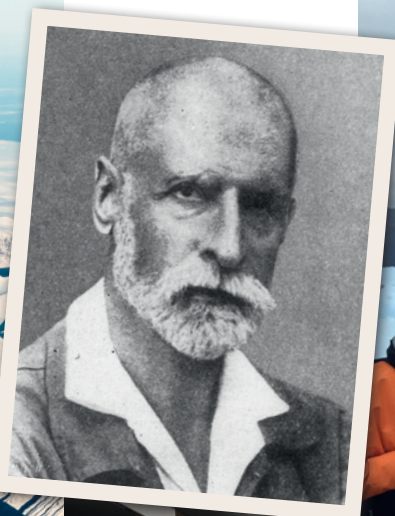




“The most fascinating thing was the immensity of the landscape”

Built to combine scientific exploration with all the comforts of a superyacht, ice-breaking *Yersin* was born to go north. Owner François Fiat and Captain Jean Dumarais tell *Sophia Wilson* about the boat’s thrilling first foray into the Arctic Circle





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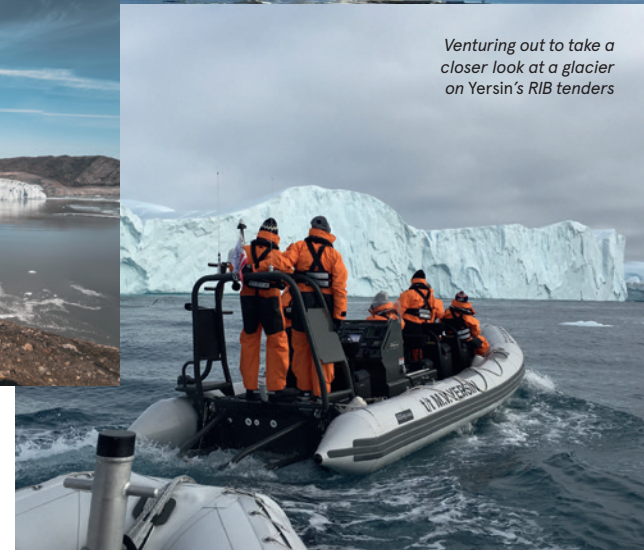
Ice-Classed Yersin was built to undergo challenging expeditions while offering a high level of comfort



Above left: the Swiss-French bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin, after whom the yacht was named. Right: despite not being a scientific expedition, the trip involved some fact-finding about whales in Iceland, among other natural studies. Left and below: Yersin's owner, François Fiat, set out to "test" the vessel in the Arctic Circle



Venturing out to take a closer look at a glacier on Yersin's RIB tenders



Above: the team visited Egi Glacier, one of Greenland's largest glaciers, where polar explorer Paul-Émile Victor constructed a cabin to use as a base in the 1950s (far right)



When 76.6-metre Yersin hit the water back in 2015, it marked a momentous shift in the world of expedition yachts. Not only had the boat, named after 19th-century physician and bacteriologist Alexandre Yersin, been designed to explore the globe, she had also been created to protect it as one of the world's only sustainable, clean and green vessels. Her vast autonomous range, Ice-Class hull and sustainable credentials were well documented at the time but last year she finally got to flex her exploration muscles on her debut adventure to the Arctic Circle. "I wanted to test the vessel," says François Fiat, who devised and owns Yersin. "She was conceived specifically for these regions." As tests go it was

fairly extreme, with the yacht visiting Iceland and Greenland before crossing Baffin Bay and cruising down Baffin Island and on through Labrador, Newfoundland, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. At her helm during the voyage was Captain Jean Dumarais who, having been involved in the yacht's construction, was equally keen to test her capabilities. "It was preparation for future trips over there," he explains. "The crew are not on board for the glitz and glamour of the Med. They want to go exploring." The yacht first headed north at the end of July, stopping in Iceland, before making her way to Greenland's west coast. After clearing in Nuuk, Yersin headed to Ilulissat, which is home to the Jakobshavn Glacier. "It is one of the most productive glaciers in Greenland, which makes

the largest amount of ice," says Captain Dumarais. "Most of the icebergs that you meet are coming from that glacier." At approximately 65 kilometres long and two kilometres thick, it's famous for being the source of the iceberg that caused the Titanic to sink. As the yacht cruised further north, it also visited Egi Glacier, which is accessible only by boat and was one of the captain's highlights. "Polar explorer Paul-Émile Victor had a base there when he did his crossing of Greenland and you still find little houses attached to the rock. It is amazing that they are still there in this polar region so many years after he visited," he says. Fiat was equally entranced by Greenland's northern territories. "The most fascinating thing for me was the immensity of the landscape," he says. "We saw the ice caps from the sea and watched glaciers fall into the water. The air is very crisp and clear." The pure air quality actually

