

Expedition South Georgia 2022: “In the Footsteps of Ernest Shackleton”



Travelogue

We left Switzerland on Thursday 17 November 2022, travelling via Madrid, Santiago de Chile and Punta Arenas to the Falkland Islands. The outward journey took a total of over sixty hours. On arrival, we were horrified to discover that half of our luggage had not been transported but had been left somewhere along the way. Since there is only one flight to the Falkland Islands per week, we had no choice but to wait.

First, we moved into our quarters on the sailing ship Santa Maria Australis. Our skipper Wolf Kloss proved to be an excellent skipper and host. Thanks to his exceptional knowledge and good contacts, we were then able to undertake interesting excursions on the Falkland Islands during this week of waiting, including to Volunteer Point. We sailed to Kidney Island, Berkley Sound, Port Louis and Yorke Bay before returning to Port Stanley.



During this time, our expedition leader Thomas Ulrich pulled out all the stops in Port Stanley to ensure that the missing luggage would arrive after all. To our great relief, this actually worked, and we were finally able to set sail for South Georgia on Sunday, 27 November.

Because of the unplanned waiting time on the Falkland Islands, our reserve days were already used up, so we had to hope for good sailing conditions and good weather in order to still be able to reach all the destinations of the expedition.

The outward journey went well and took only five days instead of the originally planned six. However, three of the participants got seasick and in general the conditions on board the sailing yacht were very unfamiliar to most of us: very cramped quarters, hardly any privacy and simple food because of the choppy sea. But that was also part of the adventure.



On Friday morning, 2 December, we sailed into King Haakon Bay. The weather was wonderful and the mood on board enthusiastic. For the first time, we finally saw the mountains and glaciers of South Georgia with our own eyes.

Once the Santa Maria Australis was safely anchored, we took the dinghy on several trips to bring the expedition material ashore. There we tried to keep the minimum distance to the fur seals, which was not always easy, as they defended their territory quite aggressively, even though we were only passing by with the material.

Until we reached the entrance to the glacier in the direction of Shackleton Gap, we first had to carry all the material up some 400 meters in altitude over partly impassable terrain, for which all of us had to do two strenuous hikes.



Afterwards, we could finally mount the crampons, and everyone pulled their own sledge first up a steep slope and then after about two kilometers on flatter terrain with skis to our first camp James Nunatak.

We were all very tired after this exhausting day, but also satisfied because we had successfully completed this first, long stage.



The next day we pulled the sledges with skis over the Murray Snowfield, partly through thick fog, but in between the sun showed up. We made good progress. This brought us to the key point of our traverse, Trident Ridge. Thomas Ulrich briefed us on all the details of the descent and showed us a safe way down the upper, steep section and around some crevasses. While we each descended secured to each other in teams of two, he and Alexander Brew, the most experienced and strongest alpinist in our group, took care of the abseiling of the eight sledges over the upper steep section, about 300 meters in total. The lower part was easier again and we were all able to bring our own sled down ourselves. As safety was always Thomas Ulrich's top priority, and the abseiling of the heavy sledges was somewhat complicated, the descent from Trident Ridge down to the glacier took around four hours. In between, however, we also enjoyed the view of Antarctic Bay from high above in glorious weather.

We then pulled our sledges on for another hour or so and set up camp late in the evening in the storm at a glacier moraine on Compass Glacier that was somewhat sheltered from the wind. Because of the strong wind, however, we all had to help each other put up the tents together, as this would otherwise have been impossible. Late and very tired, we crawled into our sleeping bags after a warm meal only

around 11pm and slept soundly despite the storm raging outside. This second day of the crossing was also very exhausting, but we could also be proud of having mastered the key section without any dangerous situations.



The third day of our crossing was very pleasant overall, we made good progress through the rather flat terrain. As we climbed the Nineteen Sixteen Snowfield, we passed a helicopter wreck from the time of the Falklands War. After crossing the highest point of the traverse (Pass Caird Nunatak), it was very easy to make rapid progress on skis and sledges across Fortuna Glacier on gently sloping terrain and good snow.

