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Antarctic wilderness

Gioele Fabiani takes his SW 95 to southernmost shores

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courtesy of Gioele
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A DREAM, A WILL TO MAKE IT HAPPEN, A GOOD BOAT AND AN ADVENTUROUS SKIPPER ON THE SAME WAVELENGTH WERE ALL GIOELE FABIANI NEEDED FOR HIS CRUISE TO THE WORLD'S SOUTHERNMOST WILDERNESS

After taking stock of my life, I felt the time had come for change. The question was, what would I do? The idea of a trip around the world took hold in my brain and grew, but I was unsure how to go about it. Then it came to me: I would go by boat. Luckily, as I was casting around, doing research on yachts and shipyards, I met Mario Pedol of Nauta Design in Milan. He showed me the design for the Southern Wind 95 that his studio had collaborated on with Bruce Farr. I was in love. *Dharma* was my first yacht.

Since I was planning on living on board for at least a year I wanted a comfortable boat and I liked Nauta's general plan for the yacht's lines: *Dharma* had a modern classic deck house, plenty of sheer, low bulwarks and a fine-angled, slender bow. The central helm station left the stern wide open, creating an excellent space for everything from sunbathing to cleaning fish. It was also an ideal position for meditating and watching the world go by. I also liked her custom hull colour – a sort of sandy gold – which gives *Dharma* a special elegance.

I wanted a boat that would allow me to stay at sea for extended periods, as far from civilization as possible. I had 5,000 litre capacity fuel tanks installed, along with two refrigerators, three freezers, a vast pantry and well-conceived storage so that we could be self-sufficient for



A welcoming committee of penguins greets *Dharma's* arrival in an ice-strewn bay (left), while her guests and crew get used to summer snow, mooring within metres of glaciers and extreme water-skiing (above)



long periods, with *Dharma* only having to get to port for refuelling and minor maintenance operations. A lover of good food, I made sure the galley was the centre of things below decks, and I was to spend many happy hours cooking with Carlos, my excellent captain, who was a good friend.

Once I had learned the basics I found that *Dharma* was quite easy to sail and had the performance I needed. Thanks to Farr's hull lines and appendages she clocked 10 knots close hauled in winds of about the same. And weighing about 70 tonnes, she feels light and quick at the helm. At times it was almost as if she made her own way once the sails were adjusted, travelling the world without a fixed destination.

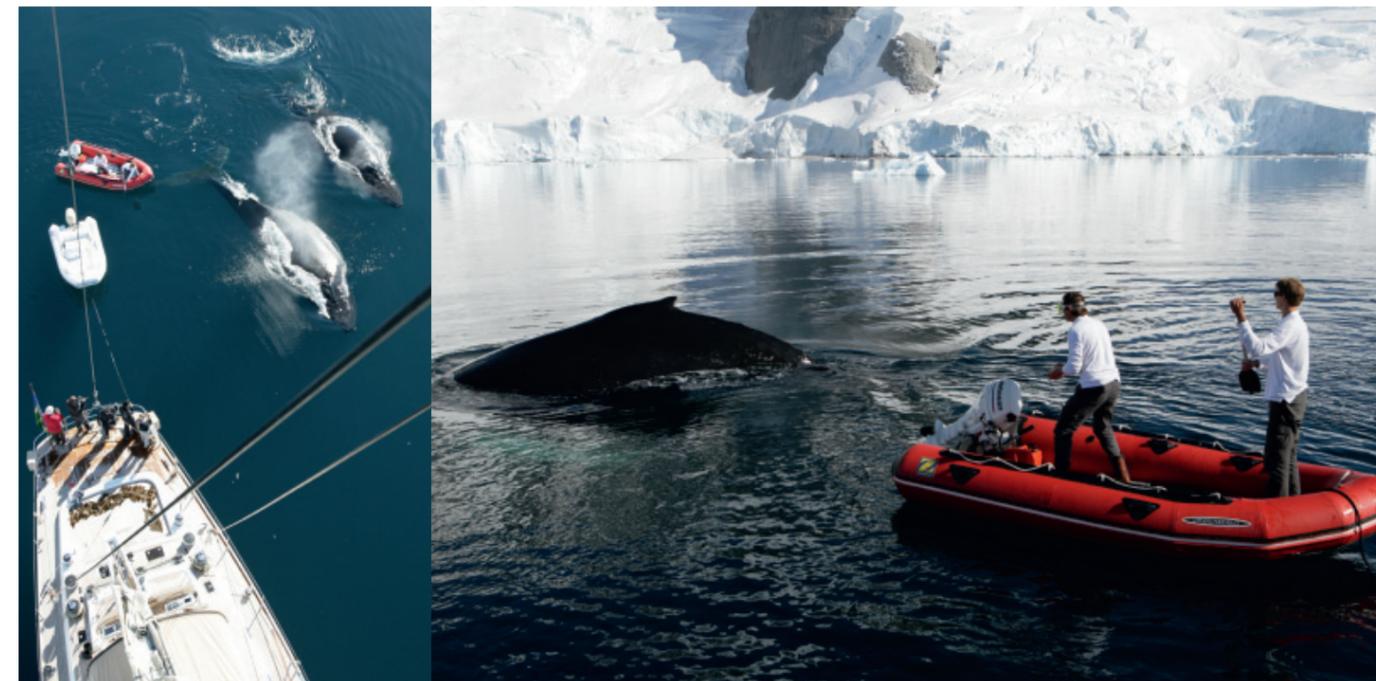
For a journey like this you need a captain and crew whom you can count on and get along with. Spending the amount of time on board that I did, I was really like another crewmember; there wasn't much difference in status between my captain and I. Finding the right people was not easy, and as with so many things it took a stroke of luck. In the first year I sailed from Cape Town to the Mediterranean, and then on to the Caribbean and back. During that time I had two changes of captains, both of whom were very competent, but not people I could imagine sailing to the Antarctic with. Then my old friend Carlos came on board. An excellent cook and a superlative sailor, we have one of those bonds that will last forever.

