



A RARE ARCTIC Bird

Across the Arctic circle in a wooden cutter with an open cockpit. No wonder the locals look surprised

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY ELLEN MASSEY LEONARD

Celeste in brash ice in the Beaufort Sea

One of the best things about sailing – for me anyway – is that the more one does, the more one wants to do. Fairly early during our circumnavigation my husband Seth and I started discussing other potential voyages. These weren't serious discussions, more like musings, because of course we were focused on the journey at hand. But the seed of an idea was there, and over the rest of the voyage that idea became reality.

It was back in 2013 that Seth and I made a test cruise of our new-to-us cold-molded cutter *Celeste* in my childhood waters of British Columbia. (We'd sold our previous boat, a GRP copy of *Finisterre*, upon completing our circumnavigation in 2010.) Although *Celeste* was fit and sound for temperate waters, we decided to go ahead with a full '30-year-refit' before embarking again in 2014. Our destination was the Arctic, not a place we particularly wanted to do unexpected yacht restoration on the fly.

We were very aware even then that *Celeste* is not the type of vessel one usually finds above the Arctic Circle, or even in high latitudes generally. To begin with, most boats in the far north aren't pleasure craft. They're icebreakers, research vessels, oil rigs, or commercial fishing ships. And the private yachts that do venture to the Arctic are generally big steel vessels with engines and generators of complementary size and with heated pilothouses in which the watchkeeper can navigate and steer. So it makes perfect sense that *Celeste* would seem ever more out of place the farther north she ventured.

By the time Seth and I reached Nome, Alaska – gateway to the Bering Strait – some of the onlookers were downright incredulous. And well they might be. On one side of the dock was exactly the type of private yacht one envisions for high latitudes: new, aluminum, twin 75hp diesels, heated pilothouse, even a two-story interior with dining salon on deck level and staterooms below. On the other side of the dock was *Celeste*, 'Best Sail' in the 1986 Vancouver Wooden Boat Festival.

NOT STANDARD ISSUE

Celeste was designed fairly recently, so she might properly be called a Spirit of Tradition. She was an independent project in 1985 for the renowned Francis Kinney of Sparkman & Stephens, commissioned by a businessman in British Columbia who wanted a wooden beauty fit to sail to Bora Bora. The result was a cutter-rigged sloop in the style of the 1940s and 1950s yachts drawn under the Cruising Club of America Rule. *Celeste* has long overhangs – 40 feet LOA but only 28 feet LWL – a narrow beam, low freeboard, and classic sheer. Her curved bow, tapering stern, and wineglass transom are not the standard issue anywhere nowadays, let alone in Alaska.

Celeste's first owner chose Bent Jespersen to build her. Jespersen – a shipwright in Denmark before

emigrating to Canada – specializes in wood-epoxy construction, having opened his own yard when everyone else was switching to fiberglass. For *Celeste's* hull he chose local Western red cedar – three layers laid up at opposing angles – and then a final fore-and-aft layer of mahogany. Kinney and the owner had agreed on a separate fin keel (rather than integrated full keel) to achieve faster speeds through less wetted surface, so this was built of stacked mahogany and bolted through the immense keelson. Like most cold-molded boats, *Celeste's* frames and deck beams are laminates and her teak deck was laid atop marine plywood. With cabin and coamings of varnished mahogany, most onlookers assume she was built in the late 1940s.

As mentioned, *Celeste's* owner wanted both a solid boat and a fast one, hence the separate fin keel and the aluminum spars. He wasn't disappointed. *Celeste* made her first ocean crossing, 3000 miles from Mexico to the Marquesas, in only 18 days. Upon return from her South Seas voyage, *Celeste's* home was the Royal Victoria Yacht Club in British Columbia, where Seth and I fell in love with her in 2013. By that point, her owner – now in his 80s – had found he was using her less and less and had decided to sell.

