IN THE WAKE OF DAVID LEWIS – PART ONE

BY HENK HAAZEN

Are there still uncharted islands you can sail to where nobody has set foot on land before, and where you can go diving in virgin waters? Yes, of course, but usually there is a price to pay, and there are some good reasons why nobody has done it before. The Balleny Islands is one of these places ...

Located at the northwestern corner of the Ross Sea region in the Antarctic, the islands were discovered in 1839 by a British expedition under John Balleny, and named in his honour by the Hydrographer to the British Admiralty, Sir Francis Beaufort.

The Ballenys are 1200 miles south of New Zealand's most southern port of Bluff, across the Southern Ocean. They are around 67 degrees south by 164 degrees east, right on the Antarctic Circle in the friction zone between the permanent Antarctic high and Southern Ocean lows which circle the Antarctic mainland in an endless stream.

The area is known for its unpredictable weather, fog, storms and sometimes hurricane-force winds that come out of all quarters. Once vessels are under way there is no safe harbour to run to, and the nearest land downwind to the east is Cape Horn, 5000 miles away.

They are very remote, rarely visited and locked in ice for about 10 months of the year. The western coast of the island group is only ice-free for about one month of the year, and sometimes it does not get free of the pack ice at all.

The New Zealand underwater scientist Dr Franz Smith originally approached us to see if our high-latitude expedition vessel, the *Tiama*, could provide transport and support for a research expedition to the Balleny Islands.

This was an expedition for the New Zealand government through the Ministry of Fisheries. They wanted a comprehensive survey done to characterise the biodiversity and ecological function of the marine environment. They rightly thought that this required a smaller vessel working close inshore that could stay there for an extended period.

The proposed voyage with the *Tiama* meant that we would be the first small vessel to go there since David Lewis' voyage with the *Solo*, 28 years earlier. And nobody had ever dived or stayed close inshore before for longer than one or two days.

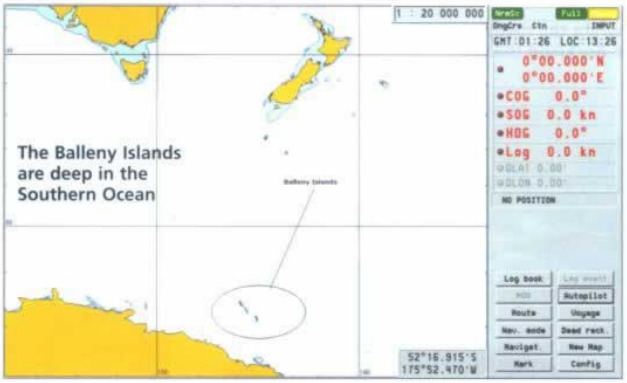
Expedition leader Franz Smith

Dr Smith immediately had my interest. We do a lot of work in the New Zealand sub-Antarctic Islands, and this was an opportunity to stretch our wings a bit. The *Tiama* was designed and built to work in Antarctica.

I just wished he had picked a different area to go to in the Ross Sea. The Balleny Islands have the distinguished reputation of being a hard place to reach and an even harder place to get ashore. Lewis discovered the only anchorage in the area, which he called Solo Harbour after his 15.2m vessel. This seemed like a very precarious anchorage at the best of times.

Lewis was the first small boat to reach the island group in recent history. Other vessels have visited the group, but they were always larger boats, often with helicopter support, and as with any boat designed to go fast, they cost a lot of dollars to run per day.

Before we left I spent lots of time looking at ice charts and consulting with ice experts, skippers and weather experts.



After analysing and discussing all the various points of view, I felt that it was possible to do the trip within acceptable safety parameters.

We had to produce a detailed voyage and risk mitigation plan for the Ministry of Fisheries, detailing all the procedures and back-up plans, which Maritime New Zealand staff and other experts then vetted.

