



Antarctica

If you want to just relax on a beach, point your jet toward the Caribbean. But if it's adventure you're after, head for the land of icebergs and penguins. It's one of the last pristine places on Earth.

by Margie Goldsmith



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY QUARK EXPEDITIONS

“YOU CAN DO THIS,” I TOLD MYSELF. I STRIPPED OUT of my yellow expedition jacket, wool cap, gloves, fleece layers, tights, rain pants and long underwear—down to my bathing suit. I was ready to step into the frigid South Atlantic Ocean off Deception Island to become a member of the Antarctic Polar Plunge Club.

The shipmates who’d planned to jump into the water with me had all copped out, maybe because it was sleeting and the water temperature was 33 degrees. Except for our ship anchored farther out and a small flotilla of Gentoo penguins watching curiously, it was going to be only me in the water. Most of my fellow passengers, looking like a colony of giant penguins in matching yellow expedition jackets, urged me on. Others walked along the volcanic black sand beach, taking photos of bleached whalebones and boat hulls, remnants of the days when Deception Island was a whaling center.

“Come on, plunge in now,” someone yelled. Gingerly, I stuck my toe in the water. It was bathtub warm! Maybe that’s why it’s called Deception Island. I decided to walk into the water backwards, waving to my shipmates. But by the time the water came up to my waist, it turned frigid. I swam as fast as I could back to shore, where the giant yellow penguins seemed to applaud me.

Antarctica had been on my wish list ever since I saw a rare signed copy of *Aurora Australis* at New York City’s Morgan Library & Museum and became fascinated by its author, British explorer Ernest Shackleton. On the 1907 *Nimrod* Expedition (on which *Aurora* is based), Shackleton failed to be the first man to the South Pole. Then, in 1914, he set sail on the *Endurance*, hoping to be the first to cross the Antarctic continent on foot. Within 85 miles of his destination, his ship became trapped on the ice pack. Miraculously, Shackleton and his men withstood extreme conditions, including frigid temperatures, until they were rescued 20 months later. All of his 27 crewmembers survived.

My trip was a totally different experience from Shackleton’s. He and his men slept in flimsy tents and ate seal blubber; I was on a luxury

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cruise in a suite with a king-sized bed, easy chair and couch, phone, TV and private balcony. And while the *Endurance* crew spent all their time surviving, I spent mine exploring islands, dining on gourmet meals with fine wines, and learning about the continent from a top marine biologist, an ornithologist, a geologist and a polar historian.

OUR FIRST WILDLIFE LANDING IN THE Zodiacs was at West Point Island in the Falklands, where we walked through fields dotted with yellow flowers and silvery green sea cabbage plants to a hilly trail. Everywhere were tussock grass clumps and you had to walk carefully to be sure you didn't step on a nesting penguin. Off the trail by a narrow stream were six little rockhopper penguins known as "Rockies," who jumped in and out of the water again and again like playful children, so close I could hear their webbed feet slap against the rocks.

Farther uphill was a rookery of 1,000 breeding rockhoppers and 4,200 Black-Browed Albatrosses, many with fuzzy little gray fur balls, their chicks. They sat still, making a continuous *eh eh eh* sound. The penguins were braying, wheezing, whistling and clucking, wound up like whirligigs. They waddled back and forth, used their stubby tails for balance and flapped their flippers as though they expected to fly any second. Bright yellow "eyebrows" dangled from their crests, which were spiky and black. They reminded me of the Rolling Stones' Keith Richards.

I noticed that each species of penguin had a personality.

ON DAYS AT SEA, I'D RUN LAPS ON THE OUTSIDE DECK OR SIT ON THE EXERCISE BIKE WHILE STARING AT THE OCEAN.



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WHAT IT IS:

Antarctica, the southernmost continent, is surrounded by the Southern Ocean and is largely covered in ice. It is accessible only by ships with icebreakers, most of which depart from Ushuaia, Argentina.

CLIMATE:

November through March is Antarctica's austral summer. Most days average around 50 degrees. Weather changes easily from bright sun to rain, snow or sleet. Pack rain pants, additional layers, warm hat, gloves and long underwear.

GETTING THERE:

Private jets fly to Ushuaia Malvinas Argentinas Airport in Argentina, which has a 9,186-foot runway. Landing fees and diplomatic clearance may be required. For information, call (888) 478-7286.

The Gentoo—who loved to puff up their downy chests, look up into the sky and make whirring sounds reminiscent of a lawnmower engine—were also notorious thieves. They built their nests from pebbles, mainly by stealing their neighbors' rocks. The Chinstraps had a thin curved line of black feathers beneath their chins, which gave them a faint smile, like the Mona Lisa's. The Adelies were copycats; if one lifted its beak and began to whistle whoo whoo, hundreds would join in, turning the rookery into a cacophonous barnyard of raucous whistling.

