

“ The Forgotten Islands”

I am now back home after my six-week southern ocean adventure to the very remote South Sandwich Islands on board the RV Golden Fleece a 65ft steel hulled yacht skippered and owned by the legendary French yachtsman and veteran Antarctic sailor Jérôme Poncet.

Joining me on the expedition was Swiss photographer Hansjoerg During together with observer and seabird biologist Andy Black from the South Georgia and South Sandwich Government. Also on board was Lindblad Expedition leader Richard White, a seabird biologist doing penguin counts on behalf of the very worthwhile and understated US based charity Oceanites. The final participant was Tom Hart of Oxford University and The Zoological Society of London currently doing postdoctoral studies in population dynamics and DNA analysis of penguins breeding in the Scotia arc.

Our crew was Jerome's eldest son Dion and his partner Cathy Colle. Dion's ability to handle the zodiac in very rough conditions was a major factor in us achieving so many landings and Cathy's amazing evening meals and endless supply of freshly baked cakes kept the team fuelled throughout the trip!

The South Sandwich Islands are a very remote uninhabited archipelago of eleven volcanic islands, curving through approximately 200 nautical miles of the Scotia Sea; the most northerly is Zavodovski, which lies about 285 nautical miles south east of South Georgia. They are the easternmost extent of the sub-oceanic Scotia Ridge that connects Tierra del Fuego with the Antarctic Peninsula. All islands are active volcanoes and are prone to regular eruptions and earthquakes, the last major eruption being on Montagu Island in 2005 and the last earthquake was just north of Visokoi as recent as December 2010. The southern islands (Southern Thule) were first sighted on the 30th January 1775 by Captain James Cook of the Royal Navy on the HMS Resolution and the northern ones a little later in 1819 by a Russian Admiralty Expedition (RAE) expedition led by Thaddeus Thaddevich Bellingshausen who was of Baltic German origin. He was born in Lahhentagge now part of Estonia and was also confusingly known as Fabian Gottlieb Benjamin von Bellingshausen in his early years.

The islands are entombed in the Antarctic pack ice in winter and are also fed by a cold current out of The Weddell Sea. In summer huge icebergs that have broken off the ice-shelves of the Antarctic Continent drift northwards and often run aground. However in 2011 there was much less ice than normal and only then were there bergs in the south of the archipelago from Bristol Island southwards to Thule. Also there were hardly any blue sculpted icebergs that the region is usually notorious for. Most of the islands have ice caps and glaciers and it is only possible to get ashore on the ice-free peninsulas and rocky coastline underneath. However in summer the islands of Zavodovski and Bellingshausen are completely ice free and large parts of Candlemas and Saunders also.

Although they are largely forgotten about the South Sandwich Islands are actually part of British Dependent territories and have been since 1908 and are administered by the South Georgia Government. Andy Black was the first representative of the South Georgia and South Sandwich Government to visit the islands in thirteen years.

Visits are very rare due to their exposed nature and difficulty landing and apart from occasional visits by cruise ships, some with helicopters you can almost count the amount of landings by boat over the last ten years on one hand!

Jerome undertook the only previous official survey of seabirds and mammals of the islands that was commissioned by the SG &SS government in 1997 with his yacht Damien 11. The task for his colleagues on board at the time proved to be too hard and he ended up completing the survey alone!

To my knowledge there have been relatively few landings in recent years. The only previous landings I know about are that of S.Y.Freydis in 1993, BBC cameramen Doug Allen and Dave Roots on Zavodovski in 1998 filming the series “Life in the Freezer”, US Ham radio enthusiast George Fremin and team on Southern Thule with RV Braveheart in January 2002, German nature film producer Uwe Muller in 2004 with his film production “ End of the Glaciers” on SY La Sourire with Huges and Marie Paul Delinier, photographer Maria Stenzel on assignment with National Geographic Magazine in 2006 and Brazilian photographer Sebastian Selgado in 2009 who specializes exclusively in black and white images. This was Jerome’s fifth visit to the archipelago and he is one of very few people to have landed anyone onto Zavodovski from a boat in recent times.

