

South Georgia - notes for cruisers

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Introduction

South Georgia is a magnificent destination for the cruiser. The sailing is challenging, requiring skill and thorough preparation. The scenery, often glimpsed through snow or rolling cloud, is marvellous beyond description. The wildlife, in its abundance and variety, offers a unique feeling of viewing the world as it was before the presence of mankind.

The following notes are intended to aid yachtsmen who plan to visit. It should always be remembered that this is a wild place and that skippers must have the experience and resources to make their own decisions without having to rely on outside help. The Admiralty Pilot (AP) and charts are more detailed than one would expect for such an out of the way place and should be on board and used. The AP identifies all anchorages of value; these notes provide information more specific to yachts.

We have only covered the N coast. The S is considerably less hospitable and there are no good anchorages. Only temporary shelter can be found under certain conditions.

Ice and Weather

South Georgia lies S of the Antarctic convergence. Therefore the islands are bathed in cold Antarctic water flowing in an ENE direction. In this flow are numerous icebergs, some of them enormous tabular bergs. At times they are clustered together, presumably resulting from the recent break up of larger ones, at others they are scattered far apart. If bergs are sighted there will be smaller bergy bits and growlers in the vicinity and an extra

good lookout must be kept. The outer limit of ice is about 400 miles in the direction of the Falklands, further in the direction of South Africa. In winter, pack ice occasionally reaches the S coast but rarely, if ever, progresses to the N.

A continuous stream of deep depressions moving from W to E dominates the weather. An occasional depression originates in the vicinity of the Falklands and crosses South Georgia. Most often they pass to the S giving winds from the W quarter but occasionally they pass over or to the N with cyclonic and E winds. Precipitation is often in the form of snow, even in mid summer.

All year round the weather is unsettled and variable. Long periods of unsettled weather can be followed by superb periods of anticyclonic weather. The barometer is often little help in predicting weather, which is strongly influenced by local topography. Visitors should be prepared for the worst and can then often be pleasantly surprised.

Forecasts

South Georgia is just within the area covered by the Chilean Navy faxes from Valparaíso. These are generally received well on 17144.6kHz

The present schedule is as follows:

Tuning frequencies: 4228.2, 8675.2 & 17144.6kHz

Note: at the time of compilation, some of the charts actually broadcast were not listed in the current list of radio signals. 1115 and 2315 UTC seem to be the reliable times.

Time (UT)	Content
1115	Surface Analysis 0600Z plus satellite image
1915	Sea Analysis plus satellite image
2200	Surface Analysis plus Antarctic ice chart (generally very out of date)
2315	Forecast for 1200Z the following day plus satellite image

Vessels that can receive email can access good weather data in "grib" format from www.saildocs.com

Likewise Inmarsat users will be able to obtain weather information.

The South African Meteorological service faxes also include the Falklands and South Georgia, however, as they do not show the waters to the west they are of limited value unless one is planning to sail to South Africa following a visit to South Georgia. The present schedule is

Time UTC	Content
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0430 Facsimile programme for ZSJ

0500 0000 Surface analysis (shipping)

0730 1200 Surface prognoses (previous day's run)

0800 Antarctic ice limits (October to march)

1030 0600 Surface analysis (shipping)

1100 0000 Surface prognoses

1530 1200 Surface analysis (shipping)

2230 1800 Surface analysis (shipping)

0630 1200 Upper-air prognoses (previous day's run)

Freq. kHz	Time UTC (tune 1.7kHz below)
4 014	1600 - 0600 (When TX available)
7 508	H24
13 538	H24
18 238	0600 - 1600 (When TX available)

The facsimile broadcast will be interrupted twice daily at 09:15 and 17:00 UTC to transmit RTTY (radio telex) weather bulletins for coastal waters and high seas.

Hydrographic information

The Antarctic pilot

Charts: (Recent surveys mean that charts are being updated, check for new charts.)