Though in good condition, *Celeste* needed the 30th birthday refit we had in mind in order to go to the Arctic. The most important project was re-doing her hull's epoxy barrier coat to prevent osmosis and the rot that would eventually result. If done correctly every 20-30 years, this is a preemptive measure for cold-molded and fiberglass boats to maintain seaworthiness. So *Celeste* was stripped of paint and spent the winter of 2013-14 in a heated shed until a moisture meter indicated it was time for the new barrier coat. Other projects upgraded her systems: she received a new diesel engine, batteries, wiring, and plumbing, as well as her first GPS, digital radar, VHF with AIS, solar panels, stove-type heater, satellite communications, and a Katadyn desalinator.

WINTERING IN THE ARCTIC

Celeste was still fundamentally a (modern) classic wooden boat, but she was ready for high latitudes. Our initial voyage (CB324) covered 3,500nm in demanding waters. From Washington State, *Celeste* made a passage outside Vancouver Island to Southeast Alaska where she handled tidal currents with aplomb. Her Gulf of Alaska crossing culminated in a staysail-only gale, and she battled not-infrequent 40-knot headwinds along the glaciated Alaska Peninsula to reach the Aleutian Islands. There we wintered *Celeste* and were loath to part from her, not just because it meant returning to work but also because she seemed so strange and alone among all those huge, steel, Bering Sea fishing boats.

Seth and I flew back to Dutch Harbor, on Unalaska Island, in early June 2015 just as the snow was

Opposite
clockwise from top
left: Crested
Auklets on St
Paul's Island;
testing seas in icy
conditions; whale
bone igloo at
Point Hope,
passage to Nome

retreating from the mountains and the wildflowers were opening their colorful buds. Unalaska gets short shrift among sailors (what sailors there are anyway, coming from Japan or heading north to the Arctic, almost always in high latitude boats): I've heard it dismissed as uninteresting and merely a provisioning stop. For Seth and me that couldn't be further from the truth. Despite *Celeste's* unusual wooden, classic nature – or maybe because of it – we've made friends easily. The deep inlets and towering green volcanoes remind me, believe it or not, of the Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific, and the hiking trails – climbing to an eagle rookery, skirting hidden waterfalls, and weaving through a carpet of lupine and avens – are paradise. We could have stayed there all summer and never set sail at all.

Sail we did, though, first on a two-day passage to the Pribilof Islands, a windswept outpost once home to slavery and brutality in pursuit of the rich coat of the Northern fur seal. Fortunately that's long since stopped and we were able not only to see beaches thick with barking seals, but to get to know the thriving modern Aleut Native community. Today the Pribilofs are best known to birders for their cliffs full of nesting puffins, auklets, murre, red-faced cormorants, northern fulmars, and the famed – in bird nerd circles – red-legged kittiwake.

FROM PRIBILOFS TO NOME

The passage to the Pribilofs had been smooth: long swells in the deep water beyond the continental shelf and a consistent 20 knots from astern. Our next passage – 470nm north to Nome – proved less comfortable due to the continental shelf. Those same 20-knot winds (building to 30 one night) brought steep, short-period seas that would make even the most iron of stomachs reach for a piece of Pilot Bread (yes, they still make hardtack in Alaska). But within four days it was over and we were in Nome. The town's slogan is "There's no place like Nome" and isn't that the truth! Founded in 1899 thanks to the discovery of gold literally lying on the beaches, the area is still mined today. The most common method is by homemade pontoon boats sporting enormous vacuum hoses. Divers on the seafloor use the hoses to send rocks up to an onboard sluice.

A local couple generously loaned us bicycles on which we went looking for wildlife on the tundra outside Nome. The area is known for birds and we were thrilled to see Arctic terns, red-throated loons, and merganser with a newly hatched brood. The animal we were really after, though, was the muskox, one of the only species of Pleistocene megafauna in North America that has survived to the present day. (The others are the bison and the pronghorn.) With their buffalo-like horns and long, musky guard hairs, they certainly look as if they roamed the same snowy hills as the mammoth. Once widespread, they now occupy only small pockets in the Arctic, so it was with real excitement that we spotted not just one, but several herds.