Unfortunately the weather throughout the trip was very poor with only three days of sunshine in 21days. High winds, gales and swell made landing very difficult on each island almost on every occasion. Despite this we managed landings on every island in the group except Leskov which is impregnable except by helicopter. Mist and low cloud gave limited opportunities for photography as light and conditions were generally poor.

Having departed from Stanley, Falkland Islands around 22.00hrs local time (GMT-3) on 1st January we arrived at Gritviken, South Georgia 16.00 hrs (GMT) on Thursday 6th January. After a night at anchor in the comfort of Ocean Harbour and a brief spell ashore we departed via The Clerke and Bishop Rocks on the morning of the 7th arriving 07.00 hrs at Zavodovski on the 9th January in a very strong north westerly wind and rough sea.

Zavodovski has two small boulder beaches on its east coast where the waves break with enormous ferocity because they shelve so steeply. They are the main access onto the top of the island for Penguins returning to the colony after feeding out at sea. The beach is littered with dead carcasses where the birds have been hurled out of the water by the breaking waves and bludgeoned against the rocks. The small beach would be an option for a landing on a very calm day but Jerome told us that he has never known it possible on any occasion throughout his past visits. There is also another option in the north east of the island up a small cliff but there was too much swell to even think about attempting a landing here. C.A.Larsen had his boat capsized and crushed here in an attempt to land in 1908 and we did not want to end up the same way!

The only possibility left was up a small cliff on the East of Fume Point, it is a little bit tricky to say the least and not for the fainthearted as I found out! It is only possible at one location where the rocky shoreline gets a miniscule of protection and rest bite for a few seconds from the continuously pounding waves. Once you have timed your jump from the zodiac and have a foot hold on the wet rocks it is a

short and relatively easy ascent up a small cliff where there is a window in the rock giving access to a large protected cleft which gives amazing shelter and protection from the sea and elements. This in turn gives access through the volcanic gullies and storm driven boulders onto the top of the island. If a few stones were cleared from the uneven floor it would make an ideal location to pitch a tent, as it is dry, protected on all sides from the prevailing winds and also Penguin guano free!

It is hard to imagine the sheer number of Chinstrap's breeding on Zavodovski but I hope some of the images that I have taken will illustrate the magnitude of the colony. It is conceivable that there could be in the region of 1.5 to 2.0 million pairs, which is probably one third of the world population! We will have to see what sort of figure the scientists come up with when all the data is analyzed to get a more accurate figure.

The weather was very poor for the first day I was ashore bitterly cold and windy with low cloud and poor visibility then driving rain and sleet later in the day. I didn't get time in the end to walk around to Pacific or Acrid Point to get some shots of the colony with fumaroles as a backdrop! There were also much smaller numbers of Macaroni penguins breeding among the Chinstraps and a small colony of Southern Giant Petrels along the northeast ash plain. Small numbers of Sub-Antarctic Skuas were also present and breeding feeding mainly on dead penguin carcasses. Large numbers of male Fur Seals were hauled out on the ash slopes and gullies above the large boulder beach but no pups were present. There were also about ten female Elephant Seals lying on the boulders but again with no pups.

The only evidence of any human activity on the island is some meteorological equipment on the north side of Mount Curry. I am informed belongs to the South African's and was erected with support from helicopters from the Ice beaker SAS Outeniqua. This station presumably gives them early warning of weather systems developing on this side of the Atlantic. Also there is a small and very prominent head stone that was erected as a request from a descendent relative of The Marquis de Traversay, the Russian Naval minister who was responsible for sending Bellingshausen in 1819. It was apparently erected with the assistance of a Russian cruise ship and helicopter but it has now in a state of disrepair and has lost the nameplate. It is a very strange that the SG & SS Government gave permission for this eyesore in such a pristine environment particularly given Traversays relative significance in the discovery of the islands and perhaps a stone for Bellingshausen himself might have been more poignant! On leaving Jerome took Golden Fleece around to the west side of Zavodovski, the sea was very rough indeed and the visibility poor with low cloud but we did get chance to see and witness all the steaming fumaroles in the cliffs. The residual sulphur was causing the sea underneath to look orange and would have been even more spectacular on a clear sunny day.