Admiralty Chart 3596 Approaches to South Georgia

Admiralty Chart 3597 South Georgia

Admiralty Chart 3585 Undine Harbour, Elsehul, Fortuna Bay, Larsen Harbour, Gold Harbour, Moltke Harbour, Right Whale Bay, Blue Whale Harbour, Cape Buller to Cape Constance, Rosita Harbour, Prince Olav Harbour and approaches

Admiralty Chart 3587 Leith Harbour, Stromness and Husvik in Stromness Bay, Jason Harbour, Maiviken, King Edward Cove, Grytviken, Cobbler's Cove, Godthul, Dartmouth Point anchorage

Admiralty Chart 3588 Approaches to Stromness and Cumberland Bay (New Edition)

Admiralty Chart 3592 Approaches to Stewart Strait, Stewart Strait and Willis Islands, Bird Sound, Bird Island and mainland South Georgia

Useful Books:

Carr, T. and P. Antarctic Oasis W.W. Norton 1998. Beautifully illustrated account of the yacht Curlew's cruises 1992 - 1997 in South Georgia.

Clark, G. The Totorore Voyage: An Antarctic Adventure Century Hutchinson 1988 and Homelands Publications, Kerikeri, New Zealand. Ornithological expedition of the yacht Totorore that included 2 winter cruises to South Georgia, 1984 and 1985.

Getting there

The majority of yachts arrive from Stanley, Ushuaia or Puerto Williams. Note that Stanley does not always have good fresh provisions and charges a landing fee of £50 per yacht with extra charges for charter yachts (payable in sterling or US dollars), regardless of the length of stay. However the Falklands make an excellent cruising ground. A stop here provides a good opportunity to meet the people involved in the running of South Georgia and gain general background information. And of course shortens the crossing. Ushuaia is probably the best departure point but the Argentine authorities will not regard the vessel as having left their waters if South Georgia is the destination. Vessels therefore give a different destination or depart from Puerto Williams.

Leaving is more difficult than arriving. By choosing a weather window, some vessels succeed in making a good passage back to Stanley. Others head north to Uruguay, which usually involves facing a lot of N wind. Charter yachts regularly slog back to Ushuaia but this requires time, luck and a large diesel. A few vessels take the downwind, but rough, route to Cape Town.

Anchoring

There is no anchorage in South Georgia totally protected from all winds. The vessel must be capable of putting to sea in extreme conditions and have gear considerably heavier than normally used to withstand wind and sea blowing onshore. (Examples are: Balaena, 12.5m, 11 tons used a 85lb plough and 10m Porvenir used a 60lb CQR.) Be prepared to take lines ashore, either to abandoned whaling installations or to rocky outcrops. Good chaffing gear and lengths of wire or chain are needed, heavy pitons, as used in the Scandinavian archipelagos, are also useful for fixing lines to rocks.

The reason for using shorelines is generally to pull the vessel into a more protected position than would be possible when swinging to the anchor. Other reasons to be considered include:

To stop the movement of the chain picking up large amounts of kelp.

To provide a way of pulling the dinghy to and from shore when the wind is too strong to row.

To make use of a space that is too small to swing with safety.

To align the vessel with the direction of swell in a roly anchorage.

Strong williwaws are common and can make life uncomfortable when the vessel is unable to swing into the wind. A way around this is to take the shorelines to the anchor chain and then let out chain until the lines are below the vessel. If using polypropylene lines (which are recommended as they float and collect less kelp) then they will need to be weighted close to the vessel to keep them from fouling the keel.

In bad weather it is probable that the person taking lines ashore will get a dunking, consider survival suits for landings as the water is near freezing even in mid summer.

In some places secure tying points are not available and a kedge must be used. Kedge anchors and their chains should be heavier than usual.

A good kelp knife is essential. Ideally a small, sharp, sickle on the end of a pole.

Stores

Freshwater, ice, and dandelion leaves are the only commodities available locally. Everything else must be carried onboard.

Self sufficiency

Total self sufficiency is expected by the authorities. There are absolutely no Search and Rescue facilities.

There are no facilities to aid yachts. In emergencies, aid would be readily given but the resources available are limited. The base at Grytviken is well provided for it's own needs and work. It is not at the disposal of visiting yachts.

