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Real Boats, Real Boaters

THE INCREDIBLE VOYAGE OF EGRET

Tragic end for rags-to-riches yachtsman

Miami Show Preview:
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ELECTRONICS FOR THE REAL WORLD

Egret at anchor in Chile.

RICH ARMSTRONG (INSET)

Mary and Scott Flanders quit their jobs, sold their home, and embarked on a 25-month, 21,900-mile voyage aboard their Nordhavn 46, Egret

BY CHRIS LANDRY / SENIOR REPORTER

It was like Scott and Mary Flanders had to earn the right to round Cape Horn. Aboard their Nordhavn 46, Egret, the couple white-knuckled through what Scott Flanders calls "four 12-hour maulings" in the South Atlantic on their way to the notorious cape.

"We simply got slaughtered," says Flanders, 63, as he sketches the Argentine coast from Mar del Plata to Ushuaia on a notebook. He and his wife are sitting under a Nordhavn canopy on the docks at the Fort Lauderdale (Fla.) International Boat Show. It has been just 13 days since their arrival in New Zealand Oct. 16, the final stop of a 25-month, 21,904-mile sojourn that began in Gibraltar in September 2006. (The couple had come home to Fort Lauderdale to visit family and friends, tour the show and attend the Nordhavn owners' party.)

Scott Flanders describes how the cold westerlies and southwesterlies stack up against the Chilean Andes. The cold air abuts the rising warmer air on the east side of the mountains. When west overpowers east, the winds "explode down the east side of the mountains and race across the Argentine pampas [grasslands] unimpeded to the ocean," says the gray-bearded Flanders. "The water is shallow and stacks up high, tight waves."

The last mauling was the worst. In an article he wrote for Circumnavigator, a passagemaking magazine published for Nordhavn, he gives this description:

"In the rapidly maturing westerly seas, a residual, extra large wave set roared through from the northwest. The first wave literally picked her up and threw her into the waves on the port side. She submerged her portlights, along with the rub rail, up to the bulwarks. We rolled nearly 40 degrees each time the balance of the wave set roared through. But that wasn't all. Once the wave sets were established, we found every ninth or 10th wave had no back. Egret would climb the backless wave until the wave could no longer support her weight, then she would fall into the trough, burying the forward half of the boat to the rub rail and again submerging the portlights. At one point, the GPS was reading minus 0.3 knots, even though we were running at 1,630 rpm at the time."

The couple and their 30-ton trawler

Remarkable Voyage

The couple dropped the hook off Suwarrow Atoll, one of the northern Cook Islands in the South Pacific.

escaped the Argentine coast virtually unscathed. Some seawater entered the auxiliary engine's exhaust system, but the problem was easily fixed after they rounded the Horn — an event that was, well, uneventful by comparison. Known for strong winds and huge seas, Cape Horn was docile the day Egret passed by the voyager's equivalent of Mount Everest. In fact, the Flanderses completed the passage twice. They motored east to west, against prevailing winds and currents Jan. 21, 2007, and then west to east the following day.

Egret was the first Nordhavn to round the Horn, according to Nordhavn director of marketing Jennifer McCauley Stern. Another Nordhavn, a 57-footer, achieved the feat only three weeks after Egret. The two trawlers later rafted up and swapped stories in the Beagle Channel.

Crossing the Atlantic, exploring jungles in Brazil, anchoring in the fjords of Chile, dancing with icebergs in Argentina's Estero Fonque, eating roasted pig with locals in the Kingdom of Tonga — these are but a few courses in a feast of memorable experiences the couple documented in words and photographs.

Scott Flanders wrote a detailed captain's log that describes not only the Kodak moments, but the realities of cruising. "I didn't want to write about dolphins in the wake," he says. "I wanted to write about nuts and bolts. I wanted to write about what it's like to try and sleep in 30 knots of wind." His ultimate goal is to persuade others to leave life's worries and stresses behind and go long-distance voyaging.

The Flanderses began living aboard full-time in 2002 after quitting their jobs and selling their home in Fort Lauderdale and a vacation house in the Keys. "We had all this stuff, and we've missed none of it," says Mary Flanders, 58. "We care about experiences, not things."

