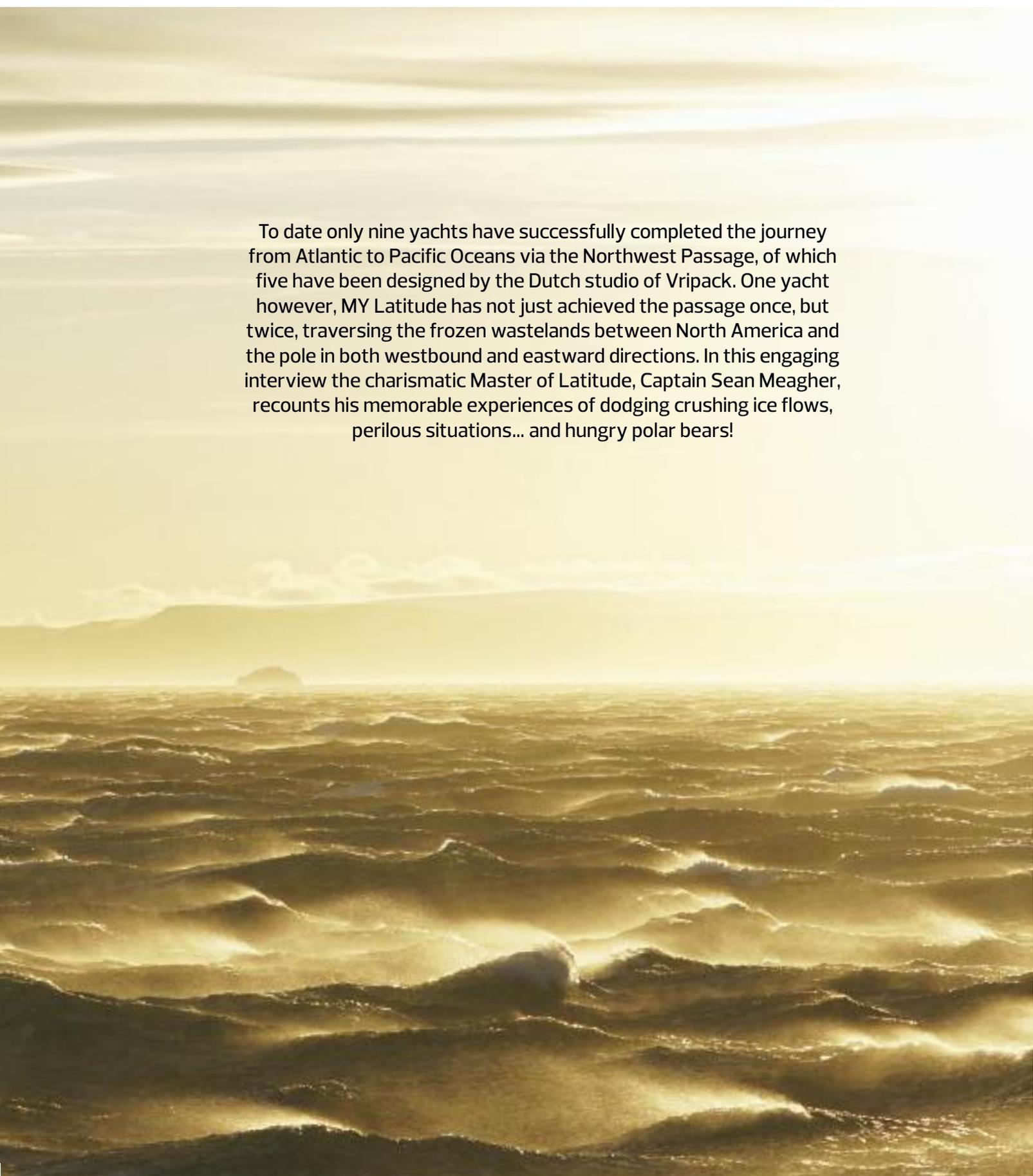


Cpt. Sean Meagher: MY Latitude

# Northwest Passage... Twice!



To date only nine yachts have successfully completed the journey from Atlantic to Pacific Oceans via the Northwest Passage, of which five have been designed by the Dutch studio of Vripack. One yacht however, MY Latitude has not just achieved the passage once, but twice, traversing the frozen wastelands between North America and the pole in both westbound and eastward directions. In this engaging interview the charismatic Master of Latitude, Captain Sean Meagher, recounts his memorable experiences of dodging crushing ice flows, perilous situations... and hungry polar bears!



