

THE SENSIBLE WAY HOME

From Halifax to Our New Home in Sitka

By Erik de Jong and Krystina Scheller, Bras d'Or Station

Walrus males fighting it out at Philpot Island.



Early May 2015 arrives and there is still snow on the ground in Halifax, Nova Scotia, as *Bagheera* and her crew prepare for the 8,000-mile journey to Sitka, Alaska. Since we love the Arctic, the most sensible way to get to our new homeport is via Greenland and the Northwest Passage. The weather is looking favorable for the first few days of our 1,200-mile passage to Nuuk, Greenland, but the ice edge north of Newfoundland is still a couple of hundred miles wide. This means that we have to make a 400-mile detour up the east coast of Newfoundland to avoid the sea ice and reduce our risk of encountering large icebergs. We have a nice downwind run for the first 36 hours and then a 25 to 30-knot beam reach, with slightly uncomfortable waves. One of the crewmembers becomes incredibly sea sick and asks us to stop in St. John's, Newfoundland so that he can fly home. From his viewpoint, the trip is a success and he thanks Erik for saving him from spending a lot of money getting his 40-foot cruiser ready for offshore sailing.

Sailing north from St. John's, we enjoy some glorious but cold days, until the wind starts to increase. At first, the wind stabilizes at 30-knots, but after a few hours, it continues to build. It is not the most ideal course, nor the safest, as both the wind and seas are coming beam-on, but it remains manageable and the waves do not throw us around too badly. The seas remain regular as the wind stabilizes in the low 50s, and *Bagheera* settles into an 'enjoyable' speed at 9 knots. Erik is standing watch under the hard dodger when a massive wave appears to windward. There is just enough time for him to call out to the crew to take cover before *Bagheera* heels over on the flank of the wave. Everything is covered in white water as the wave breaks right on top of us and the boat rolls over with her mast well underwater. It takes only seconds to come upright again and the movement is so elegant that one of the crewmembers sleeps right through it. Luckily no one gets hurt and there is no damage, but the

We are early in the "summer season" and some fjords in western Greenland are still frozen solid.



Bagheera pushing through 10/10th brash ice as seen from Snow Dragon II



Our 8,000-mile track over the 6 months from May to October, 2015

chaos inside is incredible. None of us would have been able to guess how much mess olive oil, flower, rice, pasta, sugar, salt, hot sauce, vinegar and maple syrup can create when mixed on the cabin floor. There is no doubt that *Bagheera* should leave the cooking up to her crew.

We arrive in Nuuk early in the morning, while the town is still fast asleep. The falling snow covering *Bagheera's* deck inspires Erik to get out his skis and make the five-hour hike up the mountain behind Nuuk, before starting on the long list of boat tasks that we had not managed to finish before leaving Halifax. By the time we leave, two weeks later, nonskid is added to the deck, the anchor chain is re-marked, a new heater loop installed, new seals on windows and hatches and a new fuel filter system for heater and engine are in place.

July comes and we have made it to Disko Bay where *Bagheera* is joined by *Snow Dragon II*, a Koopmans 49. They are coming from Halifax as well, but due to other obligations, they could only leave a month later than *Bagheera*. For the rest of the season, the boats will sail

together and Krystina, Erik's girlfriend and co-skipper of *Snow Dragon II*, will split her time between the two boats, even swapping boats mid ocean as conditions and crew allow.

Thousands of small, medium and large icebergs fill the waters of Disko Bay, but leave enough room for navigation between them. The weather is perfect, with the usual summer presence of the permanent high-pressure system providing warm, sunny days and no wind. A few miles out of Ilulissat, we encounter a humpback whale that is bottom feeding. The whale shows no interest in us, or the fishing boats sailing in and out of the harbour. The show continues for hours, and at one point, the whale comes close and dives at the last moment so that it looks like he will not be able to miss the keel. But he does.

The next morning, just a few miles out of Rodebaai, we encounter an enormous arch iceberg. The hole in the berg is at least 100 feet high and 150 feet wide. We have never seen an iceberg with an arch large enough to sail through—if bergs were not so unstable.

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2,200 miles of downwind sailing in the Arctic—in my 33 years at sea, I have never experienced this!

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The freshly fallen snow is very inviting for a ski trip in the mountains around Nuuk.