The establishment has no ability to reach outlying anchorages.

In summer there are likely to be yachts and cruise ships visiting the N coast with no fixed timetable (40 cruise ship visited between mid-November 2004 and the end of March 2005.)

Fishing vessel numbers are approx. 10 to 16 vessels May to September, 4 to 5 vessels Dec - Feb, normally none at other times.

A fisheries protection vessel patrols on behalf of the South Georgia Government for 8-9 months of each year, on average it is present for 2 out of every 4 weeks.

There are also occasional visits from military patrols and overflights by Hercules aircraft.

In the event of being shipwrecked, a yacht's crew would need to be able to survive for weeks in an inhospitable environment and would need radio communications to attract assistance.

From the above it should be clear that the vessel should carry all the food, fuel, spares and medical necessities for the duration of the stay and the voyages to and from the island. This point cannot be overemphasised. If something is found to be lacking then it must be done without. (Items can be obtained by post but at great expense and with a long delay.)

Waste

All people living on the islands must conform to the Government of South Georgia policy of waste management. This is designed to preserve the Antarctic environment in pristine condition and minimise the impact of man. Yachts should follow the same code.

No biological waste can be disposed of on land. All waste put in the sea should be as far offshore as possible. Food wastes should be macerated before disposal. Eggs and poultry products can carry diseases that could harm the indigenous wildlife and should be removed from the islands.

Oil, plastic and paper waste should all be removed from the island on the vessel. Incineration is not approved of, especially for plastics.

Environment.

It is important to remember that the Antarctic environment is fragile and that Britain is very serious in its commitment to its preservation. Yachtsmen and visitors should regard themselves as being under an obligation to the environment, the authorities and to fellow yachtsmen. There are people who believe that the relatively uncontrolled activities of yachtsmen should be prohibited in these regions. Therefore we should do everything possible to avoid damaging our own cause. The SGSSI government gives us considerable freedom and it should not be abused. Clear guidelines are given in the official information provided at the time of application for a permit and upon arrival and these should be followed.

A common question relates to reindeer hunting. Even though the intention is to rid the island of these introduced animals, uncontrolled hunting is totally prohibited because of the adverse environmental impact.

Winter stays.

This is possible and has been done. Apart from the post there is no public transportation service available. Therefore everything must come with the vessel. It may be possible to have things shipped on one of the government vessels but this would probably be on the basis of a one-off favour, with a payment to be negotiated, and would need to be arranged in Stanley. Some people who have wintered here have obtained limited work on contract and as a result of this been able to use official supply routes. It should be noted that even if transport could be arranged the services of a shipping agent would add to the already high costs of provisions in Stanley.

Yachts planning to spend winter should assume that they will be alone and not expect to be part of the small community at King Edward Point.

Whaling stations

Previously these have been much visited and vandalised. Since 1999 all stations have been closed and all jetties off limits other than Grytviken. The stations were closed due to the Government being liable should anyone get injured in them and due to the risks the visitor faces from asbestos and chemicals in the industrial installations and from flying sheet iron and other debris. Despite the fact that the ban has been ignored by many, it will be enforced and ignoring it will hurt the interests of future visiting yachts. In addition the wharves are in a very dilapidated state and it is poor seamanship to use them.

You must anchor at these locations and must not approach within 200m of the old installations. There is a risk of fouling the anchor on debris such as old cables and chains.

Bureaucracy

Application must be made, prior to arrival, for all visits to the government of South Georgia (SGSSI) in Stanley, Falkland Islands. Officials are friendly and helpful. Contact details:

The Commissioner for South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands
Government House
Stanley
Falkland Islands
South Atlantic via United Kingdom
Tel no: +500 27433
Fax no: +500 27434
E-mail: gov.house@horizon.co.fk

Website (with lots of information and forms to download – look under visitors and applications): www.sgisland.org

Dues of £60 (payable in sterling or US dollars) per yacht and a landing fee of £75 per

paying passenger (i.e. not for crew members) are payable regardless of the length of stay. King Edward Point is the only place of entry. Upon arrival the vessel will be visited by the marine officer who will complete formalities and fully brief the crew on procedures, especially related to permitted landing areas. Note that some areas are considered of special biological significance and landing is prohibited or requires special permission. Bird, Annenkov, Albatross, Grass and Cooper Island are completely out of bounds.

