

SOUTH GEORGIA KAYAK AND SAILING EXPEDITION 2019
Expedition Trip Report by Justine Curgenvén

EXPEDITION OBJECTIVES

A team of 5 strong sea kayakers will explore South Georgia, with professional sea kayak guides Justine Curgenvén and JF Marleau (total 7 kayakers). We will sail from the Falkland islands on the “Spirit of Sydney” yacht, leaving 5th October 2019, and return to the Falkland islands on the yacht by 2nd November 2019. We will be in South Georgia for 2-3 weeks, primarily sea kayaking, hiking and wildlife viewing. We will sleep on the yacht most nights but will camp on the island on occasions. There will be 2 sailing crew on the yacht, making a total of 9 people. This is a commercial expedition; the 5 clients are paying for the services of the yacht and kayak guides. The objective is to explore South Georgia - the landscape, wildlife and history, by kayak, yacht and foot.

SUMMARY

DATE	LOCATION	ACTIVITY
5 th October	Stanley, Falklands	Arrive and prepare yacht
6-10 Oct	Scotia Sea	Sail to South Georgia
11 October	Right Whale Bay	Kayak, hike
12 October	Elsehul	Sail, Kayak
13 October	Elsehul	Hike, tourism
14 October	Rosita Harbour	Sail, kayak
15 October	Rosita Hbr- Salisbury Plain	Kayak, camp
16 October	Prion Island, Prince Olaf Harbour	Kayak, Sail, hike
17 Oct	Prince Olaf Harbour – Fortuna Bay	Kayak, sail, kayak
18 Oct	Fortuna Bay - Leith	Kayak, sail, hike
19 Oct	Leith - Grytviken	Kayak, sail
20 Oct	Grytviken	Hike, tourism
21 Oct	Grytviken – Cobblers Cove	Hike, kayak, sail
22 Oct	Cobblers Cove – St Andrews Bay	Kayak, camp
23 Oct	St Andrews Bay- Gold Harbour	Kayak, sail
24 Oct	Gold Harbour – Larsen Harbour	Sail, kayak
25 Oct	King Haakon Bay	Sail, hike, wildlife view
26 Oct	King Haakon Bay	Kayak
27 – 1 Nov	Scotia Sea	Sail, tourism
2 Nov	Falkland islands	Tourism, fly home

THE TEAM

Yacht Crew: Darrel Day, Aurora Dewas

Kayak guides: Justine Curgenvén, JF Marleau

Kayakers: David Crocker, Donna McCready, Keri French, Michael Miros, Craig Johnston.

THE KAYAK GUIDES

Justine Curgenven has guided month-long sea kayaking trips to the Antarctic peninsula with “Spirit of Sydney” 3 times and JF Marleau has guided 1 trip. Justine has kayaked all over the world on personal expeditions, including 2,500km along the Aleutian island chain and 2,700km around the South island of New Zealand. In 2017, Justine and JF kayaked 1,000km in the Canadian Arctic from Kuujuaq to Salluit. JF has been guiding and instructing kayaking for over 20 years. He is one of only 2 people who hold the highest level of guide trainer and instructor trainer certifications in Canada. Both JF and Justine hold a current 90-hour wilderness first aid qualification, VHF operator’s license and the highest level of guiding certification in Canada, the SKGABC Level 3 Guide with Class 4 waters endorsement. They are both very experienced in kayaking, guiding, camping and leave-no-trace methodology. The 5 clients have all been vetted by Justine and JF. They all have extensive sea kayaking experience. One client came on a previous trip with Justine and the Spirit of Sydney to Antarctica.

THE SUPPORT VESSEL

Our support vessel “Spirit of Sydney” is a 9-berth 60ft aluminium hulled yacht that was built for the 1986 BOC Challenge Race. She has been used for Antarctic sailing for every southern summer since 1994. She has sailed in Antarctic and South Georgian waters for hundreds of days cumulatively. The skipper, Darrel Day, has been to South Georgia and Antarctica multiple times over the last 17 years. Spirit was designed and built in an era when good racing performance was tempered by respect for the power of the mighty southern ocean. Consequently, she is a strong and powerful yacht with excellent all-round sailing ability and her tough aluminium construction and watertight bulkheads have given her a useful second life as an Antarctic Expedition yacht. Primary safety is also covered by an over-built southern ocean sailing rig, powerful 130 hp turbo diesel engine and large feathering prop, 6 watertight compartments and redundancy in most systems and equipment.