To work in the Antarctic one also requires an Environmental Impact Assessment that has to be approved by the authorities of the country of origin, in our case the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

We had an excellent team on board. The science party comprised the expedition leader, diver and lead scientist, Dr Frans Smith, two scientists and divers, Nick Shears and Rebecca McCloud, and a mountaineer/safety officer, Clinton Andrews.

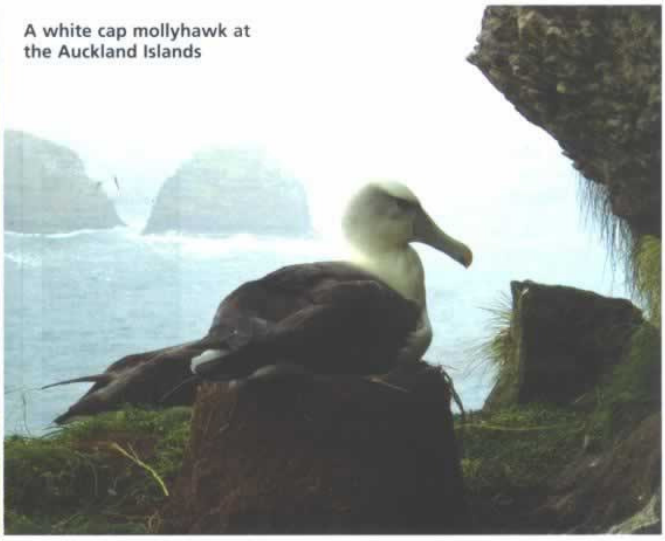
The boat crew consisted of myself as skipper and Mike Delamore as first mate. Unfortunately, Mike and I are nearing our use-by date, so I decided to take on Steve Parsons as second mate. Steve is a tough young man.

On the way south there was a bet to see when he would put on his boots. This finally happened at 62 degrees south with the first icebergs in sight, and only after I told him to, using the excuse that our insurance cover did not pay out on frozen feet at sea. I did note that Steve kept his boots on a lot longer on our way back up north!

Part of our preparation included installing a new Raytheon 1kW dual-frequency depth sounder/plotter to record depths and positions at regular intervals, to be able to correlate this with scientific data including observations of bird and marine mammal species.

We also put on board an Antarctic survival kit, including polar sleeping bags, tents, food and stoves, in case ice trapped the boat, and replaced the ageing Musto wet weather gear, including dry suits so we could make surf landings on icy beaches. ▶

Strong winds blow a waterfall back up in the Auckland Islands



A white cap mollyhawk at the Auckland Islands

By early February we had assembled the expedition personnel and equipment in the "sunny" port of Bluff. But just to keep the tension flowing freely, Franz darted back to Wellington the day before we left to get the signature of the Minister of Fisheries on our final documents.

We cleared customs and left Bluff on February 3 on a light westerly breeze, doing 5.5 knots. This led the mountaineer in the party to comment that at this speed it would take us forever to get there, forgetting the fact that boats keep going 24 hours a day, steadily ticking off the miles.

Two days later we stopped at the Auckland Islands, part of the New Zealand sub-Antarctic Islands, 245 miles south of Bluff and anchored in Sarah's Bosom. (I always feel snug in this anchorage).

We wanted to do final tests on the diving equipment in colder water, as well as safety drills in case of an emergency. All the team members needed to be able to play several different roles and jump in where required. This was time well spent, as it brought out several minor problems and misunderstandings that were easily rectified in a sheltered anchorage, but would have been hard work at sea.

I did threaten to leave my crew behind on Shoe Island (an old

The Inviting Southern Ocean

prison island for unruly sailors) if they did not put triple lashings on the anchor and other deck equipment. The Southern Ocean has an uncanny way of undoing knots at sea.

The ice around the Balleny Islands had just started to break up when we left Bluff, and while we were at the Auckland Islands we got an email from the crew of the New Zealand fishing vessel *San Aspiring*. They were passing close by the islands, and let us know that the island group was almost ice-free.

