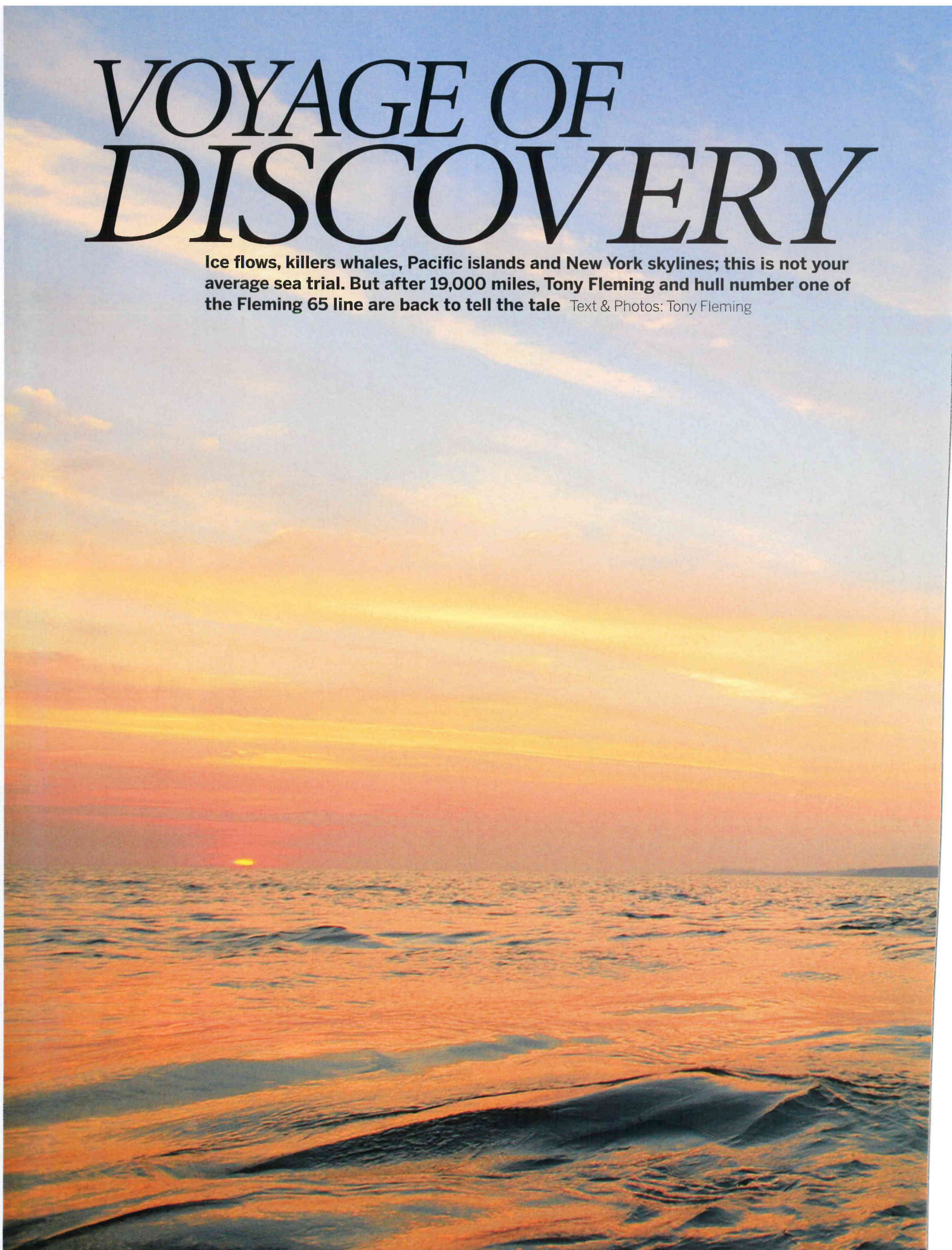


# VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY

**Ice flows, killers whales, Pacific islands and New York skylines; this is not your average sea trial. But after 19,000 miles, Tony Fleming and hull number one of the Fleming 65 line are back to tell the tale** Text & Photos: Tony Fleming