The many cracks in the berg suggest that it will collapse at any moment. After a few hours of waiting, our patience pays off, and a couple of hundred tons of ice falls off the arch into the basin underneath.

A year ago, the Equip Sermia Glacier was very active, with huge pieces of ice falling off its nearly 2½ mile long cliff face. This year, the temperatures are lower and the glacier seems less active. As we float around in the nearby brash ice, enjoying a pancake meal, we have to watch carefully not to miss the small bits calving almost silently into the water. With not a breath of wind, conditions are perfect to attempt

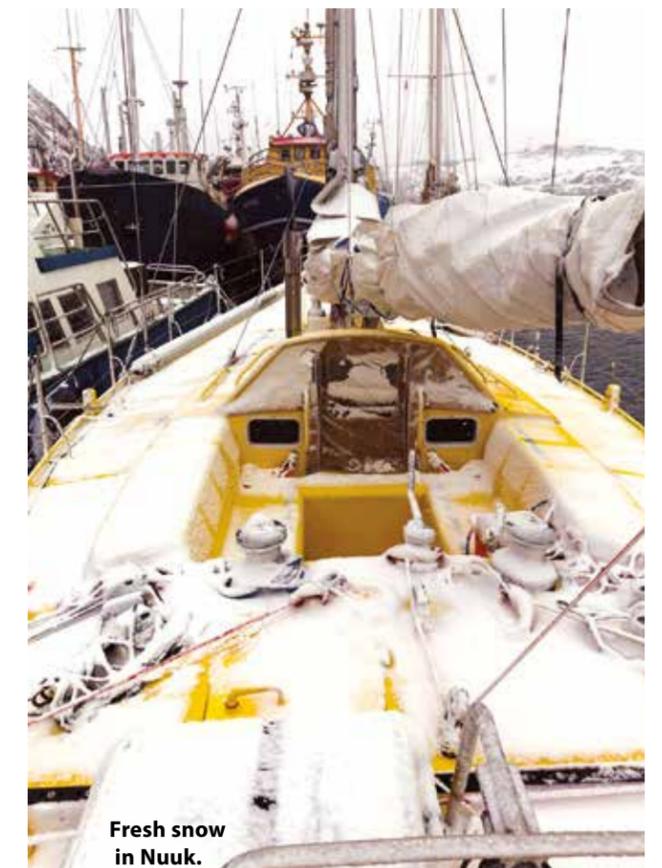
an alternate route to Vaigat. Worst case we have to turn around and go through the traditional route recommended by the pilot books. North we go—the objective is to pass through a string of islands that are uncharted, and only roughly described in the pilot. When we approach the chain, it is chock-full of brash ice and bergy bits. Sea ice cover is expressed as a ratio between ice and water and in this case, we carefully avoid the biggest blocks and push our way through 10/10th ice. Bergy bits might not be full size icebergs but they are still a hazard to navigation, even in calm weather, and they force us in a direction that brings

us closer to an island than we would like to be. There is only four feet under the keel and we have to be careful not to hit any of the underwater boulders that are common here. The water continues to get shallower and the remaining couple of inches under the keel disappear and *Bagheera* briefly drags through the mud. We find ourselves in open water but it is not long before we are back in 10/10th brash ice. Except for right behind the boat, we do not see any water around us for the next eight miles—that is how compressed the ice cover is. It is late in the evening when we approach a couple of known anchorages, but they are

full of icebergs and we have to look elsewhere. The chart shows a little bay off a river valley, it is not described in any book we have onboard, but the anchoring conditions prove to be perfect, and the river current keeps the ice away from us for the night.

A few weeks of enjoyable sailing follow and the only downside is that there is absolutely no wind whatsoever. The average wind speed in west Greenland is extremely low in the summer, but the complete lack of sailable conditions is something none of us have seen before. Both the air and water temperatures are unusually high and on one of the hot days we give in to the temptation and take showers under a waterfall.

Upernavik is usually the most northerly stop in Greenland for boats attempting to transit the Northwest Passage, but we want to go further to the Kane Basin. We have another five weeks before the passage opens up, and north Greenland has a lot to offer. We arrive in Kullorsuaq, where one of the locals gives us a demonstration of the traditional narwhal hunt with a lot of gestures and sounds, as the only language he speaks is Greenlandic. When he is done showing how his tools work, he comes aboard with some of his friends and family and plays the guitar and sings us Greenlandic songs. It is a fantastic show and as a thank you, we give him a harmonica. His eyes are wet with tears when he accepts it and his granddaughter explains to us that his great grandmother once received a harmonica from a whaling boat that stopped by over a hundred years ago. It was played for generations by his family, but got damaged over time and does not make any reasonable sound anymore. Now their tradition can be continued and to celebrate, he plays a few tunes.



