



Welcome aboard Around North America



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September 25, 2008

We've been in Dutch Harbor for the past two days. This stopover seals the success of the polar portion of the expedition. Since our departure, we have travelled 14,000 kilometers, and we validated the passage of the Northwest as we got through the Bering Strait. Nearly nine years separate my two passings of the Northwest, yet they stand worlds apart – there are no other words to express it. I organized this expedition so as to conduct field investigation and to collect evidence on climate change, but I did not imagine for a second that I would myself be the eyewitness in so little a lapse of time of the incredible changes that are occurring in this region of the world.



We barely had to keep a watch for ice between Gjoa Haven on King William Island in Nunavut and Point Barrow in Alaska -- over a distance of 2,500 kilometers ! Ice maps systematically show the coastal areas as free of ice. We again encountered a very loose ice field after Point Barrow, which gave us trouble just for the two nights we were travelling through it. The difficulty was due not so much to the density of the ice as to the absence of visibility.

The absence of ice does not mean that the Northwest Passage makes for easy navigation. All the same, the expedition "Around North America" constitutes a striking illustration of the fact that the way is de facto open to sailing. "Southern Star" is the first sail boat to cross the Passage with a schedule that was defined in advance and with equally precise crew rotations. This year, there were a priori eight sail boats navigating north of the North American continent.



Navigation

From Gjoa Haven on, the waters we crossed have been manageable. We rarely sailed at more than 30 knots, a speed that we have otherwise been able to reach. The Bering sea was particularly calm in this period of the equinox. We avoided the many storms that usually sweep through it, especially in its southern region. For example, at this moment, there is a storm over Kamchatka, but it doesn't seem to be moving east. We are ready to meet with several hard hits during the next portion of the expedition headed toward Sitka, but we're not there yet. Departure is scheduled for the day after tomorrow.





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Ports of call



The succession of stopovers in the Passage was brisk. Nonetheless, we faithfully led our field investigation. Accounts collected at Tuktoyaktuk and Point Barrow are edifying. However, we will have to wait to see the images of the second documentary to discover them. Problems linked to coastal erosion, from the meltdown of permafrost to the migration of animal species, are important. People of these areas are, in this respect, worried about the future. They also see in climate change an opportunity to develop the economy of their region, but they do not want the ruthless exploitation of natural resources, without respect for the environment. Geopolitical tensions also came to

the fore. We were in Tuk during the visit of Stephen Harper, Canada's Prime Minister, who came to reaffirm the sovereignty of Canada over these northern expanses. The Arctic is nowadays going through a fascinating step in its history, and we heartily hope that Inuit communities will have their say in it and will maintain their protective approach in the future management of this fragile polar environment.

Scheduling for stopovers between Vancouver and San Francisco is being finalized. The Maritime Museum in Vancouver will host us during our stopover in the capital of British Columbia. "Southern Star" will have the privilege to moor near "St Roch", from which originates a large portion of the writing of the history of Canadian Arctic navigation. The French Consulate, the Vancouver Aquarium and the Bluewater Cruising Association (BCA) have already scheduled meetings and debates on the theme of climate change in the Arctic.

The film

The filming of the second documentary ended at Dutch Harbor. Cameraman Vincent Berthet has just joined us. He should remain with us until the end of the expedition. He will be in charge of images and photos during the absence of our filmmaker Thierry Robert. The upcoming stopovers will stretch over a week and will allow us to collect for the next two or three documentaries.



Video extracts of the first part of the film « The Climatic Odyssey of Southern Star » are now on-line on our Web site.

Sciences

Dominique Pépin, from the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Agronomique (INRA), is responsible for our thematic on Arctic mammals. He joined us tonight in Dutch Harbor and will stay on board all the way to Sitka.



L'équipe d'Around North America