Captain Sean Meagher invites any owners or captains planning the NWP to contact him on [sean@allthingsfun.com](mailto:sean@allthingsfun.com)

# W

**Where did the idea of traversing the Northwest Passage come from and why did it appeal so much to yourself and the owner?**

It may not have been quite Archimedes' 'Eureka' moment, but the idea for the passage actually came to me in the shower. When I was growing up I had a map of the world shower curtain in my bathroom and while showering I would look at the map and think about the places I wanted to go. The Islands above Canada fascinated me, as did Amundsen's story of how he discovered the Northwest passage.

How Anil Thadani, the owner of Latitude and I decided to do the passage was also by looking at a map. After we had purchased Latitude I bought a large map from IKEA,

which I hung in the main salon of Latitude. One day Anil and I were musing over the map and I asked, "So where do you want to go?" His immediate response was "Alaska." The boat at this time was in Fort Lauderdale so I pointed out the obvious route via the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal and then up the western seaboard of North America to Alaska. Then, on a whim, I said, "Or we can go over the top through the Northwest Passage." Anil stared at the map for a few seconds and said, most casually, "Oh, we have to do that!"

**Presumably you've read numerous accounts of early attempts to explore the NWP and the disasters that occurred, which haunted you the most?**

None really, I took a cue from one of my favorite films;

Star Wars. When Han Solo went into the Asteroid Field and was told by C3PO that the calculated chances of navigating it successfully were 1,000 to 1, his response was "Never tell me the odds!" I took a similar stance and only focused on successful transits.

**In the planning stage, how much was the owner involved and what were the primary objectives they wanted to achieve/experience during the trip?**

Anil's only input was that he wanted to have an adventure and photograph wildlife, the rest he left up to me. Without an Owner like Anil Thadani however I could never have pulled it off, his support and enthusiasm were invaluable during the process.

Apart from fitting bag filters on the watermakers, MY Latitude needed almost no special mechanical preparation for the passage.

**How long did the planning stage take and what were the top priorities?**

The planning stage was actually pretty quick, just six weeks. My top priority was research and finding other Captains who had successfully made the transit. I interviewed several Captains who were helpful, but didn't strike gold until I talked to Captain Phil Walsh of MY Turmoil. Currently Phil is captain of MY Mogambo and after an hour on the phone I decided to fly to Cannes from Boston to visit with him for two days. Without Captains Phil's help I would not have been able to put the trip together as quickly as I did.

**Where there any small details missed that you later regretted?**

As surprising as this may sound, we were remarkably well-prepared and used everything we brought. My only regret was that on that first passage westward I didn't bring a better camera!

**Where did you seek and receive specialist advice that aided you in the planning stage?**

As I mentioned Captain Phil Walsh was invaluable, but the other specialist I turned to was Captain Patrick Toomey. Patrick is an 81-year old retired Canadian Ice Breaker Captain and #19 on the list of Captains who have successfully made the passage. I forget how I initially found him, but our first conversation went something like this: "Hello Captain Toomey I am looking for an ice pilot to go through the Northwest passage, would you be interested and is there anything you would recommend I can do to prepare?" His reply was, "Yes, I would be interested and to prepare you should read Ice Navigation in Canadian Waters." I explained that I had already secured a copy of the book, read it, and had found it not only informative but extremely well written. "Good," came Patrick's reply, "because I wrote it."