Fresh snow in Nuuk.



Calving iceberg in Disko Bay.

“ We have never seen an iceberg with an arch large enough to sail through—if only bergs were not so unstable. The many cracks in the berg suggest that it will collapse at any moment. After a few hours of waiting, our patience pays off, and a couple of hundred tons of ice falls off the arch into the basin underneath. ”

Melville Bay is an experience on its own. We cross this part of Baffin Bay with the company of *Salty*, a Bruce Roberts 65' and *Snow Dragon*. It has been flat calm for weeks and there is no swell rippling the mirror calm water. The closest land is 60 miles away and when dinnertime comes, we make the mutual decision to turn our engines off, hang fenders out and tie the boats together and have a three-course meal with the crews of all three boats. Some frivolity follows after dinner, when a few of us go standup paddle boarding while others jump in the icy water for a polar plunge at 75° N.

While passing Cape Alexander, the most western point of both Greenland and Europe, we see ice glare on the western horizon. This means that the ice edge is only five to six miles away from us. Littleton Island appears to be the bottleneck and if we want to anchor for the

night, we have no choice but to go a few miles south to Etah. Many polar expeditions in the old days used Etah as a basecamp, as it is one of the few somewhat protected places in the area. However, it is not a great place to anchor, the water is either too deep or too shallow and it is the windiest place in the Northern Hemisphere, according to our pilot.

We try all the anchoring locations described, but none of them were viable because of ice floes or wind direction. Eventually we find ourselves an anchorage on a ridge in the middle of the bay. After a few hours of sleep, we wake to find the bay slowly filling with ice. We pull anchor and head out of the fjord only to discover that our exit is blocked by an enormous sheet of sea ice stretching across the mouth of the fjord. The presence of the ice sheet greatly improved our mooring situation

at Etah. Erik jumps onto the ice with his ax to create a little channel so that we can anchor to the ice sheet. Once *Bagheera* is secured, he walks a few boat lengths along the edge of the ice, chops out another hole so that *Snow Dragon* can moor there in the same fashion and then does the same for *Salty*. With three boats moored to the ice edge, we christened it the “Etah Marina”—complete with being able to step off the side of the boat onto the ice and go for a walk, visit the neighbours or just enjoy the arctic experience. Instead of paying harbor dues, we each took turns keeping watch on the ice and the polar bears hunting seals in the distance. We might have spent a couple more days at Etah than we had intended, but it ended up being the most enjoyable place we stayed this season in the Arctic.

In the mean time, we work on an escape plan in case the ice sheet breaks up and drifts further into the fjord. The first matter of business is generating a map of all the channels and islands in the area, as this fjord is not charted. We create this map the old fashioned way with the dinghy and a lead line. On each incoming and outgoing tide, we watch how the ice is behaving. In one of the channels it breaks up and we manage to sneak out at 1 a.m. on our third day there. Hours later, having negotiated very dense ice, we are forced to give up and try to make our way back to the safety of the ice marina. This turns out to be difficult as a separate ice sheet is forcing us to go closer to shore where the ice is much denser. Before entering the channel, Erik climbs the mast to see from a higher position how the ice has moved. There appears to be a large and fairly wide channel further to the west that reaches as far as the eye can see. It does not take long to make up our minds, the ice

edge could not be more than ten miles away, and the open water is just past Cape Alexander. This works well, we make it out in a couple of hours, and the rest of the sail south is very easy.