A day later we got a confirming call from Peter Malcom, the expedition leader on a tourist vessel from Aurora Expeditions. It was great news for us, as the *Tiama* is not an icebreaker, and we would not be able to get near the place if it was going to be a bad ice year.

We departed the Auckland Islands on February 8 with a nice beam wind of 20 knots, sending us on our way at seven knots. The nearest land was 900 miles away due south, and this landfall had no recognised safe anchorage. Once you head south into the Southern Ocean you are committed. You have to cut across an endless series of lows that move so fast you cannot avoid them.

During our southbound voyage we had favorable west to nor'west winds of 35 to 45 knots. The *Tiama* loves this sort of breeze and she lapped it up under a storm tri-sail and hurricane jib, with a genoa rolled out when needed.

For this voyage I fitted a very small jib on the inner forestay. This was a tiny bit of rag built like a brick shithouse, and a beautiful thing to have in a stiff breeze.

The nights became shorter as we headed south, which was handy because it enabled us to keep a good lookout for icebergs. On entering the Antarctic convergence zone, the seawater temperature dropped. The following day at 62 degrees it was snowing, and we spotted the first iceberg at 62 degrees 51 minutes south, when Steve put his boots on. The seawater temperature was 1.5°C, and the air temperature 2°C.

We had some good moonlight during the short nights while we traveled through the iceberg region. Icebergs are a bit like mice. If you see one there are a lot more around that you cannot see, especially the dreaded growlers, which are essentially icebergs awash and invisible to radar.

Most mornings were foggy, which usually cleared to an occasional bright sunny day. We felt very small as we glided through this big, silent world, a bit like sailing on another planet.

The Balleny Islands appeared out of the early morning haze on February 14. Everybody was on deck as the islands loomed out of the mist, looking truly formidable. The steep cliffs of Cape ▶

We sight the first large iceberg

Ellsworth at the northern tip of the Young Islands rose sheer out of the sea and climbed several hundred metres to the ice cap.

Icicles 10m long hung from overhangs on the black volcanic rock. Most of the islands are permanently covered by ice 20m to 40m thick. As the ice moves to the edge of the cliffs, house-sized bergs are "calved" into the surrounding waters.

The day we arrived it was flat calm, with three humpback whales on the port bow. We began work immediately photographing their flukes for later identification and taking biopsy samples. On that first day we got several good fluke shots and one biopsy sample, which was a good start for the science programme.

This was real scientific whaling, unlike the slaughter taking place 2000 miles to the east by the so-called scientific Japanese whaling ships.

You can find out everything you want to know from a biopsy sample and you don't have to kill the whale to do it. The samples are collected when a dart with a small, hollow core is fired from a converted 22 rifle. Initially it felt a bit strange to stand and aim a gun at a whale, but I relaxed after seeing their minimal reaction, as though they had suffered a mosquito bite.

Mike was the best shot and got the dubious title of great white hunter. We have a picture to prove it, one that his children probably won't approve of without a long explanation.

So, now we have arrived, and the scientists can get on with their work while we have to try and find an anchorage in this beautiful place. More on that in the next issue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge the assistance we received from Aurora expeditions, Heritage Expeditions, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the National Institute of Water and Atmosphere, the Department of Conservation and Antarctica New Zealand.

Henk Haazen is the owner and operator of the 15.5m RV Tiama, *a steel sailing vessel designed and built for high-latitude expedition and research work. She was launched in 1997 and has travelled over 70,000 miles, much of it in the Southern Ocean.*

For the last five years the Tiama *has been working out of Bluff as a logistical support vessel for scientific and private charters to New Zealand's sub-Antarctic islands and to Antarctica. Haazen has been going to sea professionally for the last 25 years, specialising in high-latitude ventures. He is a former crewmember of the Greenpeace ship* MV Gondwana. *He built the* Tiama *himself from plans drawn by the New Zealand marine architect Alan Mummery.*

See www.tiama.com