No pets are allowed anywhere.

Fur seals

These are one of the major attractions and also the greatest nuisance. They appear to have little fear of humans, are naturally aggressive and may attack and bite without warning. When not breeding they will show aggression but generally back down and allow humans to pass. During the breeding months of November to January they are less likely to give way, especially the dominant bulls that are defending their beach territory and females. With experience it may be possible to observe territorial boundaries and walk between. If approached too close for comfort then a stick or the sole of a boot held forward will usually stop them. Sometimes a shout, a return growl, clapping of hands or banging two stones together may be effective.

Seals occupy almost all the accessible beaches and rock slopes suitable for landing. One may need to go half a km or more inland to be clear of them. The NW end of the islands is virtually closed to landing in November to January because of the danger from seals. It is best to avoid landing on the beaches at these times of year.

The seal experience, due to their growling, is not unlike a visit to the big cats in the zoo except there are no bars. Beware of bites, they always become infected and immediate antibiotics are strongly recommended (tetracycline or metronidazole).

These notes

Sources:

Last updated on 1st May 2005.

These notes were prepared by the crew of Balaena during a cruise to South Georgia, Dec 01 - Mar 02. Printed sources drawn upon are listed under hydrographic information and useful books. Pete and Annie Hill's booklet, Island Anchorages in the Southern Ocean, (prepared for private use by members of the RCC) was referred to. As it is unpublished and consent for its use was not given, no information has been taken directly from that source. Other information was provided by:

Jerome Poncet, Damian II and Golden Fleece, probably the most experienced yachtsman in these waters

Tim and Pauline Carr, Curlew, who have made the islands their home and have a unique perspective as a result of sailing, winter and summer, aboard their engine-less gaff cutter. They were very helpful to us during our stay and subsequently provided comments and corrections for these notes.

Phillipe Poupon, Fleur Austral, who shared the experience of his two visits with us.

Mark and Fraser Carpenter, Joshua, who lived aboard and cruised in the islands for two years.

Roger Wallis, Tooluka, who has made at least two visits.

Sally Poncet, who is an expert on the wildlife of the islands and has made frequent visits over a very long period, provided useful comments and corrections on these notes.

The relieving Government Officer, Ken Passfield was very helpful in compiling these notes. He has sailed to South Georgia 4 times with Jerome Poncet and brought his own boat, the 31-foot steel double ender - Porvenir, to the islands in 1999/2000. He and his partner Ann spent 3 months cruising from Bird Island to Larsen Harbour. He has visited all the anchorages we mention. We have made extensive use of his comments.

Users are strongly urged to provide feedback to the RCC Pilotage Foundation.

Coverage:

The notes are on anchorages on the north coast running from NW to SE. Admiralty plans are excellent so our sketch is only for supplemental information and not for navigation. We have provided information on what we consider to be the better anchorages or those that can be used as temporary stops to view areas of special interest. The harbours that Balaena found most secure are given bold headings. GPS positions are WGS84. Soundings are in metres.

For brevity we have avoided giving the fascinating background detail that makes South Georgia such an interesting visit. Much of this is well covered in Tim and Pauline Carr's beautiful book. (The South Georgia Government provides a good bibliography in its information for visitors obtainable from the address given under bureaucracy.)

A * denotes that Balaena did not visit an anchorage that is included as it may be a reasonable destination for another vessel. In these cases the primary source of information is the Admiralty Pilot with additional information from the people named above.

Chart numbers refer to detailed plans.

The Anchorages

***Bird Island**

Chart: 3592

Good in Jordan Cove but winds with S component blow with hurricane force and the entrance is very tricky if there is any swell. Anchorage is discouraged and landing prohibited. The BAS personnel have a busy workload and the base is crowded. They do not need or welcome yacht visits. Use Coal Harbour or Elsehul instead.

