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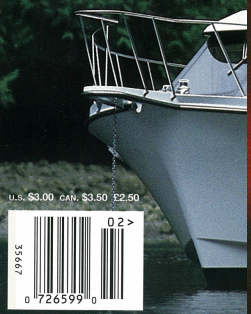
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# c r u e l D e e p t i o n

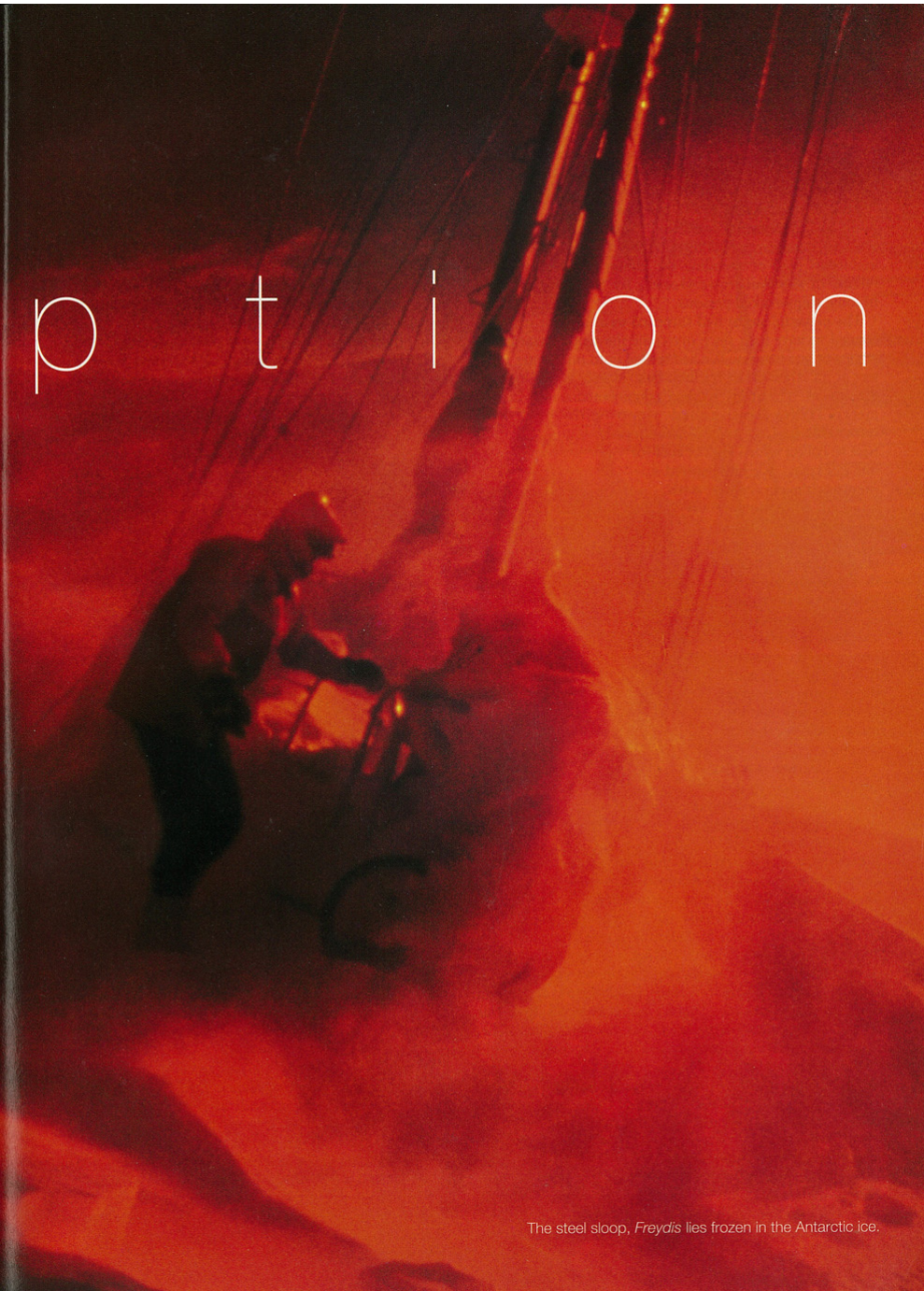
Shipwrecked

on an island

in the Antarctic Ocean

by Heide Wilts

photography by Erich Wilts



The steel sloop, *Freydis* lies frozen in the Antarctic ice.

