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'We have to prove that we can do the impossible'

Four Israelis and four Palestinians (two women and six men) are currently in the middle of a 35-day sea and land expedition to the distant reaches of Antarctica. Their goal is to climb and name a previously unconquered mountain. Two of the Israelis are former members of an elite commando unit of the Israeli army, and one of the Palestinians served three years in prison for firebombing Israeli troops. Here we present excerpts from the team's diary.

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06.01.04

Making Peace with the Sea

Among the things we've discovered is that the sea has a rhythm of its own. In an age of air travel, where it's difficult to imagine a journey of more than 24 hours, sailing forces us to re-evaluate the meaning of time. Five days at sea, progressing slowly toward Antarctica compels us to adjust our expectations concerning the pace of events and opens us to new enlightenment. It's an experience not unlike those that people have had in the deserts of the Holy Land, from the time of the ancient Jewish Essenes, who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Judean Wilderness and Jesus, who resisted the temptations of Satan there for forty days, to our own times, when campers trek the Negev Desert and populate the beaches of Sinai, seeking and finding a deeper level of serenity. This is what has begun to happen to most of us as we sail further and further from the constant turmoil of the Middle East. All of us suddenly have the time to sit and talk, to observe and contemplate.

Some of the team's time is spent in friendly conversation and some of it in heated debate, dealing with the basic questions that have fueled more than a century of conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Who is right and who is wrong? Who does the land really belong to? If they can get along so well with one another on a boat or on a mountain, why has it been so difficult to strike a compromise that will enable their two peoples to live in peace?

05.01.04

Scaling a volcano

At Deception Island, in a sea-filled volcano crater, Pelagic Australis tied its mooring line to the rotting remains of an old wooden boat, the remnant of an abandoned Chilean whaling station that operated here from 1910 to 1931. Several hours later, our sister ship Pelagic, carrying the expedition's team of mountain guides and its physician, Arik Shechter, pulled into the same shore. After days of rocking and rolling on the rough seas of the Darwin Passage, the teams on both boats were happy at the prospect of getting a peaceful night's sleep, uninterrupted by all-night watches on deck. After a quiet night and a late wake-up call, we gathered on the shore for an inland trek, meant to help prepare everyone for the physical challenges we'll face in the days ahead.

Tonight we set sail again, headed southwest for the Bransfield Strait and, beyond it, the Gerlach Strait and, beyond it, the continent of Antarctica. It's difficult to believe, but it's actually happening. The Breaking the Ice peace expedition is on the verge of reaching its destination.

04.01.04

Deception Island (63° S 61° W)

Stormy night

The storm hit us like the overture to an opera - a wild, dramatic clash of weather systems that seemed to be setting the stage for an epic saga.

After two days of smooth sailing (relative to these climes) some of us aboard Pelagic

Australis were beginning to think that the horror stories they'd heard about sailing across the Drake Passage from Chile to Antarctica had been blown out of proportion. Yes, some were seasick and others drowsy from pills to prevent seasickness but, all in all, the Drake, named after 16th century English explorer (and, say some, pirate) Sir Francis Drake, had been anything but horrific. On Saturday afternoon, the serenity began slipping away. Pelagic Australis crossed the Antarctic Convergence, an imaginary irregular circle surrounding Antarctica where sea and air temperatures drop dramatically, affected by the ice mass of the still distant frozen continent. First, the clear skies and endless vistas we'd enjoyed since leaving Chile gave way to a dismal, claustrophobic fog. Then, the brisk breezes that had pushed us along began building, growing into gale force winds of up to 65 km/h. For those of us who had finally found our 'sea legs' and had adjusted to the boat's normal rocking and rolling, the world was about to turn on its side.

Even with its sails trimmed, Pelagic Australis was severely buffeted by the storm, tilted to a 45-degree angle that left the expedition team wondering where to find the floor. Up on deck, waves crashed over the bow, showering the watch with icy spray. Down below, there was no distinction between experienced sailors and rank beginners (like us): everyone was pitched to and fro as they tried to move about the interior of the boat. This morning, as they sailed on toward their final destination in the Antarctic Peninsula, the Israelis and Palestinians of the Breaking the Ice expedition saw icebergs with their own eyes --up close, from the deck of a small sailing yacht. For a moment, at least, there were no Palestinians or Israelis aboard Pelagic Australis. There were only human beings, humbled and brought together by something far greater than themselves and stimulated, perhaps, to wonder when the ice that separates their two peoples will finally thaw.