They participated in the Nordhavn Atlantic Rally in 2004. Egret, along with 18 other passagemakers — mostly Nordhavns — made a 3,800-mile trans-Atlantic passage from Fort Lauderdale to Gibraltar, with stops in Bermuda and the Azores. The 40-day trip would serve as a warm-up for the couple's voyage two years later.

A "good seaman"

Scott and Mary Flanders began filing captain's logs as soon as they got under way Sept. 16, 2006. The logs are listed by month on the Nordhavn Web site (*www.nordhavn.com*), and each month includes multiple entries. At the beginning of each entry, Egret's position is noted, along with the weather conditions.

"The 'Voyage of Egret' is one of the top-visited sections of the Web site," says Stern. "It receives around 3,000 hits per week. It's consistently in the top 10 most-viewed sections, which says a lot because we've got a very comprehensive Web site. At every boat show, we always get people telling us they follow the Egret voyage."

You can read about how they cruised down the west coast of Africa, crossed the Atlantic and made stops in La Gomera in the Canary Islands, Bahia de Salvador and Florianopolis in Brazil, and Mar del Plata.

They picked up a crewmember, Steve Lawrence, 62, of Deer River, Minn., in the Canary Islands. Lawrence met the Flanderses in Fort Lauderdale at the start of the Atlantic Rally. He met up with the couple again in Barcelona in the winter of 2005-06, when he dropped a few hints about crewing on Egret. He spent five months aboard the trawler. His main duties were washing dishes and standing watch from 1 to 5 a.m.

"I like the solitude at night," says Lawrence, who crewed on another Nordhavn 46 for the Atlantic Rally and a passage from Gibraltar to Turkey in 2005. Lawrence would watch the dolphins break up the phosphorescence at night, painting streaks of green across the water. "It was like a light show."

The Flanderses began calling Lawrence "The Master Angler" because he landed scores of fish during his time aboard Egret. Another job for Lawrence was to stand on deck with a sickle, ready to slash kelp that came up with the ground tackle. He also offered to help Mary Flanders with the anchoring duties, but she would have none of it. "Mary and Scott have a system down, so I just stayed out of the way," he says.

Lawrence did get involved when it was time to anchor in the fjords of Argentina and Chile. Using Egret's tender, he took stern lines ashore and tied them to rocks. The lines were fed through winches in the cockpit so they could be adjusted as necessary.

Lawrence left the voyage in Ushuaia in February 2007, departing with some unforgettable experiences. He was with the Flanderses during the "maulings" along the Argentine coast, caught

The sights, sounds and experiences left Scott and Mary wanting more. They plan to spend 2009 exploring New Zealand before heading to Australia, Tasmania and beyond.

Outfitting Egret for the long haul

"Perhaps the biggest safety item is our attitude of thoroughly researching and preparing for the trip and making sure Egret is ready to go, not hoping there aren't issues," says Scott Flanders.

Powered by a 140-hp 6-cylinder Lugger, Egret carries 1,000 gallons of fuel in two tanks and a reserve of 330 gallons in four fuel bladders, which Flanders says affords a range of more than 3,000 nautical miles. The diesel logged 7,100 hours during the voyage.

Here's a list of some of the safety gear, devices and equipment on board Egret, as well as modifications made to the trawler to increase safety. Flanders provides explanations.

- Two fixed Lowrance GlobalMap 2000 GPS units with 5-by-3.5-inch screens. "One is mounted in the pilothouse and one on the flybridge. We have an upper/lower station switch to choose which unit to drive the autopilot. We carry a third new unit as a backup."

- Two Garmin GPS 76 hand-held units with hard wiring as backup. Both have a 1.75-by-3.25-inch screen and a split-wire plug in the back of the unit. One wire is a 12-volt cigarette lighter-type plug, the other a nine-pin adapter. "By adding a nine-pin/USB adapter, we can use either GPS to run a navigation laptop."

- Two EPIRBs. "Before departing on a significant crossing, we gave NOAA our rough itinerary, which is put into a NOAA database. If both EPIRBs go off, there will be no reasonable doubt if there is a false signal."

- Five navigation laptops with navigation software installed. "All five computers have been tested with different combinations of GPSs, and all work. We all have weak points, and mine is electrical and computers. Fortunately, Egret hasn't had any electrical issues. We have two [computers] in service while under way and a third standing by. Two others live in the microwave/oven along with a hand-held GPS in areas where there could be possible lightning strikes. With this redundancy, we feel we have covered our weaknesses."

