

Open Passage

Hong Kong-based *Financial Times* Assistant Editor Cameron Dueck is about to leave the desk to lead the Open Passage Expedition and traverse the Northwest Passage in a 40-foot yacht. He tells **Mathew Scott** why.

Cameron Dueck is not sure what drew him to the sea but he thinks it might have something to do with his childhood. “I’d never been on a boat in my life until I was in my 20s,” explains the Canadian, who grew up on his father’s turkey farm, a few hours’ drive north of Winnipeg and a long way from any substantial body of water.

“But I just fell in love with it when I did. I think maybe it’s because when you are out on the prairies you can see forever and when you’re out at sea it’s a similar thing.”

Dueck started sailing after moving to Chicago, at 21, to start a career in journalism that has taken him through New York, Singapore and, most recently, to the *Financial Times*’ Hong Kong desk.

The 34-year-old is about to put that career on hold, though, as he sets off in early June to chart one of history’s most romanticized stretches of water – the Northwest Passage through the Arctic climes found at the very tip of Canada.

Along the way, Dueck will also trade simply

reporting on the story for becoming part of the story.

Essentially, the Open Passage Expedition is designed to draw further attention to climate change and the effect it is having on our planet. But Dueck is hoping also it will shed light on the lives of the people who dwell in the far reaches of that continent, as well as being a right rollicking sea-faring adventure story into the bargain. He hopes to file reports while away, document the adventure on film, and produce a book when it’s all over and he has returned to Hong Kong.

“Often climate change is talked about in data and even though the numbers are incredible your eyes do start glazing over after a while. It can be hard to get your head around it,” he says. “So I want to show the effects of climate change in very human terms. I’m sure there are some cases where climate change has even made life easier to live for some people too.”

“I want to hear the stories from them, whether it is good or bad stuff. I just want to come back with the story so people can say, ‘So this is what climate change is about. This is the face of climate change.’”

The notion of the voyage first came to Dueck after he’d taken a sabbatical in 2004. He’d sailed from Thailand to Turkey, and spent a summer in France and the United Kingdom picking up his captain’s license. He had also sailed from South Africa to the Caribbean.

“I wanted to do something like that again but I wanted a purpose,” he says. “That was around 2005 and there was a lot of talk about climate change. It was quite clear that the Arctic was a place where these changes are noticeable and measurable.”

The Northwest Passage was one of human history’s last great challenges, remaining uncharted until Norway’s Roald Amundsen fought his way through on the 47-ton *Gjoa* in 1906 after a trip that took three years. There had been numerous tragic attempts before as it was thought the passage would open up new shipping lanes. But you still had to factor in the weather, the sometimes shallow waters, and the ice.

So the irony now is that the very thing Dueck wants to highlight – and thereby help to combat – is also the very thing that is allowing the expedition to take place.

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Open Passage Expedition “Fundraiser Party”, Thursday 2nd April in the Philia Lounge, Arbuthnot Rd, Central. For more information on the fundraiser or on the trip, see www.openpassageexpedition.com

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Climate change has meant the passage is now open during the summer months whereas in the past it was impenetrable.

“Since 1906 only about 35 private yachts have done it and only about 15 to 20 of those have been sailboats,” says Dueck. “It’s becoming more popular every year so I’m not doing something for the first time. Having said that though it’s not like going sailing in the Caribbean, these are pretty extreme conditions.”

Much of the remaining preparation time is being spent on fitting out Dueck’s 40ft yacht *Silent Sound* – which he purchased last year for C\$50,000 – looking for one more crew member to join Dueck, Singapore’s Elaine Chua, a top open sea racer, and the expedition doctor, Tobias Neuberger, who is based in Germany.

There’s also the matter of chasing sponsorship. “It doesn’t fall neatly into any category,” says Dueck. “It’s not an ‘I did it first’ trip. It’s not a scientific expedition. So we are finding our niche and are still talking and looking around.”

For the moment, Dueck is pulling most of the budget out of his own pocket and he admits he probably could not have picked a worse time to walk away from his job anyway, given the state of the world’s economy.

“But if you get an idea like this and you are really passionate about doing it there’s no good time. You just have to do it,” he says.

“What’s the worst thing that’s going to happen to me? I’m pretty sure I’m not going to die. No one has died sailing through there in a long time. So the worst thing that can happen is that my boat sinks. Put that against sitting there and knowing that you never went after your dreams and it’s a no contest.”