



The world from *On Liberty*

Lucy Dunn discovers how a health challenge opened a world of scientific discovery for a father-and-daughter team on board their 24-metre Outer Reef

Joe Leitch is trying not to let Parkinson's disease stop him. A seasoned sailor, he circumnavigated the globe with his late wife, Cathey, in 2017, upgrading his sailing yachts over the years before his recent diagnosis.

A bad fall eventually convinced him he needed to switch to a motor yacht. "One way Parkinson's takes you out is that you fall; almost broke my neck a couple of times," he chuckles wryly. "For me to be on a boat safely, I realised I had to go for something motorised with stabilisers."

The financier from Charleston, South Carolina, bought his 24.4-metre Outer Reef 820 *On Liberty* in 2021, skipping long delivery times and buying on the brokerage market. "I just didn't have that kind of time, I felt."

The yacht was an instant hit. "You can sit in this boat and feel like you're in your living room... it gives me a real secure feeling," Joe says. *On Liberty's* captain, Tom Ashmore, is also a convert.

"I do like to joke to people that I really like the windscreen wipers and the comfy chair, but it makes passage planning so easy – you know you're going to do 10 knots all day... it's a great tool to get to places."

Given Joe's past globe-trotting, simply puttering up and down the coast of Charleston in his new yacht was never going to satisfy him for long. Last year, Joe and his middle daughter, Amy Leitch, hatched an ambitious plan to put *On Liberty* through her paces and take her to Europe. And rather than ship the boat across the Atlantic and meet her there, Joe posed a bold question: "Why not take her there ourselves?" That way, they could have a bit of an adventure, travelling up to Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, across to Greenland and Iceland and on to the Faroe Islands, before wintering in the UK and touring Scotland and Sweden in the summer of 2025.

In theory, the voyage was doable – but no Outer Reef had ever attempted a transatlantic



PHOTOGRAPHY: ADOBE STOCK, POLAR BLAST, PAIGE MARONI AND TIM MACDONALD



Left: Captain Tom Ashmore with Amy and Joe Leitch, who took *On Liberty* from the US to Europe via Nova Scotia, Newfoundland (below), Greenland (above), Iceland and the Faroe Islands before spending the summer in Scotland (bottom left). Opposite page: *On Liberty* at anchor



crossing under its own power. The design had yet to be proven against the full demands of an open-ocean passage.

Amy recalls initial discussions around a map on the boat's galley table. "We had no idea what it was going to be like on this boat crossing the North Atlantic, but we said, 'Let's just take it one day at a time.' We thought we could always change plans if it's not working."

With a route decided, Captain Ashmore and his partner and first mate, Kelly Parsons, worked to make *On Liberty* as safe and robust as possible, including adding diesel heating and larger anchors. They also took on an ice pilot and another crew member at St John's in Newfoundland to help with the longer passages. "Growlers don't always show up on the radar, so we were constantly searching for them in the fog," Ashmore says. "Having the extra crew was not just helpful, it was absolutely necessary."

We caught up with the group near the end of their Scottish leg – important to Joe, whose family roots are Scottish-Irish. After navigating

Greenland's icy fjords, one might expect Scotland to be a gentler cruise by comparison, but the waters here bring their own demands. "There are some pretty big tidal currents you've

got to take into account," Ashmore says. "And if you get it wrong with the weather, you could end up with a really uncomfortable sea state."

While Joe is more than happy to tough out a rough sea – "If my boat's moving and there's any way I can be on it, I want to be there!" – he and Amy did have to sit out a few of the longer passages. "On some stretches the conditions were pretty intense, and we didn't want to risk putting Dad in a tough spot – or put the crew in a position where they had to worry about him," Amy says.

For this reason, they planned a generous amount of time into their itinerary, allowing them to move at their own pace. "It means you don't have to pressure the crew or the boat into bad conditions. It's about being safe and enjoying the journey – and if the forecast looks bad, we just stop and hunker down," she says.

Amy gave up her job to accompany her dad on the trip, updating her job title on LinkedIn to "expedition chronicler and ordinary crew" and sending long travel blogs to keep family and friends up to date with their voyage. "I'd worked for the same company for 16 years and loved the work," she says. "But when life changes, you realise that time with the people you love is what matters most – and I've had the chance to do that with Dad."

