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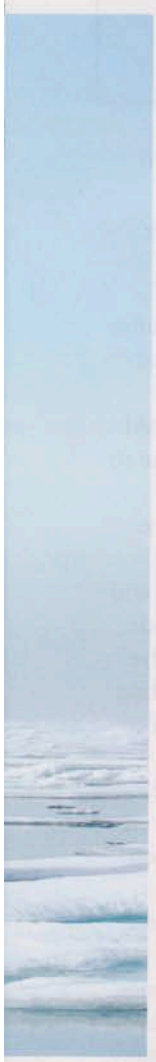
CANADA'S NORTHWEST PASSAGE

THE ULTIMATE COOL CRUISE

Story By Robert M. Lane
Photos Courtesy of Sprague Theobald



Bagan was stuck fast in the Arctic ice of the Northwest Passage.

Sprague Theobald, owner of the 57-foot Nordhavn, scanned the horizon from his post at the pilothouse helm, hoping to find an opening in the ice field that had trapped the yacht and was pushing her slowly toward a rocky shore.

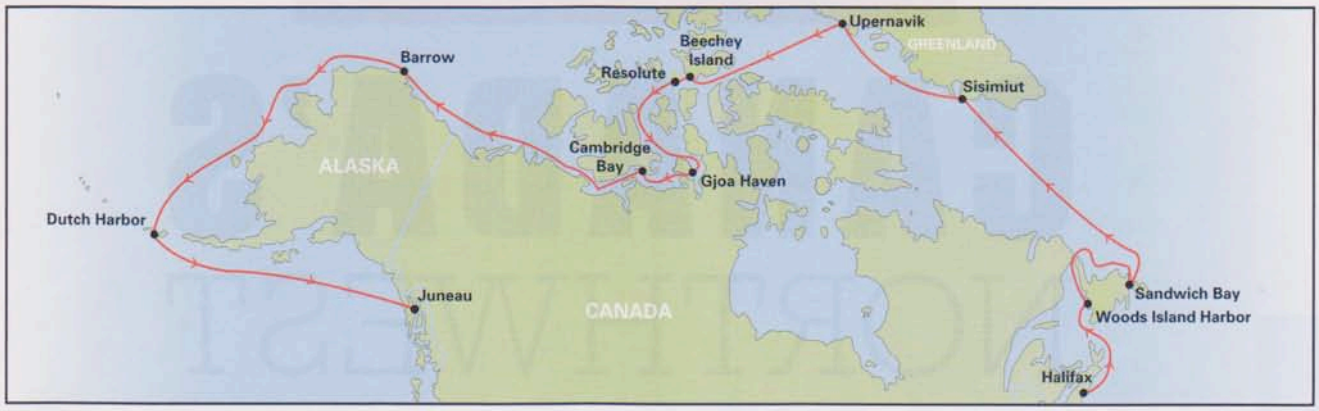
Other crew members were on deck, searching for open water through which they could escape the mass of ice.

There seemed to be no way out.

Theobald feared for his crew, which included several family members. He also feared for his boat, and for his dream of transiting the fabled Northwest Passage and creating a documentary that would share the adventure with many.

It was mid-August, and the Arctic summer was fading. *Bagan* had been southbound in King William Strait and Rae Strait, headed for Gjoa Haven, a tiny community on the south end of Canada's King William Island. Earlier, Canadian government ice reports had indicated open leads or waterways through the floe. But thick, broken ice soon surrounded the boat, bringing her almost to a stop.

The crew became skilled at inching through the grinding chunks of ice and pushing slabs away with boat poles to protect underwater gear and *Bagan*'s single shaft and prop. A lookout sat atop the radar arch, calling out directions to Theobald at the helm. They had grown accustomed to the horrendous noises caused by ice moving against ice, after first fearing the sound was that of *Bagan* breaking up.



Afterward, Theobald blogged: "If any of the ice bits found their way to our exposed stabilizers, propeller, or rudder, the potential damage could have bordered on the unthinkable. Time and again we'd fight for 500 yards, only to have it taken from us at the last minute, finding that the lead ahead had closed in the 10 minutes we'd been trying to get to it."

The boat had been averaging about 1 knot through the jumbled ice. Then she came to a halt as leads closed tightly. Movement was impossible. Darkness was falling. An anchor was dropped onto the ice—just in case—and the engine was stopped. The Nordhavn and her crew were frozen in place, about a mile and a half from a shoreline carved by glaciers eons before.

