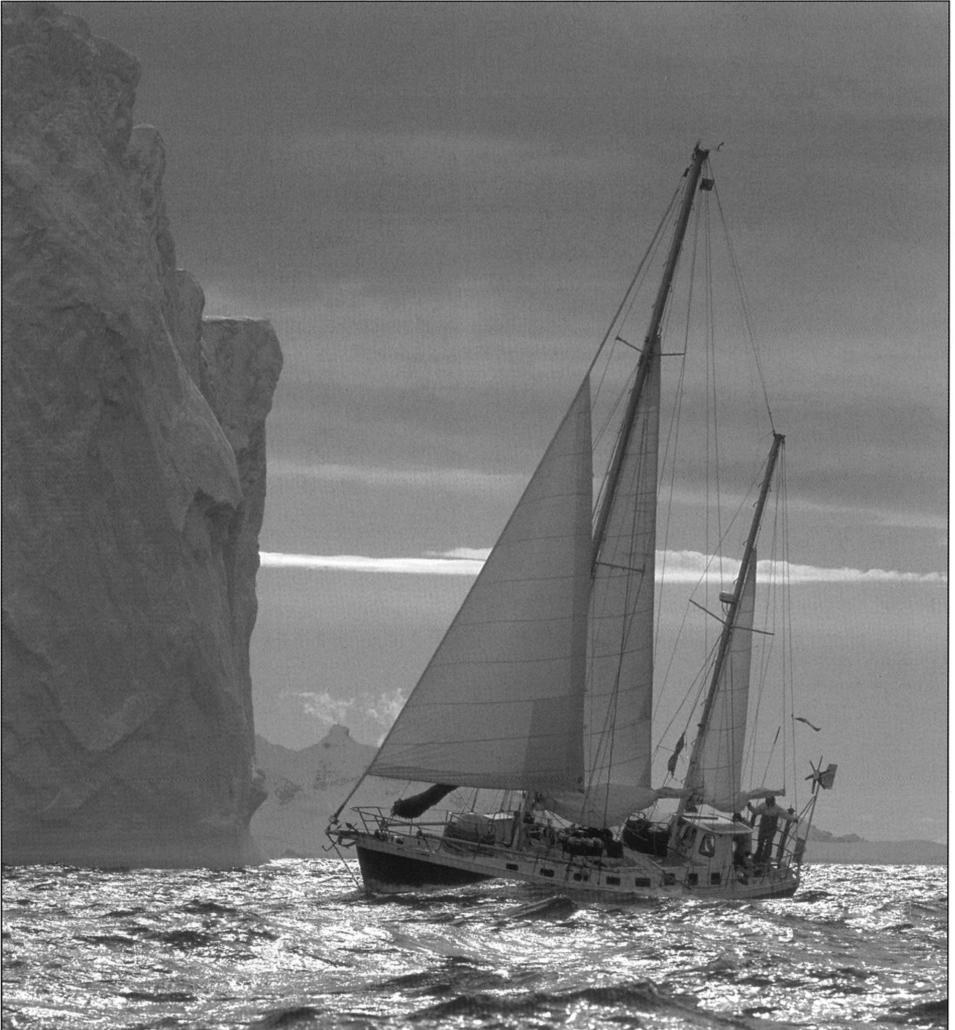


THE ENDLESS SUMMER EXPEDITION

A quest to lose oneself between Alaska and Antarctica.

ALUN HUBBARD



Sailing vessel *Gambo*, hard-reefed and close-hauled in breezy conditions in the Gerlache Strait, Antarctic Peninsula.
Peter Lane Taylor

In 1999 Dave Hildes and I scraped our pennies together and bought a 47-foot steel ketch called *Gambo*, which, over the next four years—with the help of a scratch crew of climbing misfits, barflies, and dumpster-divers—we bobbed our way up to Alaska, down to Hawaii, on to New Zealand, and then hung a left to Cape Horn, Antarctica, and South Georgia Island. Ostensibly, our purpose was to bag loads of remote mountains in a hard-assed, Tilmanesque manner, but the trip more likely resembled a low-budget floating gypsy/eco-tourist operation. During this time I made many new friends, lost some, learned how to sail, shout loudly, and inflict significant liver damage upon myself. I also pretty much forgot how to climb.

For the excessively pedantic, we covered about 25,000 miles and attempted about 40 mountains, of which we succeeded on about half. Notable named ascents include Cook (St. Elias Range), Persson (near Cook); Baird, Aspiring, Cook (NZ); Luigi, 1st & 2nd Sisters of Fief, Hoegh, Britannia (Antarctica); and an attempt on Paget (South Georgia).

I served a full sentence. Dave Hildes, Toby Ross, Chris Barnet, Bernard (Casanova) Eyrhart, Greg Brown, Jeff Martin, Chris (Jabba) Nelson, Paul Dumfy, Peter (Pedro) Taylor, John (Jonkim) Millar, Grant Redvers, Davide Fasel, Elliot Robertson, Andy Mitchell, Lena Rowat, Hamish Millar, Tim Hall, Martin Stuart, Davie Robinson, and Stuart Holmes all did suspended time.

Space and the impaired attention span of the modern reader preclude a full chronological account of this enterprise, so herein I've rendered the high- and low-lights in all their unadulterated glory into a series of user-friendly vignettes.

Early May, 1999, Vancouver, British Columbia. Hildes and I are in a fix. We've got head-splitting hangovers, two free months, and an abundance of bad news. The body of Davide Persson, our good friend and our most experienced climber, has just been recovered after he caught an edge and fell while telemarking down Mt. Rainier's Liberty Ridge. Andy Grey, owner and skipper of Loki, recruited to sail us up to Disenchantment Bay, Alaska, and back, has bailed us for his pregnant girlfriend. Bertrand has woman troubles (actually we've all got woman troubles, but thankfully we're not all French). So we've no team, no transport, no women, and I'm not feeling so hot either.