THE EXPEDITION IN DETAIL

6th October: Depart 10am from Stanley, Falkland islands.

10th October: Arrive into Right Whale Bay at midnight.

11th October: We wake up at 7am, make breakfast, untie the kayaks and fit the rudders. It’s snowing with a 10 knot Westerly wind. The forecast is for 15 knots wind and the satellite image shows big areas of blue sky that we hope will move into the area. We have lunch on the yacht before going for an orientation paddle.

Kayak 12.00 – 17.30 around Right Whale Bay. We paddled counter-clockwise around the bay, landing in the SW corner to walk around and take photos of the penguins and elephant seals. We continued kayaking around close to shore as far as Barber Cove where we watched Gentoo penguins landing and more elephant seals. We left Barber

Cove around 16.45 into an increased wind of a steady 15 knots, gusting to 20-25 knots. We landed everyone on the yacht and put the kayaks back on board. Approx. 4 nautical miles.

Around 9pm the wind picks up to a steady 25 knots, gusting up to 67 knots. The sea state is white caps and flying spray everywhere. The anchor holds.

12th October: We had planned to kayak to Elsehul but the wind is still a steady 25 knots, gusting frequently to over 50 knots. We leave around 10am in the yacht for Elsehul. Once away from Right Whale Bay, the wind is West 20-25knots but with far fewer gusts. The gusts are max 35 knots and gusts become less frequent. We arrive at Elseul at 12.45pm, have lunch on the yacht and re-check the forecast. The forecast is for lighter winds this afternoon then picking up again to stronger Easterlies on 13th. We will need to anchor here tonight and tomorrow as it's the only safe anchorage in an Easterly for some distance. We plan to go for a paddle this afternoon and spend the day exploring on land tomorrow.

Kayak 2pm – 4.30pm around Elsehul bay, looking at the elephant seals, king penguins, Gentoo, nesting albatross, southern giant petrels, sooty sheathbills, shags and fur seals. Dramatic view of Bird island. 3 nautical miles. We don't land.

Take-aways: Right Whale bay funnels a westerly or SW wind, creating a strong local effect. A seaweed that looks like spaghetti covers shallow rocks that can be boomers – avoid paddling over that type of seaweed! Giant kelp grows in deeper waters – no breaking waves in the 2 metre swell that we have.

13th October: Breakfast at 7am on the yacht.
0900 – 13.30: zodiac drop off at Elsehul. Hike over to the other side and watch Gentoo penguins and elephant seals (plus giant petrels, sheathbills, fur seals and pipits). David and Aurora hike a bit further up a hill for a view of Bird island. Some of the gentoos have an egg in their nests. Lots of Gentoo are stealing rocks from each other!

16.00-18.00: JF, Justine, David and Aurora go back by zodiac for another hike, mainly overlooking the elephant seal harem at the south end of the bay and a short hike up a ridge. We came back when we reached some southern giant petrel nests with some skuas sitting hopefully nearby. We retreated to make sure we didn't disturb the giant petrels and allow the skuas to swoop in and eat their eggs.

14th October: 07.30 – start motoring back to Right Whale bay on the yacht. We had hoped to kayak from Right Whale bay to Rosita Harbour but its 25 knots Southerly as we leave Elsehul with gusts up to 50 knots. Last nights forecast for 9am was 30 knots SE to the West of South Georgia and 20knots SE by Rosita Harbour. Both were dropping to S15 knots by 3pm. By 9am, the wind is much less as we approach Right Whale Bay. Arrive at Rosita Harbour at 12.30pm.

Kayak 2.20pm – 5.20pm. 3 hours. Michael was seasick on the sail over so doesn't join us. We paddle NE up the coastline to the headland, following the coast on the way there and crossing the bays on the way back. The wind is approx. 10-15 knots from the E with occasional stronger gusts around 20. As we approach the yacht, there is a very strong katabatic wind funnelling out of the valley off the glacier, gusting up

to 35 knots. Craig nearly capsizes getting out as his bow blows up onto the sugar scoop in the yacht and Michael grabs it and holds it there so he unbalances and can't roll. He gets back up once, goes over again and I go alongside him, grab his back deck, pull him up and stabilise him. JF asks the other paddlers to anchor in the kelp and raft up while he lands next on the yacht. He calls them to the yacht one at a time to help them in. I stay in the water until all the other kayaks are tied up on the yacht in case something blows away. I rescue Michael's hat that blows into the sea.