DANGER AHEAD

With daylight, Theobald saw that *Bagan* had been pushed to within a quarter mile of shore by the moving ice floe. Grounding would be permanent, and the crew would be in grave danger.

Theobald knew that Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer who was the first to transit the Northwest Passage by ship, spent the winters of 1904 and 1905 locked in the ice on the south shore of King William Island, a spot now named for his boat, *Gjøa*. He also remembered that two British sailing ships *(Erebus* and *Terror)* under the command of Sir John Franklin froze in the ice in the same area in 1848, that those ships disappeared, and that 129 crew members died of starvation, exposure, and disease. *Bagan*'s crew had visited the Franklin expedition grave sites on nearby Beechey Island, and those memories were strong as the Nordhavn faced similar sea conditions.

"I was so far past frightened," Theobald told me. "I wondered, what had I done? But I had to focus on my work, to keep cool."

Bagan carried radios and a satellite phone—communication was possible—and Arctic survival gear in case the crew was forced to abandon the yacht. But the nearest aid was a Canadian icebreaker more than 300 miles away. A few other small boats, including four sailboats, also were challenging the icy passage. They were too far away to be of assistance.

Despite being fearful, and feeling the burden of huge responsibilities—he was the guy in charge, after all—Theobald was determined not to call for coast guard aid.

"Calling the icebreaker was not an option," he told me afterward. "I got us into this, so it was up to me to get us out."

There was no choice. *Bagan* would break the ice herself.

"We really had to ask the unthinkable of the boat and turn her into a tug and battering ram," Theobald said.

Inch by inch, the crew used the engine to move the vessel's bulbous bow under the ice and the bulb's lifting force to fracture the ice. They made a few miles before darkness halted them.

Overnight, currents moved the ice floe and the yacht 7 miles, and by midafternoon she had battered her way into open water. They reached Gjoa Haven that afternoon.

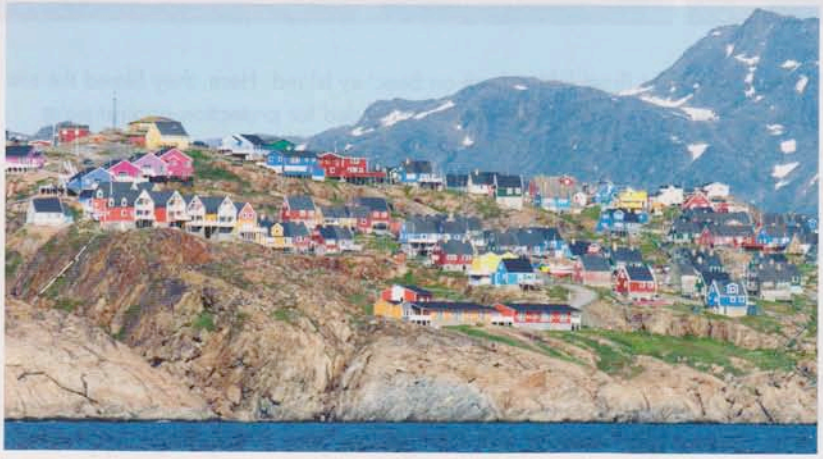
"Through the grace of God, we got out," Theobald said.

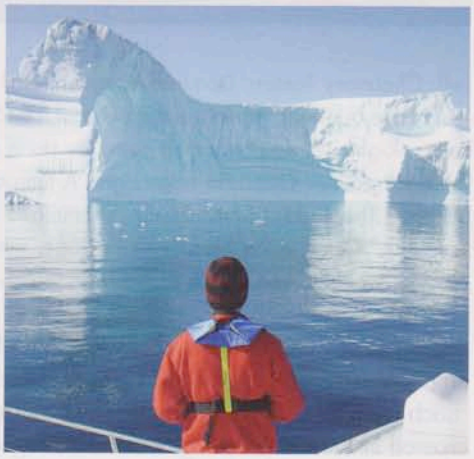
He had paid a $15,000 premium for boat insurance for the trip, but he wasn't sure if it really would have covered the loss of the boat in an ice floe. Fortunately, there was no need to test the coverage.