However, it's one of those balmy spring British Columbia days, and we head downtown to meet Andy for a conciliatory voyage around False Creek before lining up more illicit activities for the evening ahead. During the festivities I spot a red dragon painted on the bow of a sailboat moored at a nearby marina. Later, Hildes and I scramble over a gate to check her out. The boat is big, green, and built like a brick shithouse. A gruff voice hails us from below. I explain my Welsh roots and our plight. One salty sea-dog, Dai Neale, invites us aboard and cracks the seal on a bottle of Mount Gay. We compliment him on a fine boat; he enquires as to how much we've got in the bank.

Ten days later, the day the registration papers are signed, we weigh *Gambo's* hefty anchor and head north with our new acquaintances, Chris and Toby, both shanghaied from a local pub. We're to pick-up Greg (who's just returned from Mt. Logan's east ridge) and Casanova on the way. The boat's skookum and we haven't a care in the world, apart from where to put fuel, how to sail, decode a tide-table, etc.

Four weeks later, St. Elias Range. After an uncomfortable bivy forced by an unwelcome blizzard that sprang up 15 hours earlier, leaving us wandering blindly like lost sheep looking for the top of Mt. Cook, we stumble out of sleeping bags to a clear dawn and a stunning post-storm skyscape. Bertrand's toes are frostbitten and we're into the last rations, but the wind has dropped and the

dream team is back in action. Everything is plastered in rime ice, and in the 20-minute slog to the now-visible summit, Mt. Logan starts to glow and is then brilliantly silhouetted against the rising sun. On top we shake hands, take photos, smile, and stamp about a lot. It's a fantastic moment and I innocently ask if anyone's up for a little jaunt to Antarctica.

Somewhere between Hawaii and New Zealand, October, 2000. I lie listlessly across my bunk as the last puff of wind dies and the blocks and booms start banging again and the sails flog themselves to death. Soon the racket will be drowned by the monotonous drone of the diesel, which may put me to sleep. We left the women and Tonga, an idyllic but now dreamlike Eden, five days ago, along with Greg whose somewhat unexpected ritual of tears, loathing, and Prozac was getting out of hand. All is well now, but the equinoctial gales predicted from New Zealand have failed to materialize. Sailing *Gambo* about the tropics in light breezes is a bit like using a Hagland Polar Terrain Vehicle for a Californian road trip. *Gambo* has bobbed and wobbled its way across the Pacific for as long as I can remember, and the ocean has become my view, toilet, bath, sun-bed, compost-heap, source of nutrition, Sunday matinee, late-night thriller, and psychological nightmare. Dead Calm is the film that springs to mind. With no wind and not much fuel left, soon the ocean may become my mistress.

The decent booze ran out yesterday and Jabba-the-Hut (Chris) has slowly but systematically pulled *Gambo's* interior apart in search of tedium-relieving distractions. I've hidden the analgesics. Suddenly he gives out a yelp and his grime-covered bulk emerges from the fo'c's'le victorious with two trays of forgotten Budweiser under each arm. We tuck into the warm, gaseous fluid.

Six hours later, just after midnight, Jabba and I are on watch. The beer is finished but we've made a sizeable dent in the synthetic gin picked up in Samoa. It's also Jeff's birthday, and we've been celebrating by chucking Chinese firecrackers stuffed into pickled eggs and mouldy vegetables down below hoping to provoke some response, any response. Jeff and Dumfy know better, so miffed and clutching the remains of the gin, Jabba and I attempt "Follow the Leader" from one end of the boat to the other without touching the deck. Tangled in the rigging somewhere, I lose consciousness and land on deck with a thud.

I wake in the same position, blistering under the heat and sweating alcohol. It is another perfect cloudless tropical day with no wind, and I have a parched throat, a tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and a jackhammer is pounding my head. Jeff, the fresh-faced birthday-boy, beams me a smile as he hauls in a tuna. I squint empathetically at the suffocating fish as it quivers before Jeff smacks it over the head with a spanner.

Later, taking down our daily position, I realize we are within yards of the international date line. In a spontaneous surge of euphoria, we stop the engine, strip, and jump in. We're five days from the nearest civilization and, impulsively, somewhat mysteriously, all four of us start swimming away from the boat. The film has now switched to Picnic at Hanging Rock. After five minutes we stop, tread water, and look back and marvel at this surreal little green and white bobbing thing that has carried us mere mortals such vast distances. Then a ripple crosses the water. I feel a whiff cross my face and in stunned terror we watch *Gambo's* sails ruffle. The headache's gone and Jeff's 10-hour birthday is also up.

Mid-October, 2001, Lyttelton Boat Yard, New Zealand. Grant's back, all fresh faced and keen from a week's pre-med emergency course at Wanaka. He's got a bunch of Kiwi guiding mates in tow. They look hard and surly and dubiously poke around what's left of *Gambo*. "When you planning

to leave?" one of them asks innocently enough. I disentangle myself from a spaghetti of wiring and my response even sounds ludicrous to my own ears. "Er, end of the month?" *Gambo* equals chaos and sits on the hard surrounded by her own intimate innards. As we speak, Jonkim is grinding out ominously large chunks of the bow and stem, while Garry is drilling apparently random holes in the boat, shaking his head in a not entirely encouraging fashion. It's been non-stop for the last fortnight and I haven't showered in this time, falling unconscious each night in the same filthy clothes in a hastily cleared space below. But there's progress. The new engine is in, the rigging's good, and the hull's been blasted, welded, and painted half a dozen times.