One day when we were in Fernando di Noronha in Brazil Carlos met a family that had chartered boats for years between the Antarctic and Patagonia. I will always remember Carlos' face when he returned from a provisioning trip – he was so excited he could barely speak.

'*Dharma* is going to the Antarctic!' he announced, 'I just met some people and they said that not sailing that route in a yacht like this would be a crime!'

Such was the faith and confidence that I had and still have in Carlos that I consented. But I really believe that if I hadn't I would have woken up one morning and found that we were on our way anyway. As I said,

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there really wasn't much difference in status between me and my captain. In Angra Dos Reis we met Amyr Klink, an expert on the Antarctic who gave us valuable advice on how to navigate those waters. It was he who suggested we mount steel rollers on deck to stow four floating warps, each of 250 metres, to take lines ashore fore and aft.

When we reached Ushuaia our boat was by far the most luxurious amongst those about to navigate the Drake Passage, but our crew didn't exactly look like old salts. It was just Carlos, myself and a crew of two German brothers and their sister, who, although young, had grown up living on a 27 metre yacht, so it could not be said that they did not have any sailing experience.

Around us were the decayed-looking robust boats that you usually meet in remote areas like this. I was moved by the courage of people who tackle such demanding seas in such small and uncomfortable boats. I told myself that this was the evidence that if you will it, nothing is beyond reach.

On 16 January my mother, my brother and his wife and my own wife arrived to share this leg of the journey with our motley crew. The waters of the Beagle Channel were calm and by late evening, sailing with two reefs in the mainsail and the jib, we were already at Cape Horn. It was a shame to pass it at night but we planned to come back this way by day. Offshore, a weak wind was blowing from the Atlantic in the wake of a storm. We sailed in choppy seas for a whole day in a breeze of about 10 to 15 knots, pushing us along at between 8 and 12 knots.

On the last day of the crossing a stiff breeze started coming in off the Antarctic Peninsula and we had to sail close-hauled. The storm behind us was worsening, but luckily we were already close to the coast. As we

Whales leap out of icy waters around *Dharma* (above), while even closer encounters were to be had from the tender when exploring the coastline. Patagonia (left; below) is a stunning start or end to any Antarctic cruise



drew nearer a vast vista of ice and snowy mountain peaks stretched before us. We stood awestruck by the beauty of the landscape, when suddenly the silence was broken by a whale breaching. Once we had the boat safely anchored Carlos and I could relax and share the feeling of pride and accomplishment that sailing to such a remote location gives you.

The following days flew by. We explored the coastline in the tender, photographing seals and penguins, and sailed past icebergs as big as islands. One night we anchored in a bay, and awoke to find the current was pushing a mass of broken-up ice in our direction: a piece half the size of the yacht missed us by a hair. At times the sea was covered in ice. The yacht was never in difficulty, and we found that we if motored at two to three knots we could push the ice aside without damaging the hull.

We spent a night near the Argentine Almirante Brown base and then proceeded on to the Strait of Gerlache. There we sailed in snow and a strange fog that hovered a few metres above the boat. We made it to Port Lockroy without mishap and from there to the Ukrainian base Vernadsky, passing through a narrow channel with majestic snowbound mountains plunging into the sea on either side.

On the 26 February our voyage was almost over. Carlos decided to celebrate our adventure by preparing his special paella, and, again, a whale saluted us. We proceeded on to Port Williams in Chile, through some calm snowfalls, and my family disembarked in nearby Ushuaia.

While the birth of my children has shortened the range of my travels somewhat, Carlos has remained a constant. And *Dharma* with her regal elegance, serene beauty and steadfast seaworthiness will always be in our hearts.