**What contingencies were available to you in the event of an unforeseen medical, mechanical or meteorological incident?**

I will address all three separately. For the Medical aspect, with our training, MedLink subscription and





The owner couldn't get enough of jet skiing around bergs, while the Captain took to wakeboarding in the ice.

enough medical supplies to outfit a small field hospital we were adequately prepared to stabilize most medical emergencies until help could arrive via air. Unless of course the weather prevented rescue. But even in ideal conditions the time to a real hospital could be days. In terms of Mechanical preparedness our engineers were well-prepared with enough spare parts and filters to rebuild most onboard equipment ourselves. We did have a crane go down and the boys rebuilt it. For Meteorological information, up in the high latitudes the only reliable means of communication are iridium satellite phones, but with no internet capability I would have to download forecasts in the settlements we visited. When we were out of touch I would call a friend who would give me the latest ice reports and weather updates. My primary sources for weather are the Canadian Government sponsored page [www.ec.gc.ca/glaces-ice/](http://www.ec.gc.ca/glaces-ice/) and [www.seaweather.net](http://www.seaweather.net). But of course the best laid plans can run amok and usually do!

It was a route  
our ice pilot  
had never  
navigated,  
nor had been  
surveyed since  
the 1930's.  
Some areas  
of the chart  
were just blank.

**So we hear! I understand during your 116-day trip there was more ice than there had been in decades... what additional challenges did this present?**

It is all about the ice and interpolating the ice maps. Fortunately, we had Patrick who had contributed to actually inventing the ice maps, but even that didn't help with the amount of ice we encountered. There was so much ice that we almost didn't make it through and at one point it took us three days make 50-miles of headway in ice and fog. Our original intended course had us going over Somerset Island, through the Victoria Strait to Cambridge Bay, but due to the excessive ice we picked our way through Prince Regent Inlet, through the treacherous Bellot Strait and south of King William Island. Incidentally this was Amundsen's original route, a route that our ice pilot had never navigated nor had been surveyed since the 1930's. Some areas of the chart were just blank. Luckily I had discussed this route with Phil who had discovered a large pinnacle on his course line. He



Exploring isolation comes at a price; every eventuality in terms of meteorological, mechanical and medical incidents must be prepared for.





reckoned that the survey was about 1,000-feet off on the chart. Both he and another Captain had pushed further offshore and both found the pinnacle. I decided to go the opposite way and head 1,000-feet closer to the shore. I guessed that the original survey was done without the aid of GPS, using sketchy sun sites and an insane compass, so the best way to get a position would have been to take bearings off of the land. The land in this area is very flat so they would have to be close to shore to take the bearings. It turned out I was right and the depths they reported were bang on. Interestingly, the Simrad unit I was using as a back-up to the primary navigation system gave a suggested route through this area, one that was surprisingly accurate.

**Where any particular modifications required for the yacht prior to departing; for example heated sea chests, changed raw water filters, uprating internal heating systems, etc.?**

Actually the boat was pretty good to start out with, but one modification we did was to fit bag filters on our water makers. These filters worked fabulously.

**Five out of the nine yachts to have completed the NWP have been designed by Vripack—did this have any impact on your trip?**

The guys at Vripack were wonderful throughout the whole process. Questions, additional plans and advice were all freely offered. Vripack takes great pride in their boats and love it when their designs are pushed to the limits.

**The onboard epicurean experience is a key component of any cruise, was provisioning a challenge for the chef, and what surprise local delicacies/ingredients did you come across?**

Arctic cuisine in Northern Canada consists of many items on the endangered species list, though I did try a sampler plate in Greenland and it was 'interesting',

to put it rather kindly. Just for the record, avoid Puffin if you see it on a menu, it sucks! Luckily our Chef and Chief Stew arranged for provisions in Pond Inlet, Resolute and Cambridge Bay.

**What impact did these passages have on the crew in terms of turnover, retention, bonding, skill development, etc.?**

I have been fortunate in my career to have worked with some excellent crew. Sometimes you have to forge a crew into shape, other times the stars align and they fall into your lap. On Latitude it was the latter. The first trip, though grueling, did bring all of us closer and pushed us beyond anything any one of us had ever previously experienced. When I suggested we do it again the crew thought I had lost my mind! But during the passage, and after, they all admitted that it was the best decision and the experience proved to be very cathartic. Subsequently, we have had a very low turnover and those who have left are all still very close.

