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On watch

Novice sailor **Naomi Hart** joined the crew of *Ezra*, a 44-foot Scillonian pilot cutter, as expedition artist on a voyage to Greenland. Back home in Exeter, she reflects upon her journey and leafs through her sketchbooks with *Belinda Dillon*.

For artist Naomi Hart, travel is intrinsic to her life and work. A nomad since her earliest days – born in the UK, she moved with her family to Nairobi at six weeks old, then to Germany aged five, and as an adult lived in Cameroon (a year), Tanzania (two years), and France (five years) – she has always embraced migration in all its forms. In fact, it's in her blood: her great-great grandfather was a missionary, artist, polymath and polyglot who moved from London to Canada in 1868 and produced a series of richly illustrated journals to document his international family history. Naomi honoured his vision in 2008 when she explored that heritage through Europe, India and Canada, creating a series of carnets de voyages (travel sketchbooks that encompass the physical accoutrements of journeys as well as artistic interpretations) along the way.

“Combining the two, travel and art, is my best-case scenario,” says Naomi. “I’m happy in the moment when in front of an interesting new view with a sketchbook.”



Naomi's thirst for adventure was put to the test by her latest project, one that combined both a physical journey and an immense personal challenge: as expedition artist on a photography charter sailing from Cornwall to Eastern Greenland, Naomi not only documented the journey artistically but was also an integral part of the crew. A daunting prospect, considering she'd never sailed before.

“I'm not an adrenaline-seeking traveller, but I have always felt the need for new challenges,” says Naomi. “When I've lived somewhere for a while I begin to feel that I know how it works, so I need to put myself in a new situation that forces me to figure it all out again. It's terrifying, but at the same time really invigorating when you realise you can still cope – so it's not hard to make the leap to a boat when you've never sailed and to travel thousands of miles with people you've just met.”

After a day's training in Falmouth, Naomi joined her fellow crew members – all experienced sailors – on *Ezra*, a 44ft Scillonian pilot cutter. With *Ezra*'s owner, Ron Pfister, at the helm, they set off from Penryn in mid June, sailing around Land's End, past Wales and across the Irish Sea to Ireland, then up to Skye, the Faroes, north-east Iceland, before reaching eastern Greenland in late July. Over the weeks, Naomi grabbed opportunities to document the journey and the day-to-day experiences of life on board, filling her seaworthy sketchbooks with drawings and watercolours. But she was also a fully fledged member of the crew, with all that role demands.

“It's nerve-wracking to realise that you're in charge of four other people's lives when you're

helping the boat,” says Naomi. “As I was the least experienced, I was generally part of double watches, but at some point the other person goes below to check the charts, and you're up on deck alone at the tiller, at night, trying not to hit anything. Although at times we were in what I would consider dangerous conditions – with *Ezra* heeling hard in half a gale, one side of her under water – when you're at the helm you feel the winds, the way she's pulling, and remember that the boat is made to do this.

“But there's always a risk, and with it the constant awareness that you can't lose concentration for a second. I have felt that before, particularly in Africa, and although I love the UK, there isn't that same sense of living this moment as if it were your last. Maybe I need that every so often.”

Having been based in Exeter for eight years, perhaps it was inevitable that there was an adventure brewing. Naomi's previous project, 'All About Migration', didn't take her out of the country but certainly sent her imagination soaring: she sent cards shaped like Brent geese into the world, and they returned covered in messages, drawings and greetings from every continent, including the Arctic Circle, and were exhibited as a flock of birds in flight.

During the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, it was common for exploration teams to include artists, individuals with broad interests and specialisms, and Naomi fits this model perfectly, using her artist's eye to explore what interests her in whatever format feels right, whether installation, painting or watercolour sketches. The Greenland books bear this out: measured sequences of mountain ranges feature



A couple of examples of work from the four sketchbooks that Naomi filled during her journey

alongside quick impressions of gannets gathering overhead, as well as detailed studies of flowers forcing their way out of ice-split crevasses, and portraits of the crew, indicating when the weather allowed for some down time; notes on geology, weather systems, the customs and daily routines of life in remote settlements add to the narrative. The books – four in all – create a vivid commentary on the journey.