***Elsehul**

Chart: 3585

Exposed to N, affected by swell. Anchor in the inner bay in 10m, sand. This anchorage has a particularly bad reputation for aggressive fur seals in the breeding season.

***Right Whale Bay**

Chart: 3585

Anchor in inner part, good holding in 8-10m off N end of Binder Beach but very strong winds. Dangerous with E winds, from which Barber Cove may be protected. Cairns Cove is less windy but has poor holding.

Rosita Harbour

Chart: 3585

The recommended spot is in the small cove on the NW shore of the bay. Anchor in 5m behind kelp, good holding in sand. Open to E but otherwise well protected especially if pulled in close with shorelines. Porvenir experienced an E wind of force 6/7 in this position and the kelp broke the seas to nothing. This is virtually an all weather anchorage and a good spot for day trips to Prion Island and Salisbury Plain.

Camp Bay

Chart: 3585

Anchor in 6-10m behind kelp on the S side, off small waterfall with good holding in sand. Open to E but otherwise well protected. A good place to collect water as the waterfall runs onto the beach and is not polluted by fur seals.

Salisbury Plain

Chart: 3585

A very insecure anchorage but useful in settled weather to visit the large king penguin

colony. If landing is possible at all, the best spot may be at the far W end of the beach, to the W of a river outlet and E of a small rocky headland (itself, to the E of Start Point) that would give some protection from W, 14m sand, good holding (GPS 54° 03'S 37° 21'W).

Prion Island

Chart: 3585

Anchor off the E of the island, separated from the landing place on the SE by a rocky spit. Settled weather only. Landing to view albatrosses on S side of island only with permit.

Prince Olav Harbour

Chart: 3585

North Bay is a reasonably secure anchorage, it is fairly open to E but a vessel could probably ride out an E wind here. Anchor in 7-8m, thick mud amongst a lot of kelp. The bay is small enough for multiple lines to be taken ashore.

The whaling station was abandoned long ago. The wreck at the south entrance to North Bay is the Brutus, launched in 1889. There is good holding SW of Brutus island in an E wind.

South and East Bays are subject to hurricane force winds in SW conditions.

Elephant Lagoon

Chart: 3585

This is clearly shown on the chart. Carl Passage is very narrow, especially at the inner end. There is a minimum depth of 2m at LW and entrance is recommended on a rising tide, as it is easy to stray from the channel. The centre of the lagoon provides excellent holding in thick mud, 5-8m. During Balaena's visit the lagoon was spared the worst of the SW williwaws that passed through South and East bays. This would suggest a very secure though possibly windy anchorage. Good walking on hills above anchorage. Because of the steep hills on the S side the density of fur seals may be lower than elsewhere and this may be a good place to get ashore.

Blue Whale Bay

Chart: 3585

Good protection behind Shelter Point, 8-10m sand amongst kelp, consider shorelines. Subject to swell and strong gusts in SW wind. Appears to be safe in N and E winds. (Balaena experienced little wind but a heavy swell in this position during a NE gale.) Landing is difficult and walking is limited.

Leith Harbour

Chart: 3587

The whaling station was abandoned in the 1960's. W winds here are directed to the NW and are exceptionally strong. There is nearly always a swell, which makes anchoring and landing difficult. There is a tough walk over the col to the N leading to Hercules Bay where there is a colony of macaroni penguins.

Stromness

Chart: 3587

The whaling station was abandoned in the 1960's (it was a ship repair facility in its latter days). The bay is too deep for easy anchoring and reputed to be severely fouled with debris and is subject to swell.

Husvik is a better option.

Husvik

Chart: 3587

The whaling station was abandoned in the 1950's. The bottom may be foul. S of the jetty, near the river mouth, there is a lot of moving sand which may have covered the debris. Balaena spent much time anchored here without fouling. An anchor line is recommended. SW winds in this position can be very fierce but the holding is good. A ship reported force 10 in the open sea when the steady wind here was 25 gusting 40 knots.

Husvik appears to be open to the E but the outer rocks reduce the swell considerably and several boats have weathered E gales here in safety.