Her choice has inspired friends, especially those who wished to spend time with their parents as adults. "Being able to do something active with Dad and help him undertake this trip is something I'll never forget. My sisters are proud that Dad keeps going," she says. "Hearing his stories about his childhood and our family has been really special too."

Amy and her dad have fallen into a gentle rhythm each day and have enjoyed taking part in planning the voyage.

"We love the freedom to explore that boats allow you," she enthuses. "It's like choosing your own adventure – you pull into these little, tiny communities in the middle of nowhere, or

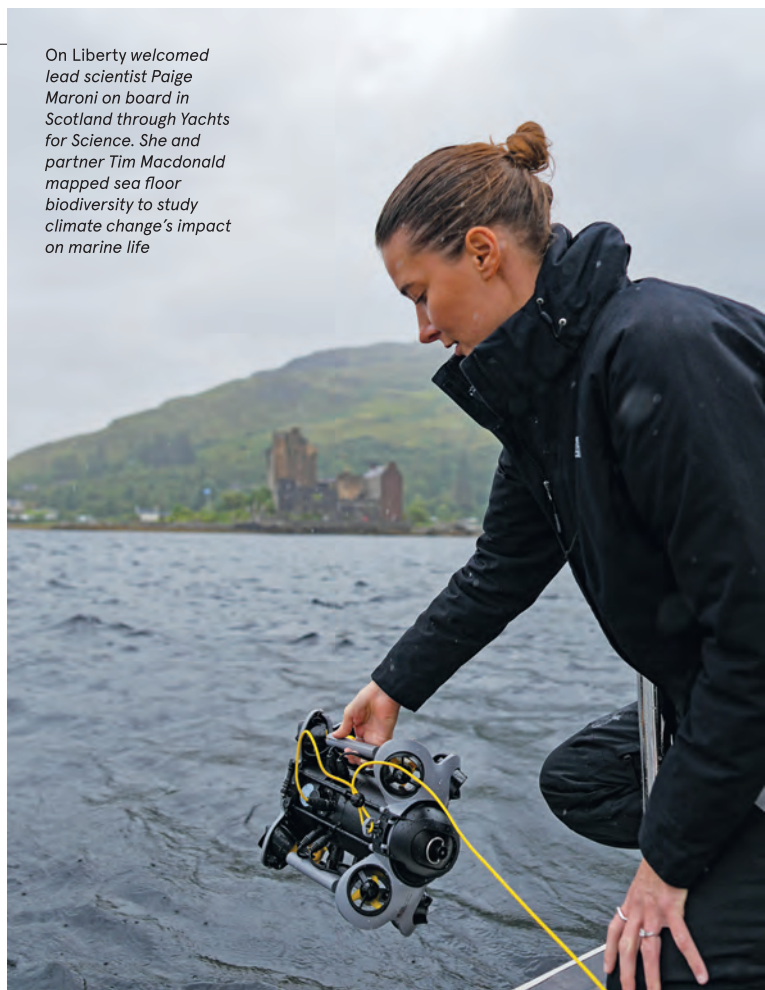
cruise into a big city after you've been gone for a long time. I've loved seeing how life and the landscape changes. We left Charleston with its dolphins, pelicans and palm trees, then we got up to Greenland, and it was all sled dogs, fjords and icebergs. Seeing the continuity of this planet mile by mile is pretty incredible."

Highlights have been plenty, like watching the icebergs in Greenland's Disko Bay: "It's so quiet, and then you hear these booms as the icebergs collapse. Our ice pilot knew of a protected anchorage where we could stop and have lunch, and you could actually hear the icebergs grinding along the ground - the crunching of the gravel even through hundreds of feet of water below, which was really amazing."

Wildlife encounters have also provided a constant sideshow; Joe and Amy have spotted basking sharks, seals teaching their pups to fish and an orca called Old Thom living in the Gulf of Maine, so famous he has his own Wikipedia page. Spending a lot of time on a boat really brings it home that you are living within nature.

