

TRAVEL

Young gator is show's star

Everglades airboat ride ends with a reptile close encounter, K2



On snowshoes through forest

Follow a woodland outing with high tea at a nearby B&B, K3



Mica a mecca for heli-skiing

Resort offers deep powder and mile-high vertical drop, K5

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THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, SECTION K



PHOTOS: ERIC FLETCHER/FOR OTTAWA CITIZEN

Kayaking near Vernadsky Ukrainian research station. The MV Fram in the background is 1.5 kilometres beyond the sheet of 30- to 38-centimetre-thick sea ice.

Where Mother Nature rules: Spectacular southern continent demands respect

KATHARINE FLETCHER
FOR THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

ON BOARD THE MV FRAM
IN THE WEDDELL SEA

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Today we hope to reach the South Orkney Islands, but sea ice may prevent us from our goal. We'll need to be flexible. I'll give more information soon."

This was one of expedition leader Anja Erdmann's daily announcements to passengers aboard the MV Fram. She and Capt. Arild Hårvik apprised us of weather conditions, wildlife sightings and photo opportunities during Norwegian cruise

company Hurtigruten's Antarctic expedition last December.

Ice covering the Weddell Sea proved impassable, so Hårvik did reroute the Fram. We explored the western Antarctic Peninsula, sailing through the narrow, icebergs-jammed Lemaire Channel to our southernmost destination of Vernadsky, a Ukrainian research station.

This aptly demonstrated that even 100 years after Ernest Shackleton left Britain bound for Antarctica on his doomed ship Endurance, Mother Nature still rules the frozen continent.

Erdmann was right: embracing flexibility was wise — which is precisely why Hurtigruten identifies its voyages to Earth's southernmost

continent as "expeditions," not cruises. Cruises follow published itineraries, but expeditions offer no guarantees. And in Antarctica, a vessel's ability to approach destinations is dependent upon shifting ice and unruly seas.

This isn't theoretical. Remember Christmas Eve? The Russian ship Akademik Shokalskiy was trapped by sea ice, as well as its supposed rescuer, the Chinese icebreaker Xue Long. Happily, this did not happen during Fram's expedition — but it could have.

To me and my husband, such unpredictability represents compelling, authentic adventure amid nature.

See ANTARCTICA on page K6



A young elephant seal sleeps on the shore at Grytviken, South Georgia.



South Georgia's Fortuna Bay king penguin rookery, with Konig Glacier and Breakwind Ridge in background.

TRAVEL

Antarctica: Prepare for penguin poop, rough sea

Continued from page K1

We chose Hurtigruten's 19-day expedition to learn about the still largely unknown continent. The longer voyage also let us experience the sub-Antarctic islands of the Falklands, South Georgia and South Orkneys.

Eight on-board scientists delivered informative, illustrated talks during five at-sea days, deepening everyone's understanding of Antarctica's environment, animals, geology, and work being conducted at international research stations on topics such as climate change.

Nineteen days sped past. The Falklands and South Georgia islands revealed penguins, seals and tenacious humans. The Antarctic Peninsula's quintessential wildness, ever-changing moods, towering snow-clad mountains, blue-ice glaciers and growlers (baby icebergs), proved more extraordinary than imagined. Even the crossing of the infamous Drake Passage (reputedly the world's most unruly waters) was on our bucket list...

Nonetheless, Antarctica's remoteness presents challenges. Assessing and preparing for them is what makes expeditions memorable — in a good way. It's wise to research options and weigh risks.

SIZE MATTERS

Can you imagine not being able to land if you want to get up close and personal with penguins?

The 100 signatories of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators helps preserve Antarctica's environmental integrity through conservation controls. To reduce impact on delicate ecosystems, IAATO-member vessels carrying more than 500 passengers do not make landings.

Tip: Research the companies to understand landing constraints.

UNRULY SEAS

The larger the vessel, the smoother the voyage. Fram is classified as



PHOTOS: ERIC FLETCHER/OTTAWA CITIZEN

At our campsite on Antarctic Peninsula, our morning view was of an ice cap and glacier overlooking Neko Harbour.

a mid-size ship, so although it's very safe and comfortable, stormy seas affect it. Everyone was worried about the Drake Passage, where, according to Friederike Bronny, swells can reach 20 metres. "I'd not want to experience that again," our on-board bird specialist confided. "Mind you, that was a hurricane."

Right. And because Mother Nature rules, hurricanes could occur. Our voyage was relatively calm, but we did experience 12 hours or so of seven-metre swells.

Tip: If you're prone to motion-sickness, consult your doctor. Mine

prescribed patches, and we weren't sick at all.

SUITABLE CLOTHING, EQUIPMENT

Research what clothing and equipment tour operators provide. For Antarctic excursions such as kayaking and camping, most have specialized gear for extreme weather. We never used our winter parka and hiking boots. Instead, Hurtigruten's "souvenir" hooded waterproof jackets allowed us to manage layers of clothing, and the neoprene boots we rented on board were superb for wet landings and hikes.

On their recommended clothing checklist, waterproof pants became indispensable because they kept us dry and cosy.

Even in fine weather, all this waterproofing was important. Staff occasionally had to hose passengers down while boarding Fram to rid us of penguin poop after onshore excursions to see these birds.

Tip: An on-board shop had a selection of gear, but it was pricey.

GEAR

Taking technology to Antarctica demands forethought. Cold drains batteries rapidly. Condensation and salt spray affect lenses, binoculars, cameras, tripods — any gear, actually. December heralds Antarctica's summer, with typical highs and lows of 5 C and -5 C, but the temperature plunges with wind chill.

Tip: Take extra batteries, waterproof bags, lens cleaners. Research the ship's on-board power: you may need adapters.

EXCURSIONS

Be realistic about your physical abilities. Landings involve stepping from a stable ship into small tender boats that sometimes can be tossed up, down and sideways by waves. The firm hulls and sturdy handrails of Fram's tenders were much easier to manage than other inflatable tenders we've experienced.

Once ashore, activities ranged from gentle strolls through villages such as Falkland's Port Stanley, to hiking thrilling (read: steep) inclines with sometimes icy footing or deep (knee-high) snow, kayaking alongside ice-

bergs, camping overnight — or swimming in the Antarctic Ocean.

Risks? "One year, a glacier calved, sending huge waves onto shore close to where we'd pitched our tents," explained expedition team biologist Rudolph Thomann. "Now we camp higher up."

A cautionary tale — particularly while taking down our tents at Neko Harbour.

That morning we witnessed another glacier calve, then saw an avalanche plunge down a cliff opposite our campsite.

Tip: Emergency airlifts to hospitals from Antarctica are exorbitantly expensive. Comprehensive travel health insurance is prudent — and may be mandatory.

ANTARCTIC EXPEDITIONS? RISK THE ADVENTURE OF YOUR LIFETIME

While on South Georgia, a Norwegian couple revealed this was their third trip to Antarctica with Fram. Why, I asked? "You'll see for yourself. Perhaps you'll be enchanted, too."

I was. I'd return in a heartbeat. Risks? Prepare for — and embrace them.

If you go

Hurtigruten: hurtigruten.com
IAATO: iaato.org

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MV Fram's tender takes kayakers and passengers to Cuverville Island, Antarctic Peninsula.

Cairo steers tourists

WHERE TO STAY

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