

4
MONTHS'
PREPARATION
3,500
NAUTICAL MILES
80
YEAR-OLD
ICE EXPERT
75
DEGREES NORTH
400
GROSS TONNE
LATITUDE

ONE EPIC
VOYAGE

Words - Cecile Gauert



OWNERS' CLUB

Polar bears, whales, icebergs and rugged, dramatic landscapes provide the backdrop for Latitude's epic voyage through the Northwest Passage



“I am addicted to polar bears,” smiles Anil Thadani when I ask him why he decided to take his 45 metre yacht *Latitude* through the Northwest Passage. He's not kidding: he shows me dozens of bear photos when we meet on board in San Francisco. He even has one of a bear at full roar, standing on the bow. But it turns out that Owners' Club member Thadani has a sense of humour and knows his way around Photoshop. No bear really boarded *Latitude*, although it would not have been impossible. Thadani took a photo of a younger bear, its nose high up the air as it caught a whiff of the fish-and-chips aroma wafting from the galley. The source identified, the bear slid into the water and swam toward the yacht.

We meet in March this year, following his completion of a nearly 11,000-mile trip that took the yacht from Fort Lauderdale, to New York, Newport, Rhode Island and north to Greenland and then through the Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific coast. The *Latitude* party likes to say more people have climbed Everest than made the entire 3,500 nautical mile crossing between oceans. *Latitude* is just the 216th vessel to have completed the Northwest Passage, a series of waterways that constitute the northernmost route to connect the Atlantic and Pacific.

Not content with doing it once, Singaporean Thadani is eager to head back and shows me a number of possible routes for a second trip through the Passage, this time west to east. On a chart, his captain, Sean Meagher, has traced several routes - in red is the one already completed, which, in part, traced the steps of explorer Roald Amundsen. The Norwegian adventurer with a cool stare was the first to get from the Atlantic to the Pacific using the northern route in 1905. "It took him three years to do it; it took us three months," says Thadani.

In blue and green are the next possible itineraries. The plan taking shape when I'm on board is for *Latitude* to double back for what all aboard call "The Sequel", this time starting the crossing in Nome and heading toward Greenland, then on to Iceland and down to the UK. An area he wants to see again is Devon Island. The mountainous land at 75°N in the Canadian archipelago is Earth's largest uninhabited island and is a favourite

The seven most incredible ice destinations to visit by superyacht: boatinternational.com/ice-destinations

OWNERS' CLUB



stomping ground for polar bears and herds of musk oxen. It's so desolate that NASA has sent astronauts there to train for a Mars mission. "Devon Island is the reason I want to go back," Thadani says - and the animals, including the polar bears, of course.

Retreating sea ice has made the trip much more feasible than it once was and a cruise line is even selling spots for a 2016 departure, but the Northwest Passage still isn't for the faint of heart. *Latitude*, which has a steel hull but is not Ice Classed, was only one of two large yachts to make the passage in 2014. She arrived in Alaska's north west outpost and gold rush town of Nome, Johnny Horton's song *North to Alaska* playing on her sound system, in late September 2014, after passing Iceland's south coast in August. The passage down the western seaboard of the US saw them arrive in San Francisco in December 2014, where the boat wintered.

There were hairy moments and periods of boredom; they missed warmth and colour when all was brown and white, but were rewarded by the spectacle of the Northern Lights, limpid water, crisp air that smells of nothing but the sea and colourful

Inuit villages clinging to rocky shores. A flight by helicopter over the glacier near Ilulissat brought the northern latitude into full perspective early in the trip. "It felt like we were walking on the top of the earth," says Thadani.

In all, the group saw 19 bears on the trip. The first iceberg came into view on 1 August near Elliston in Newfoundland (that's the general area where the *Titanic* met her fate). From that point on, icebergs were a part of daily life. "The bergs are showing up like mountains on the radar," wrote Meagher on his Facebook page during a stop in Nuuk in

Greenland. A few days later, he wrote: "The icebergs, some over 1.5 miles long, are in as many shapes as clouds come in. We saw one almost roll over today. Picture the Sydney Opera house doing cartwheels and you may just glimpse what I am talking about."