For the descent from Turnback Glacier, Thomas first had to look for a safe route for quite some time, but then he succeeded. After another abseil with the sledges and all our equipment, we came down from the glacier. We had already seen the Santa Maria Australis down in Anchorage Bay from far above. However, we then had to haul the heavy sledges with all our material from the foot of the glacier all the way to the sea, which required an extra effort from everyone after another long day. On the way to the sea, we again had to walk between many quite aggressive fur seals, but with mutual help we also managed this without an accident. Back at the shore we sorted and packed all the material and after several trips with the help of the crew of the Santa Maria Australis, we were finally all back on our ship at 10pm. We enjoyed dinner on board very much and afterwards we all had a long, relaxing night.



During the whole crossing of South Georgia, it never rained or snowed, the cloud cover and the fog in between did not cause us any difficulties. The temperatures were always pleasant, only slightly below 0 degrees Celsius. And except for the second evening when setting up the tents and the following night in the camp on Compass Glacier, the wind was no problem either. There was hardly any fresh snow on the glaciers during the whole tour. The crevasses were therefore clearly visible everywhere and posed little danger to our group.

The next day, Monday 5 December, we sailed to Grytviken, where the first thing to do was the immigration formalities. The immigration officer was very dutiful but also very friendly and we didn't have to wait long to go ashore and explore the old whaling station. We always made sure to keep enough distance from the fur seals, elephant seals and penguins. There were many photo opportunities, especially the next day when we visited the museum, the post station, and the grave of Ernest Shackleton. We were also interested in the exact replica of the James Caird on display in Grytviken. It was with this simple boat that Ernest Shackleton managed to reach South Georgia in 1916

after an incredible journey of almost 850 nautical miles from Elephant Island and to organize the rescue of his crew stranded on the remote island.



In the afternoon we sailed on to Prince Olaf Harbor, another derelict whaling station in Possession Bay, but no shore leave was allowed. The overnight stay on the sailboat at this quiet anchorage was again very pleasant.

On Wednesday, 7 December, we sailed to Salisbury Plains, where an impressive natural spectacle awaited us. It took several hours for all of us to return from our shore leave with a variety of impressions. Several hundred thousand king penguins live in the huge colony there, and there were again many fur seals, elephant seals, albatrosses, seagulls, and other bird species. The visit to Salisbury Plains confirmed to us once again how important it is to preserve the natural paradise of South Georgia and to strictly regulate access.



The return trip by sailboat to the Falkland Islands was again very strenuous, but thanks to the good weather it only took six days instead of the planned seven. We anchored late on Tuesday evening, 13 December, in Sparrow Cove and enjoyed a surprise cheese fondue on the Santa Maria Australis, which Thomas had brought with him from Switzerland. The next day we drove the last, short stretch to Port Stanley and were relieved on arrival that the whole tour had ended without any major problems and, above all, without any accidents. In Port Stanley we had two more days, among other things for personal hygiene and to pack all the material for the return transport. We also hiked again to the penguin colonies in Yorke Bay and back in beautiful weather. On Friday 16 December, we all enjoyed our last meal together at the Waterfront Restaurant in Port Stanley. The next day we had to wait over five hours at Mount Pleasant Airport for our departure flight, the check-in took an incredibly long time and was tedious. The journey home via Rio Gallegos, Punta Arenas, Santiago de Chile, and Madrid again took over sixty hours.



Conclusion

The expedition was excellently planned and executed by Thomas Ulrich. The group of eight participants got along very well and supported each other. Wolf Kloss and his crew made sure that the sailing trip of more than 1,600 nautical miles in total was safe and as pleasant as possible under the given circumstances. But the unforgettable and incomparable part of this whole trip is definitely South Georgia. The journey there is very time-consuming and involves great hardship, but in return a unique natural paradise awaits you with a fantastic combination of mountains, glaciers and diverse, impressive wildlife.



Jost von Allmen, participant of the South Georgia Expedition led by Thomas Ulrich in November / December 2022

For further information, visit:

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