But that was not the last challenge in *Bagan*'s 150-day, 8,500-mile Northwest Passage adventure, which was planned to begin in Newport, Rhode Island, in early summer and end in Seattle late in the fall. There remained the possibility that she might be forced to spend the winter in the Arctic.

AN AUDACIOUS ADVENTURE

I met Theobald in Seattle aboard *Bagan* at a boat show on Lake Union last January, long after the boat





Top: *Bagan* on Disko Bay, about halfway up the west coast of Greenland. The crew stopped here to marvel at the ice coming down from the Greenland ice sheet before crossing to Lancaster Sound and entering the Northwest Passage. Above left: Sisimiut, the second largest town in Greenland, is just over 45 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Above right: Sefton Theobald on "ice watch" on *Bagan*'s foredeck. The crew had to watch for submerged ice shelves, which could have ended the trip very suddenly.

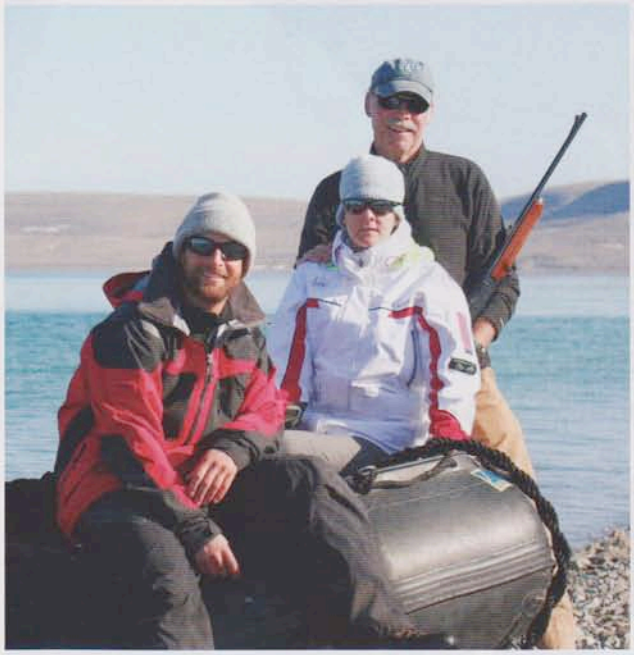
had reached Seattle safely. Generously, he had come to show off the boat (which was for sale), to talk about the adventure, and to give away CDs containing a video from the voyage. With him was Dominique Tanton, his stepdaughter and a member of the *Bagan* crew throughout the five-month journey.

Theobald said Dominique is a skilled boat handler, with five years' experience as a first mate and chef on a number of yachts. Aboard *Bagan,* she also proved her skill at fending off threatening hunks of ice. But her reputation will endure because of her cooking: she prepared 150 dinners for as many as six crew members during the expedition without repeating a recipe.

In total, the crew was extraordinary. It included a film director and a writer; a master diver-photographer; a cinematographer; Theobald's stepson, Chauncey Tanton; and his son Sefton, a University of Colorado student. Not all were aboard for the entire trip.

I had expected the Nordhavn to look a little beat up from her trials in the Arctic. But her exterior was in exceptionally good condition, and interior spaces looked new—so new that only those who truly know the Nordhavn line would have identified her as a 1998 model.

Theobald was in satellite contact with Jim Leishman at Nordhavn's headquarters in Dana Point, California, during



Left: Chauncey Tanton, Dominique Tanton, and Sprague Theobald (from left) ashore on Beechey Island. Here, they filmed the site where the doomed Franklin expedition of 1845 spent two winters. As always, guns were needed for protection against polar bears. Right: A traditional Inuit cairn, or stone memorial, just outside of Cambridge Bay in Nunavut, Canada. Mount Pelly is in the background. Opposite page right: A temporary anchorage in Howe Harbor, at the north end of Peel Sound. From left, Sprague Theobald, Clinton Bolton, Dominique Tanton (hidden, in white), and Sefton Theobald go ashore to film, with the usual "security." Once in the Northwest Passage, whenever the crew went ashore, two people always stood watch for polar bears. No one was allowed to talk to those on watch—this was deadly serious business.

the worst of the trip. He said Leishman and company engineers studied original drawings to determine how much ice pressure the hull could bear. With fingers crossed at Dana Point, *Bagan* came through in fine shape, with only one minor gouge on her bulbous bow.