“ulu-Papa-1 X-Ray-Echo-Delta. Eduardo, can you hear me? We've got bad news. *Freydis* is stranded. We're okay; so's Adelie, our cat.”

This radio message was our first link with the outside world since the accident. Our failure had now been spread abroad.

That 24th of May, 1991, will always mark a decisive point in our personal lives...our Black Friday. Thursday we had been circumnavigators of the world with the ambitious plan of spending the winter on Deception, an island in the Antarctic Ocean. By Saturday we had become shipwrecked persons.

The powerful storm had surprised us at a point when we seemed to have long since overcome the worst hazards and strains of our journey. We had settled in to our winter quarters at an Argentinian research base recently abandoned for the season. That day, we had taken *Freydis*, our 15-meter Hydra steel-hulled sloop with retractable keel, to another abandoned base to collect a final load of coal for our stockpile. We had enjoyed a memorable encounter with hundreds of gentoos splashing in the sea. “Ark, ark,” was their comment on our efforts. Later, we realized that penguins are better indicators of the weather than barometers, and that it is significant when an unusually large gathering of these funny creatures pushes its way into the most sheltered bay in the area.

The weather was fine that day as we took our leave towing the dinghy with coal boxes, heading for our home bay aboard *Freydis*. But disaster was looming. Within minutes the temperature dropped as an unexpected Antarctic low approached. Sudden gusts of wind made the air inhumanly cold. Spray was blown horizontally across the crater lake and across our boat. With the savage wailing of the wind in our ears, we raced on westward. Far off we could already see our goal, a bright red buoy bobbing up and down between the whitecaps. There a safe haven awaited: our winter quarters, with the roaring fire beside which Adelie, the cat, our traveling companion since Argentina, would stretch herself and purr.

Then came the fateful moment. Casting anchor, a maneuver we had mastered dozens of times without difficulty, even in heavy weather, failed. Erich tried to get hold of the rope with the boathook, but as the boat reared up it was jerked away from him.

The “full power in reverse” maneuver came too late. Ninety meters of chain and the anchor disappeared irretrievably into the depths.

The hurricane-force storm, which was to rage for two

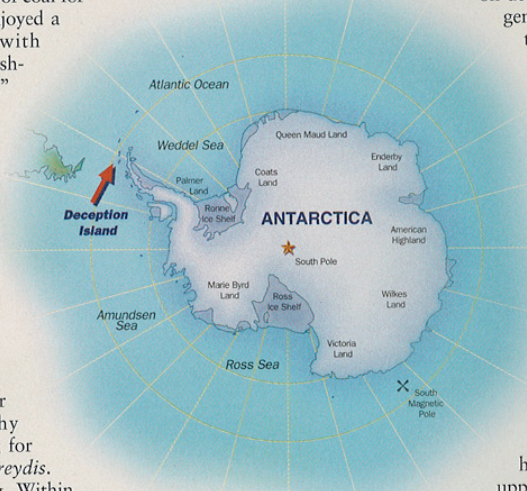
days, really got going. *Freydis* was dashed against the sand, shaken about and pushed across stones. The breakers beat like rammers against her hull and lifted her 25-ton bulk half a meter into the air and dropped her with a jerk back onto the sand and stones. Icy water rushed into the ship. We watched in horror as the sea took possession of our home. We tried to seal the leaks. We pumped until we were bathed in perspiration. Finally we had to give in to the force of this salt-water deluge. In the mess the cushions arched and started to move as though by magic. Bottles of soap, woolen socks, packets of dried yeast, plastic bags, shrink-wrapped emergency rockets, the echo sounder broken away from its fitting, packets of soup, floorboards—everything came floating past us like the contents of an enormous stew.

Nightfall, accompanied by exhaustion, fear and hunger, made the nightmare complete. For 15 hours we did not dare to leave the ship. With numb fingers, we put on several layers of dry clothing, wrapped ourselves in our sleeping bags and crawled into the upper berths.

Around midnight we heard a dull thud on deck. It must have been the wind generator torn from its fixture by the continual bumping of the boat. In the meantime the water was overflowing into the kitchen and the port berths. On the starboard side it had reached the navigation cupboard in which we kept our “treasures:” charts, spare parts, field glasses, sextants.

