

# A NEW LATITUDE

S / Y *Sun Tenareze*

While most yachtsmen tend to depart for warmer climes on their maiden voyages, cold places continue to attract a hearty few, among them the owner of *Sun Tenareze*. Built by JFA Yachts in Concarneau, France, the 85-foot catamaran was designed to circumnavigate the world short-handed.

An experienced sailor, the owner had once commissioned a 69-foot Swan for offshore racing. Sometime later, he built an 82-foot ketch at Camper & Nicholson's. It was during this project that he employed Captain Thierry Sagnes and his partner, Marine Jeannes, a couple who continued with him on *Sun Tenareze*.

After she was launched from JFA in 2004, *Sun Tenareze* embarked on a voyage that took her to Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago that lies east of northern Greenland above the 76<sup>th</sup> parallel, just 710 nautical miles from the North Pole. Jeannes explains that the owner had been to these islands many



**For centuries, shipbuilders and owners have watched from the quay as a new vessel embarked on her first passage, waiting in anticipation for news of her safe arrival at journey's end.**



Visitors flock to Tromsø to see the Northern Lights between September and April.

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inexpensive moorings and friendly harbor agents, is always delightful.”

Coastal Norway has an astounding number of islands – 50,000 of them – that protect the mainland, giving the country, according to most sources, a coastline four times greater than that of the United States. The passages are deep, the water clear and cold and the islands rocky, many of them steep and thickly forested. The scenery is unforgettable.

*Sun Tenareze* then sailed to Tromsø, in the far north of Norway, where the owner, his wife and their guests joined the boat.

“Tromsø is known as the Paris of the North,” says Sagnes, “a seaside resort for Norwegians from Oslo, a charming small town where houses are red, blue or yellow. At one o’clock in the morning, people were outside celebrating the warm weather. The terraces were full, and music was playing loud. Tromsø was the last taste of paradise before putting [ourselves] afloat in the wild.”

One of the most unusual details of their visit, Jeannes notes, had nothing at all to do with the area’s natural beauty. “When we arrived in [Tromsø] and told people that we were going to Svalbard for a cruise, they told us that we’d be obliged to rent a gun! In fact, we found that guns are required to ensure that you can protect yourself from the polar bears when you go ashore.”

Armed with that advice and a rented Mauser rifle, all hands made ready to cross the Barents Sea, a trip of 600 nautical miles in rough seas that was quite unpleasant.

“The forecasts given by weather stations only announced ice positions,” Sagnes recalls. “We were obliged to go along a drifting ice field that prevented us from going closer to the coast. Some blocks were drifting a hundred meters from our hulls.

“When, finally, the Longyearbyen fjord entrance became visible, the sight was breathtaking,” says Sagnes, “with glaciers [that flowed] to the sea, and some [places] carved by the ice, offering huge, imaginative sculptures that seem to be made by a giant, crazy artist. The light had a crystal purity. When the anchor [windlass] stopped, the silence was total.”

Longyearbyen, located on the island of Spitsbergen, is the only large settlement in the entire archipelago.

“There is one travel agency, one supermarket, one hotel and a few shops,” says Jeannes. “But there are

When *Sun Tenareze* (far left) crossed 80 degrees north, she was met with walrus basking on shore, a sight the captain describes as “obese tourists at a crowded beach resort.”



years before aboard the cruise ship *Jean Mermoz*. “Although he greatly enjoyed the scenery,” says Jeannes with a laugh, “having five hundred guests on board with him made the trip far less pleasant. He always wanted to go back there someday with his own yacht.”

Leaving the yard in early June, Sagnes and Jeannes, sailing alone, traveled to Stavanger in southwestern Norway, where they began to experience the long hours of daylight that are enjoyed at this latitude. From there, says Sagnes, the couple stopped in Bergen, then Ålesund, where “arrival in the small, colorful towns, with their



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two pubs, because alcohol is almost free, and they have no tax (which is unique in this heavily taxed country).”