Gambo's tribulations as she's been dismembered and deconstructed have provided the mainstay entertainment for all the other boat owners in the yard, who fine tune and polish their cherished beauties for the racing season. But the lack of pretension of our motley crew have endeared us to all and not an hour goes by without someone waltzing over to offer a beer, old paint, advice, or the like. Garry, our hired, weather-beaten Kiwi of indeterminate age who subsists entirely on a diet of Nescafé and Rothman's, has become an oracle in all things nautical. At first I was too bashful to inform him of our true intentions, but now that he's got wind of it, he's taken up the crusade with gusto. "Na, mate, ya gonna wan' nothin' less than inch plate up front to take on those bergs. Don' wan'er goin' daaan like the Titanic, eh?" During a bleak moment, I consult the Oracle. "Ah, na worries, she's a bit of Maori job, but she's a goer." I'm reassured but still have to find money, skis, anti-fowling, obscure charts, depth sounder, medical kit, outboard, inflatable, a year's provisions, more money, and the instructions for putting the wiring back together. Jonkim walks up, hand over his eye. He's got a shard of steel in it.

Six weeks later, around 57 degrees south in the Southern Ocean. We're well south of the Antarctic convergence zone now, and again the ocean has become our world. But this time there's no shortage of wind and it's pretty cold too. The batteries no longer hold charge and the diesel fuel's gone waxy. More significantly, the wind has picked up to 70 mph north-westerly, gusting force 12. To anyone well versed in "How to Sail" textbooks that's "Air filled with foam, waves over 45 feet, sea completely white with driving spray, visibility greatly reduced." Under such conditions these books will also inform one to employ "storm survival tactics," jargon for pulling the sails down, which seems eminently sensible. Progress is definitely on the up though, and in a week we've covered 1,500 miles under bare poles. Cape Horn looms about five days off.

Outside, it's pretty breezy and the waves are phenomenal. Estimating wave height is much like estimating ice-climb angles; both are prone to embellishment. I am mesmerized by these gray-bearded monsters, stacked up, wave upon wave upon wave, and get a distant, out-of-body feeling marveling at the surreal mass of water that emerges out of the gloom. Our mast, 50-feet high, is dwarfed by them. But they have a long wave-length and *Gambo* surfs nicely and feels in control. I'm just concerned for any further deterioration and icebergs, of which I'd spotted one.

It is primeval below: the dank, semi-frozen interior is like a bombed World War I dugout. We flinch as the biggest waves break on deck, shuddering the steel frames and squeezing high-pressure jets of freezing water through the hatch seals. Everything drips and virtually all time not on watch is spent in salt-sodden sleeping bags keeping warm. Morale is high, though. We're exhilarated by the sheer scale of the waves and isolation, and therein lies the beauty of going to sea with a bunch of mountaineers. It's a marginal improvement on snow-holing, and there's plenty of music, literature, and food.

On December 3 the pressure bottoms out and the cold front passes through, accompanied

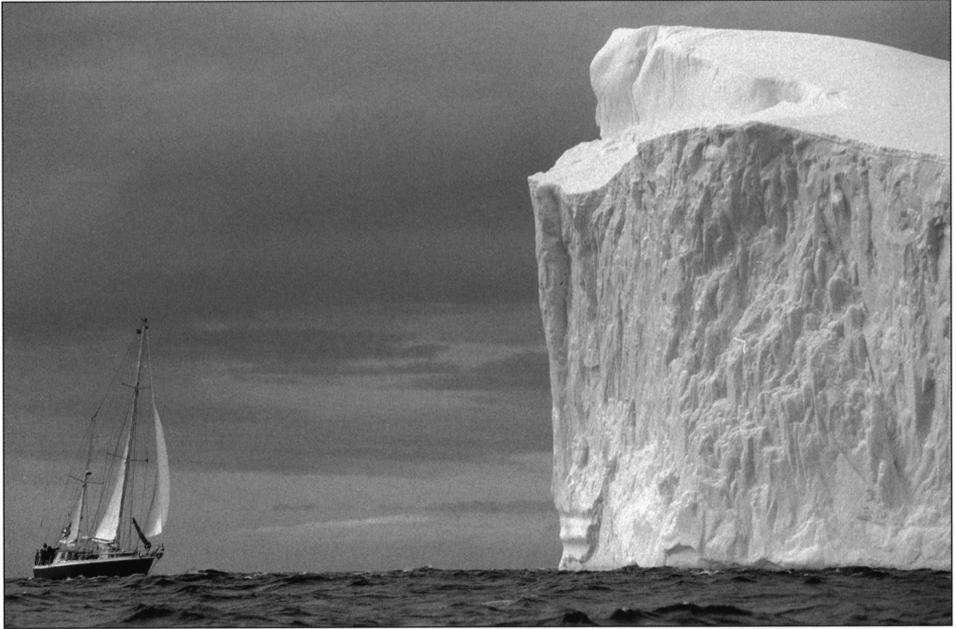
by a savage wind shift and a sea that in nautical-speak is termed “lumpy.” I hastily re-read the “storm” chapter in the textbook, and it informs me to throw all manner of junk off the stern attached to 300-foot loops of one-inch nylon hawser to reduce boat speed. We do this but it has no effect, so we then deploy a 20-foot water-parachute from the bow that comes mighty close to ripping my arm off. This works better, though, bringing our bow up into the 100-mph gusts. The real problem is there’s no prevailing swell though; the sudden wind shift has sent the whole lot into a random towering maelstrom and there’s little to do other than sit tight. After 18 hours the wind slackens, so the storm sail is hoisted, and on we go.