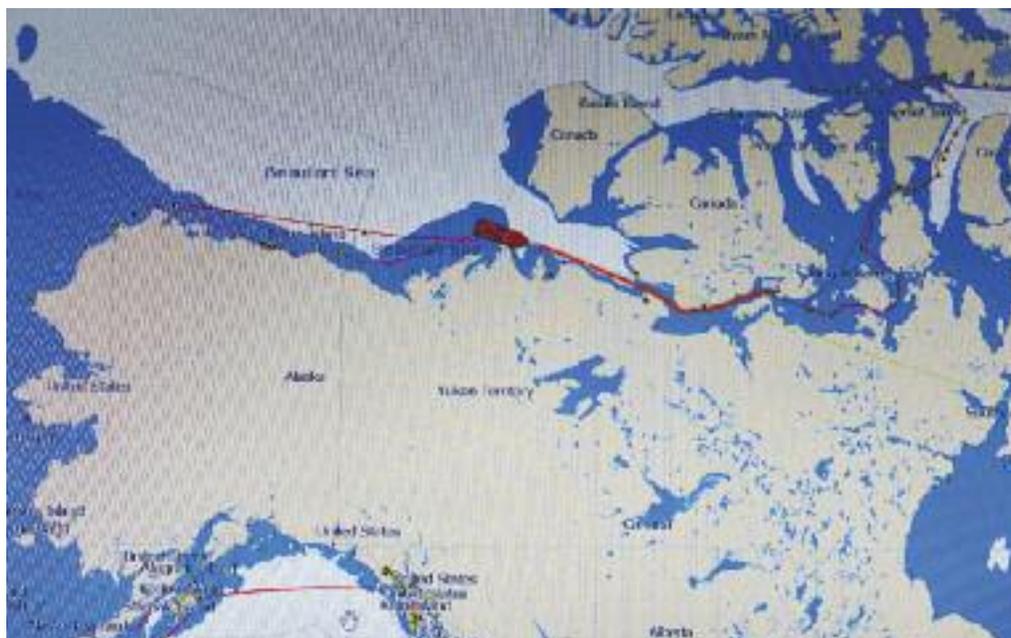
The captain says the first trip, though grueling, brought the crew closer and pushed them beyond anything they'd previously experienced. Subsequently they've had a very low turnover.



From heavy ice, dangerous floes and uncharted waters to serenely calm and peaceful moments, there's apparently no experience like the NWP.

**Toys and tenders play a vital role in getting the most out of such a passage, what did you have on board and was there anything you'd consider would have enhanced the experience?**

Again in this regard we were totally dialed in. The Everglades tender we brought was outstanding and is the best tender I have ever used. The owner thought I was nuts for suggesting we jet ski in the ice of Greenland, but now he can't get enough of cruising around the bergs either. We also discovered wake boarding in ice is fun too! Without our Hollis DX 300 dry suits, Fourth Element thermal gear and Ice Armor Gloves however we would have frozen.





“Overall we saw very little man-made trash that I can recall and the wildlife all seemed fat and happy!”



**What were your most memorable experiences of both passages?**

Obviously there are simply too many to list, but here are a couple that immediately spring to mind, the firstly being on our first passage westward. The Belot Strait is bar none the hairiest body of water I have ever navigated, it's an unhealthy mix of ripping current, ice and bears, plus it is very narrow with rock walls. Oh, and it's 20-miles long! We had to wait several days until it was clear enough to get through. Once, on a scouting expedition in the tender, we became stuck on the wrong side for 8-hours in a blizzard. When we did finally go with the big boat we had to fight our way through ice flows coming at us at 6-knots, only to find the exit frozen solid. It left us no choice but to punch through the ice. The second memory was on the return passage eastward when we had been tracking a polar bear on land.

We were on Devon Island and came across a polar bear, so tracked it for several miles on land before it tried to lure us into a large outcrop of rock where he could hide and perhaps ambush us. We didn't take the bait and quickly hiked back to the tender. Actually, another great moment was off Eastern Greenland, on our way to Iceland. We left in zero visibility at night, but an hour into the trip the Northern lights started putting on a show and the fog dramatically lit up in a surreal shades of pink, green and red, that was really amazing! You get the idea, I could go on and on...