After Zavodovski we headed for the spectacular Visokoi (formally called Ostrov Torsona after Lieutenant Konstatin Petrovich Torson of the Vostok). Then later it was changed to Ostrov Vysokoy or "High Island" Here we managed to find some protection from a strong swell and northwest wind behind the reef running out to Coffin Rock. We arrived early evening and the light was the best so far on the trip so I managed a few shots of the hanging glaciers on Mount Hodson. There is also a spectacular nunatak in the form of a large pillar high up in between the glaciers, it

reminded me of The Old Man of Storr on Skye. The next day we landed at Finger Point, I climbed high up the scree slopes above the Chinstrap colony and concentrated my time taking pictures of Antarctic Fulmar and the Cape Petrels that were nesting among the scree and boulders. Just as we were leaving two Humpback whales were sighted. It wasn't long before they came over spending nearly an hour with us swimming around and diving under the boat. Dion, Richard and Tom decided to get into the water and have a swim with them. The bigger male came surprisingly close to Dion almost threatening him by splashing his fins and large fluke close by.

Later In the afternoon the three scientists made a short landing at Irving Point to count the Chinstrap colony there. The landing was very difficult as it was against rocks where the waves were breaking hard, they soon discovered the rocky plateau to be full of large hollows and trying to walk inside them was the only route ashore. Keeping their feet was impossible as the waves broke knocking them off their feet time and time again. It was on the beach just around the point that the majority of Fur Seal pups are born in the archipelago. Approximately 1500 pups were observed. After a better pick up from shore, as the swell had eased a little we dropped the anchor near Mikhaylov Point for the night.

Next morning we pulled up the anchor and repositioned to the east side of Vindication Island, as it was forecast to blow hard from the northwest. We arrived early evening and firstly reced the coastline between Braces and Chinstrap Point. There was too much swell for Braces so we wasted no time in landing at Chinstrap Point, this time it was against a steep boulder beach and proved quite tricky. We had just observed two separate incidents of Fur Seals eating Penguins in this location although there wee only a few on the beach and a solitary Weddel. As soon as the counts were finished by we were off and back onboard as the waves were starting to break really hard against the beach. Jérôme headed up to Braces Point and tucked Golden Fleece in close under the cliffs to weather what turned out to be 36 hours of Gale Force winds and very high seas.

On the morning of the 17th January the swell had abated enough for us to go and try a landing on Candlemas Island. The swell against the beach between Seaserpent Cove and the Medusa Pool on the west side of Candlemas was to high to consider a landing so we headed around to Kraken Cove on the east side and effected one there.

It is more than likely that the topography of the two main beaches is changing over the years with winter storms and volcanic activity. It is almost possible at the moment to get a zodiac (with the engine up) into the Medusa Pool at high tide. A few hours work would clear the remaining boulders that are at the moment preventing access to what would be a fantastic natural harbour. C.A. Larsen noted that when he visited Candlemas in 1908 there was good shelter in the form of two harbours. Clearly both the Medusa and Gorgon Pool were open to the sea in 1908 and provided excellent shelter for his ship.

There are large colonies of Chinstraps and also Macaronis around Kraken Cove and east of the Gorgon Pool. At Clemera Flats they are mixed with a few Adelies as well. There are also other colonies on the headland above Seaserpent Cove, at Sarcophagus point and at Carbon Point all the way down to Clapmatch Point.

Breakbones Plateau has a large Southern Giant Petrel colony numbering about 1500 pairs. There appears to have been a huge increase since the 1997 survey in the population of breeding and non-breeding Subantarctic Skuas. This population seems to have now exploded from the 349 breeding pairs recorded in 1997 to something in the region of 2000-2500 resident birds including non-breeders. There were huge middings of regurgitated pellets and broken penguin eggs littered all over the plateau. Black-bellied Storm Petrel chicks were also found predated and were confirmed breeding on the island in 1997. Maybe the reason they have increased here on Candlemas (as appose to Zavodovski) where there are more penguins and eggs is because they need an additional food source to supplement their diet in the form of ground nesting Petrels. The existence of the brackish pools on Candlemas may also be a factor, as Skuas are known to like to bathe and preen in fresh water. I do not know what the cost saving and benefit in energy terms is also for a Skua to take in brackish fresh water as appose to salt water but it must account for something.

