

2015 PolarExplorers Shackleton Crossing Expedition Report

Submitted by Annie Aggens, expedition guide

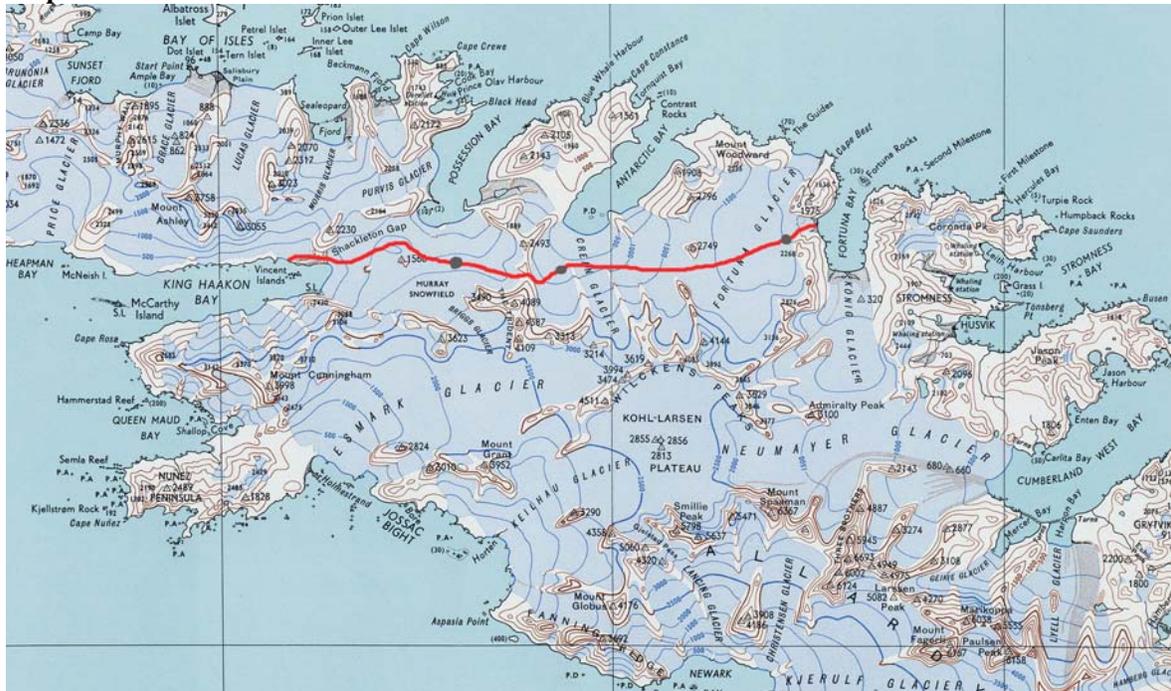
Introduction:

PolarExplorers is a commercial guiding company that specializes in polar expeditions. Our November 2015 Shackleton Crossing was our second time guiding this expedition (the first being in October 2012). We started in King Haakon Bay on November 9, 2015 and ended in Fortuna Bay on November 12. Due to weather conditions we made the final trek from Fortuna to Stromness on November 14. Our objective was to complete the crossing successfully in the time allotted and immerse ourselves in Shackleton's experiential footprint during this historic anniversary period. The expedition went according to plan and we had a wonderful time.

Route:

On day 1 we departed from King Haakon Bay around 10 AM and skied up the Murray Snowfield making camp approximately 1 mile from the Trident Ridge. On day 2 we skied to the Trident Ridge under a clearing sky with gusty winds coming over our right shoulders. We descended the Trident Ridge from the saddle immediately south of the main "tooth". Once initiated the descent took roughly 1.5 hours for all teams to reach the bottom. We made our second night's camp on the Crean Glacier. On day 3 we traversed the rest of the Crean Glacier and most of the Fortuna Glacier, camping just north of Breakwind Ridge. On day 4 we descended to Fortuna Bay via the eastern arm of the Fortuna Glacier. It was an easy descent with few crevasses. We stuck mostly to the south side of the sub glacier. We reunited with the Plancius in Fortuna Bay. A forecast for very strong winds and high waves in Grytviken meant that we had to postpone our immediate hike of the Shackleton Walk so that we could land at Grytviken in the afternoon. We returned to complete the Shackleton Walk two days later.

Map of route:



Reports on Activities:

All activities went according to plan with the exception of a small diversion on day 1 when we went slightly out of our way in low visibility. We traveled in three rope teams of 4, 3 & 4. At the Trident saddle we dug a snow pit to assess snow conditions and we rolled a snow wheel down slope to test for avalanche and crevasses (it ended just adjacent to a small crevasse). We removed our skis and walked with crampons for the descents off the Trident Ridge and Fortuna Glacier, the latter of which would likely not have been necessary had it not rained during the night.

Weather:

We experienced a variety of weather including white-out conditions on the ascent to the Murray Snowfield and extremely strong winds at the Trident Ridge and again on the traverse of Crean Glacier. The gusts on the Trident Ridge

we estimate at over 85 MPH. The gusts on the Crean Glacier we estimate at around 60-70 MPH. The gusts would come every few minutes and last for a minute or so, allowing for periods of relative calm in between. Nonetheless we were knocked down several times and our sleds frequently caught the wind and wanted to escape. Had we not been attached to them they would have rolled all the way to Antarctic Bay. We had rain/sleet on the evening of day 2 and again during the early mornings of days 3 & 4.

Equipment:

We used Hellesport tents with double poles. We had 2 poles break during gusts of wind. We used Paris expedition sleds with rope traces. Most people used either three pin expedition boots/bindings or plastic mountaineering boots with Silveretta bindings. Both worked fine though our preference is for the lighter 3 pin set up.

Safety & communications:

We carried two sat phones and had twice daily communications with the Plancius (at 8 PM & 8 AM) as well as daily communications with our office staff. We had two potential bailout points at Possession Bay and Antarctic Bay though the specifics of the Antarctic Bay retreat were unknown. We carried enough food and fuel for 2 extra days if necessary. We carried a comprehensive first aid kit and repair kit.

Environmental plan:

In accordance with South Georgia protocols we all cleansed and vacuumed our clothing and equipment prior to landing on South Georgia. During the traverse we practiced LEAVE NO TRACE and packed out all waste including human waste. Other than our ski tracks and our urine we left nothing behind.

Expedition application and processing:

Our application and permitting was a simple process. There was some initial confusion with IAATO about whether our guides were required to take the field assessment for Antarctic Peninsula and SGI field staff. Two of our three guides did so. With the exception of a few questions about the Shackleton Walk this assessment provides no benefit to Shackleton Crossing guides who bear no responsibility outside the Shackleton Crossing and will otherwise be under the supervision of IAATO field staff during the rest of their stay on SGI. Perhaps this assessment, which is primarily about the Antarctic Peninsula and only secondarily about South Georgia Island, can be waived for Shackleton Crossing guides who will not be supervising any other shore landings. Alternatively perhaps a more beneficial assessment can be drafted that will more accurately educate and assess Shackleton Crossing guides about the expedition.

Conclusion:

We felt very privileged to make this traverse during the centennial anniversary period and we would like to thank the GSGSSI for issuing our permit and assisting with our planning. We would also like to thank the expedition staff of the Plancius for their support before and during the expedition.