**What was the most awe inspiring natural sight you saw?**

Without hesitation, Ilulissat, Greenland. It's simply awe-inspiring. This is where Icebergs are born and our first foray into the ice, real ice, was in Ilulissat. Ironically, this was where I had to pick up Patrick ice

pilot, so I left Latitude with my mate Shelton Dupreez and headed in with the owner in our tender. The ride in was epic. It was dark, stormy, with massive icebergs and flows everywhere. At one point we were near the glacial wall when an iceberg the size on an office building calved. This huge block of ice came out of the wall at 5-knots then, suddenly stopped, spun around and bashed its way back into the hole it had just left. A very strange and wondrous experience.

**How was the reception from communities you passed?**

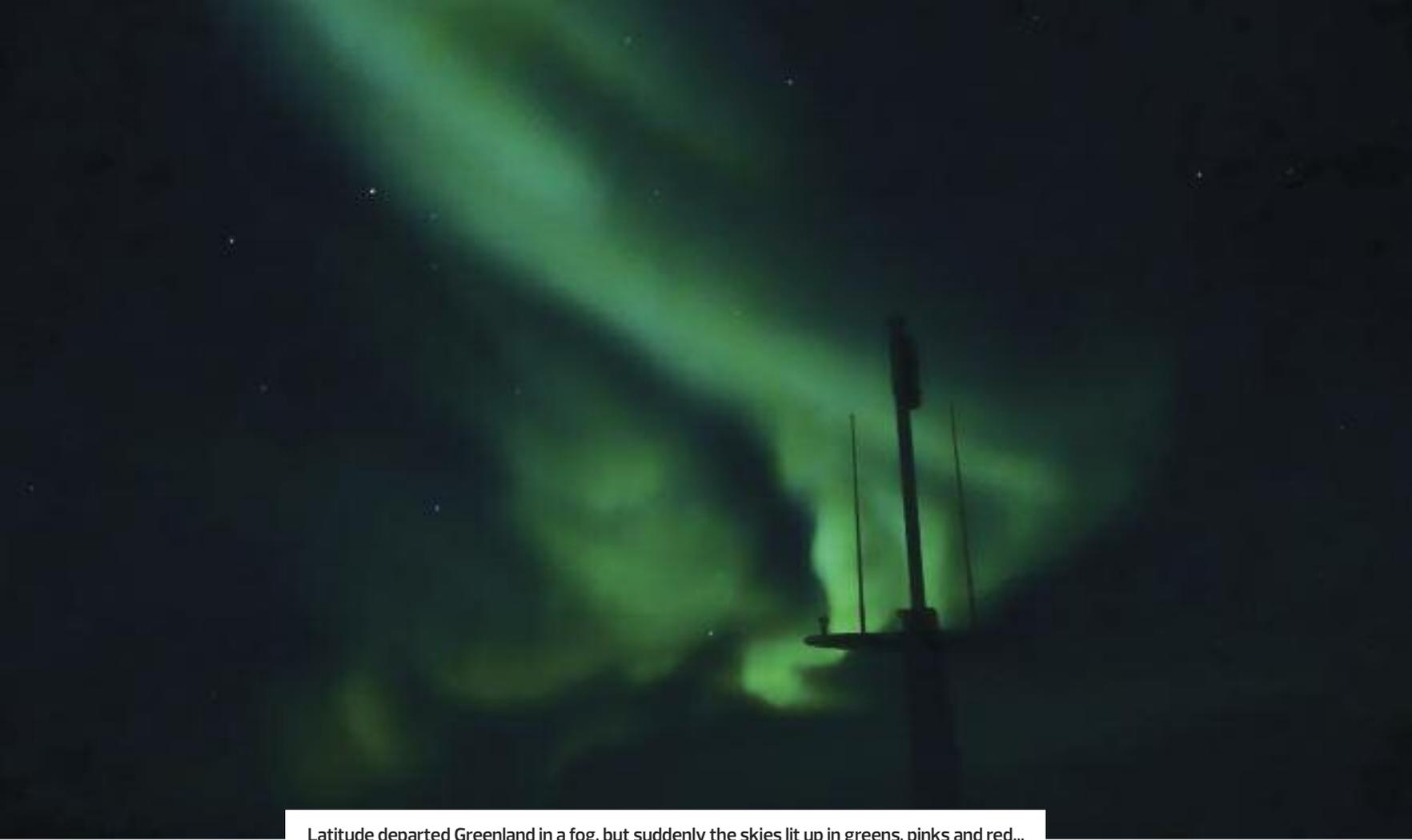
Overall excellent, we met wonderful helpful people.