The Medusa Pool is littered with storm blown driftwood some of it probably many years old, there are also a few whalebones. It has large numbers of Male Fur seals loafing around its shoreline but no females or pups were observed. I also counted ten King Penguins (several in molt) but one in very good condition looked to be incubating an egg on its feet. The fold in the belly was very prominent and was characteristic of an incubating adult. Breakbones plateau is good habitat for petrels and both Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm petrels were observed flying around. The small rockface of the plateau along the northern shore of the Medusa Pool had a few pairs of breeding Cape Petrels and a small colony of Kelp Gulls some of which had chicks.

British Antarctic Survey had a field camp to assist scientific work on Candlemas in 1997 and there are still pieces of the camp left remaining today. I am told they had to evacuate in a hurry and didn't get everything back on the support ship HMS Endurance in time. They have erected some equipment in the form of seismic probes, batteries and solar panels on the headland overlooking Seaserpent Cove.

True to form the wind was picking up from the east and getting off the island was not easy. Dion timed his approach in the zodiac and brought it in behind a big breaker giving us a few seconds to scramble and dive into the zodiac before he slammed it into reverse to get out of the danger zone. There were several occasions when one of us did not make it into the zodiac but we could be pulled free into deeper and safer water by just holding on to side ropes on the tube of the craft until it was easier to get in out of the surf.

Jerome repositioned to the west side of Candlemas and we were able to drop the anchor in Seaserpent Cove for the night. Things didn't improve so we remained here for 36hrs before heading south on the morning of the 19th January to try a landing at Clapmatch Point. It was a wet, windy, cold and overcast day but the scientists still managed a full count of the Chinstrap colony. A Leopard Seal was also observed hauled out on the beach.

The weather had still not improved by midday so we decided to call it a day and try our luck on Saunders arriving off Natrass Point in Cordelia Bay in the early evening. Again landing on the dark beach on Saunders is very tricky as my

colleague from Oceanwide Expeditions Jan Belgers found out in March 2006 when their zodiac was overturned while attempting to land from the cruise ship Aleksey Maryshev luckily without injury. The landscape on Saunders is very eerie with numerous dark gullies running down the hillside to the beach from Mount Michael almost like deep veins. It is possible to observe the different layers in the volcanic ash where sections of bank have broken away exposing alternate layers of ash and feathers. It shows how each eruption has covered the penguin colony over the years and would give a very good timeframe and subject for future study. The weather was very poor and everyone was back onboard by early afternoon. We then moved on to Montagu Island the site of the most recent volcanic eruption in 2005.

It was a glorious morning the best on the trip so far and our first landing was at Matthias Point which is basically a steep ridge running down to the sea. From the boat the climb looked impossible but once ashore it was clearly “do able” The cliffs above show some interesting geological formations and folding and the area is covered in a deep red volcanic dust. We landed against a low narrow rock ledge then scrambled up the ridge covered in nesting Chinstraps, this in turn gave access to the cliffs and boulder scree running down the side of the glacier.

Again I used my time taking images of Antarctic Fulmar and Cape Petrel, which were nesting, on the cliffs and among the boulders. We also found two accessible Snow Petrel chicks in their nests, but the adults were nowhere to be seen and also a Black-bellied Storm Petrel sitting on its nest under a large boulder. I could see down into the small bay below and a Leopard Seal was skinning a penguin in the water tossing it too and fro. As we waited for Dion in the Zodiac it patrolled just in front of me but only put its head out of the water once.

In the afternoon we landed at Allen Point a little further south on Montagu. I set up my camera and long lens on a tripod where most of the Chinstraps were landing hoping to capture some images of a Leopard Seal taking a penguin but it was to no avail. Once back on board we reced the south coast of Montagu down to Horsburgh Point observing a large avalanche in Phyllis Bay before returning for the to Scarlett Point and dropping the anchor for the night.