From Greenland we cross over to Ellesmere Island and anchor at Craig's Harbour, on the southeastern point of the island, as the rest is still fully covered in sea ice. It is only late July and the ice melt is not halfway completed yet and this area is one of the last to open up. The wind is picking up from the south and becomes very strong, forcing us to leave our anchorage and head for the protection of Coburg Island, in 40-knot headwinds. We make it to the southern anchorage and have a relatively peaceful dinner. Once the dishes are done, the wind starts hauling off the mountain. One gust after the other is released on the boat throughout the night. The weather forecast predicts 50+ knots of wind to the south of us, so we decide to stay here a bit longer and wait for the gale to pass. The wind has calmed down by morning and we head for shore, where we find traces from various expeditions. Our imagination goes wild over why certain items were abandoned on the beach. The wind is picking up again, and we are now on a lee shore. We pull anchor and motor over to the other side of the bay and re-anchor. The wind continues to increase, and by late afternoon, we have gusts falling off the mountain that makes the boat heel 30 degrees even while at anchor. The wind is slowly changing direction, and the swell in the bay is building up to 7 feet. With a pebble beach only a few yards away from our transom, this anchorage is no longer sustainable. We pull anchor and head for an uncharted and unnamed bay next to Raper Point. Here we find complete protection from the wind and sea.



A close encounter with a Humpback whale.

Curious polar bear is checking us out in Victoria Strait.



Polar bear drying his fur by freezing it on the ice so he can shake it off more easily.



Before entering Lancaster Sound, we stop at Philpots Island where we find a herd of walrus congregating on shore. One of our crew takes a rifle and scouts ahead to see if we can take a more direct route back, but he rapidly returns with a polar bear in tow. We shoot off a few warning shots but the bear has spent its life around calving glaciers and icebergs and is not shaken by the sound. Surprisingly, the bear does not seem interested in us, just a bit curious as to what has disturbed its sleep. With one person keeping an eye on the bear at all times, we make our way back to our dinghy without the bear following us.

Once we reach Devon Island in Lancaster Sound, the weather becomes more stable as the Arctic high pressure is doing its work to keep the wind down and the clouds away. We make it to Resolute in day trips, allowing us the luxury of some nice walks on shore.

The NW Passage can roughly be undertaken in seven different routes, most of which are ice-free for a period every year. Since we want to take our time and see something of the country, we head out of Resolute as soon as we have cleared customs, fuelled and picked up our new crewmembers. The only two routes that are open at the time of departure are Peel Sound and Prince Regent Inlet. The first one is roughly 120 miles shorter which means less sailing (read: motoring) and that is our preference. For us, any hour saved is an extra hour on shore. We sail through the night and experience our first night since

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May that the sun disappears below the horizon. Frost builds up on deck and in the rigging during the night and falls off in clumps with the morning sun. Ice charts are refreshed once a day and we receive one while we are passing Bellot Strait that shows the ice south of us is still too dense and the wind is pushing it against the shore. It is time to find an anchorage and await the movement of the ice. Only 24 hours later, almost half of the ice in the Franklin strait has disappeared and we continue south in light sailing conditions. Another 24 hours show us that the 10/10 ice cover in Victoria Strait has diminished and now varies between 3/10 and 8/10 with quite a few large patches of open water in between. If melting continues at this rate, we can easily go through Victoria Strait, and save ourselves the 150 miles extra distance that it would take to sail via Gjoa Haven. *Maia B*, another boat of friends has joined our small group, and we sail through Victoria Strait with four boats. Usually ice charts are not all that accurate, but this time it seems to be quite close to reality. We regularly find large patches of sea ice. Some bands can be sailed around; others we have to do some serious pushing to get through.

Sea ice is the hunting ground for polar bears, and during our adventures in Victoria Strait, we see several bears. On some occasions a bear is curious and comes up to the boat to have a look at the creatures invading his territory. That is safe given that you keep some open water between the two. The concentration of ice gets denser and more frequent as we move south. The last band of roughly 8/10 multi-year ice extends for half a mile and stops *Maia B*. *Salty* and *Snow Dragon* stand by, while we turn back to assist *Maia B*. It is the first time that we have used