We plan to camp at Salisbury Plain tomorrow so we organise camping gear and food tonight.

Take-away: The wind seems to pick up in the evenings. We plan to try to be off the water earlier.

15th October: Forecast NW 5-10, Forecast for 16th SW 15 knots.

Up at 7am. Pack kayaks. On the water at 9.30am with kayaks packed for camping. We kayaked to Salisbury Plain and camped overnight. There are blue skies and there is very little wind all day. We have lunch at Start Point. We land 1 at a time at Salisbury Plain using paddle signals as there is 1 metre dumping surf. We camp near the far north point of the beach as there are less elephant seals here and less surf. Once on land, there are thousands and thousands of King penguins as far as we can see, including brown fluffy chicks. An elephant seal gives birth and a dozen giant petrels and skuas fight to pull the placenta out of the mother. Grey clouds appear in the late afternoon and spread. It starts snowing a bit in the evening.

16th October: At 3am: The wind picked up to estimated 40 knot gusts (The wind was 40 knots on the yacht, not far away). There is deep snow covering the kayaks and blowing into some tents which have mesh inners. 4-season Hilleberg tents do well. REI/MSR tents not so much. JF gets up to check on people and tents during the night. Keri has a lot of snow in her tent so she comes into our tent with us.

We have breakfast and decide not to kayak the 2 mile open crossing to Prion Island as the wind is too strong at 25 knots. We launch from the beach through 0.5-1 metre surging surf and kayak to the yacht then sail to Prion Island. We go ashore and walk on the boardwalk (which is covered in snow) to view a few wandering albatross chicks. We sail to Prince Olaf Harbour.

17th October: Forecast SW 15 knots. We planned to kayak from Prince Olaf Harbour to Fortuna Bay. The wind was noisy all night and in the morning it was Westerly 20-25 knots, gusting 30. We looked through binoculars at Possession Bay, the first big inlet that we would have to cross and we could see many large white caps. We changed the plan to kayak inside the bay.

Kayak 8.30am – 11.30am. We paddle from the yacht and land outside the 200metre exclusion zone of Prince Olaf whaling station and hike up to the reservoir for a view of the whaling station. Then we kayak counter-clockwise around the harbour, going into and around Elephant Lagoon. We paddle to just short of Black Point where we can see the sea being whipped up into spirals of spray. I estimate some of the gusts that hit us were at least 35 knots although there is very little fetch in the bay so the waves were manageable.

Sail to Fortuna bay 12 – 2.40pm. The wind was gusting to over 50 knots out of Possession Bay and Antarctic Fjord.

Kayak 3.15- 5.30pm. Paddle down the west side of Fortuna Bay to Whistle Cove. It's calm in the bay – wind less than 10 knots to start with but it swings around from W to WNW and sometimes starts to funnel into the bay down the valleys. Lots of elephant seals, Gentoo and king penguins. We see a beached iceberg roll. Land at Whistle cove to look at elephant seals and penguins.

18th October: We plan to kayak from Fortuna Bay to Leith Harbour. The forecast is for 15 knots from the SW and the satellite image shows a triangular hole in the clouds to the NE of the island suggesting the larger scale wind is from the SW. However at 7am there is a light wind coming from the valley to our WNW. By 8.30am, this WNW wind is occasional and up to 20 knots. We can see whitecaps on the East side of the bay signalling there is a strong N wind funnelling into the East side of the bay. We decide to go anyway, as we can always retreat back to the yacht but we hope that once we exit from the bay and head East, the wind will be behind us, or that the cliffs to our South will offer protection. We fight the wind to the NE point of the bay and start heading East along the exposed coast. The wind is 25knots from the NNW with a 1-2 metre sea state. We are being blown onshore and if anyone capsized they'd be on the rocks quickly. We very soon decide to turn around and retreat to the yacht. We sail to Leith Harbour.

PM: We get dropped off in Stromness by zodiac and walk 3km back to Leith over the hills, where the yacht is anchored. We visit the cemetery and head back to the yacht.

19th October: Forecast is NW 20 knots at 9am, NW 15 knots at 3pm, SW 15 knots at 9pm. Actual wind is N 8-20 knots and rain. The sea state is almost flat inside the protected Bays.