**T**he month is February, the year 2007 and Tony Fleming, the man behind the eponymous range of motor yachts, is sitting on board his own Fleming 65 in Baja California, wondering what to do next. He has just finished being an escort boat in a rally down the Californian coast and now has duties to attend to on the US East Coast. Tony is considering shipping his 65, *Venture*, up there to meet him in Annapolis. But something is bugging him. A skipper he just met was talking about how he'd recently taken a 35-footer from California through the Panama Canal to the East Coast. If a 35-footer can do it, why was Tony even considering putting the mighty Fleming 65 on a cargo ship for the same voyage? Absurd! That's the kind of voyage Flemings have been built for. Tony reaches for his East Coast charts. This is a temptation he can't resist.

The great voyages don't always start out intending to be great. Tony's Mexico to East Coast jaunt was one of a series of hops that altogether made up a mammoth adventure of around 19,000 miles from 2006 to 2008. The trail took Tony from Alaska around the entire US coast via the Panama Canal to Nova Scotia. On the way, for good measure, he took in the Galapagos Islands. The distance is impressive enough, but incredibly Tony's craft of choice for the epic voyage was hull number one of the Fleming 65. It came straight off Fleming's Taiwanese production line, was shipped to California, where Tony set off. It was probably the greatest sea trial in history.

Tony, 74, shies away from such grand statements. "The whole thing grew from one simple conversation. It wasn't a grand plan," he says. "What it does show is that we do use our products and incorporate what we learn into the production boats to improve them."





## Ice flows to desert canyons

Tony is English, but with a father in the RAF he had lived in 26 different places around the world by the time he was 16. He trained as an aeronautical engineer but joined American Marine, otherwise known as Grand Banks, and became technical director. After building boats in Hong Kong and Singapore for Grand Banks for 24 years, he knew where to go when he started his own range, Fleming, in 1985.

"Taiwan offered the best choice of yards capable of building the type of boat I had in mind," he recalls. "Unfortunately, most people who went to Taiwan were looking for yards that would build as cheaply as possible. I chose the yard that could and would build to the highest standard, not the lowest price. And they take as much pride in our boats as I do."

For most of Fleming's history, Tony was the lynchpin, the man around whom the entire business grew. However in recent years, as family members and associates took a bigger role in running Fleming, Tony's thoughts turned to releasing some of his grip – and going to sea. After so many years on the other side of the counter though, he had some adjusting to do.

"I'm a builder rather than an owner. Being an owner is rather a strange feeling really! When the boat is upside down in the yard, that's more normal for me." Equally, despite his huge experience in the boat yard, he admits: "Some things you're not going to find out until you go to sea."

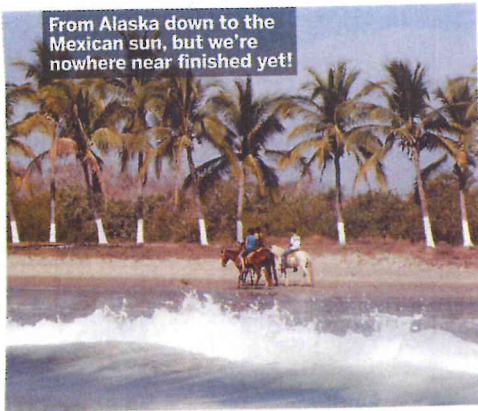
On the first stage of his liveaboard odyssey, Tony headed north from California to Vancouver and Alaska. All the while he was assessing how the Fleming worked in real life situations. "When you got up in the morning, the water in the tap was cold for a few seconds. It just needed to run for a few seconds to get hot," he remembers ruefully of the chilly Alaskan starts. "So we've now put in a circulation system where you get instant hot water. It means you save water too."

