

Voyage to Antarctica

Tony Cavenagh

The speaker had long thought of visiting Antarctica, inspired as a young chap by Douglas Stewart's verse play *Fire on the Snow*. In February 2010, Tony and two friends flew from Sydney to Santiago, across the Andes to Buenos Aires, then to Tierra del Fuego, the southern tip of South America. Ushuaia on the Beagle Strait, the southern-most city in the world, is where they boarded the Finnish-built ship for 18 nights on the ocean. Tucked between imposing mountains and the water, all goods come to Ushuaia by sea. The tiny Argentine navy was moored in the harbour. Before setting sail on their oceanic adventure, the travellers had time to inspect Tierra del Fuego National Park, where the forest, hanging lakes and a carpet of red and silver lupins were notable.

The cruise ship was built at the end of the Cold War as a listening device, but had been comfortably converted to make scientific expeditions and for tourism in the Arctic and Antarctic. It could carry 100 passengers and 40 crew. Its Russian captain and crew were efficient and pleasant. There were also specialist guides: naturalists, historians, kayaking, and walking guide Andrew Lock, the first Australian to summit the world's 14 mountain peaks over 8000m.



Cruise ship *Akademik Ioffe*

First taste of wildlife was an albatross following the ship during its 1½ day sail to the Falklands Islands. Taken ashore by Zodiac rubber ducky, the travellers walked to a black-browed albatross and rockhopper penguin colony on the rugged western side of the island. The owners of the island run sheep, but make more income from tourism. Despite a 40kph breeze blowing over the barren headland, the albatross nests with

large grey chicks were smelly and noisy. Then to Carcass Island, a lower, sandy formation, where Magellanic penguins nest in burrows on a plain behind the beach. They were seen in groups of 40 or so on the short grassy plain. An outpost of the British Empire was very much in evidence at Port Stanley, with its Thatcher Drive, ubiquitous Land Rovers and substantial Government House set in well-mown lawns.

The ship next crossed the Southern Ocean and the Antarctic convergence to South Georgia, passing icebergs up to 100m high. The mountainous territory was snow-covered, with elevations up to 2915 metres. The old whaling station at Grytviken was operated by the Norwegians from 1904 to the early 1960s, when it was leased to the Japanese and closed in 1965. A British Antarctic Survey base is now located nearby at King Edward Point. The whaling station had processed up to 35,000 whales per year in its early days, but this led to the rapid decline of the whale population in the surrounding area and factory ships were then used to hunt further afield. Old chaser vessels lay stranded ashore and the rusting whale-oil tanks loomed large. When the station was occupied there were 250 workers during the season. Fur seals, which were hunted almost to extinction in the early 20th century, have made a comeback and are now in large numbers. Shackleton's grave and headstone was a particular point of interest.



Shackleton's grave

The party moved south to Gold Harbour and its 50,000-strong King penguin colony. They had black heads, grey and white bodies and were noisy and smelly. At the back of the beach, in marshy ground, were the young elephant seals, while the mature elephant seals were on the beach. The 100-metre-long ship was able to sail into the narrow and typically steep-sided Drygalski Fjord in eastern South Georgia. At its head was a glacier tumbling into the sea, with dense white cloud covering the mountains in the background.



Penguins at Gold Harbour, South Georgia

As they sailed from South Georgia to the Antarctic Peninsula the travellers could see a group of penguins seemingly marooned high up on a mountainous iceberg and a patch of blue ice showing through on another. They now experienced heavy weather and the sea icing up, which meant the ship had to sail seaward rather than going through the Antarctic Sound. This pointed up the role of chance in the voyage, finding a passage for scheduled landings only being possible if conditions allowed.

They passed a flat-top iceberg with thousands of Antarctic petrels roosting on its frozen surface. Killer whales broke the ocean surface within photographic range. Indeed, hump-backs came alongside and even rubbed against the hull.



Humpback whales

The travellers were next conveyed on the Zodiac dinghy to the Antarctic shore, and a dozen or so in yellow dry suits kayaked on glassy waters at temperatures just above and below freezing. They spent a night camping ashore, in sleeping bags in hollows in the ice. They could see the lights of satellites passing overhead. On the voyage back to Tierra del Fuego there were more penguins (Chinstrap and Gentoo), snow petrels and whales.



Antarctic Peninsula

The oldest tourist was 85, the oldest kayaker 72. The three-week trip cost \$20,000 when the \$A was worth about \$US 0.80.

