

CLASSIC ROUND THE HORN

Precious wooden classics like Merrymaid normally restrict their cruising to the gentle waters of the Mediterranean, but the owner of this 1904 gaff cutter had other plans. He sailed her round Cape Horn into the teeth of a gale and completed a remarkable cruise in the Chilean channels. Richard Haworth was aboard

All photos: Classic Cruising Ltd

Merrymaid makes to weather in big seas around the Horn, occasionally all but disappearing behind the waves. The wind had been gusting 35 knots as they approached the Cape





Merrymaid running before a following sea north of the Falkland Islands. Bosun James Wilkinson at the helm with deckhand George Cox riding shotgun

The legends surrounding Cape Horn hold a strange fascination for sailors all over the world. The shores are littered with the wrecks of ships and the mountainous seas, which build up here as the waters squeeze between South America and Antarctica, are notorious.

This was at the forefront of my mind as I surveyed the vast expanse of gleaming teak on the classic topsail gaff cutter *Merrymaid*. My company, High Latitudes, advisers on polar cruising, had been approached to help the yacht in an attempt to round Cape Horn and then cruise the Chilean Channels.

This stunning vessel, originally designed and built by Camper & Nicholson in 1904, had recently been restored to her former glory at Southampton Yacht Services. Beauty, however, is not much help when

faced with the fierce conditions that the Southern Ocean can deliver and therefore during the refit we had advised on suitable modifications to make this trip south feasible (see panel on page 73).

Merrymaid was obviously far removed from the purpose-built high-latitude yachts more commonly visiting these areas, which are usually set up to be sailed short-handed, with roller furling foresails and up to four reefs in the mainsail.

Merrymaid's skipper Justin Holvik explained that we needed at least an hour to reef the mainsail. I was stunned by the size of the boom, which must weigh a tonne or more. Projecting way aft over the stern, it was easy to imagine this huge spar being thrown around in a gale while trying to handle the sail. I was assured that this was the new, shortened version!

Having last seen the yacht in refit in Southampton,

the *Merrymaid* that I welcomed into Stanley Harbour, some six months later, was a very different vessel. She had covered around 9,000 miles and had been transformed into a well-prepared cruising boat.

9,000 miles to the Falklands

Having left Puerto Madryn in Argentina, the crew had encountered a deep depression north of the Falkland Islands. This stretch of water, affected by the continental shelf, is notoriously rough, but vessel, crew and owner looked remarkably unfazed by the conditions as they moored alongside in Stanley. They followed in the tradition of sailors for hundreds of years and recovered from the Southern Ocean storm in the cosy environment of a proper 'English' pub over a few pints of ale.

In order to make the Beagle Channel from Stanley,

you have to cover around 300 miles to the south-west. With the prevailing strong westerlies in these latitudes this can be difficult. Therefore, when we saw two days of north-west winds forecast, we took our opportunity and set sail. Justin had arranged for a storm trysail, working topsail and small jib top to be shipped to Stanley to join us and was keen to try out these sails as soon as possible.

We sailed under the new sails for the first part of this leg, electing to raise the main and topsail for the last day, with light winds forecast. This day turned out to be great sailing through the Strait of Lemaire, with calm seas, the sun overhead and a great view of the remote and barren Staten Island to the east.

Before we could tackle Cape Horn, we had to clear into Chile at Puerto Williams, the southernmost village in the world. Here we were met with the usual

The relatively low freeboard makes going to weather a wet process!



James and George are careful not to get too close to the ice front at Seno Iceberg in the clinker-built ship's tender *Merrybaby*. A long lens can be very deceptive!

Chilean paperwork, but also with friendliness from the locals and the warm hospitality of the Micalvi Yacht Club Bar. Housed in a sunken naval supply vessel, she has settled at such an angle that every person inside tends towards the bar!

Photoshoot

Both Justin and I felt strongly that if we were to take a vessel such as *Merrymaid* around the Horn, the event must be recorded on camera. We therefore arranged with two French yachtsmen, Bernard and his son Christophe (and Hugo, the dog) aboard the 40-footer *Pulsar*, to accompany us around the Horn. This needed some logistical planning, since there was no way that *Pulsar* could match the speed of *Merrymaid*.