Should we really wait for daylight? What would happen if the ship capsized before then or broke in two amid the breakers and we could no longer get out? At seven in the morning, when the water had reached the level of the upper berth Erich made a decision: “We must leave the ship if we don't want to drown or freeze to death.” At that moment, I was seized by panic. But we had no choice. We crawled up on deck, our legs numb with cold. In order to reach the open air we had to pass through what resembled a limestone cave with grotesque stalactite and stalagmite walls. The lamp at the top was still burning, eerily, lighting up icicles as thick as an arm that were hanging from the roof of the deckhouse. The stern was buried beneath a wall of ice.

Approximately 30 meters separated us from land. In between lay cold, rough waters. Erich was the first to jump. A few terrifying seconds after he had disappeared into the raging icy mass, I heard his voice: “I can stand, come on!” I let myself fall in and fought for my life through the chaos of the roaring seas. Then I felt ground underfoot and a pull on the lifeline to which we were both attached. We burrowed our way through a large mound of snow in front of the building we had established as our winter home, found the door handle and were safe.



*Freydis* (above) spent the Antarctic winter in the crater basin of Deception Island, frozen where a storm left her. The way to the wellhouse (right) at the Argentinian base was arduous, but the trip was preferable to melting snow for water. The volcanic nature of the island kept the well from freezing over. A Weddell seal mother and her pup (below left) were signs of spring. Tea time in the hut at the Argentinian base (below right).



Stranded in the safest natural harbor in the polar region was a bitter and surprising end to the long journey from Leer in East Frisia, via Rio de Janeiro, and through the most dangerous sailing waters in the world: the Roaring Forties, the Furious Fifties, and Screaming Sixties. For over a year we had lived on board like nomads, together with several crews. The last had left us two months before. A six-month stay on this volcanic island at the southern tip of the globe was to be the climax of our carefully prepared journey.

On a sailing trip 10 years earlier we had first experienced the unique fascination of the Antarctic. We had wanted to return ever since. We were not aiming to test the limits of our capacity, as is fashionable today. We simply wanted to experience the nature and the solitude of the Antarctic winter first-hand, with some degree of comfort. It was our dream to have time to ourselves and for each other. Afterward, we planned to sail on, perhaps via South Africa to New Zealand. And now this. Never before had I felt so much at the mercy of the forces of nature, nor felt nature to be so hostile. She had transformed our *Freydis*, which had borne us 140,000 miles over the oceans of the world, into a large lump of ice, a wreck between rocks and glaciers. It looked as though our ship would never be seaworthy again.

Should we call it a day, we wondered; get the helicopter from one of the bases in the region to pick us up? The last load of coal we sought that unfortunate day was all that was missing from our otherwise fully equipped "winter palace."

We decided to stay on. We tried to console ourselves with the fact that everything could have been much worse, that our insurance would pay for part of the damage, that a ship was nothing more than a metal box like a car. And yet, we knew these were empty words.

*Freydis* is named after the heroine of a Viking saga who was the first woman to lead an expedition across the Atlantic. The yacht had long since become a part of us. Every holiday, every spare minute outside work, we had lived for this ship. She had been a tyrant and a companion. The many tours and adventures with her had left their mark on our personalities. At times I have cursed her, wished she would sink and disappear from my life. And now that the time had come I was extremely sad. Her 13th year would have been over in a few weeks.

At the end of February, we had taken on the dreaded Drake's Passage. Tales of monstrous seas and capsized yachts there are not only popular but true. We found it stormy and bitterly cold. Our cat was transformed from a mascot into a seasick patient. But after four days of exertion, we mastered the crossing.

Soon the first icebergs jogged laboriously past us. Jagged black lava rocks towered up out of the water. Deception, our destination, lay ahead.

In this region 60 million years ago, red-hot masses rose out of the bowels of the earth to form huge mountains in the sea, the South Shetland Islands, as they are now called. Deception, the last island in the chain, lies somewhat apart from the rest. It owes its present form to a second, massive eruption in which the mountain blew its own summit into the air. All that remained was a frayed edge of jagged rocks which surround the world's most impressive crater lake. The lake is linked to the open sea by a small opening. As we sailed through, two black, wet seals were sitting back at the black, wet entrance as though representing Cerberus, the double-headed hell hound.