One of Naomi's strongest recollections is the experience of never-ending daylight. "By Greenland, and when we reached ice, the clarity of the light was incredible, but perceptually confusing: mountains that are utterly distinct turn out to be 25 miles away, the width of the English Channel.

"I remember looking all the way down a fjord, 50 miles or more, at row upon row of snow-covered

mountains, and realising that we were one tiny vessel in a tiny part of the largest fjord system in the world on the world's largest island. I felt so ridiculously insignificant. Living on *Ezra*, there was nothing missing: we ate well, there was a flushing toilet, we each had a bed, there's a fully functioning galley. But as soon as you got off onto land and saw her in the distance, you realised how tiny she was. But I never really felt scared, which surprises me."

Not that there weren't hair-raising moments, especially when they were manoeuvring their way through leads in the drift ice that a month before they arrived had been completely impassable. "When we first started seeing bits of ice, I had the realisation – what I had known before but was now suddenly presented with – that if we screw up we could die

here. An ice floe several miles across will contain 100 million tonnes of ice or more, and is capable of crushing a boat.

"By then we were on constant watch, with Ron at the helm, standing on the thwart to see over the bow while steering with his foot, me on the throttle, someone up on the mast looking ahead for the best lead, someone on the foredeck, keeping a watchful eye on the approaching ice floes. We were chugging through at two knots or less, wriggling round this maze of ice, for ten-hour stretches. And at the end of the first day, when the fog came down, we decided to stop and threw a rope around a bit of an ice floe, 20-30 feet square, and we got out and walked around on it. It's so surreal – all of your senses are telling you it's not right, because it's midnight and bright as day, and our boat is anchored to what is essentially a bit of water. We couldn't go anywhere, so we all just went to bed, attached to this iceberg."

Naomi is planning a series of talks that will give people an opportunity to see the sketchbooks and hear about the experience of being an expedition artist. "I feel very privileged to have been to these places, which are so rich with the history of exploration. Artists used to be sent on these expeditions, but now there has to be a financial reason – to find places to drill for oil, or for trade routes. For most of the time on this trip I was the

only woman, and I'm interested in tying all of that together, and looking at issues around climate change and wildlife. We didn't see a polar bear because they're being hunted at such a rate that their numbers are vastly reduced. Everything that happens there is already affecting us, so if talking about my experiences can make it seem less remote somehow, that's valuable."

Inevitably, the experience has changed her. "I find myself much calmer in situations now and able to see the bigger picture. Half of me is having nightmares about the ocean, and half of me is slightly desperate to be back there. The idea that at the beginning of the summer I didn't even know how to tie a bowline and two months later I had an understanding of that world, and with knowledge that can mean the difference between surviving or not... that still amazes me." **M**

Naomi is giving a talk about her trip on 27 April, 5pm, at Exeter Phoenix. See naomi-hart.com for full details.



NORTH BY WEST SAILING EXPEDITIONS

The Eastern Greenland photography expedition Naomi joined is led by renowned landscape photographer Peter Cox. During the 10-day trip, four participants explore the wilderness of Scoresby Sound, the world's largest fjord system, shooting from the deck of *Ezra* (left) but also making use of the 4m *Zodiac* to cruise through iceberg fields, along glacier fronts and make landings.

Integral to the expedition is the opportunity for participants to assist in the day-to-day operation of the boat, including being at the helm and working the sails. Built by master shipwright Luke Powell and his team in Gweek, Cornwall, *Ezra* is a replica of the 19th-century pilot cutters – small, hardy and very seaworthy vessels that were designed to get harbour pilots out to large trading ships in the worst of weather conditions, safely and efficiently. *Ezra* has been specially refitted for Polar sailing.

The next expedition will take place in August 2016. €17,500 per person (4 participants max.) includes: 9 nights on board *Ezra*, all meals, photography instruction. Flights to Greenland not included.

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