We visited two scenic anchorages en route to the Horn, including the very small and remote fishing village of Puerto Torro. Awaking on the day of our intended rounding of the Horn, we had been joined in our anchorage by *Australis*, a charter yacht just returned from Antarctica. The skipper advised us that conditions off the Horn were pretty rough, with winds of over 30 knots from the west. However, he and his crew had not sailed 9,000 miles to wait in anchorages and were anxious to have a look at the seas about which they had read so much.

As we approached the Island of Hornos, it was gusting 35 knots and more and a fierce sea had built overnight. But with the trysail, staysail and small jib top set as jib, *Merrymaid* was making good progress

into a difficult sea. By late morning, the wind had gone into the south-west and abated somewhat, allowing us to make our way around the Horn on one single port tack. The dark cliffs of the Cape towered above us and we were soaked from the spray as *Merrymaid* buried her bowsprit into the waves. We frequently lost sight of our photographers, as they dropped from view behind the large seas. It was very exciting to be under these famous cliffs in such an amazing boat.

The following day the wind and the sea had subsided considerably and Justin was keen to take the opportunity of rounding the Horn once more – this time under topsails and in the opposite direction! This second day spent in the area gave us the

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opportunity to land on the island and visit the Chilean naval officer and his family, who manage the famous lighthouse.

Wild anchorages

There was, quite rightly, a feeling of satisfaction as we headed north, back towards the Beagle Channel and our trip up the west coast of Chile. This area has some of the most beautiful, wild anchorages in the world and I was looking forward to showing Justin, *Merrymaid*'s owner and crew the sights of Patagonia.

Having restocked in Puerto Williams to avoid the extortionate pilot fees for entering Ushuaia, we were soon on our way up the Beagle Channel. Our first stop was at an *estancia* (cattle ranch) where the crew were

Merrymaid explores Ventisquero Pio XI ice front in Chile, taking care with the paintwork and the bobstay among the brash ice and growlers



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able to go horse riding – Patagonian style. In the days that followed we made good progress up the Beagle Channel, spending time among the amazing glaciers that tumble down to the water in deep inlets. It was a strange feeling to be moving through brash ice in such a boat. Care was taken to avoid larger growlers, which could have made a mess of the bobstay and its fittings, not to mention the paintwork.

As we neared the western end of the Beagle, the weather took a turn for the worse, giving us the strong westerly winds which are all too frequent in this area and on several nights we sought refuge in appropriate anchorages. Here we used a combination of the huge fisherman’s anchor and long shorelines, which we tied around suitable trees. To secure *Merrymaid*’s 90 tons we often tried to spread the load between several trunks, using shorter mooring lines to create a spider’s web in the dense forest.

We were hoping for a bit of respite in the weather to allow us to pass Canal Brecknock – a narrow stretch of water which must be transited in order to access the channels leading towards the Strait of Magellan. This canal runs in a north-westerly direction and is notoriously difficult to pass through when the wind is funnelling down it. Sure enough, just as we approached, the wind built to 50 knots on the nose. It was pleasing to see that *Merrymaid* could make progress under engine and hold steerage in these



Richard Haworth is an experienced skipper of charter yachts in polar waters, having managed some of the best-known yachts. He has explored many remote areas, leading the first sailing expedition to some of the uncharted coastal areas of Baffin Island. He runs the company High Latitudes, which specialise in assisting and supporting private vessel expeditions to the more remote cruising grounds of the world. This includes assistance and advice on vessel preparation, preparation of itineraries and logistical support, obtaining permits and the services of pilots as required. See advice in panel (right)



Long floating lines were used to secure *Merrymaid* in many of the anchorages. Left: the barometer dropped well off the scale as we struggled to make progress west of the Beagle Channel

conditions, but once into the funnelling winds of the Brecknock, we would not be making progress. We sought shelter in a likely-looking bay to the north. The bottom was clearly rocky with katabatic winds gusting fiercely through the bay, but once again the big fisherman’s anchor did not let us down.

The channels to the north offer spectacular anchorages and involve passing three significant tidal gates. One such narrow had a nine-knot tide running when we arrived and, anchoring just next to the narrows, we eyed a seething, boiling mass of water that would have interested most white water canoeists just off our transom. A short diversion from our direct route took us to Puerto Natales, where we refuelled and the crew enjoyed a day ice climbing in Torres del Paine National Park.