Log and clouds of sulfur floated slowly over the water. Here Antarctic cold is united with fire from the interior of the earth. On pitch-black beaches ridges of baked krill had been formed by the tide. Sea water bubbled up from holes in the sand and fountains of steam rose from the depths like white torches. Penguins trotted hurriedly up the slope to cool their feet higher up in the snow. An icy wind blew over us and blackish-brown scuas danced in the air to its plaintive cry, hovering above our heads like avenging spirits.

Deception is an eerie place, but one whose eeriness has a certain beauty. Our first time on land we climbed a cone-shaped heap of ash. The Antarctic sun beat down with all its force and scorched our numb skin. From the top we admired the splendid view over mountains, bays, lagoons and freshwater lakes.

Remains of research bases cling to the dark mountain slopes like memorials to past volcanic eruptions—the last major one was in 1970. The wind howls unrestrainedly over the former site of this inferno. Ruins, stray stones and lumps of rock tell all too clearly of the enormous force of the explosions, of hot gases and red-hot rivers of lava. This was the destination of our dreams?

Before testing the experience of being alone, we left Deception one more time on a sailing tour, "around the world in forty days," to international Antarctic bases. A decade before, as yachtsmen and strangers from a far-off country, we had been made welcome guests.

Antarctica is the only continent where no passport is required, no visa, no ship's papers, where there is no

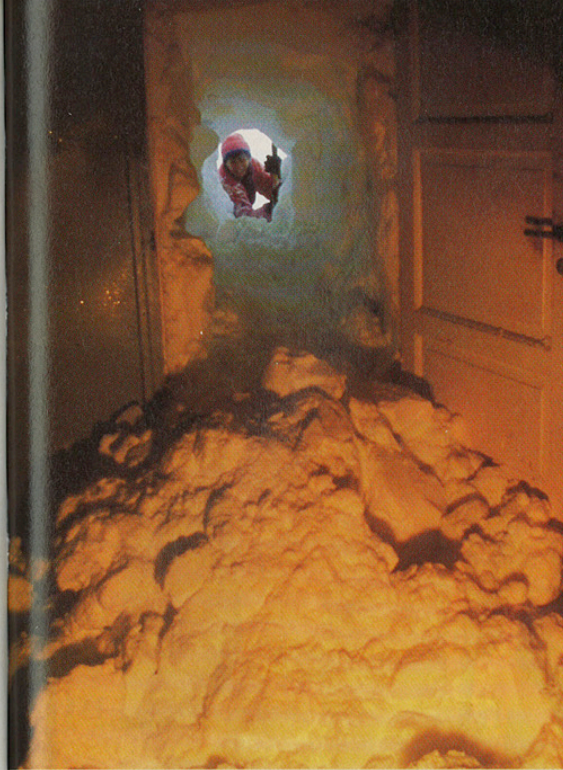
## Blizzards raged as we made our way like moles through mounds of snow.

Customs clearance and where no explanations are necessary. Characteristics such as friendliness, concern for others, tolerance, a sense of humor and helpfulness seem more important in the Antarctic than elsewhere.

When we returned to Deception at the beginning of May the sun was shining, the sky was blue and a light wind was blowing from the east. It was the kind of day that made one wonder how the island had come to earn itself this name, which was given to it by its unknown discoverers. Could it cheat and deceive, or even disappoint as its name in Spanish suggests? The volcanic landscape showed itself in all its splendor: the glassy crater lake sparkled a deep blue, and was surrounded by glittering white mountains, which sported the original pitch-black fall of their lava folds. Penguins were taking their morning walk, ambling along the "heated" lakeside promenade in front of the two-story red corrugated iron shed, which the Argentinians had in the meantime abandoned.

The days before the shipwreck had been happy ones. They flew past, filled with assembling the most basic necessities for survival. With the help of the dinghy we brought dozens of boxes, chests, bags and seabags on land, stuffed full of food supplies, clothing, bed linen, books, plates, cups, pots, pans and music cassettes. Every time we went through the biting cold our backs became rounder, or our arms longer. It took us two days just to

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The hut at the Argentinian base (left) was our intended home for the winter, even before *Freydis* succumbed to the storm. We wanted to experience the nature and solitude of the Antarctic with some degree of comfort. A Chilean vessel (above) arrived in spring and towed *Freydis* to freedom from the crater lake. The view from Deception Island (below) improved significantly along with our spirits as winter gave way to spring.

