



South Georgia Shackleton Crossing Report-October 20th to 22nd 2015

REPORT: Sean Brooks and Kevin Nicholas IFMGA Mountain & Ski Guides. (NZ Mountain Guides Association.)

EXPEDITION BACKGROUND FORMATION:

One Ocean was approached by **Nigel Watson** from the **NZ Antarctic Heritage Trust** to expressly put this South Georgia Shackleton Crossing trip by Ski Expedition together. The Expedition was to commemorate the 100 year crossing of Sir Earnest Shackleton of England, Tom Crean of Ireland, and Frank Worsley of New Zealand. A big part of the inspiration behind the Expedition was to encourage young explorers to get out amongst the mountains and embrace a modern day adventure. In so doing Nigel Watson had over 200 applicants for 3 positions aged between 20 and 29 from England, Ireland and New Zealand. The 3 eventual chosen from a rigorous selection process were James Blake from England, Sinead Hunt from Ireland, and Tom Mctavish from New Zealand.

Sean Brooks was involved in the interview process of the last 12 young explorers and final selection of 3 to go to South Georgia. Kevin Nicholas took James, Sinead, Tom and Nigel Watson who were to make up the final group of 4 clients on a weekend shake down trip in New Zealand on skis with all their gear, including pitching tents and sleeping out above the snowline at a local ski area. Kevin was also able to view all of their proposed gear they were to take with them South and make any necessary changes both he and Sean thought were prudent. This weekend exercise with all of the clients together out on the hill with Kevin proved to be very valuable and helped in the success and safety of the overall Expedition, and to form some good initial bonding of the team members early on.

ITINERARY:

This Expedition was conducted aboard the Vavilov during the Vavilov's "**South Georgia In Depth**" voyage dated **17th to the 30th October 2015**. The Voyage started in the Falkland Islands where all passengers had flown to.

The first 2 and a half days were at sea sailing directly to King Haakon Bay which was to be our drop off point on South Georgia. During this time, gear was sorted amongst the Expedition members, food for the crossing put together and shared amongst the group and radio communications sorted. An FM radio was carried by Kevin Nicholas with a spare battery and a spare Ship Sat Phone was carried by Sean Brooks. In addition to this Nigel Watson had elected to carry his own Sat Phone. We made our Sched times with Nate on the ship at 6.00am in the morning and at 7.00pm in the evening every day. This worked well for all parties and enabled an updated wind forecast etc for us, as well as letting the Expedition Leader Boris through Nate know our approximate position each evening and expected progress each morning etc.

SKI CROSSING DAY 1 TUESDAY 20th

We landed at the end of King Haakon Bay in the afternoon at around 1.30pm, in a Westerly wind slowly growing in strength. Our forecast was of wind to increase steadily towards evening with poor visibility at times. Kevin lead us off towards Shackletons Gap. Towards the top we had to start navigating with GPS and compass for most of the rest of the afternoon. With the poor vis came light snow on and off throughout the afternoon. At the top of Shackletons gap we followed a compass bearing across the Murray Snow field to the peaks of the Trident, making camp at about 500m at 7pm. Tying the 3 tents down very strongly with skis and ice axes etc as we were expecting some wind that night. As the night progressed, so did the wind, stronger than forecast with wind gusts approaching 50+ knots at times. One tent had a tent pole slightly bent from the wind gusts that night.

SKI CROSSING DAY 2 WEDNESDAY 21ST

Camp was broken and we were under way by a leisurely 9.30am. We approached the middle saddle to take us down onto the Crean Glacier in reasonable visibility. Kevin lead our group down carefully with reasonable skiing conditions and poor lighting taking care with crevasses lower down the slope which proved to be non existent, as the winter snow had filled all the troublesome crevasses in completely. Sean followed at the back carving large slow turns and coaching Sinead down following in his tracks to easier ground at the bottom and on the Crean proper.

Skinning across the Crean was uneventful with occasional views down towards Antarctic Bay otherwise in and out of misty cloud past Cornwall Peaks to the Nunitak. Here we took skins off and skied down to Fortuna Bay, Kevin leading in increasing poor visibility with squally snow showers. Taking care not to trend right down to Fortuna Bay too quickly. Kevin lead us through to his Secret Passage he had found the season before creating no issues with crevasses at all and connecting on to the slope below Best Peak leading down to Fortuna Bay where we set up our tent camp near the beach at around 7.00pm with increasing SW winds gusting 20 knots.