It is a small insight into how Tony fed back to the design team as he progressed, and also into the Fleming 'nothing spared' ethos of building luxury motor yachts. It is an ethos that no doubt saw Tony, his skipper Chris Conklin and various friends and family who joined them as crew, enjoy the liveaboard life in some comfort.

Tony's diary of the voyage is peppered with glimpses of an idyllic existence. From the Sea of Cortez, otherwise known as the Gulf of California, he reports: "The natural world did not disappoint. On the very first day we encountered a pod of killer whales as we headed for a rocky islet teeming with seals while fork-tailed frigate birds wheeled about our heads and pelicans plummeted into the water to feed on schools of fish."

"Over the next few days, we made our way slowly north encountering numerous whales including the huge, endangered blues as well as fin whales and the more athletic hump backs which breached repeatedly clear of the water. It

*We were greeted by a pod of killer whales, while pelicans wheeled above us*



From Alaska down to the Mexican sun, but we're nowhere near finished yet!



With scenery like this, the open-deck dining was always a pleasure.



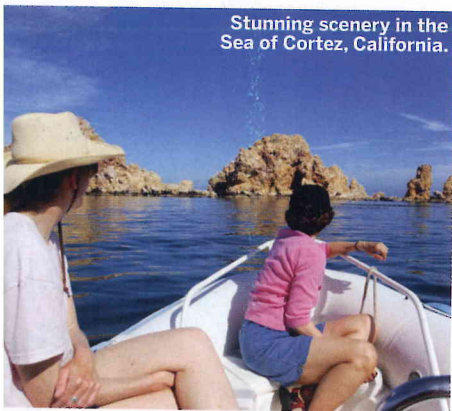
The Baja coast around California was a unique cruising ground.



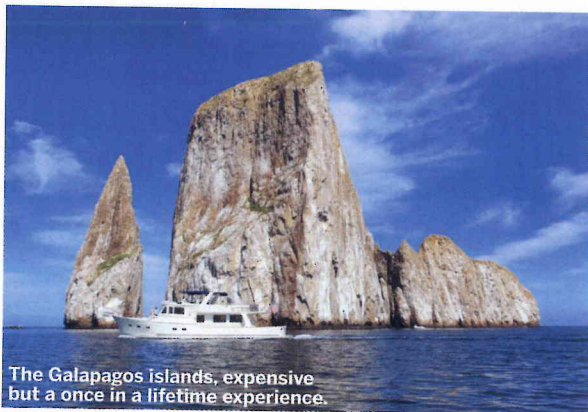




Seeing the natural world in such a far-flung and idyllic setting as the Galapagos was a real highlight.



Stunning scenery in the Sea of Cortez, California.



The Galapagos islands, expensive but a once in a lifetime experience.



A taste of the Pacific on the island of Coco.



The Pacific northwest provided an icy but magnificent first leg.

became almost routine for dolphins of several types to stop what they were doing and speed towards the boat to bodysurf in our wake and cavort around the stem, some turning on their sides, as if to gauge the height of the bow, before using powerful thrusts from their tail to launch themselves clear of the water higher than the foredeck handrail.”

A little later in the voyage, Tony sounds like a man who is not really missing the daily grind of overseeing an international business: “For two weeks we have enjoyed perfect weather with balmy days and cool nights anchored in a series of secluded bays off the Baja coast. The sky remains a pastel blue streaked with ever-changing patterns of wispy clouds while the sea takes on the shade of a kingfisher’s wing. Every evening mountains as high as 4,000ft are etched against the backdrop of a lingering sunset.”

**Galapagos adventure**

The boat was handling the mileage and conditions with aplomb. Heading south from La Paz down the western side of Central America to Costa Rica, they ran for 96 hours nonstop. Along the way, 70 miles offshore, they met

strong winds which churned up the sea. They now had an idea of what was in store over their next leg, motoring 700 miles from Costa Rica out into the Pacific, first to the island of Coco and then on to the Galapagos.