Jeannes notes that the city is also home to the University Centre in Svalbard, which, according to the literature, is the world’s northernmost institution for higher education and research. Another interesting facility on the island is the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a high-security facility that preserves a wide variety of plant seeds, which are duplicate samples of seeds held in various gene banks around the world. Built into a mountain, the vault is an attempt to ensure against the loss of seeds in other facilities as a result of catastrophic regional events or global crises.

“You might think that there would be no social life,” says Jeannes, “because it is a small village, and they don’t have daylight for months. But everybody needs human contact, so, [despite] the weather, people don’t stay at home. The social life is very active there, more than in our big cities.

“The funny thing is that when you go to the supermarket, or wherever, you’ve got your gun with you. So, you just drop it in a special rack at the entrance of the supermarket or at the pub.”

Sagnes takes up the story. “We left the capital under the freezing sun. There was no rush. We would moor every evening, put our foot ashore to walk the tundra that sheltered a diverse fauna – birds, rodents, Arctic reindeer – but also the frightening polar bears that are fearless and very curious.

“We brushed past ancient glaciers, admiring the ageless blue ice. One has the sensation of looking back at the birth of the world...”

Jeannes and Sagnes say there are many fine anchorages throughout the archipelago and beautiful fjords but cruising in ice is always unpredictable. “After we dropped everybody at the small airport in Longyearbyen, Thierry,



### NO REST FOR THE DEAD

Despite the hours of preparation and planning that go into a voyage, it is easy to overlook some laws that are just too bizarre to anticipate. Imagine, for example, a place where it is illegal to die.

In the small town of Longyearbyen in the Svalbard archipelago, dying is prohibited. There are two reasons. One is that there is no room in the town’s cemetery, which reached capacity in the 1930s. Also, because bodies do not decompose in the island’s permafrost and some micro-organisms like influenza – which caused a number of deaths on the island in 1917 – remain viable, any seriously ill person is transported by sea or air to another part of Norway; the closest facility is at least two hours away by air.

*The owners and crew of Sun Tenareze were required to get guns to protect themselves from polar bears.*

the owner and I decided to go back to Tromsø, but the ice pack was already closed. We tried ‘til one o’clock in the morning. Luckily, we had daylight to help us, and we found an anchorage for the night,” says Jeannes.

“In the afternoon, we decided to go for a walk ashore with the tender and, of course, with the gun. We saw beautiful Arctic reindeer, and I picked up some bearskin on the tundra. But the polar bears weren’t far away, so we had to be very attentive about the surroundings.”

What happened next, says Jeannes, was quite frightening. “When we went back to the beach, where the tender was supposed to be, we saw it sailing away! Thierry ran across the rocks to try to catch it, and I was running behind with the owner...with the gun in my hands to protect us from the bears.

“Finally, Thierry got the tender, and we got back on board safely. Otherwise, I don’t know what would have happened to us if he hadn’t caught it. You can’t swim because the water is too cold. But [the memory] is a great souvenir.”

After weeks of exploring, *Sun Tenareze* sailed north toward Moffen, a protected island situated north of the 80<sup>th</sup> parallel. Since the near-extinction of walrus in Svalbard in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Moffen has played an important role in re-establishing the species, a process that continues today.

Sagnes describes the scene that awaited them as *Sun Tenareze* crossed 80 degrees north, a goal of the owner. “On shore, some walrus basked, obese tourists at a crowded beach resort. It was impossible to get closer than authorized by the Svalbard regulations, but even at 100 meters, some males became agitated and started grumbling, their moving making greasy ‘floppong’ sounds and sending us strong [unpleasant odors]. Prehistoric animals are fascinating; they look friendly, but their tusks are as sharp as [knives].”

All told, *Sun Tenareze* spent almost a month-and-a-half cruising the Svalbard archipelago, arriving in July and departing in August. While they were there, temperatures ranged between five degrees Celsius during the day and two degrees at night.

“Well,” says Jeannes with a laugh, “it was summer, so it was warm.”

When asked whether she carried any special equipment for cruising in the ice, she smiles and answers, “Just good socks!”

