

# Arctic Passage: Sailing the Edge of Alaska – Part I

by [Ben Spiess](#) | Nov 7, 2022 | [Adventure](#), [Cover Story](#), [Sailing](#)

The Polar Sun, a 47-foot cutter-rigged, bluewater sail boat

I got a call from my old friend Mark Synnott in late August. Mark was in the middle of sailing the Arctic Northwest Passage from Maine through to Nome.

Could I join him in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories in a week? He needed crew for the last leg of his voyage – from Northwest Territories to Nome. I hedged. Busy at work, I said. He persisted in a text: “It’s gonna be epic.”

I’ve lived in Alaska for awhile. But, the Northwest Territories? It’s the most-deserted part of a lonely region. And Tuktoyaktuk? Never even heard of it.

Mark Synnott

Mark is a sponsored North Face athlete with a deserved reputation for stellar mountaineering feats and well-executed expeditions all over the globe. He’s turned to the sea in recent years, and his Northwest Passage expedition proved a magnet for big sponsors.

He sailed from Portland, Maine in June. National Geographic, Disney, and his book publisher were all on board. The 47-foot Polar Sun – a cutter-rigged, bluewater sail boat – had been re-fit for the Arctic. Renan Ozturk, another famous climber and photographer joined. North Sails donated a custom suit of red sails. The boat was stuffed with sponsored clothing and food – everything from vitamins and energy drinks to free sweaters from a company in Norway. Mark’s reputation for success coupled with a combined on-board Instagram following in excess of 1 million proved persuasive.

A confirmed Instagram-addict, I’d followed the Polar Sun north to Greenland then west into the maze of island and ice which is the heart of the Northwest Passage. Posts from Mark and Renan were a panoply of ice, smiles, blue sky and sunshine coupled with wry tales of life aboard.

Ben Zartman, first mate

In mid-August, the mood changed.

At the crux of the Passage, the ice trapped the Polar Sun for 10 harrowing days in Pasley Bay. A 47-foot boat is a solid thing underfoot, but it's a bath toy in the ice. They were pushed on shore, grounded, flexed between ice floes, lost (then recovered) an anchor, and very nearly wrecked. Mark was scheming to freeze the boat in place for the winter when the ice relaxed and they escaped, firing the engine through an open lead and dragging the keel across the bottom into deep water.

A few days later in Cambridge Bay, two crew abruptly left and flew south. Mark and Ben Zartman – his sole remaining crew – explored stopping then and there.

Dave Thoreson, Northwest Passage veteran

It could work – they could weld together a cradle out of scrap steel then haul the boat onto the beach with a front-end loader. Mark spent two days bolting around town trying to piece together a plan. No ramp. Not enough power. No one to look after the boat. Finally, a local offered to buy the boat for \$25,000. Mark could just take the money and leave. No way, Mark said. Stymied, he and Ben plunged westward alone for Tuktoyaktuk.

After leaving Cambridge Bay, Mark canvassed his contacts for two fresh crew to join the boat. From the Northwest Territories to Nome is almost 1,500 miles of open ocean.

I don't know how many calls Mark made, but first and foremost he needed experience. He found it in Dave Thoreson. Dave is a veteran of two Northwest Passage trips and thousands of miles of bluewater sailing. He also happens to be one of the world's fine human beings – direct, sensible, cheerful, and fun. Over the next two weeks, he also proved his ocean experience.

Mark and Dave studying the weather

With Dave committed, Mark needed one more body, preferably a person he knew, and someone with at least some salt-water experience. Meeting the minimum criteria plus being in Alaska already, I got the call. “You can just get a direct flight from Anchorage to Tuk, right?” he asked.

The scale of the Arctic escapes even those who are there.

In a private jet, a trip from Anchorage to Tuktoyaktuk would be a straight shot. In reality, it involves seven flights and 36-hours of travel, capped by a bone-rattling, two-hour taxi ride across the tundra.

Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories

<https://alaskasportsreport.com/2022/11/arctic-passage-sailing-the-edge-of-alaska-part-i/>

By the time Dave and I joined the boat on the dock in Tuktoyaktuk, Mark and Ben were almost 100 days into the voyage. They were all smiles at seeing some fresh faces. But, the fatigue and anxiety was apparent.

At times, a sense of foreboding pervades September in the Arctic – the sky, sea and land are all grey alike. It was late fall with the cold coming down and the pack ice behind.

Mark seemed worn down – by decisions, by the departure of his crew, the ice, the ocean, the increasing cold. There could be no better mate than Ben-Wah. Ben is a professional rigger with deep experience, cooking ability, quirky humor, incisive opinions, and bullet proof optimism. But it was apparent both were ready for some new blood and Polar Sun needed shot of enthusiasm.

The Beaufort Sea

**SAILING SPECIAL: This is the first of a 4-part series written and photographed by Ben Spiess of Anchorage.**