The venture certainly was audacious, highly risky, and adventurous. But Theobald is not an amateur, and he planned well.

In his early life, he did some acting and then moved to the production side of the camera for several television series. Later, he began making documentaries as Hole in the Wall Productions. One documentary he produced for Nordhavn brought him an Emmy award for editing.

Bagan is Theobald's third Nordhavn. He has accumulated thousands of miles of open-ocean cruising and once was a member of a two-man crew that raced a sailboat across the Atlantic.

WHY, OH, WHY?

In this kind of interview, there always are two key questions. The first is, why?

The motivation came incrementally, Theobald said, stemming from a long-term fascination with the Northwest Passage. A friend once asked him about the "fantasy trip" he most would enjoy. He said, "The Northwest Passage."

It took a year to get ready, to find sponsor support (as the nation's finances crumbled), and to plan, plan, plan. He boarded an icebreaker for a firsthand look at the conditions they would encounter. He planned a documentary that would showcase the trip and examine a lightly touched region that may become a hot property for resource exploitation (oil, gas, diamonds, and minerals) if global warming does open the waterway to commercial navigation.

Theobald wanted to talk with some of the few people who live along the passage, to understand how they view their future and their pristine environment and how changing temperatures have affected them.

"I'd also like to follow the route of the Franklin expedition and try to convey through the moving image how it is that such a large expedition can simply vanish," he wrote in a Northwest Passage blog. "When Franklin and his men set out for the passage, it was that country's equivalent to one of the first moon shots for us. To this day, those waters are for the most part

uncharted, and transiting them will present very obvious and present dangers..."

Although *Bagan* was in good operating condition, Theobald—who had owned the 57 for four years—installed new navigation and communications equipment, a new heating system, and a new watermakers and replaced or upgraded other gear or components that were suspect because of age. Despite those improvements, she remained a basic 57 Nordhavn, he said.

Bagan carried them all the way with no problems.

The shakedown cruise was from Theobald's home port of Newport to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where a faulty ship's computer was replaced. From there, *Bagan* crossed the Gulf of St. Lawrence, turned northeast to the coast of Greenland, and then swung west across Baffin Bay to enter the 1,800-mile-long Northwest Passage, generally following the route of the Franklin expedition 160 years earlier. (Looking at a chart, that Greenland route seems far out of the way. But it kept them out of the ice pack along the north shore of Baffin Island.)

From Greenland, their route would lead to Lancaster Sound and Peel Passage, to King William Island and then west to the Bering Strait, through the Aleutian chain and across the Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska to Ketchikan, and, later, to Seattle.

To understand the vast distances: *Bagan* would spend two months reaching the entry to the Northwest Passage, one month cruising through the passage, and another two months cruising on to Seattle.

Countless other mariners—and nations—have shared Theobald's fascination. Ancient mapmakers hinted in the 15th century that a passage existed across the top of North America, one that would link Atlantic and Pacific and bring Europe closer to Asia. The first recorded attempt at finding the passage was by John Cabot in 1496. Later, the Spanish searched but found nothing more than fish. The French came and explored the St. Lawrence River, far south of the passage they sought.

The Hudson Bay Co. was trading for furs in Hudson Bay in the late 1600s. British sailors sought the Northwest Passage by sailing northwest in the bay. It didn't work, but those explorers left their names behind: Davis Strait, Baffin Island, Frobisher Bay, Hudson Bay, Foxe Basin, and James Bay among them.

Glyn Williams, in his book *Voyages of Delusion: The Quest for the Northwest Passage,* said the English became so discouraged at not finding a way through the ice that after the 1631 voyage of Luke Foxe and Thomas James, no other vessel entered Hudson Bay for almost 40 years.

In later years, fleets of exploration and trading vessels probed for the passage from both the Atlantic and Pacific, without success. Vancouver, Cook, and Quadra explored and mapped the west coast of North America in the 1790s, but they were also looking hard for the passage. The Northern Hemisphere was emerging from a long cold spell, and the Northwest Passage—if anyone had found it—would have been blocked by ice, as were waterways much farther south.

