

Antarctica: Land of superlatives

Trip of a lifetime reveals Antarctica's spectacular nature

By **Katharine Fletcher**

"Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. ... This is your Captain speaking. We are incredibly fortunate because today is a beautiful day..."

According to Norwegian Captain Arild Hårvik of Hurtigruten's *MV Fram*, all 19 days of our Antarctic expedition were beautiful – including those 22 hours when swells exceeded seven metres ...

Being hardy Canadians we concurred. After all, December to February is summertime in the southern hemisphere, where we enjoyed "balmy" temperatures of +5C to -5C.



Ice rules

Nonetheless, the trip is an "expedition" because in Antarctica, ice rules. We selected Hurtigruten's 19-day adventure because we wanted to experience not "only" Antarctica but also the Sub-Antarctic Falkland, South Georgia, and South Orkney islands. And penguins.

Although *MV Fram* never became trapped in ice, one day Expedition Leader Anja Erdmann cautioned that due to pack ice we might not make it to South Orkney, part of the South Shetlands. The Waddell Sea became impenetrable, so miss it we did.

Otherwise, Captain Hårvik expertly navigated icebergs, growlers (baby icebergs), and pack ice, keeping passengers impressed by his skill and satisfied with our progress.

Some days were entirely "at sea." Thinking we might use such times to paint, write, or read, we soon realized Hurtigruten keeps everyone occupied. Who knew the expedition team of eight scientists would present four compelling illustrated lectures every "at sea" day? Occasionally, there were quiz nights or movies, which expanded everyone's understanding of *Terra Australis Incognita* (ancient maps' "unknown southern land").

Expedition lectures

Before landing, geologist Steffen Biersack explained, "You'll be stepping onto ancient African rocks when we visit the Falklands, South Georgia, South Orkneys and Antarctic Peninsula. Moreover, Antarctica's 2,000 metre mountains are the extension of Chile's Andean Cordillera. Thirty-five million years ago major geological upheavals ripped the ridges apart, creating the Drake Passage – the most unruly seas in the world!"

Yikes!

The Drake has a formidable reputation – happily for us, however, anti-motion-sickness patches saved us from being seasick.

Also, before our first landing, Friederike Bronny lectured on birds. "You'll see rockhopper penguin rookeries on New Island, in the Falklands, sharing space with king cormorants and black-browed albatrosses. Here let's also watch for the long-tailed meadowlark – its scarlet breast and song are unmistakable. Later, we'll see king penguins on South Geor-

gia." She added, "Skuas, mind you, are everywhere. They are the penguins' arch-enemy because they eat their eggs and chicks."

Island life

Everyone was on deck while approaching New Island – the first Falkland landing, where resident guardian Ian Strange greeted us at the jetty.

"Welcome!" he cried. "Take the path to your right to the rockhopper colony – and don't miss our little museum."

A well-known environmentalist, Strange lobbies for the eradication of non-native fauna and flora such as sheep, cats, reindeer, and gorse. He encouraged us to remain on the path so we wouldn't trample native tussock grasses en route to visiting the rockhoppers.

Penguins... and protection

Penguins are wildly popular thanks to films such as



Approaching the spectacular narrows of the Lemaire Channel.

March of the Penguins, which chronicles the migration of emperor penguins amid Antarctica's brutal conditions. Of the 17 species worldwide, we saw seven, including the three other Antarctic species: Adélie, chinstrap, and gentoo; plus three true Sub-Antarctic species: king, macaroni, and rockhopper. The seventh, the Magellanic, lives on these islands as well as coastal Argentina and Chile.

Throughout the expedition penguins challenged our eco-intentions. They are endearing. They are comical. And they cannot read. They're completely oblivious to the International Association of Arctic Tour Operators' best wildlife-watching guidelines, which stipulate everyone should keep five metres from animals.

The thing is, penguins are curious. When I sat on a rock, a rockhopper sidled up, assessed me and settled down, dozing alongside me. I stifled my urge to touch it because, as expedition biologist Tomasz Zadrozny explained, "Petting wildlife puts not only you at risk, but animals, too. We simply mustn't transfer our microorganisms to them."

Wildlife!

It's not just penguins which mesmerize. Almost everywhere – along the beaches, rookeries and grassed slopes of these islands – wildlife find their niches. Elephant seals roared else slumbered in gigantic sausage-like heaps; adult fur seals barked in defence of pups; albatrosses whirled on updrafts; and in the ocean, Peale's dolphins as well as humpback and fin whales breached.



Photos: Eric Fletcher

Rockhopper penguins on their nests at a large rookery on New Island, Falkland Islands.

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Photo: Eric Fletcher

King penguins and chicks in the rookery at Fortuna Bay, South Georgia.

Onward!

It was hard leaving those windy green sanctuaries in the “middle of nowhere” with their old whaling stations such as Gritvyken and Leith. But, Antarctica beckoned ...

Before seeing the continent itself, we passed Elephant Island with its improbable-looking bronze statue rearing from the snow. Cutting the engines, Captain Hårvik explained it commemorates one of Antarctica’s luckiest rescues in the annals of its early exploration. In 1915-16, crew from explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton’s ice-bound ship *Endurance* somehow survived 135 harrowing days, sheltering from the elements beneath two lifeboats right here, before being rescued.

Finally: Antarctica itself

Marvelling, we voyaged further into this land of superlatives. In small groups we hiked, kayaked, some of us swam, and a lucky 19 of us tented overnight at Neko Harbour.

Imagine breathtaking glaciers of blue ice descending 2000-metre jagged peaks into the ocean ... icebergs the height of a tall ship and breadth of a football field ... pack ice floating in jigsaw patterns, some with penguins, leopard or crabeater seals on board, hitching a ride. Truly, Antarctica wows the soul.

The many international Antarctic Research Stations are also intriguing, where scientists research such phenomena as climate change. They showed off their compact quarters – and sold books, pins, stamps and postcards.

Best part?

Possibly the Lemaire Channel, aka “Kodak Gap” because it’s so incredibly photogenic. With towering peaks and ‘bergs crowding its narrow passage (1,600 metres not including ice) whatever its mood, the Lemaire is magical. While our misty morning voyage through it resembled an ominous scene from *Lord of the Rings*, when we arrived at Vernadsky, our southernmost destination, the day transformed. Sunlight and blue sky, breathtakingly clear azure water, plus icebergs, growlers and lofty mountains jostled for attention. What an unforgettable backdrop to our two-hour kayak.

One Norwegian on board said this was her third Antarctic expedition with Hurtigruten. Initially, this surprised me.

Now? I completely understand.

For more information visit hurtigruten.com; iaato.org

Katharine Fletcher is author of such books as Capital Rambles: Exploring the National Capital Region.

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