Kayak 8.45- 12.00. We kayak from Leith Bay to Husvik bay along the shore, landing at Husvik (outside the 200 metre exclusion zone) and exploring the emergency hut. During the paddle, we see a lot more fur seals today than previous days and they are much more active, males fighting in the water and on land and curiously following our kayaks. We see quite a few elephant seals in the water 10-30 metres offshore.

We returned to the yacht, ate and sailed to Grytviken.

20th October: Day in Grytviken, hiking and exploring the old whaling station, museum and post office and touring the BAS base.

21st October: We hoped to kayak from Grytviken to Cobblers Cove. Forecast is 20 knots at 3am and 9am, dropping to 10 knots by 3pm. Actual wind at 8am is 15-20knots from the North. We decide to spend the morning further exploring Grytviken on foot and paddle in the afternoon.

1pm-5pm: Kayak from Grytviken SE, across Moraine Fjord and Cumberland East Bay. Wind is about 10 knots or less. Land at Coral Bay by a hut for a break. Paddle north almost to Barff Point, where the yacht picks us up.

Sail to Cobblers Cove where we anchor overnight.

22nd October: Forecast is for almost no wind and the conditions match. We are able to execute our plan to kayak to St Andrews Bay and camp.

8.45am- 4pm: Kayak 16 nautical miles from Cobblers Cove to St Andrews Bay. We have thick fog for the first 5 miles to the entrance to Ocean Harbour and navigate with map and compass. We land at Ocean Harbour for lunch and carry on to St Andrews. The fog lifts revealing a sunny day and beautiful mountains.

23rd October: Forecast is for max 10 knots wind from the West. It's calm and foggy in the morning.

9.30am – 2.30pm: Kayak from St Andrews Bay to Harcourt island. We plan to kayak 12 nautical miles to Royal Bay. We kayak around Calf Head and land just south of it for lunch in a little bay. Spirit of Sydney radios us to say there is 30 knots of wind coming out of Royal Bay and the yacht can't anchor there. We arrange to be picked up near to Harcourt Island. The wind is gusting 50 knots out of Royal Bay by the time we sail across.

We sail to Gold Harbour, eat dinner on the yacht and get dropped ashore by zodiac to look at the beach which was entirely packed with elephant seals (mainly) plus fur seals and penguins. We had hoped to camp but there was no safe space to put tents.

24th October: We sail to Drygalski Fjord

1pm-6pm: Kayak. The yacht drops us off at the NW end of Drygalski fjord and we kayak back along the SW coast with a 20knot following sea. We finish in Larsen Harbour where the yacht is anchored. We see Weddell seals in Larsen Harbour.

25th October: Sail along the SW side of South Georgia to King Haakon Bay. We arrive at 5.30pm and go for a walk on Peggotty Bluff and see where Shackleton made camp in the James Caird and started his hike to Stromness. We see lots of elephant seals and a few Gentoo.

26th October:

Kayak 9am-1pm: We planned to kayak from the yacht around King Haakon Bay, via Cape Rosa. The forecast is for 15 knot winds but the winds pick up to 20 knot gusts before we leave. We head off towards Cape Rosa but the wind picks up to 30 knots behind us. We abort the plan 0.5miles early and head back into the wind close to shore. We are making reasonable progress but we call the yacht for a pick up to be on the safe side.

27th October: Start sailing back to Stanley. The conditions are good with winds around 10-20 knots for most of the journey.

1st Nov: Arrive back in Stanley in the early morning.

2nd Nov: Fly home.

