our good luck persisted on the final outwash plain of the

DAY 4 – Sept 24

A gently descending traverse round the northwest edge of the Kohl Plateau took us to the windscoop below the col leading to the north branch of the König Glacier. With nine people of varied experience and nine still quite heavy pulks to manoeuvre, it took four hours to cross this awkward notch, where both the Kohl and König glaciers have melted back to leave a steep crest of South Georgia's finest crumbling rock. It was late afternoon by the time all the team and all the gear were over the pass, so, after a short ski descent, we stopped to camp on the upper König.



DAY 5 – Sept 25

The promised northerly weather system was starting to reach South Georgia. During the night we had cloud and light snowfall, and we were dreading a shuffling white out shambles down

to Fortuna Bay. But our good luck held, the cloud burnt off and we were actually treated to a fantastic descent of the König, with lovely easy gentle skiing on immaculate snow, with





now drastically receded König Glacier: instead of the dreaded ski-boot hobble across dry rubble, we were treated to perfect skinning across the frozen König Lakes. *And* the snow continued all the way to the Fortuna beach, where we made our final camp in the tussock

Once camp was struck, the RIB came in to ferry all our gear back to *Vinson*, leaving us unencumbered for the final section of the original Shackleton route to Stromness. It was an absolute delight, and apart from the König river crossing we were able to keep skis on all the way from Fortuna Beach to the last patch of snow at Stromness. After a brief champagne celebration, *Vinson* then took us round to Cumberland East Bay, to tie up at Grytviken before the big northerly blow arrived with driving rain that night.



grass. In the afternoon *Vinson* arrived to anchor just offshore and Kenneth and Mariana delivered much-needed cans of beer and bottles of wine, plus Philip Baum who was to join us for the final leg of the traverse to Stromness.

Day 6 – Sept 26

Spectacular lenticular clouds at dawn heralded the forecast bad weather, but amazingly it held off for another twelve hours.



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FINAL DAYS

Cloud and rain on September 27 were a good excuse to take things easy at Grytviken, cleaning tents and cooking equipment, visiting the museum and, in the evening, attending a party in the forward hold of Pharos, tied up at



KEP, with salsa dancing continuing after midnight. The return trudge round the bay to Grytviken, at one o' clock in the morning, on breakable snowcrust, was challenging.

Good weather returned the next day, allowing some of the party to ski up to Echo Pass and back. The following day, September 29, we left Grytviken, sailing initially, then giving up on the light wind and motoring round to St Andrew's Bay for a sunny afternoon amongst the seals and penguins. We anchored that night in Cobbler's Cove. The plan was to spend September 30 skiing over Black Peak. To that end we rose at 6.30 am. But it was soon raining and the wind rising. Given the adverse westerlies promising a slow return to Stanley, we decided to cut our losses, up anchor and head for home.



RETURN VOYAGE

Motoring west along the north coast proved so slow that the skipper agreed to stop and anchor that night in Anchorage Bay, for a relaxed dinner, wine and last sleep at anchor. The next morning, October 1, we started the return voyage proper, but with enjoyable

diversions through the Bay of Isles and Bird Sound before heading into the open sea. The wind was unhelpful for the next few days, so we had to motor almost the entire way back to Stanley. However, with such an excellent crew and genial ski team for company, the six days voyage was not at all irksome and was actually rather enjoyable. On a perfect sunny afternoon, on October 6, we sailed back through The Narrows and tied up in Stanley at 17.30, exactly as predicted by Sebastian Mottram five days earlier. On October 8 most of the ski team said goodbye to the crew and flew back to Santiago.

CONCLUSIONS

The alternative high level route from King Haakon Bay to Stromness proved a perfect ski tour, taking in even more dramatic scenery – and better skiing terrain – than the classic 'Shackleton Traverse'. We were very lucky with the weather, getting a sustained window just when we needed it. However, we were well aware how remote are the Esmark and Kohl glaciers, from where the only feasible exits are either back to King Haakon Bay or Possession Bay, or onward to Fortuna Bay. We took the traverse at a leisurely pace, taking six days in all to cover a route which a really fit party, travelling light, could probably do in two or three days. But we were there to enjoy ourselves, making the most of the mountain interior and carrying enough surplus to cope with an extended blizzard if necessary.

Skip Novak & Stephen Venables October 2022