With the summer fleeing and many miles still to cover, Seth and I set out from Nome in thick fog and strong westerly winds (a combination we decided must be unique to the Alaskan Arctic). We beat against wind and chop for hours before rounding the Seward



“Seas that would test even the most iron of stomachs”



Above: left to right: Ellen and king crab traps on Unalaska Island; northern fur seal; Nome's mining heritage

Peninsula and entering the Bering Strait, where the notoriously strong currents swept us north but increased the nauseating pitch and roll caused by 30-knot winds in 100-foot-deep water.

Celeste crossed the Arctic Circle and continued north in the same conditions. In fact, it wasn't until the wind came north three days later that life improved. Unfortunately the gentle breeze was forecast to build to over 30 knots, and the idea of driving into the kind of seas we'd just had astern of us did not appeal. So we backtracked 50 miles to the only shelter in the entire Chukchi Sea. This was a spit of gravel and tundra called Point Hope, named not for the emotion but for an admiral in the Royal Navy. We would be completely exposed to the south, but protected from northerly waves and swell.

TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

This unexpected halt turned out to be our favorite on our entire Arctic voyage. Mostly this was due to the warm welcome we received from the Inupiat community. They are the current residents of a place that has seen the longest continuous habitation of anywhere in North America, and the elders were particularly interested in this history. We were shown the old village of sod and whalebone iglus and told of the spring whale hunt that is still conducted in open boats made of sealskin. As only the second sailboat that these elders had ever seen anchored off their peninsula (for the younger generation, we were the first), we were welcomed into their homes and shown traditional masks and drums. Point Hope also had a stark beauty to it: the flat tundra rising into the Brooks Range, the wildflowers when one looked closer, and the giant snowy owl hunting for squirrels.

When the wind began to shift into the south, however, it was time to go. Our anchorage was exposed to the south for 200 miles and, of course, this was a favorable wind for heading north to our goal: Point Barrow, the most northerly tip of the United States sticking into the Arctic Ocean at 71° 23'N. As always when one sails in low pressure systems, the wind and waves were stronger than we would have liked and we suffered bouts of unpleasant nausea. But the southerlies were essential for pushing the pack ice north away from the shore, so we suffered in reasonably happy expectation of achieving our aim.

Despite our successful arrival at Point Barrow, another – worse – low pressure prevented us from launching the dinghy and rowing ashore for three days. Once we finally reached land and met a few of the residents of this large Inupiat town, we learned how unusual we were. By that point, we'd grown accustomed to the rarity of our wooden classic, but that wasn't all they meant. It seemed that no sailboats had ever made much time for Barrow, let alone made this harsh Arctic spit of land their destination. The townspeople were used to sailboats headed through the Northwest Passage who either didn't stop at all or simply wanted fuel and water.

That we actually wanted to explore the tundra, see the migrating birds (it was time for autumn migration already by early August), visit the Native museum, and invite our new friends to dinner on board *Celeste* was unheard-of.

In the end we stayed two weeks before braving the return passage through the gales that were now fully in force in the Chukchi and Bering Seas. Unsurprisingly, we encountered the worst weather of the whole voyage in the first few days after leaving Barrow, with 35-knot NE winds barreling down on us from the Arctic Ocean.

We got a respite as we transited the Bering Strait, but then another low pressure system brought contrary winds and we were forced to heave-to. Even worse was to come, however, so we decided to shelter in a bay on Nunivak Island, a large expanse of permafrost just off the Yukon River delta. Even inside our bay, the wind got up to 30 knots with a 4-foot chop and we stood anchor watches for four nights. Outside, 15-20 foot waves were reported, something we were quite content to be missing. It's never good to congratulate yourself too early, though: the Arctic gods sprang nearly the same conditions on us soon after we left Nunivak.

Fortunately we had enough sea room to run with it on our quarter until it moderated and we could revert to our course to Dutch Harbor. In the end, we sailed over 1300 nautical miles and, when we stepped ashore again in the Aleutians, we had not touched land for 20 days.

While the wooden *Celeste*, with her varnished cabin, low freeboard, and small engine, may not look the part, Seth and I were very proud of her. She brought us safely to the Arctic Ocean and back with only a little chafe on her jib to show for it.