It took longer to see the first polar bear. The prospect of not spotting any gave captain Meagher some trepidation. Thadani has loved animals since he was a child and his favourite thing to do when he was home from boarding school was to visit the Delhi zoo. His entrepreneurial success allowed him to travel far and wide as an adult, and he's shot many portraits of animals on the African plains, some of which grace the walls of *Latitude*. One particular favourite on the voyage was a young male that the group nicknamed Jerome, which followed the 13.7 metre Everglades tender and its passengers as they explored Kearny Cove. "He was hunting us," Thadani says. In the crew blog, Ashley Kendall wrote: "Huge paws paddled through the water towards us as we gulped our fear and prayed to live another day."

Thadani says he had long dreamt of long-distance cruising in remote areas, after criss-crossing the Med. That's why he bought *Latitude*, a Vripack-designed steel-hulled yacht built by the former Timmerman yard in Russia, his first full-displacement yacht after a series of fast boats. "Standing in front of [the map] one day, I asked [Sean] whether he had any ideas for something unusual we might be able to do instead of the usual Caribbean cruise," Thadani



Top left: the Latitude gang - ready for anything. Left: Roald Amundsen and crew aboard the first vessel to navigate solo through the Northwest Passage, in 1903-06

AN EXPLORER AT HEART

Bart Bouwhuis, creative director of Vripack, explains *Latitude's* strengths

With more than 7,000 designs under our belt, we know that an exploration yacht does not need to look like one, as long as she has been designed with an explorer's heart and a no-nonsense attitude.

The trick is hidden in hundreds of smart solutions: an efficient hull design fit for its purpose, with remarkable steering capabilities; access to all necessary back-up systems essential for cruising long distances; and a smart layout both for the owner as well as for the crew.

I can proudly say that *Latitude* has been designed and engineered to defy extreme circumstances. She is one of many Vripack-designed yachts that have conquered the Northwest Passage.