Walking and wildlife make this one of the best locations in the islands.

*Jason Harbour and Carlita Bay

Chart: 3587

Indifferent shelter in Jason and both are frequently subject to ice from the Neumeyer glacier.

Ken Passfield comments: "Carlita is a beautiful sheltered spot. Ice may drift in on the tide, but its shallow so no big bits. No problems with a steel boat! Have been there in Damien, Golden Fleece (approx. 18m) and Porvenir without incident.)

Maiviken

Chart: 3587

Inside George Rock in the NW corner is a secure anchorage but with restricted room, much kelp and subject to swell. Shorelines (one being to George Rock itself) are required, as holding is poor.

Burnet Cove on the E side of the bay provides all round protection with shorelines.

King Edward Cove and Grytviken

Chart: 3587

The good news is that the environmental clean up works at Grytviken are over so the station is now open to the public. A part of the Tijuca jetty is due to be fixed up in 2005/6 and will be available for yachts. Other berthing options may be available, contact the Government Officer on arrival.

Holding is good in the bay, the only problems seem to have been with vessels that have inadequate ground tackle (such vessels have absolutely no justification for being in S Georgia and will not help the interests of well-found boats if they cause problems for the authorities). The wharf at King Edward Point is very exposed in SW conditions and is not normally available for yachts, but may occasionally be so, at the discretion of the Government officer. Grytviken is said to be the safest location in the islands, however very strong winds still occur so, if tying up, breast lines and an anchor to the E are needed to prevent damage from collision with shore structures.

Cobblers Cove

Chart: 3587

Good all round shelter in 6-8m, sand, in the NW corner of the bay. Lines (it is 300m from one side of the cove to the other) are required to hold the vessel in the sheltered spot and head to swell. In a NE gale Balaena experienced little wind though the S side of the Cove was white at times and swells were breaking in the entrance.

Excellent walking, especially to the macaroni penguin colony at Rookery Bay.

Godthul

Chart: 3587

SE part is sheltered from W or SW but exposed to NW. Subject to swell. Not recommended by Balaena. Ken Passfield comments: "beg to differ - found it a lot more sheltered than it looks."

Ocean Harbour

Chart: 3588

All round shelter with good holding in 5-8m sand between wreck on the S shore and head of bay. The NW wind can be very strong and swell in E winds and calms can be

uncomfortable. The dangers are easy to see. This is one of the best anchorages on South Georgia and the walking and wildlife are excellent. The wreck is the Bayard; an early iron ship built in 1864.

*Hound Bay

Chart: no plan - 3597

AP suggests that off the north cove in the SW corner there is good shelter. It is very windy and probably subject to swell.

St Andrews Bay

Chart: no plan 3597

Exceptionally strong SW winds, swell and surf make this a very poor anchorage. In settled conditions it is well worth visiting the largest King Penguin colony in the islands. Anchor and land at the N end where a small headland gives some shelter.

*Moltke Harbour

Chart: 3585

Said to be very windy, subject to swell and dangerous in E winds.

Gold Harbour

Chart: 3585

Good shelter from W winds, 9m sand, close inshore at the N end. Open to E and subject to swell and ice on occasions. Not a good anchorage but a spectacular location