**Photographing wildlife was obviously an important element of the cruise... did you notice a difference in behavior than you'll normally expect?**

Polar bears are the most photogenic animals I have

**While always approaching with caution, the Captain counts Polar bears as the most inquisitive and photogenic animals he has come across.**





Latitude departed Greenland in a fog, but suddenly the skies lit up in greens, pinks and red... the Master lists the Northern Lights amongst his most impressive memories.



ever come across, they are extremely curious and will come right over to you. Our most memorable encounters were with bears that we named Jerome, Leroy, Taylor Swift, Bubba, plus the mother with two cubs. Oh, and I swam with a humpback whale. Overall the animals seemed fat and happy.

**Explain how you exercised environmental responsibility during the passage, minimizing your impact on what was presumably a pristine environment... or was it?**

Most of the waste we saw was biological; wood, dead seals, etc. Overall we saw very little trash that I can recall. To minimize our impact we offloaded our trash at the settlements we came across and of course our water treatment plant was operational.

**What was your 'hairiest' moment while up north?**

At one point after three days in fog and ice we came out of the mist and into the sun. Utterly exhausted, we were putting the tender back on tow, but unfortunately the tow line became tangled in the prop and I had to dive. Somewhat stupidly I only wore a 3mm neoprene hood and—because I was positioned upside down with my feet on the hull bottom, yanking on the tow line—all the blood rushed to my head, thus making me instantly hypothermic. I felt myself starting to black out and just made my way to the swim platform for the others to drag me back onboard. After a few minutes I was able to stand and jumped in the shower

with all my gear still on, as the hot water hit me I felt my brain come back online, which was a relief! Amidst the protests of the owner I then jumped back in with the first mate, he and I got the line unwrapped and we continued on our way.

**Do you have a good example of when a challenge presented itself that required a 'creative' solution?**

Hahaha, I was always playing jazz, but I didn't know what I was doing so was just making it up as I went along, being creative you know! Seriously though, it's always a learning process. I mean, you can't learn somewhere in a book how hard you have to hit an ice flow in order to get it stuck between the hull and the bulbous bow, just so you can use it as a battering ram and shield you for other ice flows coming at you at 6-knots through a canyon. I guess almost daily improvisations like that would rate as creative solutions.

**What did you learn during the first passage that impacted positively on the return?**

Bring warmer socks! Also, you can hit car-sized pieces of ice at 1.8-knots and keep going, anything faster than that is bad.

**Finally, what five key pieces of advice would you give to an owner or captain planning a Northwest Passage?**

•The best piece of advice I could give is, talk to as many Captains who have done it and don't listen to people who want to charge you for their advice—it usually isn't worth it.

- Read 'Ice Navigation in Canadian Waters'.
- Every time you get in your tender assume you are spending the night and prepare accordingly. Mustang Suits, food, guns, Iridium, etc.
- Bears are always about, so don't be lazy and watch your six (look behind you) as they are very smart. Polar bears are the Hannibal Lector of the animal world; calm, charming and cool, until of course they eat you with some fava beans and nice Chianti!
- Don't have a set schedule be prepared to wait or move depending on the ice.

**Have you noticed an increase in interest from yachts to attempt the NWP? Have you been contacted by other captains seeking advice?**

Yes, and please feel free to pass on my contact details to anyone who is interested. I will happily pass on whatever knowledge I have (sean@allthingsfun.com).

**What's next... over Siberia for the Northeast Passage?**

I did suggest that! Right now however I will have to settle for Svalbard—a Norwegian archipelago between mainland Norway and the North Pole—which is where I am writing this from now, during 24-hour sunlight summer days.

**Latitude is currently in the Norwegian archipelago and enjoying almost 24-hour sunlight.**