That night we get knocked down. Grant’s on watch, the rest of us are sleeping, and suddenly the boat is thrown over about 130 degrees to starboard and back up, all within 10 seconds. After the initial shock of coming to on the cabin floor, surrounded by utter chaos (topped off with a vat of lovingly prepared veggie chili), it’s pretty obvious from the motion that the boat’s okay. I call out to each of the crew. Jonkim and Peter, who have also been flung across the cabin, are fine. Grant, who’d been doing the chili justice at the chart table, sat in horror as the galley rained upon him. Cutlery, pressure cooker, and the entire set of “unbreakable” crockery had dispersed around the cabin in a zillion pieces. There’s a knife embedded in the woodwork next to his head. We sit there in a mass of books, pots, clothes, broken glass, and food, dazed and confused. As the adrenaline hit subsides, I stifle a giggle and a lighter side to the bedlam prevails. It’s not at all unlike the feeling after surviving one’s first whanger.

January 2002, Weincke Island, Antarctica. With the additional ballast of Hildes, Elliot, and Davide Fasel picked up in Ushuaia (along with a ton of kit/stores and a couple of skinned sheep), now we are the Magnificent Seven and the Endless Summer Antarctic Expedition is a reality. We’ve been based along the west coast of the Peninsula (a.k.a. the Banana Belt) for almost a week and we’re having a hoot. The infamous Drake Passage was a doddle (even to complete sailing novices) and New Year’s Day was appropriately celebrated in a haze of single malt and a stupidly entertaining, if not outright vicious, snowball fight with the crew of a French charter boat.

Apparently though, the Antarctic summer season is not going well—the weather is uncharacteristically unstable and sea ice completely jams Crystal Sound, our intended climbing destination 200 miles farther south. Nonetheless, we are stunned by the magical scenery, wildlife, and the wealth of mountains and gorgeous routes. An easy decision is made to focus our efforts on the Wall and Fief Ranges of Wiencke Island until conditions south ameliorate. Within minutes of mooring up against the fast-ice in Port Lockroy, our skis and climbing kit are unloaded. Jonkim, Davide, Hildes, and Elliot camp in the midnight twilight for a three a.m. start to check out the first of the unclimbed Seven Sisters of Fief. I awake early, and am pleased to see that only ski tracks remain. Later, Grant, Peter, and I sail *Gambo* round to a safer haven in Dorian Cove, where numerous shorelines can be set up to hold the boat steady in the 90-mph williwaws that sweep down from the icecap. A shallow reef across the entrance also bars the bigger bergs from wreaking havoc. We are quickly learning the perils of Antarctic yachting, but Dorian Cove provides the perfect haven, complete with an operations hut built by the British Navy during WWII and equipped with bunks, Primus stoves, and 1940s pin-ups.

By early evening, getting anxious, we spot two figures skiing across Thunder Glacier. Within minutes Jonkim and Davide schuss the last slopes down into the cove. As they arrive, Hildes and Elliot come into view. They are knackered but elated, and I am chuffed as hell, badgering them with countless questions. They succeeded on a difficult mixed route up chossy rock, with some

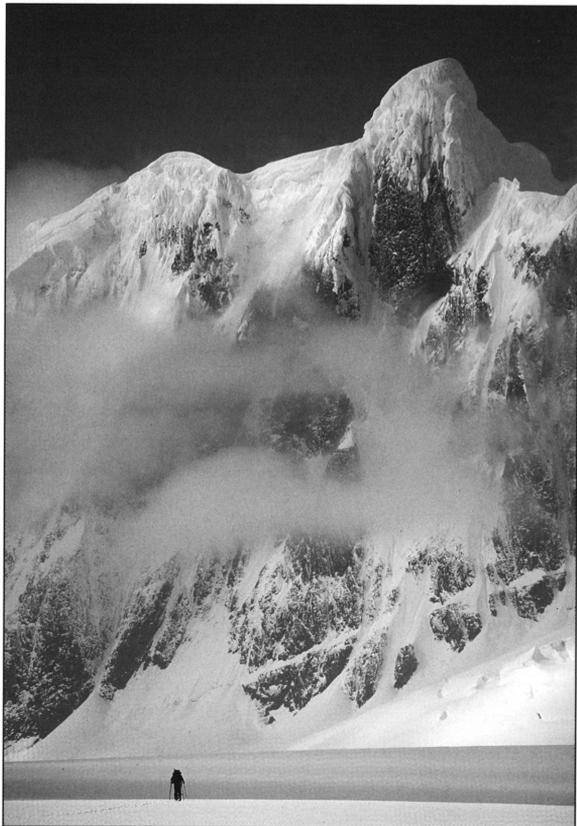


The *Gambo* flying past growlers in the Gerlache Strait. *Peter Lane Taylor*

taxing pitches. But the indefatigable Jonkim is up for more and with the weather not going one way or t'other, tentative plans are made for an attempt on Mt. Luigi, the highest peak on the island.

At four a.m. the weather is perfect. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for myself. Three months with only the odd argument to raise the pulse has taken its toll, and now, sweating hard, I labor along on my rusted skis with Peter and Grant, all of us in Jonkim's trail. The lad is unstoppable. Despite my ailing physique, conditions are ideal. The route up and onto the east shoulder is straightforward, and soon I am psyched and breaking trail up to the base of the summit pyramid. Skis are dumped and Grant takes the lead. All of a sudden I'm hit by that odd sensation that comes from being reacquainted with steep places with good views. Grant puts on a spurt. He weaves in and about a number of hanging seracs, traverses onto steepening ground, and after a final strenuous pitch it's an easy slope to the summit and we're shaking hands, all smiles, slapping each other on the back with all of Antarctica spread out at our feet. A life's savings, three oddball years, a few hundred gray hairs, 1,000 petty arguments, 20,000 miles—but it's been worth it.

Danco Island, February 2002. A month on and morale is no longer high. Despite notable successes—a stunning midnight ascent of Mt. Hoegh with Davide, Jonkim, and the British Army in tow, and a fantastic first ascent and yahoo descent of Mt. Britannia—generally we've been frustrated by unremitting conditions. What did we expect? Thick sea ice has thwarted attempts to get farther south, and the unstable weather has stalled our more committed mountain projects. Even the Gentoo colonies are suffering: there's little snow-free ground about the rookeries and no sign of life from the eggs that should have hatched months ago. The Antarctic summer is short, and the winter night is drawing in.