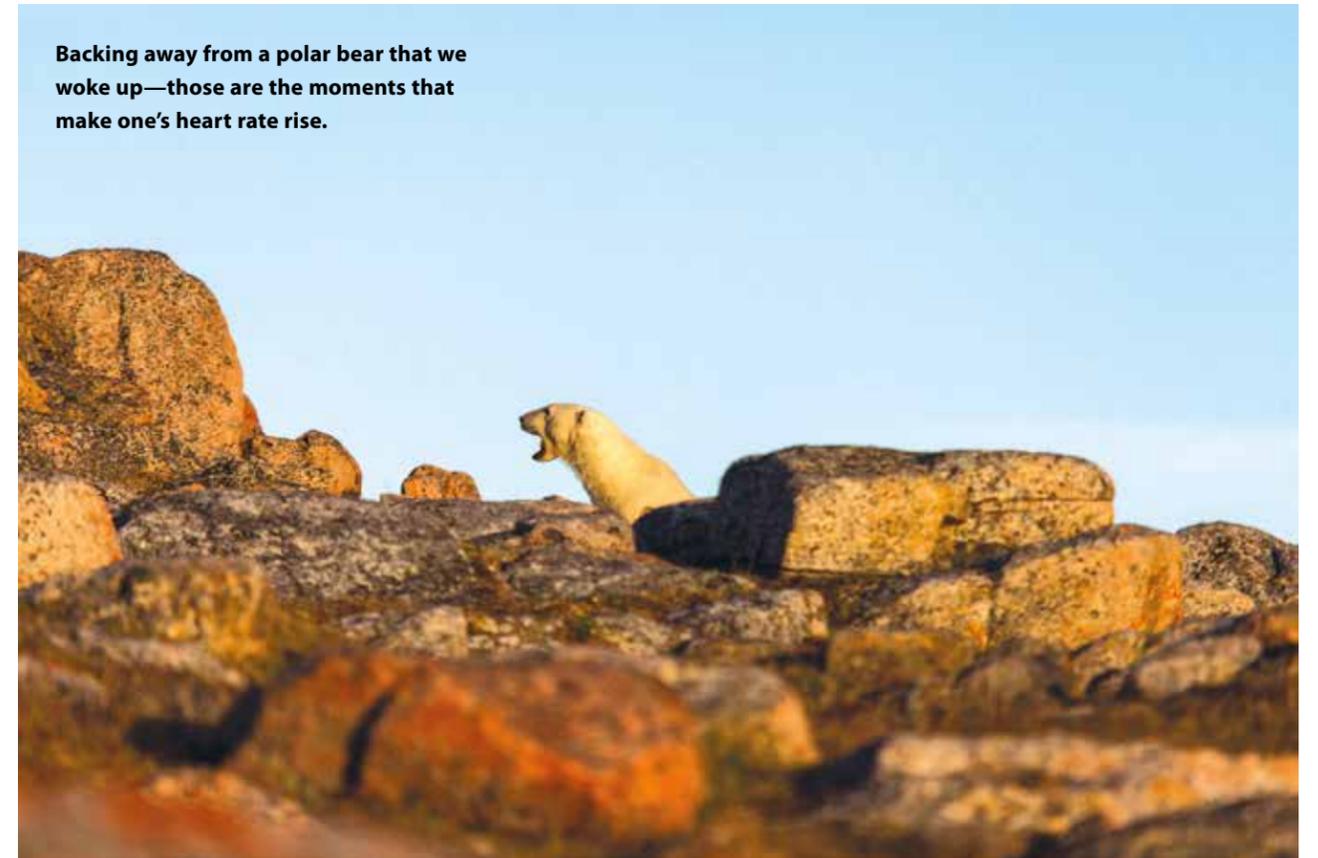
Bagheera to extract another boat out of the ice and it is vital that we approach carefully so as not to damage their hull from the ice that *Bagheera* is breaking and pushing. We manage to manoeuvre in front of them and push a substantial block of sea ice out of the way. With *Maia B* now behind us, we continue through the ice creating a new channel for them to exit the ice and rejoin the others.

Once we reach Jenny Lind Island, the ice for the rest of the passage is behind us. We make more stops on the way and enjoy the landscape. Wildlife is sparse, but beautiful. Wind is consistent and weak. When we are almost in the Amundsen Gulf, we get a weather forecast for strong head winds. Since we are not in a hurry, we stay at an anchorage on the south shore while we wait for favorable winds. The plan is to go to Banks Island, the most western Island of Arctic Canada and the home to 75 percent of the world's musk ox. The wind is favorable to get there, but not to anchor. Since we still have 1,400 miles until Nome and practically no shelter in between, we decide to keep going.

In Nome, Erik's crewmember suddenly has to fly home after learning that his house has been struck by lightning. It is mid-September and Erik does not have the luxury to wait and arrange for another crewmember to join him before the winter storms arrive. Instead he singlehands the Bering Sea nonstop, from Nome to Dutch Harbor, and then again to Kodiak with only a few stops along the way. From Kodiak to Sitka, Erik is rejoined by Krystina for the last crossing of the season.