03.01.04

Among the South Shetland Islands (63° S 62° W)

Past the 50s: the Pelagic Australis has just crossed 60° S, now truly being in Antarctic Waters and within the area of the Antarctic Treaty. However, a book found on the boat describes what some of the crew (especially seasick Suleiman and cameraman Colin) really don't want to hear: "You've noted the way cyclonic movements race across the Southern Ocean - Indian or Pacific, it's much the same. You've learnt the signs for shifts of winds - the slight clearing in the south-western sky, a movement in rising cloud, then the swift sudden shift. It's the same off the Horn, except the wind is madder there, the shifts faster, nights longer, seas higher, ice nearer... You get no sleep.

You'll get so wet for so long that your skin will come off with your socks, if you get the time to take them off. But with luck you'll get past Cape Horn and by the grace of god, you won't kill anybody."

02.01.04

Drake passage (59° 54'S 62° 40'W)

Iceberg's tip surfacing

Psychological challenges will play a major role. How will Israeli Special Forces veteran Avihu Shoshani be able to overcome his distaste for the actions of Suleiman al-Khatib, a Fatah Organization activist? As al-Khatib made a farewell phone call to Yasser Arafat, Shoshani stood on the side shaking his head. "Just like that old guy, Suleiman was also

in jail for attacking Israelis. Now he says he's abandoned violence in favor of diplomacy. So why's he making a folk hero out of a guy who murdered Jews?"

That's just one iceberg tip out of many that are bound to surface during the weeks ahead as the group makes its way further southward. As they begin to understand that the routine of round-the-clock on-deck watches, cold weather and seasickness is more than a one day "experience" these voyagers from the Middle East are likely to find their nerves fraying fast.

31.12.03

Puerto Williams, Chile (55° S 68° W)

Best wishes for the New Year! After settling into two small guesthouses, the team members made their way down to Puerto William's tiny yacht basin for their first encounter with Pelagic Australis and Pelagic, their two sailing vessels.

Another full day of preparations lays ahead of the team before it sets to sea on January 1. During the voyage, they'll be expected to play an active role in crewing the yachts. With virtually no sailing experience, they'll have to learn everything from how to weigh anchor and hoist sails to how to flush marine toilets. But, over dinner on Tuesday night, the team seemed most preoccupied by the skippers' exhaustive explanations on seasickness and how to deal with it.

On the morning after, with Palestinian Ziad Darwish cutting vegetables for salad and Israeli Avi Shoshani scrambling eggs, they enjoyed one of the last meals they're assured of being able to keep down before they sail onto the waves in pursuit of their objective.

In the Beagle Channel, Chile (55° S 68° W)

The dream is for real

Pelagic Australis' skipper, Steven Willis, had good news: the weather forecasts for the unpredictable Drake Passage showed a window of opportunity. The preparations moved into high gear and the realization crept in that the dream of Israeli businessman Heskell Nathaniel was about to become a reality. It was about a year ago that he first conceived the idea of combining his love of extreme sport with his desire to do something to advance the cause of peace in the Middle East. The result was what most of his friends told him was an absolutely crazy idea: taking a group of Israelis and Palestinians to Antarctica to see if they were capable of working together in order to do things most people never attempt.

"I knew that to make it across the Drake Passage, to trek 20 miles across Antarctic glaciers and to reach the peak of a mountain that no one had ever climbed before would demand real teamwork. And I knew that if we could succeed it would send an important message to both our peoples and the whole world. We have to prove that we can do the impossible. That's the same challenge we face in making peace."

30.12.03

Leaving Punta Arenas

Today, the process of packing up and getting ready to move began all over again as the team shuttled southward to Puerto Williams, the southernmost town on the face of the earth. It is there that they'll get their first look at the Pelagic Australis and the Pelagic,

two small sailing yachts that will take them across the thousand kilometer wide Drake Passage. Separating South America from Antarctica, the Drake passage is known for its stormy weather, considered by sailors to be the roughest patch of sea on the planet.

The team is complete! Palestinian expedition member Nasser Quass received a warm welcome when he arrived in Punta Arenas on Monday, a day after the others. Nasser was forced to delay his departure from the Middle East due to a last minute diplomatic mission assigned to him by Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat.

Before leaving for Chile, Nasser first set off for Cairo, where he joined a delegation of Palestinians sent to apologize to the Egyptian government for the rough reception its foreign minister had received the week before at the hands of Islamic extremists in Jerusalem's Al Aksa mosque. There, they had thrown shoes at him in protest against Egypt's efforts to help mediate a cease fire between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

28.12.03

Punto Arenas, Chile (53° 10' S 70° 54' W)

The expedition group has just arrived in Punto Arenas, Chile. They are in great spirits or should we say: rather relieved that they are almost complete now and that all the technical equipment needed is with them. They flew from Tel Aviv via Barcelona to Madrid, where they picked up satellite communications engineer Tony Robinson and production editor Mario Dieringer as well as mountain guide Denis Ducroz who joined from Berlin, London and Geneva respectively.

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