Next morning we set off for Bristol Island. The conditions and visibility were poor which was a shame because there were several large icebergs around the Freezland and Wilson Rocks. A landing was made (the easiest of the trip) on the south side of some rocks at an unnamed point on the south west coast. There was a small Chinstrap colony and a few Imperial Cormorants nesting but the landing was brief because of the unsettled conditions. Jerome anchored to the east of Harker Point for the night just off a sandy beach. There were several Humpback whales feeding just offshore.

We arrived at the east side of Hewison Point the site of the former Argentinian base early afternoon on the 23rd January and wasted no time in getting ashore. The visibility was poor with thick fog and constant rain. The landing here was up a little geo/gut and onto the rocks. There was quite a lot of swell but it was breaking at the entrance to the geo leaving the beach relatively calm for the landing. A refuge hut was constructed here in by the Argentineans in 1954-55 and is still just standing although in a poor state of repair. It was last used in 2002 by some US Ham radio enthusiasts but on side has now collapsed.

The military outpost and base Corbetta Uruguay was established in November 1976 by the then military Junta right in the middle of a large Chinstrap penguin rookery but it lay undiscovered by Britain until December 1976. A diplomatic solution could not be reached for its removal so after the victory over Argentina in the Falkland Islands a task force was sent to remove all personnel. This was done in June 1982 and the facility was left unmanned. In December 1982 the base was blown up after the warship HMS Hecate discovered that someone had removed the Union Jack from the base flagpole and run up the Argentinean flag. This seems to have been a very hasty decision with no concern for the wildlife and penguins nesting at the time or for the future environmental impact.

It is absolutely amazing that the neither our government, nor the South Georgia and South Sandwich government, British Antarctic Survey or anyone else has made any effort or moves or lobbied parliament since to get this environmental disaster cleaned up and I would be very interested to know why it was destroyed. Clearly someone was accountable for this action at the time and steps need to be taken to clean up our mess. We are very good at criticising other nations but should perhaps look closer to home and get our own house in order. A large part of the ground is contaminated and the resultant debris is of concern to the thousands of Chinstraps which nest here.

On the morning of the 24th January the fog had lifted and the rain stopped so we decided to have another day at Hewison Point. The swell had also settled a little and Dion was able to drive the zodiac right up onto the small pebble beach in the geo. The scientists needed more time to finish their counts and I set off to the Point in the hope of capturing some images of Leopard Seal. As it turned out there were no Leopard Seals around so I concentrated on Chinstraps being hurled out of the water onto the stony beach! In the afternoon we circumnavigated the island, which included a bit of tricky navigation over the reef that extends out to the northeast from Beach Point where we got down to 5m of water. Jérôme decided to drop the anchor in the large bay south of Beach Point on the east of the island where it was relatively calm.

The next day was one of the highlights of the trip for me and our target was to land and spend the day on Bellingshausen. We were put ashore on a rocky beach at Isaacson Point and from there it was a short scramble up the low ledges above the beach onto the top of the island. I was eager to climb up inside the volcano where I had read that quite a number of Snow Petrels were breeding among the rocks inside the crater. I could see a lot of smoke rising from fumeroles inside the crater and wondered if it might be too dangerous to access.

I was not to be disappointed and soon found the ideal location. Just below the crater rim were some large boulders and a unique rock formation (one rock having an archway or window in it). There were about ten nests in this area all with downy chicks with the adults away feeding. It was not long before one adult returned to feed its chick. The nest was underneath the boulders but I had a good view of the bird alighting nearby then walking to its nest underneath the boulders. The problem was that I could not get a sharp image because of all the sulphurous fumes that just never let up. It was however an amazing experience and one I will never forget.

The night was spent at anchor south of Resolution Point on Cook Island, it had snowed overnight and Bellingshausen was now covered. After a quick landing by the scientists on the west coast we headed to Beach Point on Thule. This turned out to be our last time ashore and probably the best weather of the trip. The view across to the snow-capped Cook Island was just stunning. I did find another Snow Petrel to photograph but the nest was in a difficult position to obtain really good results.

Our final night was spent at anchor off Beach Point before starting the long voyage back to Stanley the next morning. We departed from Thule at around 8.00 am on the 27th January arriving at Stanley at 9.00 am on Thursday 3rd June.

This distance is around 1150 miles, which we covered in seven days. Not bad going!