The 'Shroom, Wall Range, Wiencke Island. The team's route follows the gully right of the relatively snow free rock band, into the splodge of cloud and up into rimed cornices above. *Peter Lane Taylor*

The team is restive and dysfunctional; the original crew have been in close proximity for almost half a year now and is beginning to crack. Interaction is at an all-time low, and Jonkim, the expedition mainstay, has bailed, ostensibly due to worries back home. However, there's also the fact that our relationship has hit rock bottom, his proud self-reserve steam-rolled by my hot-headed, petulant outbursts. All the same, I'm gutted and at least get a private moment to tell him so before he leaves. So Jonkim, Elliot, and Hildes have sailed back to Ushuaia for re provisioning and a crew swap, leaving Grant, Peter, Davide, and me based at Danco Island with a month's provisions and grand ambitions for a 60-mile traverse and ascent of the highest unclimbed peak of the peninsula, Mt. Walker, via the appropriately named Downfall and Forbidden Plateau. Apart from climbing Mt. Britannia and a few other modest rock peaks, our climbing plans have been frustrated by the weather, which isn't exactly horrendous, just

damp, unstable, and generally shite—the cloud hardly lifts, leaving us blind trying to weave torturous routes through a labyrinth of increasingly tenuous crevasses. It is maddening, and, apart from kayaking, knitting hats, carving whalebone, climbing icebergs, holding up the odd cruise ship, quibbling, and attempting to make homebrew out of jam, much time is passed in the horizontal angle of repose.

A fortnight after watching *Gambo* sail into the sunset, a mast and sail appear on the horizon to the north, but hopes are dashed when it is revealed that the hull is red, not green. Still, we take the Zodiac to indulge our curiosity and are welcomed aboard by a genial skipper and his mixed group of charter passengers.

Five hours and many beers later we are no longer so welcome; furthermore, it is dark, snowing hard, and the wind has picked up. We are about three miles from Danco Island, the GPS is bugged, and though two sheets to the wind, I vaguely comprehend the nuttiness of our situation. Peter's gone quiet, possibly to sleep, though more likely questioning his karma-debts as to how he ended up with such a bunch of losers. Davide has morphed into a drama queen and is arguing incomprehensibly with/at Grant who appears to be in a stupor. My head torch beams

faintly into the dark, snowy gloom as I clutch a compass that appears to be stuck on west. Peter perks up though and we try to keep an ear out for the warning sounds of water breaking against rocks or icebergs. Before long, we are somewhere in the middle of Errara Channel, the sea is getting choppy and the Zodiac is taking on water. It is ridiculously wet and cold and quite absurd. Davide is now in full Wagnerian rant, setting the world to right and everyone to shame. Suddenly, out of the darkness he springs and jumps Grant. It's impossible to discern if it's a fight or a wrestle or an over-zealous hug—but for sure he's lost his marbles. It is pitch dark. Davide is standing in his Welly boots and Gore-Tex jacket in an 11-foot inflatable boat that is bucking wildly in ice-strewn water in the middle of a blizzard. He has Grant by the collar and is screaming at him. Both are on the brink of going overboard. Grant, with astonishing presence of mind, collapses to the bottom of the Zodiac, dragging Davide down with him. The freezing water sloshing about brings Davide round. He shakes off, sits upright, and moves back to his place, muttering. We get on our way, whatever way that is. Another idyllic night of the Endless Summer Expedition.

Back at Wiencke, early March 2002. Perched precariously on steep snow about nine pitches up the Grade IV gully of the 'Shroom, I am attached to Andy Mitchell, one of the new crew, who is trying to look confident and who in turn is attached to Peter, who is busy taking photographs. This is my third attempt at this route, and, although the wind has picked up and bits of cornice sweep down on us, ice conditions are splendid. It is going well and I am having a laugh. Andy, the expedition's eager water-quality scientist, also seems to be enjoying himself despite not having done this before. I am trying not to think of the consequences of a fall. We are nearing the crux of the route, where the headwall steepens into an overhanging cornice that I am psyching up to bore into. It is getting blustery and spindrift is whipping up. Furthermore, the good ice has given way to banked powder with the odd firn lens, and I place a dubious ice screw, then an even more dubious stake and tentatively move up some. I'm leaning right back now, feet high, and my left axe and arm shoved deep into the snowbank in front, the other digging into the cornice above. A table-sized chunk loosens, topples, and cascades downward. I am beginning to suffocate in the spindrift. With as much strength as I can muster, I thrust upward and forward in a desperate attempt to gain purchase in this powdery stuff surging about me. Next instant, I am ejected. With axes flailing, I topple backward, but before gaining too much downward momentum my crampons bite into firmer snow and I manage to hold steady. I plant both axes firmly, cough, splutter, wipe my eyes clear, and grin over toward Andy, who is no longer looking so cheerful.

I give it one more half-assed attempt, but after a piece of cornice smacks me in the face, I call it a day. Andy looks relieved, Peter disappointed, but the weather's breaking again and we've got to get off before it starts avalanching proper. Unfortunately, Andy takes twice the time descending as he did ascending. Toward the bottom of the gully where the angle eases, Peter and I, now well below Andy try to coax him to turn around, face outward, and plunge step. He turns but doesn't look too happy. Suddenly, irrationally gripped, he closes his eyes and takes a blind step into the void and loses it, accelerating headfirst. "Get your axes in!" we both yell as he shoots past, the rope snaking wildly behind. We have about enough time to swap manic grins before Andy disappears down a hidden bergschrund and the rope jerks both of us downward. It takes our combined weight and strength to bring him to a stop and eventually, after a lot of pulling, his head pops out. In his broad West-Country accent he asks if we can do some science now. I concur.

