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Heading for the Arctic

Sprague Theobald leaves Newport, Rhode Island, for the Northwest Passage on his Nordhavn 57. The first leg: fog, more fog and, finally, ice.

BY SPRAGUE THEOBALD

The time comes when you have to stop designing the bridge and actually start to build the damn thing. This particular "bridge" is about a 7,500-mile-long passage. One morning early this summer, *Bagan*, my Nordhavn 57, and the crew of four slipped its lines from Newport, Rhode Island, and headed off on the first leg of what has to be, for me at least, the trip of a lifetime — a trip to hopefully transit through the Northwest Passage.

This dream came to fruition at the start of 2008. Despite funding that was here today/gone today, one month led to another, crew fell into place, wild ideas seemed plausible and at 11:15 a.m. one overcast morning I watched the Castle Hill Lighthouse pass by our port side as we headed north in search of that arctic grail. I've been producing documentaries for many years now, and the coverage of this trip will be my largest project to date.

Our first leg was more a shakedown cruise than anything. Our destination was Halifax, Nova Scotia, and *Bagan*'s small crew consisted of Capt. Clinton Bolton, expedition coordinator Dominique Tanton, master carpenter/close friend Ted Croy and myself. As with any cruise — large or small, long or short — the final days of preparation breed a frenetic pace, and ours was no exception. The ship's computer suffered a major crash the day before departure. As we exited the Cape Cod Canal that first evening, the collective decision was that we needed to set fiscal caution

JASON EVANS

A GOOD START. **Bagan**'s *initial crew on the rail (right) and the first ice, off Newfoundland (top).*

DEPARTURE. *Sprague Theobald's Nordhavn 57 leaves Newport, Rhode Island, on a calm day.*

aside and ensure *Bagan* had the best equipment for what lay ahead. A quick call to Sandy Davies of Rhumbline Yacht Services in Connecticut alerted him we would need a complete computer upgrade. We have all the paper charts necessary, and all of us are adept with divider and parallel rules, but today's computers (when they're happy) build in such a degree of precision and safety that we all have come to rely on the things.

The two days it took us to make our way up to Halifax were made-to-order; the light breeze was following with very little in the way of seas. With a watch schedule of two hours on, six off, we arrived at the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron confident in all the work Bolton had done during the winter. The wait for the computer to arrive had us tucked away comfortably while a northeaster formed and delivered its punch just outside the harbor's breakwater. During this time we had a crew exchange, with Croy flying back to Rhode Island and cameraman Ulli Bonnekamp and my son Sefton flying in from Los Angeles and Denver, respectively. Bonnekamp is an Emmy award-winning cinematographer and signed on to cover the Halifax-Greenland leg. This is Sefton's first major passage, and his enthusiasm and willingness for hard work more than make up for his seeming lack of experience. Both flew into Halifax on two different carriers, and both their sets of luggage were lost. The five-day holdup played out nicely in our favor, as their bags weren't found for four days.

Finally, we dropped our lines from the docks of the RNSYS and were once again northward bound for the arctic, this time in the densest of pea soup fogs I've seen in 40 years on the water. With all systems running as advertised, the next day we locked through the Canso Causeway, officially entering the Gulf of St. Lawrence and leaving the Atlantic behind. We enjoyed a few hours of brilliant sunshine and balmy temperatures before the legendary fog caved in around us once again.

That morning the weather cleared just long enough for us to find and tie up to the small but incredibly welcoming marina at Havre-Aubert on the Magdalen Islands. It's a small town that proudly offers some amazingly diverse shops and restaurants. The next morning we were off for the Cabot Strait, which was not quite so welcoming.

A southerly that was predicted for 12 knots developed into a strong blow delivering punches up to 30 knots. The combination of wind against outgoing tide made for a hellacious day, which tested boat and crew to the limit. Early the next morning we powered into the protective lee of Newfoundland. That afternoon we dropped the hook in North Arm Harbor, a deserted, steep-sided cove complete with two waterfalls, crystal-clear water and, much to an afternoon shore party's dismay, fresh evidence of bear.

The next morning we up-anchored again and set out for the Strait of Belle Isle and thoroughly enjoyed a day of flat seas and variable breezes, a welcome respite from the thrashing we took 24 hours earlier. Yet the leisurely, laid-back atmosphere of the day turned with a vengeance. That night we started to encounter not only icebergs of all sizes, but another all-encompassing pea soup fog, as deadly a combination as there can be. With double watches rotating every two hours, each piece of ice the radars picked up was plotted and tracked to the nth degree. This night truly exhausted all of our mental stamina. At 12:30 p.m. local time, we broke out of the shroud of fog and entered the harbor at St. Anthony, Newfoundland. It's here in St. Anthony that we'll pore over ice charts and weather faxes with the hopes of finding a good window to cross over to Greenland. northwestpassagefilm.com ✤

FAR NORTH. *The unsettling fog seems to be a constant presence in St. Anthony, Newfoundland.*

TOP: BILLY BLACK; SPRAGUE THEOBALD