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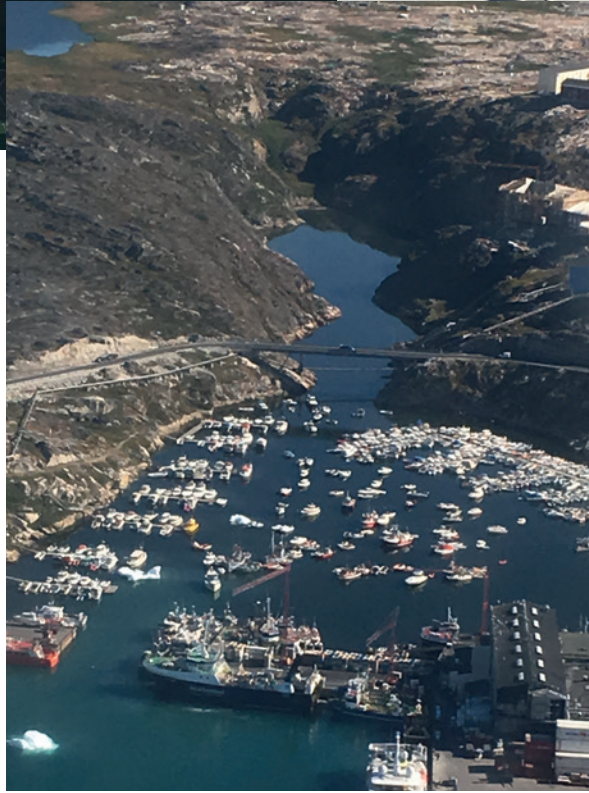
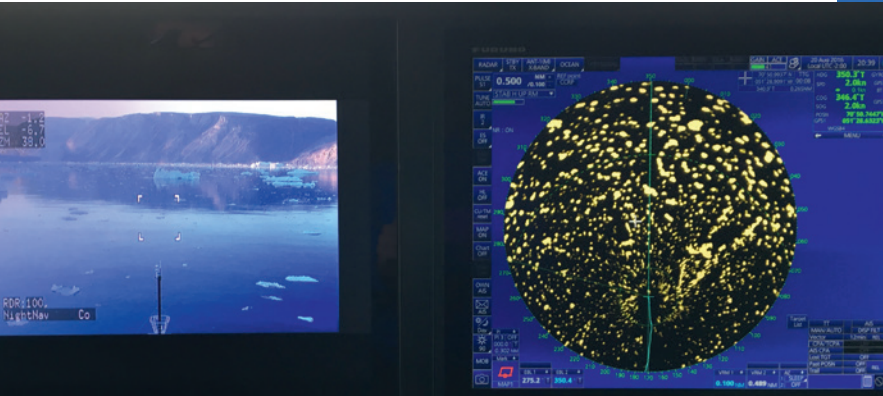
created an unforeseen issue for Captain Dumarais as it became increasingly hard to judge the distances to the shore. "Looking at the glacier it seems that it is near, but when you check it on a radar it is much further away than it appears," he explains. "You have to verify the distance before you go over there in a tender, especially in ice-covered water. Otherwise it can take a very long time." As well as its stunning natural credentials, the trip also provided a fascinating insight into remote communities. "There are two or three main cities but after you head north there are only a few houses and a few dogs," says Dumarais. "The towns have roads, but they stop at the end of each town, so [people] have to take a boat to visit other settlements." The trip made Dumarais

aware of the uncertain future that these traditional set-ups face. "You can see the movement of the population; a lot of people have moved to the major cities leaving only a few people in the villages. You will see a village with 20 houses and probably 15 of them are now uninhabited. It makes you realise just how fragile this equilibrium is," he adds. From Greenland's Uummannaq, Yersin crossed Baffin Bay to Baffin Island, the largest island in Canada and the fifth-largest island in the world. This stretch of coast proved to be one of the best destinations for spotting sea life and polar bears. On this trip they chose not to have a naturalist on board to help them find bears, but they still had success. "We saw five, including a couple of cubs," says Dumarais. "They definitely see you more than you see them, though. As they are white-on-white it is very difficult to spot them." One of the key parts of Yersin's design is her polyvalent room on the main deck, which can be





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Above right: French explorer Paul-Émile Victor (centre), who first traversed Greenland in 1934. Below: the town of Uummannaq in Greenland

used as a laboratory, media room or classroom as required. Even though this trip was not specifically for scientific purposes, scientists and television reporters did come on board for parts of the adventure. “We did some on-site fact-finding research,” explains Fiat. “In Iceland, we [studied] whales. In Greenland, we surveyed the formation of ice and glaciers falling in the fjords. In Nova Scotia, where the currents are very strong, we studied scallops with the scientists from the National Museum of Natural History in Paris.”

One of the biggest challenges of the voyage was that so much of the route was uncharted. “No map is available – land maps do exist, but it’s not possible to know where the seabed is or how deep the water is beneath the vessel. It could be 10 metres or 500 metres,” says Fiat. To ensure the route was safe, *Yersin* used sonar and sent the tenders in front to navigate. “We had to cruise slowly and make our own map,” adds Fiat. “When we were unfortunate enough to encounter fog, we had no other choice than to stop, which was quite distressing.”