February 2003, the Scotia Sea. We're deep into the Southern Ocean again with a largely new crew. This time we're headed due east from Cape Horn toward the fabled island of South Georgia. There's a slight problem though: the engine is buggered, and South Georgia is sieged by whopping great tabular icebergs and detritus associated with the break-up of the Larsen-B ice shelf the previous year. The cause of the engine failure is a broken drive plate, mortally weakened when we ran into an unmarked mooring line in the Beagle Channel. Not until after three days and 500 miles is it apparent that something is seriously amiss, when all manner of unhealthy clanks and groans start emanating from the bell housing. Thankfully, I have on hand a mechanical wizard and am introduced to some of the more endearing eccentricities of the crew. Hamish Millar, Jonkim's older brother, in great earnestness enlightens me. It's my "bad karma" that has led to the diesel's demise. Somewhat piqued, I quiz his mechanical authority, Hamish replies that not only does he know a mechanic but, furthermore, has just read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

However, we are unanimous in our decision to forge on since *Gambo* is a sailing vessel after all, and we are already halfway to South Georgia. Fighting talk, and, indeed, ignorance is truly bliss. A day later we cross the convergence zone and hit the ice. The tabular bergs are immense, and we spend a whole day skirting round one particular set of monsters, keeping a close eye out for the growlers and bergy-bits that have broken off. Without the engine or being able to sail to windward if a real howler blows up, I am very aware that the risk is now real. Furthermore, since we have no way to charge batteries to power the radar, this risk is multiplied by the fact that night is still seven hours long and, when it's not blowing hard, we're inevitably fogbound. Hence, we heave-to. I opt for the two till five a.m. "dog-watch" to get the boat underway as soon as dawn breaks.

It is cold, muggy, and eerie as hell during the night while the blocks and tackle creak and clank and the wind whistles through the rigging. Every quarter of an hour I try to penetrate the gloom with a spotlight. Coleridge was right: you can smell ice, and I am in a state of perpetual anxiety. On the third night of this, 50 miles off Shag Rocks, the wind drops to a gentle 15 mph and the boat starts rocking violently in the swell. As the gray hints of dawn materialize, I note that visibility is down to 80 feet in the thick fog that cocoons us. But within minutes it becomes calm; the swell and rocking ease. I squint into the gray gloom and discern a patch of darker gray. I don't know if the fog has thinned, or if my eyes are adjusting, but I can make out various shadows of gray all around. Suddenly, I realize that not only are we surrounded by ice; we are in the lee of a massive berg. Even as I start to unlash the tiller, I can make out cracks and detail in its face where it has calved, and with rising panic realize it is almost on top of us. It wouldn't likely sink us, but at best it would bring the masts down, which without the engine amounts to much the same thing in the long run. I release the jib furling and within seconds the boat is heading downwind, away from the looming face, but into a cluster of house-sized bergs. I close haul and beat, skimming within a few yards of one of them. Then we are free, away from immediate danger. I am tired of this; I want to make landfall and the next day we do just that, setting eyes on the highest peaks of South Georgia.

March 2003, Mt. Paget. A fortnight later, Stuart, Grant, Davie, and I are five miles up the Nordskjold Glacier with a week of supplies, attempting to push a new route up South Georgia's highest peak, Mt. Paget, via its unclimbed east ridge. It's been a breezy 10 days and we have been acquainting ourselves with the island's captivating wildlife and rugged beauty along with the inhabitants of the BAS base at King Edward Point (KEP). While the team has been out on various forays generally

pestering penguins, getting blown about, and being avalanched off mountains, I have been up to my eyeballs in grease pulling apart *Gambo's* diesel and have recovered the buckled remains of the drive plate. With the help of a concerned girlfriend, a new drive plate has been ordered and dispatched from the U.K. It might arrive on a supply ship, but for now the air pressure is high, the forecast good, and we're making real progress on a route through to the 5,600-foot col that lies between Paget and Roots. I suggest halting near a buttress marking the start of a steep icefall. It is a crisp, clear evening, and we'll get an early start, taking advantage of the cold to get us over the snowbridges. We camp, eat, brew up, and settle in for the night.

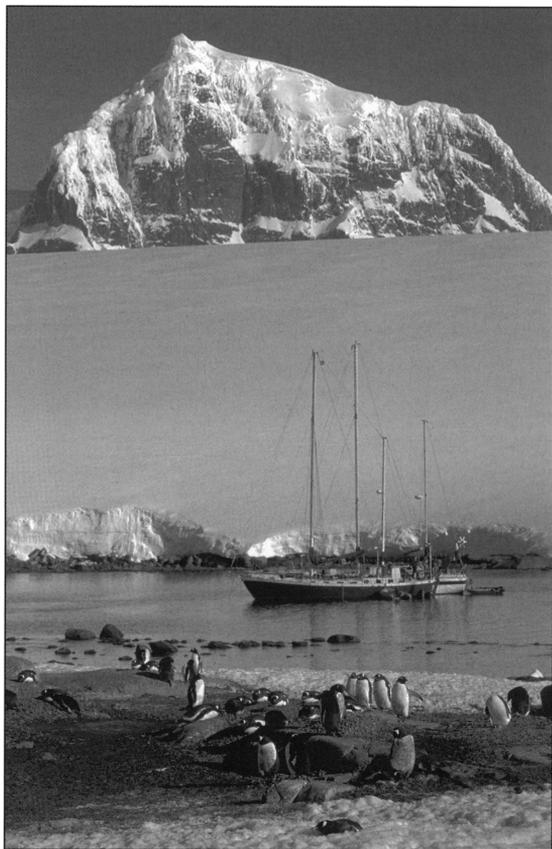
At 4 a.m. I wake and check my altimeter; it must be on the blink since we've apparently gained 1,300 feet of elevation. I snooze some more, then Stuart quizzes me about the pressure. I work out that the barometer has dropped more than an inch as the first gust hits. Stuart is for moving, but I