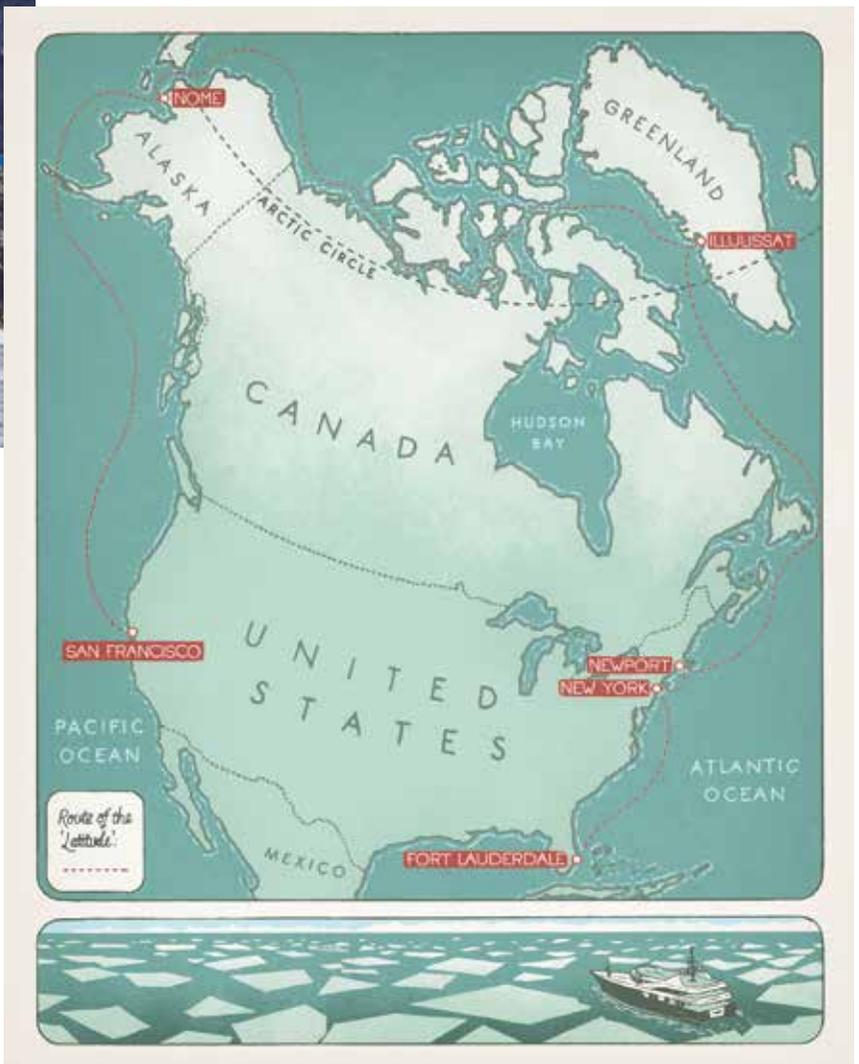


The Latitude party enjoyed sights such as the Northern Lights (above) and the colourful architecture of Greenland's capital, Nuuk (right)





Right: an illustration showing the first voyage of Latitude. The second trip will take them as far as Devon Island, at 75° north, home to musk oxen (left), and beyond



recalls. “He pointed to this passage over the top of Canada and said, ‘Well, if you really want an adventure, we could try and go through the Northwest Passage through the Canadian Arctic!’ I suspect that he was only joking, because you should have seen the look of surprise on his face when, almost without hesitation, I said, ‘Let’s do it!’”

Meagher remembers it a little differently. “Finally!” was the word that came to his mind, when he picked up on Thadani’s desire to do something truly out of the ordinary. Meagher was on board with the Northwest Passage plan immediately. He hired crew and prepared the expedition in about four months. He consulted with experienced skippers, who provided valuable advice and told him to be cautious as some of the charts available for the area are miles off, which proved useful as he made his way west. He also hired a local captain and expert on Arctic ice, 80-year-old former Canadian coastguard and book author Patrick Toomey.

But no amount of preparation can prepare you for all eventualities in this wild part of the world: the *Latitude* party received a nasty taste of this one day when Thadani and six guests became trapped on board the tender for hours by the fickle Arctic currents.

And even the steel-hulled 400-gross tonne *Latitude* had her share of difficulties navigating stretches of the Passage. One night, a discreet knock on the door got the captain to his feet and back onto the bridge; the conditions had changed drastically since he’d gone down for his nap. He grabbed his night-vision goggles to look at the path in front of them. “It looked like a horror movie,” he says, recalling how packed ice was all he could see ahead. “It was five hours straight driving the boat with night-vision goggles. And in the morning, the ice went *poof* (and disappeared),” adds Meagher. “It was quite an experience and luckily had a happy ending.”

Another dicey experience was crossing the Bellot Strait, a notorious stretch of some 13 miles. It took 10 hours for *Latitude* to push her way through ice. Then came King William Island. Ice had forced the yacht to deviate from its original route and to detour to an area that had proved tragic for a now famous 19th century expedition that had sought a passage from Europe to Asia via the northern route. Royal Navy Officer Sir John Franklin and 129 sailors died after ice trapped their two ships near Franklin Island in 1845. Since then, the Canadians have found grizzly evidence of the ill-fated expedition, including tombs and a camp-site, but the two ships were not located until last year. As fate would have it, the day *Latitude* arrived, a team of explorers spotted one of the two sunken vessels, *HMS Erebus*, which had vanished along with *HMS Terror*. “They found it on the day we were there. That’s the amazing thing,” Thadani says.

On 23 September 2014, Meagher wrote on Facebook while in the Bering Sea: “We have done it. We have successfully navigated the Northwest Passage.” Safely ensconced in the marina in San Francisco, I catch Thadani and Meagher looking at new routes again, pinned on the walls of the saloon. “We see the same thing when we look at these maps: adventure,” says Meagher. The travels of *Latitude* since our meeting in March certainly confirm this. At the time of writing, the yacht is back in Alaska, preparing for another trip through the Northwest Passage – or, “The Sequel”. ■