SAFETY PLAN

- Experience & Fitness. The group were all experienced kayakers with previous expedition experience. All were reasonably fit and had completed a medical questionnaire and signed medical advisors opinion.
- Group Size. Our group size of five, plus 2 guides provided an excellent safety margin. We had expected that we could split into 2 groups on occasions but it was so windy and the sea so cold that we decided it was safer to always have 2 guides with one group.
- Medical. We carried a very comprehensive medical kit on the yacht, plus 2 smaller medical kits within the kayak party. Two members of the team had wilderness first aid qualifications, one is a doctor.
- Communications. We carried two satellite phones and 5 VHF radios. We tested the VHF radios every day before leaving and were in constant communication with the yacht via VHF, or satellite phone.
- Contingency. We made a plan every evening for the next day's paddle based on the weather forecast. We frequently revised the plan the next morning based on the updated forecast and our observations. We often had to downgrade our plans to paddle less far and in more sheltered areas due to strong winds. The yacht was always within a few miles of us in case the conditions deteriorated further and we needed a pick up. On 3 occasions, the yacht came to pick us up early due to winds picking up. On another occasion, we paddled back to the yacht rather than continue around an exposed coastline to our planned meet-up point.
- We always carried equipment in the kayaks in case we were forced to camp out several nights. This included bothy bag, tent, sleeping matt, sleeping bag, spare warm clothes, food, cooker, stove, water. When we went on shore by zodiac we took a barrel with emergency survival equipment in it.
- Personal & Group Equipment. We compiled an equipment list while planning the expedition for both personal equipment and group equipment. Two people took 3-season tents which were not adequate for the South Georgian winds. We will recommend 4-season tents and snow pegs if we run the trip again.

ENVIRONMENTAL PLAN

-All members were sent copies of Visiting South Georgia 2019-20 and the 2019-20 Biosecurity Handbook.prior to the expedition. Everyone was briefed about bringing

new clothes or making sure their clothes and equipment are fully cleaned from debris, seeds etc.

-Everyone was fully briefed about conduct ashore before leaving the yacht.

-We only landed at approved landing sites.

-We fully adhered to the Wildlife Protection Guidelines at all times

-We avoided walking on fragile vegetation, especially moss beds and the margins of streams and lakes. We took care in tussock grass not to damage burrows or disturb seals or nesting birds. We made noise to avoid surprising any seals and carried a paddle in higher densities of fur seals to keep any surprised seals at a safer distance. At Prion Island we remained on the boardwalk, although this was totally covered in snow! We adhered to the conditions of the visit permit at all times.

-We did not approach within 200m of the old whaling stations at Leith, Stromness, Husvik and Prince Olav Harbour.

-We did not remove any items like plants, bones, or eggs.

-We did not light any fires.

-We did not disturb or feed wildlife or use flash photography on wildlife. We stayed on the edge of animal groups, approached slowly and quietly, and we avoided surrounding the groups. We backed off immediately if mammals or birds showed any sign of being disturbed. We took extra care near fur seals not to enter any male territories. We planned our expedition for October to avoid large congregations of aggressive fur seals.

-We chose landing places which minimised disturbance to animals.

-We did not damage or remove any historical artefacts.

-We cleaned all clothes and equipment to be brought ashore, paying special attention to Velcro, pockets and hoods and making sure there are no soil particles, seeds or organic matter brought ashore.

-The yacht and personal possessions were fully inspected for rodents.

-Any footwear that will be worn ashore (paddling footwear and any other footwear carried in the kayaks) will be cleaned and sterilised with Vircon prior to all landings and again when returning to the yacht.

-The kayaks were inspected for rodents and any organic material every time we moved location.

-Bags were not left open and unattended ashore. To avoid any accidental transporting of rats or mice, kayak hatches were not left open and unattended, our tents were zipped up and drybags closed and stowed either inside the tent or kayak.

-When camping, human waste and grey water were left in the inter-tidal zone. All yacht waste was transported back to the Falklands for disposal, except for grey and black water, which were disposed of in open sea.

-There was a large amount of snow on South Georgia during our visit. This helped to minimise our environmental impact as we were not walking on vegetation, and the chances of moving seeds from one location to another was minimised.

EXPEDITION APPLICATION AND PROCESSING

The application process was time consuming but straight forward. It was a beneficial process that encouraged thoroughness throughout the entire expedition planning process. It reinforced the need to prepare and plan for the unpredictable weather and strong offshore winds that South Georgia is famous for. I felt that the application was a little repetitive in places, asking for the same information in different questions.

Once we applied for the expedition permit, there was an email dialogue between applicant and assessors. It was made clear to us what we needed to address before the application could move forward. This was very helpful.

SUMMARY

7 kayakers and 2 sailing crew successfully explored the beautiful wild island of South Georgia by kayak, yacht and hiking over a month period. We circumnavigated the whole island by yacht, and were able to kayak in many different areas. We had to modify our plans significantly due to the strong katabatic winds, which were much stronger than the forecast and almost omnipresent. We kayaked less distance than we had envisaged but we did not have a less amazing experience. We were able to spend many quality hours enjoying the landscape, scenery and history of a very special island.