reassure him that nothing measures up to Patagonian winds and we'll be just fine. I call out to the other tent and we decide to sit tight. Oh, dearie me. An hour later and I am bent painfully against the side of the tent trying to relieve the tension on the poles and seams. The tent is filled with a fine mist forced through the layers of fabric, and the interior guys that have been rigged have just popped their retaining loops. I am about to suggest collapsing the tent when nature obliges. The first pole goes, then a second and third crack in quick succession. As the flysheet shreds in a wild frenzy, I concede to Stuart that the last gust was perhaps worthy of Patagonia. We are, however, distinctly better off than the other two, who suddenly have no tent at all, and in a surreal running commentary inform us that their rucksacks, full of climbing gear and a week of food and fuel, have just ripped from their anchors and are flying off down the glacier. I snuggle deeper into my sleeping bag and resign myself that our attempt on Paget is to be delayed for a wee tad.

A week on and I'm being ferried in the Zodiac back to the Nordenskjold, this time with the two relative novices, Tim and Hamish, since Stuart has decided he doesn't like bad weather, Grant doesn't like the look of Paget, and Davie just thinks I'm a wanker. We leave them at Grytviken to mind the boat and their blossoming relationships with KEP. For a change though, we can at least see Paget, which is a promising start. After a night camped at edge of the glacier, we awake to a



Jonkim Millar hoofing up the start of the east flank of Mt. Luigi, Wiencke Island, with the Gerlache Strait and the Wall Range falling away behind. *Peter Lane Taylor*



Gentooes foraging at low tide in Dorian Bay, with Mt Luigi dominating the skyline above. The top of the east ridge is the left hand skyline. *Peter Lane Taylor*

cold and windy dawn, but with clear skies and after a long day, we set up the tent in a crevasse above the first icefall. Day two we thread our way through a second icefall, and after setting off a wind-slab avalanche, come to a halt in failing visibility below a series of seracs. After half an hour's deliberation, by which time it clags in completely, Hamish convinces us to ski into an icefall to find a sheltered spot to pitch the tent. Eventually we choose a snug little corner deep between two mammoth blocks. I am glad of this, since during the next five days it snows constantly, about twenty feet, and, while cocooned in our grumbling, rumbling icefall, we can hear the roar of large avalanches sweeping down to our left from the hanging seracs above. Although the icefall has a definitive ephemerality about it, we are undoubtedly better off. We doze in a state of perpetual hibernation, wisely concocting less painful methods for consuming porridge while maximizing our bladder capacities. On the third day, after tiring of getting my pants filled with spindrift and watching my turds fly off in incredible gusts, I dig the most

elaborate shithouse in South Georgia. Thank heaven for small joys.

On the fifth night the blizzard moderates and the dawn is cloudless and windless. After a slow start digging out the tent, we are back on the planks and ski into a large basin, the back of which forms the east ridge proper. We hoof it up a 1,000-foot, 40-degree gully to the right and after a lot of puffing and swearing top out onto the crest of the east ridge. The view is phenomenal and I am in raptures. Although the summit is still almost three miles off, with over 4,000 feet of ascent, the route looks good with a couple of interesting sections. Conditions underfoot are excellent and the weather remains perfect.

Then Tim drops a bombshell and informs us that he won't go on. He mentions wife and family, and how exposed, committed, and short of food we are. There is no reasoning with him. Hamish also feels out of his depth and backs down. I am pissed off but defer an immediate retreat by announcing that I'll go it alone after lunch. We sit and eat, marveling at the tremendous views of the ridge, down the whole of the south coast, and at the peaks that surround us, rising straight out of an azure Southern Ocean dotted with bergs. Our meal is accompanied by my monotonous

running commentary regarding the amazing, once-in-a-lifetime, never-to-be-repeated opportunity they are about to pass up. Tim is having none of it, but a suggestion that a little look-see, while practicing some ice axe arrests, provokes a thoughtful look from Hamish and then he bites. Despite the bad karma crap, I am beginning to really like him. He's turning out to be garrulous version of his rock-hard younger brother.

We potter along the ridge, fixing belays, and generally prating about. Hamish is having a ball, and although the wind picks up the sky remains clear and by the time we return to our col, Tim is well into digging out a snow hole. I'm skeptical, but Tim retorts with a succinct "fuck you," and so we go with it, erring on the side of caution. Eventually it is finished and we enjoy a rare, perfect South Georgia sunset.

Snuggling down, I concede that the ice cavern is indeed much roomier and warmer than the tent (or the boat, for that matter). Then the drips commence and the roof starts to sag. Five hours later, after little sleep, we waste the first hour of dawn rescuing kit buried under a heap of mushy snow. By the time Hamish and I set off, an ominous lenticular cloud is already draped over Paget. The race is on and we push fast, making superb progress along the ridge, turning numerous cornices and ice pinnacles, and dealing efficiently with a couple of airy ice pitches.

After three hours the weather is definitely deteriorating; the wind has picked up, and a bank of cloud is sweeping in. At just over 8,500 feet, some 1,000 feet from the now completely obscured summit, the first gust hits us, and a series of surreal cloud tendrils sweep up from below. However, on the opposite side of the ridge, we have a completely unobscured view of the whole of Cumberland Bay and so call up KEP on the VHF radio. It is the first they've heard from us in nine days and Sarah Lurcock sounds relieved. After a few pleasantries, she informs us that the latest surface prognosis is good, but that there's a small system lingering to the south, the edge of which may be affecting us. I wholeheartedly agree, and, as a sustained gust knocks me off my feet, I express disbelief that it's a balmy, cloudless day down there, a mere five miles away. Before signing off, Sarah



Davie Robinson enjoying a spindrift breakfast in typical South Georgia style in the gully on the North Ridge of Quad 5. *Stuart Holmes*

asks if we can say a few words at our high point for one of the few previous Paget summiteers, who has become the latest fatality in the war in Iraq. With this somber news—and now completely engulfed by cloud and a snowstorm—it takes little for us to decide to retreat. After a quick hug, a photo, and a few words of tribute to Mark Stratford, we backtrack into the mounting maelstrom.

