

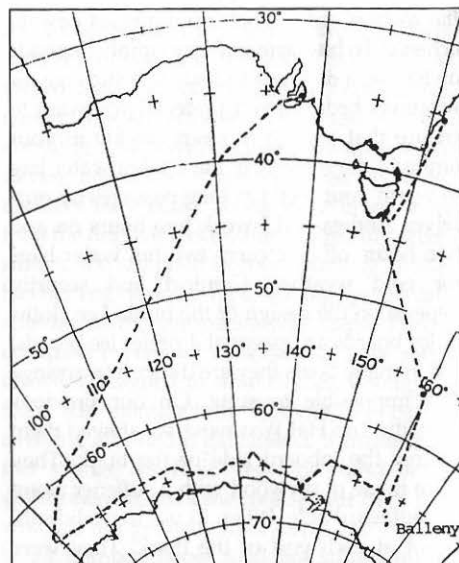
Whale Watch in Antarctica

Tim Edkins

Iniquity left Adelaide in May, 1992, and sailed over 14,000 miles before returning to the Squadron pool on 9 March, 1993. More than 2,000 miles were through the ice and snow of Antarctic waters. This article tells of the expedition south after leaving Hobart on New Year's Eve. The crew of six spent 68 days at sea. The main aim was to conduct a whale survey in Antarctic waters, which are the feeding grounds of the Southern Hemisphere baleen whales devastated by twentieth century whaling. Some species, such as the blue and humpback whales, are still rare and endangered after thirty years of protection. Very little is known about their living biology. The main species of interest to us was the humpback. This has been relatively well studied in coastal waters of Australia, but its habits and distribution are little known in Antarctic waters.

The total distance was over 7,000 nautical miles, and *Iniquity* circumnavigated 20% of the Antarctic continent. Much of this area has not previously been visited by a yacht. Throughout the entire journey there was a significant danger from floating ice and icebergs. This ice is incredibly beautiful. After sailing through thousands of bergs, the next one is still amazing enough in its colour, shape and size to have everyone scrambling for cameras to try to capture the feeling. Only one small piece of ice was hit, despite sailing through thousands of bergs and bergy bits. To achieve this we were conservative in not going into dense pack. We hove to at night.

After stopping at Macquarie Island we made for the Balleny Islands. This area was one of intense whaling, and thus seemed a good starting point for our whale survey. It



proved impossible to get through to Balleny Islands due to dense pack ice, so we started moving slowly west and generally keeping between the edge of the pack ice and about 100 miles north. *Iniquity* rendezvoused with Don McIntyre's yacht *Buttercup* in Boat Harbor, Commonwealth Bay. This was the site of Sir Douglas Mawson's Australian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-13, and was the only place we landed on the Antarctic continent. Commonwealth Bay is the windiest place on earth. Anyone who has read Mawson's *Home of the Blizzard* will understand the unbelievable way it can blow in this corner of the earth. We planned to spend only a few hours there, but as the anchor was being layed the wind came howling down off the ice at over 50 knots. It was impossible to leave through the narrow channel in such a strong wind. The winds continued for four and a half days, and at one stage were accompanied by a heavy blizzard. At its worst the wind gauge was

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hard on the stop at 70 knots, and gusts were coming through on top of this. *Buttercup* anchored in front of us was hit by a gust that knocked her down over 45° to put the windows under water. Don had five lines to the shore and two anchors down. We also had two anchors out, two lines to the shore and a line to *Buttercup*. In the really strong wind we motored up on our lines to reduce the loads. The yacht became laden with snow and ice, which had to be manually shovelled from the deck.

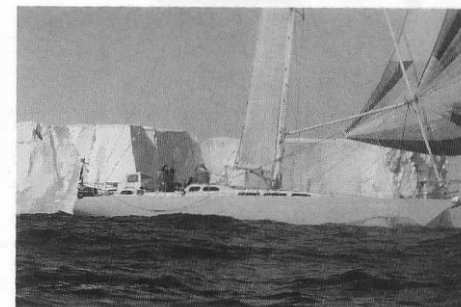
It was a huge relief when the conditions abated enough to allow us to navigate the entrance to the boat harbour and put to sea. We were given a pleasant surprise when we came across MV *Greenpeace* moving through the ice looking for the Japanese whaling fleet. They were very interested in what we were doing, and we gladly accepted a hot shower. It was also an opportunity to get off our boat and talk to some new people.

Other than the weather in Commonwealth Bay and two major gales on the way home, the winds were favourable throughout the journey. All the way westward along the continent we had remarkably consistent easterlies. These are fuelled by a high sitting over the continent, with lows regularly moving through to the north. The second gale was caused by a small intense low. This generated much shorter and steeper seas than I would have expected in this part of the world. We held up into the breeze, gusting round 70 knots, with just a storm jib, until the wind backed to the point where we could broad reach and generally achieve our course. The low moved through quickly. This created a big and confused sea, with waves coming from about four different directions.

More than a hundred whales were sighted. It was clear that the larger species, which had been most heavily whaled, are still very rare after decades of complete protection. There is currently strong pressure from whaling nations to resume Antarctic commercial whaling of minke whales. This contrasts with a proposal by the French Government to create a whale sanctuary in waters south of 40°S. The results from this expedition will be used to provide further evidence to support the French proposal. The data collected in our sightings included still photographs, video footage and underwater sound recordings. In addition to scientific papers, it is expected to produce from the expedition a television documentary, magazine articles and a book.

The expedition was carried out under the banner of the Oceanic Research Foundation. Its success was due in part to the many businesses in Australia which provided goods and services free or at minimal cost. We wish to thank everyone who assisted us in this adventure. SQ

Diary note! Tim Edkins will give a talk on this adventure on the night of the Youth Trophy presentation dinner, 24 September, 1993.



Iniquity slipping past an iceberg, Antarctica, 1993