SKI CROSSING DAY # THURSDAY 22nd

Break camp again at 9.30am following the glacial stream for 10 minutes, back up to its exit point from the glacier carrying skis, and crossing above on snow so as to keep our feet dry. We then walked for half an hour back along the beach to a bluff where we climbed the tussock hill and sidled above the bluff for 45 minutes on flat hillocks and then put crampons on to come back down the snow slope to the beach after the bluffed section. Kevin and I roped every body up on 2 ropes and short roped everybody sidling initially and then down to the sea. This section was always an unknown to Kevin and I if it would go or not but proved to be very satisfactory. The slope back down to the sea is definitely an area to proceed with caution in weather conditions that may produce snow sluffing or a larger wet slide from above but was very safe when we descended. Conditions were firm enough to produce a fast slide for anyone tripping on descent and with injuries as a result and even when softer snow encountered, a short rope technique by the Guide for descent proves to be a safe and fast technique.

Easy walk along the rest of the way round beach to the Konig Glacier river mouth where we found a safe crossing. Ski Boots off and waded through coolish water to the other side. Boots back on and walked to the base of the snow line where we could put our skis and skins on to climb to the top of the pass to take us down to Stromness Harbour. Up to the river crossing the wx had been clear and fine. While crossing the river a snow squall hit us. On the way up to the pass on skis visibility was poor and the wind steadily increased. Once cresting just over the top the wind began to gust up 50-60 knots at times. Kevin at one stage got blown off his

skis and I was being blown sideways with my ski edges digging into the firm snow surface. It was at this stage we all huddled together and made the decision to take skis off and put on crampons and use iceaxes as this would be a safer option even though we would get buffeted around with skis on our backs. Everyone worked through this transition extremely well. Instructions to keep the body close to the ground when a gust came through and no further incident ensued. 150 metres further down the wind eased back considerably and we were able to put skis and skins back on at the bottom of the valley and skin the rest of the way to the beach at Stromness where the Vavilov was waiting our arrival at our 5.00pm rendezvous.

EXPEDITION SUMMARY:

The Expedition proved to be a very successful Crossing. We were fortunate with the weather, even given the battering the wind gave us on the first night and on the last day. The strength of the party with strong clients, that were well prepared, and with the appropriate prior ski and mountaineering experience proved to be very important for this particular crossing at this time of year. When the wind blows, the temperature drops very quickly and people need to be very efficient in how they operate on the hill. South Georgia's weather and interior is always to be greatly respected.

If the Ship's Wind Forecast Weather Charts showed winds of 35-40 knots (60-70kmh) at sea level for more than a few hours during the crossing, Kevin and I would re-evaluate the safety of doing the crossing where wind speeds will definitely be higher up on the Elevated Glaciated Terrain and look at retailoring the trip to suit.

The Radio coms and Sat Phone and call times worked very well. We carried adequate food and carried enough for 1 to 2 days extra if needed. We carried everything we needed in our packs including tents and this worked fine. We felt having to tow sleds would have been slow and cumbersome for a 3 day crossing. Kevin had a good selection of route waypoints listed that we both had on our GPS using many of them and then a compass bearing for travel in whiteout conditions to save on GPS battery or if they went flat. Crevasses don't seem to be much of a problem this time of year in October so the only time we felt we needed to use the rope was for short roping on the last day. Kevin also carried the Brooks Lightweight Portable Sled (borrowed from a friend in NZ) in case of emergency as a safety backup for self-rescue evacuation.

NOTES FOR FUTURE CROSSINGS:

A Client to Guide ratio for the Shackleton Crossing on Skis of 3:1 would work fine given that there is a Pre Shake Down trip, in perhaps Ushuaia over 2 days. Both Kevin and I think this is critical to finding out the true abilities of the clients and any gear issues there might be. South Georgia's interior is no place to find out these problems! In certain weather conditions, a weak team member, or major gear issues could endanger the rest of the team. Unsure how a shakedown trip may work out of Ushuaia, when we voyage from the Falklands?

Future gear to carry that would be very useful are some thin but strong snow saws. When making camp with tents, they should have a snow wall of either shovelled snow (if soft enough) or blocks cut out and stacked as shelter for the tents from the wind. Purchase of a Brooks Lightweight Portable Sled would be a good "Self Rescue" safety investment for future crossings and should always be carried by one of the Guides.

It is crucial that clients have well-adjusted crampons and that they are efficient at putting them on their boots in any weather.

Sean Brooks. Kevin Nicholas. IFMGA Mountain and Ski Guides for One Ocean Expeditions.