The lack of charted maps was particularly perilous as the yacht cruised south from Baffin through the remote region of Labrador. “The area is not charted; it’s just a blank page,” recalls Dumarais. “It is treacherous because you can find rocks 50 miles [80 kilometres] offshore.” The yacht used the trip to help plot a safe route for

future visitors. “Vessels that go to Labrador make their own way and record their route and send it to the team that creates charts, who will then list the vessel’s route as a new route on the map. Our voyage is now charted,” explains Fiat.

During its time in Labrador the yacht went for periods of longer than a week without seeing any other boats or humans. “In Greenland you can find some villages but in Labrador there is no one,” says Dumarais. Labrador also saw the yacht face some of the most challenging weather conditions. “We had good weather for most of the trip but of course we had a storm as well. If you are visiting this area you expect this,” he says. “We had to hide in a bay and protect ourselves. We were fine but I lost all my instruments because the winds were over 100 knots an hour.”

With such a remote cruising route, provisioning was also one of the biggest considerations that had to be factored in. “The



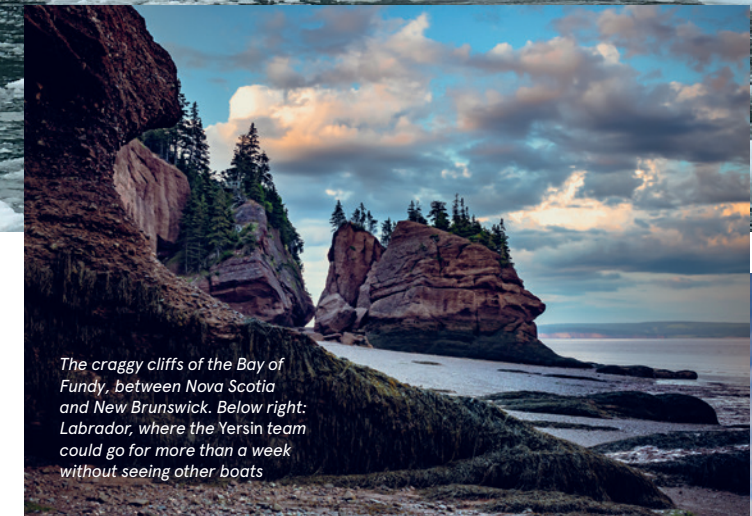
preparations and storage start way before the trip. You have to be very organised,” says Dumarais. “Once you are further north you won’t find anything; you are happy if you find 10 apples.” The crew were able to catch some cod en route, which they used to cook fish and chips, and also purchased some halibut in Greenland. “We made a local dish from the South of France. It was quite amazing to have a glass of wine and that type of food so far from home,” says Dumarais. During the trip they were also able to have some meals on the sundeck using the yacht’s teppanyaki hot plate. “These are some of the best memories, when you are able to eat something

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unique in a place where you wouldn’t normally think it was possible,” he adds.

As autumn approached, the yacht continued to make her way south, including a stop in the Bay of Fundy, which is famed for having the highest tide in the world. As the seasons changed, those on board were fortunate enough to see the Northern Lights frequently. “We saw splendid aurora borealis,” says Fiat. “We were there in September, and from 10pm to 5am or 6am; the auroras constantly move above your head. It is not a rare phenomenon at all.” After making it as far south as Nova Scotia, *Yersin* crossed to Bermuda before returning to her native South of France.

So, did *Yersin* pass the test? According to her owner, yes – with flying colours. “*Yersin* is perfectly equipped and she reacted very well, as anticipated. To make this kind of trip you need an appropriate vessel; I know of only one, and that is *Yersin*,” he says. For Fiat, it is her combination of robustness and luxury that make her perfect for such a voyage. “Of course, there are many ice breakers out there, but without comfort on board. It is lovely to return after an expedition and enjoy a sauna, relax in a nice [suite], watch a movie and dine on sophisticated cuisine,” he adds.



The craggy cliffs of the Bay of Fundy, between Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Below right: Labrador, where the *Yersin* team could go for more than a week without seeing other boats

Captain Dumarais agrees that there is no other yacht he would rather take to this part of the world. “If you have a boat as silent as ours, you can cruise along like you are visiting the place on a magic carpet. You can barely see a wake on the back of the boat,” he says. “It was breathtaking.”

This trip is clearly just the beginning of *Yersin*’s adventures and Fiat has even more ambitious plans for her in the future. “My dream trip would be the Northwest or Northeast Passage,” he reveals. “We stopped on its doorstep and it should be feasible as *Yersin* has all the capabilities to explore this route.”

Yersin is for sale (for the first time since she was built) with Fraser for €79.5 million, fraseryachts.com; yachtsales@fraseryachts.com