The trip turned out to be one of the few moments of Tony’s voyage where things didn’t go absolutely to plan, as he explains: “Honesty causes me to confess that the stabilisers failed on the outward journey so we had 2,000 miles without their benefits. I should say that the failure was not the fault of the stabilisers nor of the crew of Tung Hwa who built the boat, but was due to changes made to *Venture*. Her role was to serve as a test bed for new ideas, not all of which have been successful. But then, unless we tried we wouldn’t know.

“However, the stability of the Fleming hull kept the ride tolerable, although cooking would have been much more of a challenge without the potholders on the cooktop. When I see so many boats on the market without them, I wonder how they get along without them in rough weather. Sandwiches I guess.”

Unsurprisingly, he the Galapagos as one of the highlights, although is reserved about the logic of travelling

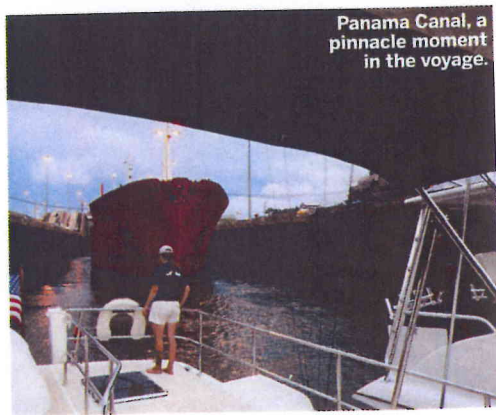


Assembling the second anchor.





A home from home. The split-level, accommodation gave the crew enough space to get away from the bustle and relax in comfort.



Panama Canal, a pinnacle moment in the voyage.



Arriving in New York, after covering over 16,000 miles. But we're still not done!



The impressive helm station is large and beautifully finished.

there in your own boat. "It is very expensive taking the boat there. Apart from the fuel, they charge you \$200 a head for each day you're there. You've got to have a naturalist guide while you're there and the islands are further apart than we realise, so you do a lot of miles. The itinerary is very tightly controlled so you are not able to dawdle in a place you like."

Perhaps the trip back was, to Tony's engineering mind, more interesting. "We had 900 miles of open ocean ahead of us before arriving at Panama City at the southern entrance of the famous canal," he recalls. "This was the longest passage any of us had undertaken in a powerboat and there are of course no ports of refuge along the way."

The Fleming covered the distance in four days and six hours, at an average speed of 8.7 knots, burning 1.2 gallons per mile. A big Pacific swell on the beam at one point saw Tony alter course to make the ride more comfortable, but as they arrived in Panama, with a total of 15,000 miles under the 65's hull since leaving California, he could look at his motor yacht with some satisfaction.

Of course, the boat may perform perfectly, but that doesn't mean its crew will. At rare strained moments

the Fleming layout helped matters. It is based on a split-level concept with the wheelhouse totally separate to the living quarters, meaning people can almost always find a private corner. Again, Tony relished the chance to see his concept work so well on Venture.

"The boating side of the trip was incredibly useful," he says. "Using the boat is terribly important and most builders don't get the chance to use their boats like this."

### Through Panama, roll on New York

The central American part of the voyage was particularly impressive, with the Fleming covering 5,000 miles in seven weeks. The distances recorded in Tony's log would make the average motor boat owner baulk. Nonstop legs of 500 or 600 miles were the norm before they re-entered the USA and began hopping up the coast to New York.

As they hit the Gulf Stream, speed increased from 9.5 knots to more than 14. Tony remembers: "The stream's warmer water contributes to the propagation of thunderstorms and a monster with ominous black clouds, rent



Family and friends joined Tony (right) and his skipper Chris Conklin on various legs.