As we went north the air got warmer, but no less wet. Most days it rained. Some days it never stopped raining! However, we did enjoy good weather for our visits to the impressive ice fronts of Ventisquero Pio XI and Seno Iceberg. Here we could take *Merrymaid* up close to the ice, though not too close as the high walls are constantly calving.

On the last leg we were fortunate to be able to take advantage of light southerly winds to cross the Gulf of Peñas, a relatively shallow stretch of water which can get very rough in strong westerly or north-westerly winds, finally berthing in Puerto Montt.

Merrymaid and her crew had done themselves proud, coping with everything the region could throw at them and I left the boat in Puerto Montt with many happy memories. From here, they were to continue up the west coast of South America, looking for somewhere suitable to restore the varnishwork. Follow *Merrymaid*’s further adventures on her circumnavigation at www.merrymaid.sy



Preparing for the South

We had recommended a number of changes to *Merrymaid* during her refit to prepare her for high-latitude cruising. With water temperatures around 4°C, the performance of the watermaker would drop to around half its rated capacity. A pre-heater to the sea water intake had been added to boost the output.

We also reviewed the heating system of the vessel and looked at the problem of condensation from the hatches and agreed equipment that should be carried on board, such as long lengths of floating polypropylene rope for mooring the vessel in rocky anchorages.

Perhaps the most vital area that we often have to address when reviewing vessels for trips such as this is the adequacy of the ground tackle. In this area *Merrymaid* had no concerns whatsoever – she carries a 140kg bronze/aluminium fisherman’s anchor which performed admirably in some very rocky, windy anchorages.

Potentially the greatest challenge of all was *Merrymaid*’s tankage capacity – with a range under engine of not much more than 900 miles. This was going to be pitifully inadequate for the passage up the west coast of Chile, where narrow channels, contrary currents and strong headwinds could be expected.

Plans were made for fuel bladders to be carried on deck and arrangements made to ensure that fuel would be available in the remote fishing village of Puerto Eden.

Apart from the modifications mentioned above, here are some of the more critical issues in preparing for the South:

Hull integrity and strength

Most experienced high-latitude cruisers prefer hulls in steel or aluminium (*Merrymaid* is wooden). Chances of collision with ice are high. Skippers of non-metallic vessels should carry heavy duty tarpaulins and/or other measures for emergency leak repair.

Rig and sails

We prefer slab reefing mainsails over roller reefing, being much more reliable. Most vessels have four reefs, with the final reef able to do the job of a trysail, with a small furling storm staysail.

Covered helming position

Once one has enjoyed the experience of cruising these waters with the benefit of a covered wheelhouse, it is difficult to understand why anyone would want to attempt to do so without.

Ice light

A powerful searchlight sited forward of any sails and rigging to avoid glare and may often be fitted to the pulpit.

Kelp cutter

It is not unusual to find the anchor has up to a tonne of kelp around it. This can be cut away with



Top: James and ‘Frank’ the chef (real name Ralph Sprenger) take a break just west of the Horn. Above: the crew, from left – George Cox, James Wilkinson, Frank, Justin (skipper) and Tig (Andrew Reid – mate). Above right: wash day

a variety of tools, but one of the best is a common garden hoe which can be wielded from on deck with relative ease.

Safety equipment

We always carry survival suits for all crew when in cold water regions. Preparation must be made for the failure of one of the vessel’s hatches and we prepare storm boards for this purpose. A securely stowed, but accessible liferaft is a must, as is a working, correctly registered EPIRB.

Dinghy and outboard

Since it is often used to moor the vessel in anchorages, this becomes an important piece of safety equipment. It must therefore be reliable. We always carry a spare dinghy and outboard.

Instruments

The inaccurate and incomplete charting means that we are often reliant on our radar for coastal navigation. A forward-looking sounder is also a very useful additional instrument. Electronic charting systems should be treated with great caution in these areas.

Spares and tools

Any vessel cruising in these waters should be self-sufficient. Skippers must have plenty of spares, tools and the expertise to be able to fix serious problems. www.highlatitudes.com