Williams finished the first draft of his book in 2000, when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police vessel *St. Roch II* transited the passage in little more than a month. It was a trip, he said, that "suggested that global warming

Top left: Chauncey, left, and Sprague filming on the north end of Barrow Island, Alaska. The Inuit still practice their time-honored tradition of whale harvesting and use the north end of the island to "reduce" the whales. The film crew was downwind. Top right: Heading south down Peel Sound and into the unexpected ice fields. Greg DeAscentis, left, keeps a weather eye to the north, watching for ice filling in behind the boat—which, unfortunately, it did. Chauncey sits on *Bagan*'s pulpit with a 12-foot "pushing pole." Six hours later, *Bagan* was trapped. Above: In the final third of the trip, *Bagan* made her way through the Aleutian Islands, where Mother Nature had a treat in store—continuous whole gales.

might have transformed the idea of a navigable Northwest Passage into a reality." An earlier *St. Roch* had cruised through the passage in the early 1940s, a trip that took 27 months. It was the first west-to-east transit.

One of the best-remembered passages was by the first U.S. nuclear submarine, *Nautilus* (SSN 571), which cruised across the top of the world and under the North Pole in 1958. Her journey began in Hawaii and ended in England.

AN ARCTIC WINTER?

Bagan's crew was enchanted by cruising with whales and by watching polar bears on shore. All were subjects for photographers, who endured 28°F water, and air temperatures only slightly warmer. They came away with stunning images of the landscape, the crew at work, bears and whales, and the shoreline and ice viewed from all angles, including underwater.

Cruising in the near-perpetual light of the Arctic presented benefits and problems. Because there was darkness for only a few hours, *Bagan* could be pushed hour after hour to make good distance. But the crew needed to rig blackout curtains in the staterooms to sleep with the sun bright overhead.

A professional captain was aboard to give Theobald

Blaney Bay, on the north side of Lancaster Sound, was one of the many staging areas where *Bagan's* crew would wait and download ice charts as they came in from the Canadian Ice Service. They needed to see how the ice in Peel Sound looked, whether they could enter the sound, and, if so, how far.

time to direct camera work and to edit videos daily. When the boat reached Nome, Alaska, the captain left, and Theobald assumed his responsibilities.

Recovering from their ice adventure in Gjoa Haven (the Norwegian pronunciation is difficult, and Theobald said the little community commonly is called Joe's Haven), the crew faced a rapid end of summer and a long way to go. With ice thickening behind them, *Bagan* could not reverse course and head back to Rhode Island. Continuing west to the Aleutians and south to Seattle would require crossing the Bering Sea before huge winter storms began in mid-September.

The alternative was to leave the boat for the winter. They decided to go for the finish line.

Cruising westward toward Amundsen Gulf, the crew found time to stop at Cambridge Bay, a community on Victoria Island, which lies just off the northern coast of Canada's Northwest Territories. In talking with residents and a group of scientists there, they encountered the same disagreement on global warming and its effects that today echoes around the world.

Elders in the native community told Theobald the winters were getting longer and harsher. Scientists working down the road had the opposite view.

There is speculation the global warming trend seen by those scientists will lead to an open, ice-free Northwest Passage, at least in the summer. Theobald doesn't believe it will become a major route for freighters and tankers, for several reasons: the passage is not well charted, the patterns of ice movement are not predictable, vessels would be required to have double or triple bottoms to protect against spills, and icebreakers would be needed.

There's also an international debate over which nation controls the passage, with the United States, Russia, and Canada claiming rights. To Theobald, there's no argument: it's all Canadian.

Canadian lands border the common routes through the Northwest Passage "and this is Canada's waterway," he said. To say it's not would "be like calling the Mississippi River an international waterway."

Bagan cruised west across the Beaufort Sea, and south in the Bering Strait—with Russia to starboard and Alaska to port. She continued on, in rising winds, to cross the Bering Sea (remember the TV series *Deadliest Catch?*) and plunged on across the Gulf of Alaska to Ketchikan in nonstop gales. Fearsome winter storms were just a few days behind.

When we talked on the boat in Seattle, Theobald had completed editing a documentary—condensing 250 hours of HD video recordings—and was shopping for a network to broadcast it. His Northwest Passage adventure had convinced him that he can successfully combine his two interests: cruising and documentary production.

As for the second key question, I asked if he would cruise the Northwest Passage again.

No, not as a boat owner, he said, citing the huge and pressing responsibilities inherent in a risky voyage.

But as a passenger?

"Yes."

To read more about Bagan's *adventures in the Northwest Passage, visit www.northwestpassagefilm.com.*