While in her cabin one quiet night in Cornwall, Amy began to hear what sounded like music or people chatting. "It seemed loud for a restaurant in such a sleepy little town," she recalls. Curious, she went up on deck to investigate, but all was silent. "I went back down and heard it again... then I realised it was the fish grunting through the hull. I looked them up, and it turns out they make that sound using their swim bladders. It made me laugh to 'sleep with the fishes!'"

On Liberty welcomed lead scientist Paige Maroni on board in Scotland through Yachts for Science. She and partner Tim Macdonald mapped sea floor biodiversity to study climate change's impact on marine life



PHOTOGRAPHY: POLAR BLAST; PAIGE MARONI AND TIM MACDONALD; ADOBE STOCK



The Drangarnir sea stacks in the Faroe Islands. Right: Disko Bay, Greenland. Bottom: Greenland



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The original plan was for *On Liberty* to meander up the Scottish coast for a limited time before pushing through the Caledonian Canal, but then Joe got an offer he couldn't refuse: the chance to host

two scientists on board for a week. The opportunity came through Yachts for Science, an organisation co-founded by *BOAT International* that connects marine researchers with private yacht owners. Instead of waiting years for spots on traditional research vessels, scientists "hitch a ride" on private vessels so they can do their research in exchange for sharing their expertise.

Science mission, and Maroni and colleague Tim Macdonald have got travelling light down to a fine art, bringing only the essentials, including two small Remote Operated Vehicles (ROVs) and a couple of drones to join *On Liberty*. The scientists spent days piloting the ROV, with Joe and Amy watching the screen from the comfort of their cosy saloon. Exploring the depths is something Joe, an avid scuba diver before his diagnosis, has missed, and he jokes that driving the ROV around is "kind of like diving without having to get wet or put on a wetsuit!"

The extra guests have been no trouble, and the scientists have simply slotted into the group's activities. "We generally have a chat every evening before dinner," Ashmore says. Once the scientists explained what they're looking for, "you can look at the chart and see, oh, this looks like an interesting underwater area to explore. But mostly, they just go with whatever we're doing. Sometimes they don't even need the tender and the group can launch their ROV off the back of the boat. *On Liberty* is small enough to squeeze into most anchorages, which has made

For lead scientist Paige Maroni, Scotland is a vital missing link in her wider study of the Arctic and subarctic regions. "Scotland represents a transitional zone between the colder Arctic waters and the more temperate Atlantic system," she tells us. By comparing northern Scotland and farther north, she hopes to map patterns in sea floor biodiversity and start to see what effects climate change is having on marine life. This was not her first Yachts for



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this set-up really convenient,” Ashmore says.

Discoveries have been plenty - from flourishing kelp gardens to huge gatherings of sea pens, organisms that look like feather pens and are vulnerable to rising sea temperatures. One of the most spectacular sightings was of millions of brittle stars, beautiful, spindly long-legged starfish-like creatures, that the group discovered at the bottom of a fjord.

“You just couldn’t see the sea floor for them,” Maroni recalls. “They were even on top of each other, in their dozens; so many it was hard to comprehend what we were watching.” While brittle stars are known to live in Scottish waters,

seeing them in this area and in such numbers was a new discovery for the scientists.

“It’s been pretty cool seeing the kind of stuff you usually see watching David Attenborough on our modest-sized yacht,” Ashmore says. The experience has also proved that you don’t need a 100-metre expedition vessel or a million-dollar submersible to access remote places and witness real-time science.

“We know more about the surface of the moon than we know about our ocean bottom, and I think that the ability to have a PhD scientist on board answer any question you’ve got is amazing,” Joe says. “I’m just happy to be able to help Paige and Tim, and in the process of helping them, I will learn things as well.”

The epic voyage has left *On Liberty*’s owner brimming with renewed energy. “I guess I’ve always had the travel bug,” Joe says. And, after seeing just what the yacht can do, the world has opened up even more.

“Dad’s put it out there that he’s quite keen to see Patagonia and then go on up to Alaska,” Amy laughs, admitting she may need to keep her current LinkedIn profile a little while longer. ■



Maroni (above) and Macdonald (below) found thriving kelp forests, fields of sea pens (bottom) and millions of brittle stars on the fjord floor. Left: Joe and Amy watching live footage from the ROV



EPIC ADVENTURE