The voyage of doom, mid-April 2003, somewhere in the South Atlantic. We are at last within spitting distance of the east coast of Argentina, Mar del Plata to be exact. The last week's been purgatory, excruciatingly frustrating with either constant headwinds or no winds. We have wobbled back and forth across the Plata Estuary, failing to gain any westing against the strong easterly current. We are onto our last LPG bottle and water is low, too. The decent food ran out yonks ago, and the last of the veggies have retreated to inaccessible corners of the boat to die a malingering, rancid death. We have covered well over 3,000 miles since leaving South Georgia, though less than half of it in the right direction. The new drive plate never did arrive, and a temporary welding job on the old one was a tad too temporary. Stuart is a week late for work, and flights home are being missed by all, resulting in frayed tempers and a lot of whinging. I'm almost enjoying myself, not least due to others' frustration (bastard that I am), but also I've got an ominous feeling about landfall and am now learning how to actually sail; every degree closer to the wind that can be coaxed out of *Gambo* yields a meaningful reduction in our ETA. This has suddenly all changed. The glass has fallen, an easterly risen, and under full sail we gallop toward Mar del Plata at eight knots throughout the night. By mid-afternoon the next day we are within 15 miles, but the wind has now risen to gale force and is veering south. Stuart, who has been at the helm all day in a state of rapturous ecstasy at the thought of making landfall, is visibly gutted when I announce that we are going to heave-to and sit it out. I'm just not willing bring *Gambo* into an unknown port, in a gale and poor visibility without the engine.

Throughout the night we drift northeasterly and by midday Saturday the gale subsides, but we have lost over 40 miles and begin again the laborious process of beating into light headwinds. As darkness draws in, we can see the telltale orange glow of city lights, the first sign of civilization in almost three months. With a favorable wind shift to the northwest during the night, we have a sense of renewed excitement and anticipation come morning.

Easter Sunday is gorgeous and the oppressive atmosphere of the last weeks vanishes. We catch fish, lounge about on deck, and chat and joke happily while watching the city tower-blocks looming larger and larger as *Gambo* tacks back and forth in an ideal zephyr. By late afternoon we are within three miles of port, and though it's an undignified end to the trip, we are not willing to risk another calamity. We request a tow from the port. They are happy to oblige and within an hour we are ogling the evening strollers as we enter the harbor. We tie up and a friendly, curious local, Alfredo, greets us and passes over a bottle of chilled beer. We are a sight indeed, but the cold beer tastes magical.

A day or so later, after we are all stuffed and sated and almost normalized once again, I stop by an internet café to quickly whizz through e-mail. At the bottom of the pile is a short message from Lena stating that Jonkim Millar and Guy Edwards are 3 days overdue from an attempt on the northwest face of Devil's Thumb. The worst is presumed. My stomach knots up and I'm overcome. With a grief-laden heart, I go to find Hamish and the next day we pack up, say our goodbyes to *Gambo*, and head home to yet stormier seas. This story is dedicated to Jonkim. He was an exceptional individual and his memory lives strong with all of us who were fortunate enough to sail and climb with him.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Antarctica, South Georgia, New Zealand, Alaska

ASCENTS:

Alaska: First ascent of Mt. Persson (NW Cook, 3880m) and second ascent of Mt. Cook (4,200m), via a new route—linked traverse from sea level.

Antarctica, Wiencke Island: Three ascents, two likely to be first ascents. 1) The First (or northernmost) of the Seven Sisters of the Fief Range above Port Lockroy—ca 1,200m by its northwest ridge. 2) The “Shroom,” a ca 900m corniced summit on the Wall Range, climbed via “Crag Jones” gully (opposite Noble Peak) to ridge heading up left (north). 3) Mt. Luigi (1,400m) climbed by its east ridge via an exceptionally good ski route with a snow climb of 300m to the summit of up to 50°.

Peninsula first ascents: 1) Stolze Peak (ca 1,580m), on skis. 2) The westernmost peak of the Laussedat Heughts, and Mt Hoegh, on skis with short technical sections at the end. 3) Mt. Britannia (ca 1,500m) on Ronge Island, climbed via two routes: east ridge (directly opposite Danco Island), technical; southeast ridge, mostly on skis.

Peninsula Icecap Plateau: ski traverse from the Orel Ice Fringe to the Downfall. Weathered off the downfall at the crux, precluding an attempt at FA of Mt. Walker. Many other unnamed peaks (up to 1,400 m) were climbed along the Banana Belt of the Antarctic Peninsula, some of which had likely been climbed by unofficial BAS parties, but not all. South Georgia: Numerous attempts on Paulsen, Quad5, and Marikoppa Peaks. To within 300 m (& beyond difficulties) of the summit of Mt. Paget (ca 2,900m) via a new east ridge route.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alun Hubbard might be described as an unhinged Welshman with a penchant for high places and latitudes, typically approached by unorthodox means involving water. He is also passionate about frozen water, and works for the University of Edinburgh, School of Geosciences, as a glaciologist and ice sheet modeller. He is of no fixed abode, though occasionally consorts with an increasingly impatient girlfriend and has half a boat currently moored in Uruguay. He is looking for crew.

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Davide Fasel, Jonkim Millar, and Alun Hubbard tripping the midnight-light fantastic on the summit of Mt. Hoegh. Alun Hubbard