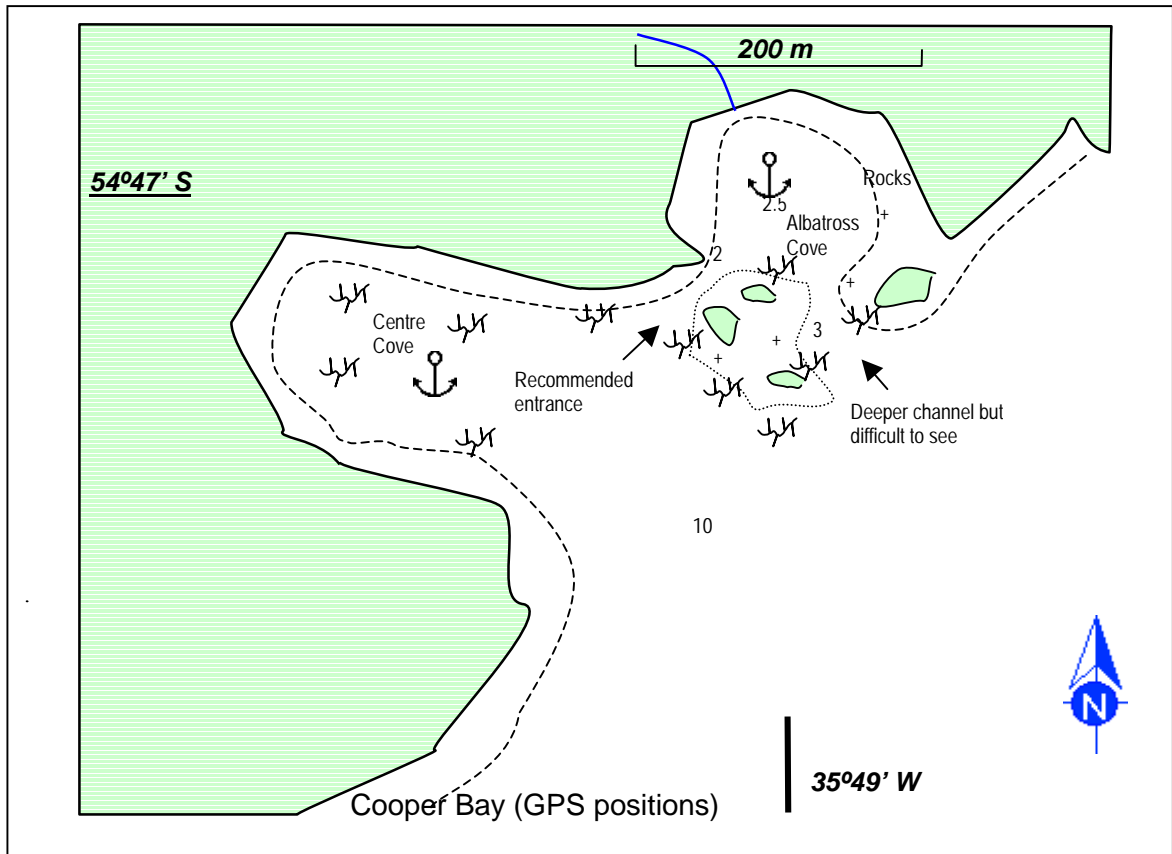
Cooper Bay

Chart: 3597 no plan - see sketch

The appearance of all round shelter in Albatross Cove (the lagoon to NE of inner arm) is illusory. E winds or ground swell, particularly if a low barometer has caused the sea level to rise a little, can cause heavy seas to break across the protecting reefs. As the lagoon is shallow these seas produce a severe surge and can break within the lagoon and there is a danger of hitting the bottom. In these conditions it is dangerous to leave. Balaena was very uncomfortable with seas breaking close by and on the beach with only 15 knots NE and 2m swell. Said to be a lovely place with W winds but beware.

Enter between rocky shore and off lying rocks on NW side of the opening, there is a lot of kelp and only 2m depth.

Centre Cove offers less shelter but good holding in 5-6m and would be easier to leave if conditions were bad. To the W is the island's largest colony of Chinstrap Penguins



Larsen Harbour

Chart: 3585

This is one of the most protected harbours in the islands but because it lies W-E it is very windy. Winds of exceptional force can make the main part of the bay untenable. Moor with anchor and lines to the rocks in a basin below a small mossy cliff on the N shore, due N of Fairway Rock and the stony spit. This position is sheltered from the W by a 30m high rock projection (not shown on chart, which is otherwise fairly accurate). This will give some protection from the strongest winds. GPS position (note: discrepancy between GPS and 1962 chart): $54^{\circ} 50' \cdot 3S$ $36^{\circ} 01' \cdot 2W$.

Several good walks. Larsen Harbour, Smaaland Cove and Doubtful Bay are the only places in the islands to see Weddel seals.