It is early October and we depart Kodiak on the tail end of a low and make the 565-mile crossing to Sitka just as the next storm starts pounding the Gulf of Alaska. It is the middle of the night and though

Backing away from a polar bear that we woke up—those are the moments that make one's heart rate rise.



Finding our way through the Upernavik Icefjord.



we could anchor off the house we bought in the spring, we have never been there by boat and there are a lot of navigational hazards. Instead of taking the risk, we anchor on a mudflat just off the town harbor. While we eat our midnight arrival breakfast, we reflect on our summer in the Arctic.

The Northwest Passage is fascinating, but also disappointing in some ways. It is a passage of mythical proportions, but after many years of cruising the north, we must say that the NWP itself is one of the

least challenging Arctic cruising grounds that we have sailed. The charting is quite detailed and accurate and weather and ice reports are frequently updated and mainly reliable—unlike north and east Greenland and the northern islands of Canada, where the weather is very unpredictable with a lot of local effects, ice reports are not often updated, and navigational charts are pour at best.

To our surprise, the most difficult part of the NWP, is dealing with “online stalkers.” Both of us have made more challenging trips and never before experienced harassment by know-it-all armchair sailors that have never been to the Arctic on their own boats. Our every move was watched, analyzed and criticized. One of them even made public announcements that we were in great danger and needed to be rescued by an icebreaker while we were actually having the time of our lives in Etah. Another thought we were crazy to go through Victoria Strait when he felt we should be making a pilgrimage to Gjoa Haven instead. Then a few weeks later, one of the “stalkers” notified the Coast Guard on behalf of friends of ours because he could see from their online tracker that they made a 90 degree course change, and took it as a sign that the vessel was in distress when all they were doing was heading into an anchorage. Luckily the Coast Guard did not take him seriously. Unfortunately, this is not the first year this has

Three boats moored against the ice just outside of "Etah Marina."



happened to boats transiting the NWP and some have even turned around thanks to bad advice from “online experts.” Luckily, for us, we have the experience to not let outsiders create panic, but not everyone going through the passage will realize the potential harm that interference from behind a computer far away from the Arctic can cause.

We do not have more time to reflect, the sun is up and we are eager to move the 2½-miles to Thimbleberry Bay and get the boats settled for the winter. It is blowing 30 knots as we drop anchor in the middle of the bay. Eventually we will move closer to shore so we can

med-tie *Bagheera* and *Snow Dragon* side by side, but first we have to remove the rotten wooden dock that came with our house. At high tide we float the dock onto the beach and over the course of several days we dismantle it with a sledgehammer, ax and a saw. One day, we will put in a new dock but for the moment we have our hands full finishing the house and our never-ending list of boat tasks. Of course our most important project is planning our next sailing adventure, the housework might have to wait. ☺



ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Krystina Scheller sailed the first three years of her life in the South Pacific with her parents, and did not get back into ocean sailing until 2006, when she started co-skippering Snow Dragon II in the vessel's home waters of Alaska. Since then, she has sailed extensively in the Arctic including Svalbard, Greenland and Arctic Canada. Though she did take a brief break from the Arctic in 2010 and ventured into warmer waters by sailing direct from Greenland to the Azores and then into the Mediterranean and Black Sea.

Erik de Jong started sailing as an infant as well, and has been sailing all his life. His parents have a 46-foot aluminum ketch, and Erik grew up sailing to the European waters of the far north. Erik designed Bagheera himself, and built her from scratch with help from his father, all with northern waters in mind.

Erik and Krystina met each other in Greenland, and quickly came up

with a plan to merge their lives together. They decided to partner with Frances Brann, the owner of Snow Dragon II and finding a home base for the boats and crews. A waterfront property in Sitka, Alaska was purchased, and a Northwest Passage was planned to bring the boats from Eastern Canada to Alaska.

The 2015/2016 winter will be used to upgrade the property so that the house can be rented in the summer season. The basement of the house will be converted into a sail loft and the large garage will be made into a workshop to make repair projects for both Snow Dragon II and Bagheera easier and more efficient. The immediate sailing plan is to do some ski and sail trips in early spring, followed by a cruise of the South Coast of Alaska.

Bagheera will be used for Arctic chartering, and will continue to do so with Sitka as her base for the foreseeable future.