- Two 4 kW JRC radars, one with 4-foot open array, the other with 24-inch dome.

a shortbill spearfish off the Cape Verde Islands, and got mugged in Salvador. "I tried to take a shortcut back to the boat and got mugged," he says. "They pushed me down and took $75, but I hung on to my passport."

In a recent e-mail to Lawrence, the Flanderses extended an open-ended offer for Lawrence to join them in a year (after they leave New Zealand) for any future cruising legs.

"He is a good seaman, never complained, could sleep through anything, loved Mary's cooking, and was a great companion," says Steve Flanders. "There are few folks who can get along for five months on a small boat. I'll say we never had an uncomfortable moment with Steve."

After rounding the Horn, the couple wintered in Chile (enjoying the southern "summer") and decided to spend a year in the pristine cruising grounds of the "deep south."

Hanging out Down Under

Egret set sail again last spring and made stops in the Juan de Fernandez Islands, Easter Island, Pitcairn Island, the Gambier Islands, the Tuamotu Islands, Tahiti, American Samoa and Tonga before reaching New Zealand.

"Don't think New Zealand is the end of Egret's adventures," writes Scott Flanders in his Aug. 31 post. "We are just getting started, and we plan to do this for a long time. If we totter off the dock pushing our walker and don't make it, what the hell? It sure beats tubes and bedpans and drooling and the sadness of it all."

They'll spend 2009 exploring New Zealand and then head to Australia and Tasmania. They have become enamored with the simplicity of life Down Under. "You can go to the post office to get your title for your car," says Mary Flanders.

During their stay in Fort Lauderdale, Scott and Mary had a chance to visit with friends and family. Prior to cruising, Scott was in marine distribution and boatbuilding. He owned a boatbuilding company called Egret — hence, the name of the trawler — that produced small flats boats. Mary is a former physical therapist who worked with cerebral palsy patients. Both led busy, stressful lives.

Cruising changed all that. "You learn to accept things as they are," says Mary Flanders. You're more tolerant. You look at people — I mean really look at them. You are more sincere. People don't want anything from you. You're dealing with sincere people."

Egret serves as a social icebreaker when she pulls into a port. "The boat draws people," says Mary. "With island people or people who live near the shore, boats are a part of their lives, so they are interested in our boat, and we were treated nicely." ■

- Iridium satellite phone. "In the phone case, there are plasticized copies of emergency phone numbers — with oversized numerals — so we don't need glasses to read the numbers."
- Six-person Winslow life raft.
- Ditch bag with a hand-held GPS, hand-held VHF that uses AA batteries, binoculars, fishing gear, solar blankets, food, water, small medical kit, roll of toilet paper, money, plasticized copies of boat papers and passports, knife, 28-pack of AA batteries, second flashlight (LED), signal mirror and signal flag. A strobe is attached to the ditch bag, along with a Pelican waterproof flashlight. The life raft (kept in the saloon while under way) was tethered to the ditch bag. "This gives us a 20-foot-long floating string to snag if the worst happens."
- A sickle and long wooden pole for cutting kelp from the anchor and chain when raising the ground tackle.
- Jacklines to cover every outside deck area.
- Custom stainless steel hatch dams, so boarding waves can't force water under the hatch seals.
- Custom 1/2-inch-thick Lexan storm windows.
- Four heavy-duty padeyes to lash down the foredeck deck box.
- Sailboat winches for paravane retrieval and warping the stern lines. "In Chile and Argentina, there are few anchorages where … we drop the anchor on a steeply shelving bottom, then take the shore lines ashore to the west — and direction of weather. This puts us into a wind shadow, giving 100 percent protection."
- Doubled the number of ocean-crossing spares. "In the deep south [latitudes], you have to be able to fix problems yourself and have the parts to make the repairs."
- Added a much larger anchor — a 110-pound Turkish version of the German Bügel anchor — for extra holding and dropping through the kelp.
- Added paravane stabilization for redundant safety at sea in case the Naiad stabilizers failed. (The Naiads never missed a beat).
- Added six large inflatable fenders.