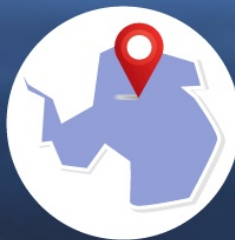


Discovering THE ICY CONTINENT

Kayaking
in Antarctic
waters.



A LANDMARK BIRTHDAY
NECESSITATES A
LANDMARK DESTINATION.
WHERE BETTER THAN
ANTARCTICA — THE
COLDEST, WINDIEST,
DRIEST, MOST BARREN
CONTINENT ON EARTH.

STORY ALAN JAMES

IMAGES ALAN JAMES + THINKSTOCK

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TAKE A TRIP TO THE COUNTRY



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A photogenic Weddell seal.

Gentoo penguins, straight from Happy Feet.



LACKING AN OCEAN-GOING, ice-strengthened vessel of our own, we join a group expedition. Fortunately, they don't call it a cruise. We're not the cruisy types. Not yet anyway.

And though we are guilty of glamping, we're far from luxe travellers. This is easily the most expensive thing we've ever done. And while we've opted for a private cabin on an upper deck, we'll still be sleeping in single bunks.

Our vessel departs from Ushuaia at the very south of Argentina. From home in Brisbane, we fly to Sydney en route to Santiago, then take a spectacular flight over the Andes to Buenos Aires, before heading south to "the end of the world", as Ushuaia is fondly known. We're travelling at the start of Antarctica's short summer in November, when the snow is pristine and the wildlife abundant.

Our 13-day expedition will give us seven days on and around the Antarctic Peninsula – the most northern and accessible part of the white continent.

It takes between two and three days to cross the lumpy, bumpy Drake Passage that separates Cape Horn and the South Shetland Islands – our first stop, where we wake to find the ship shrouded in snow.

There are 60-something passengers on this trip, and about as many again in crew and staff. Our fellow guests range in age from twenties to seventies, and in fitness and energy levels from elite athletes to seasoned bons vivants. We fall comfortably somewhere in the middle.

The 30-plus mostly Russian crew run the Russian-flagged ship, from the engine room to the bridge, which is always open for us to visit. Another 30 or so specialists run the tour – expedition leaders, ski guides, kayak guides, mountaineers, naturalists, an ornithologist, a geologist, a photographer, and an intrepid Australian author hailed as the first person to ride a motorcycle on all seven continents.

We're constantly amazed by the breadth of knowledge onboard. As my partner Beth (whose birthday we're

WE'RE TAUGHT A
RUSSIAN WORD
EACH DAY. OUR
FAVOURITE IS
"PENGVEEN".

celebrating) observes, while we miss the internet oracle in such a wondrous place, if there's anything you need to know, someone will provide the answer.

The Russian crew are delightful and seem only too happy to have a bunch of over-insulated tourists aboard their immaculate boat. They banter with us in a variety of languages, occasionally one we recognise. We're taught a Russian word each day. Our favourite is "pengveen", which seems much more evocative than the English "penguin".

Over the coming week, we sail through a cinematic landscape, stopping at



Aptly named Chinstrap penguins.

Our polar expedition ship was right at home in the icy waters.





The perfect way to explore glaciers.

A Weddell seal waves for the camera.



The view from the top deck.



several points each day to foray out in inflatables. We're following a very flexible itinerary, governed by the unpredictable weather and ice. Keen to make the most of our brief Antarctic experience, we've optioned-up our expedition with kayaking, snowshoeing and a photography workshop. Others more intrepid join ski tours, which look like hard work, but the smiles say otherwise.

We paddle through crystal-clear water, nudging through ice floes. Porpoising penguins zoom by. Sunbaking seals loll on the shore. We snowshoe up icy peaks to gain an elevated vantage. The skiers go much further. The penguins further still.

We visit sites of historical significance – former research bases and the photogenic crumbling remains of abandoned whaling stations. Much time is spent simply sitting and contemplating penguins and glaciers – both endlessly fascinating and humbling in their own way.

Our resident ornithologist works overtime identifying the enormous diversity of birdlife – from the vividly blue-eyed Antarctic Shag to the ground-dwelling Snowy Sheathbill (the only land bird native to Antarctica). Our ship is shadowed by seabirds every day – Giant Petrels and even more Giant Albatross.

IT SEEMS IMPOSSIBLE TO TAKE A BAD PHOTO OF A SEAL.



With the whalers long-gone, the whales are back in healthy numbers. We spot humpback, fin and minke. Our kayaking group has a particularly close encounter with a pod of orcas – so close I hear them spouting as they submerge on one side of us and resurface on the other, continuing on their way. I think we all held our breath. I'm later assured wild killer whales have never killed a human.

We see hundreds of seals – Weddell, Leopard, Antarctic Fur, Southern Elephant and the misnamed Crabeater, which filter-feed on krill (there are no crabs in Antarctica). It seems impossible to take a bad photo of a seal. Their waxy fur coats make them look like oil paintings.

And, of course, we see thousands of penguins. The orange-eye-browed

Macaroni; the red-billed Gentoo; the dapper Adélie, with their white eye rings and tuxedo-like tails; and the aptly-named Chinstrap. Vast rookeries with more members than the RACQ, their gargling calls and fishy guano odour fill the air.

A group of us leave the relative warmth of the ship to camp out for a night on the ice. We dig swag-sized recesses, affectionately termed "ice graves" by our guides, and build a modest wind barrier with the spoils. I happily sleep barely a wink. In the morning, we fill in our sleepy hollows – everywhere we go, we're under strict instruction to leave no trace.

As spectacular and varied as the wildlife is the weather, which ranges from impossibly idyllic to hilariously hellish.

Antarctica was a worthy destination for a landmark holiday. Others had the same idea – two engagements were announced on our trip, and the captain was called on to marry an eloping couple from New York.

Perhaps the most uplifting thing about Antarctica is the sense that you're experiencing a piece of the planet as it always was. Well, for as long as we've been here anyway. Untouched and unchanged. The coldest, windiest, driest, most barren continent is a pretty special place. ■



The Neumayer Channel.

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