*The trail took Tony from Alaska to Nova Scotia, taking in the Galapagos, New York and Vancouver for good measure*





with jagged bolts of lightning, enveloped us as we headed north past Florida and South Carolina. The anemometer recorded gusts as high as 60 knots and whipped the black surface of the sea into a seething white froth. The storm passed to reveal the blood-red orb of the sun sinking into the turbulent sea, staining the sky a lurid orange.”

After such exotic surroundings, *Venture* must surely have done a double take as Tony and Chris nosed her into Long Island Sound and moored her in downtown New York. The towering skyscrapers, city noise and throngs of people were a certainly a big change. But as ever with this voyage, her engines were not idle for long. Next on the itinerary was the Hudson River and eventually Lake Ontario, where *Venture* re-entered Canada, ten months after leaving Vancouver. She now had a staggering 17,000 miles on her clock.

### Canada – the final frontier

But Tony wasn't finished yet. Ahead lay Montreal, Quebec and the vast expanse of the St Lawrence River, where at 49° 18 minutes they reached their most northerly point since leaving Mexico. Dodging lobster pots, they motored on through the Northumberland Strait. Tony's diary reads: "The breeze was brisk and whitecaps numerous but it was a clear, crisp morning with blue skies and, for once, the weather was behind us. As we approached Cape George, right alongside the boat, a

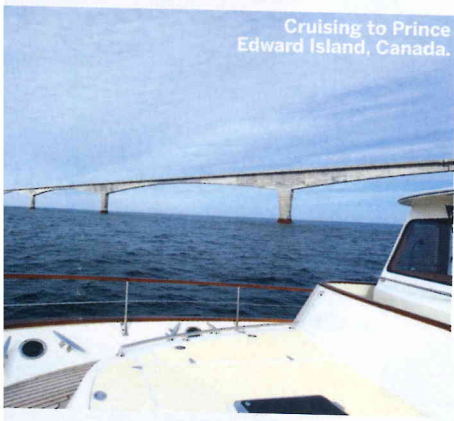
pod of pilot whales suddenly appeared. It was a wonderful surprise to see their shiny black bulbous heads and prominent fins among the whitecaps.”

As Tony headed south from Halifax, Nova Scotia, *Venture*, had travelled 19,000 miles, more than 9,000 in one extended season. Surely Tony could look back with immense pride at his achievement? "Yes I've been proud," he says. "But not in the way most people would think. I'm an engineer and I think engineers are rather boring people really! We set out to do this with the boat and it did what it was meant to do, so what's all the fuss about? I think satisfaction is more the right word.”

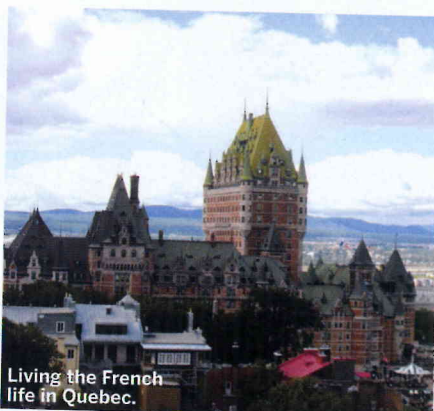
On the Fleming website, Tony's personal statement reads: "My objective was to build the ultimate cruising and liveaboard yacht for a retired individual or couple with reasonable accommodations for occasional guests. The kind of boat that I would want for myself”

After almost 20,000 miles on board, has he got it right? "I think we can safely say, we tested her out and we have definitely succeeded!" *Venture* is now available for charter through the Fleming Yachts. **MBY**

*This season Tony is taking Venture 2 from Fleming's European base at Shamrock Quay, Southampton up the West Coast of Scotland and on to Iceland. For more details of the boat contact Fleming Yachts Europe: Tel: +44 (0)2380 337289. Website: www.flemingyachts.com*



Cruising to Prince Edward Island, Canada.



Living the French life in Quebec.



Venture arrives in Shelburne, Nova Scotia.



Northern exposure: moored up on the St Lawrence River, Canada.