The Macaronis were distinguished by their feathery yellow and black plumes, and when I saw my first two, I finally understood what the lyrics from Yankee Doodle Dandy meant: in 19th century England, any man wearing flashy feathers in his hat was called a Macaroni. My favorite were the King penguins, not because they were the largest species we saw, but because they were always in pairs, and like lovebirds, rested their heads on each other's chests.

After the Falkland Islands, our next destination was the South Georgia Islands, which some say God created so he could have a holiday. There was so much wildlife that at first I thought it was a mirage. In one rookery, penguins were packed together like the crowds in Times Square on New Year's Eve. In another rookery, endless lines of penguins four and five deep shuffled along like pilgrims on their way to Mecca.

And then there were the seals. I was always mesmerized by mama seals suckling their newborn pups, but I was also on the lookout for male seals who didn't want us there and stood in our way, barking. Once, I was tiptoeing past some huge elephant seals that looked like giant slugs when suddenly I heard loud honking and barking. Less than 10 feet from me, two elephant seals were attacking each other using their huge proboscises.

Surprisingly, the temperature usually hovered around 50 degrees, and sometimes it was warm enough to sit on my balcony in a T-shirt watching the Giant Petrels glide by or the playful Commerson's dolphins breaching alongside the ship. On the days we went ashore, there'd be several hikes from which to choose. On days at sea, I'd run laps on the outside deck or go to the gym and sit on the exercise bike while staring at the ocean glittering like an undulating blanket of sapphires.

For me, Antarctica was about icebergs and wildlife. The seal harems were like the Rockhoppers, constantly in movement. I sat on the beach watching them play in a big green meadow near the rustic remains of a whaling station. They were like two opposing soccer teams, scurrying back and forth on their flippers.

As I was watching, a tiny seal pup waddled up and looked at me with huge soulful eyes. I had to restrain myself from picking him up because you're not allowed to touch the animals and are, in fact, supposed to stay 15 feet away. Of course, that rule applies only to humans. One day, a fluffy brown penguin chick planted himself an inch from my face as he tried to figure out what kind of animal I was.

One morning we visited Grytviken, a former whaling colony where Shackleton's Endurance set sail in 1914. Eight years later, Shackleton died of a heart attack (his doctor said it was because he drank too much whiskey). The explorer's body was brought back and buried in the Grytviken whaler's cemetery. As is the custom, we stood over Shackleton's grave and toasted him with Irish whiskey, saving the last drop to pour on his grave.

I walked around to the back of his tombstone to see his favorite Robert Browning quote engraved there: "I hold that a man should strive to the uttermost for his life's set prize." Then I walked to the nearby museum, formerly the whaling station manager's house, and looked in amazement at a replica of the J. Caird, the small lifeboat that carried Shackleton and five crew members 800 miles across open seas and wasn't much bigger than a closet.

Later that week, we hiked to Stromness, where Shackleton and two of his crew members slogged up the final 36-hour leg of their journey looking for help. They were freezing in the Antarctic winter and wore only flimsy threadbare clothes. For us, it was the austral summer—so warm I took off both my fleece layer and expedition jacket. I wondered how Shackleton could have possibly survived. And what about his men? When he and five of his crew sailed off on the lifeboat looking for help, he left the other 21 of his men on Elephant Island.

As we motored towards the island in the Zodiacs, hundreds of Chinstrap penguins leapt out of the water in greeting. The weather was too rough to allow a landing on Cape Wild, the beach where the stranded crew waited to be rescued for four months, and where there is now a bust of the Chilean captain whose ship rescued Shackleton's men in 1916.

For Shackleton, the sea ice and icebergs were the biggest enemy. For me, the icebergs were as big a draw to this continent as the wildlife. They were like massive sculptures shaped like billowing sails or elegant swans or like the eerie hoodoo rocks you see in Bryce Canyon. Every now and then, we'd pass a berg where one or two penguins were lazing in the sun or two seals were sleeping. And we'd pass close to icebergs as big as ship containers or railroad cars joined together. The Zodiac captain would always turn off the motor and we'd drift by this universe of silence.

One day, we hiked along a beach past huge Weddel seals, then up a steep hill where the snow came past our calves to a rookery of breeding Chinstraps. I was exhausted from carving my own footsteps, trudging uphill in the snow. I sat until it was time to go back down, but the hill looked even steeper from there than it had going up. "Slide," the expedition leader suggested. Slide? Without a sled? "Just lie down like Superman and go," he said with a grin.

I remembered that Shackleton, too, had arrived in a place too steep to descend, so he and his crew had sat on the ice and slid down, their first moment of happiness in 19 months. If Shackleton could do it, so could I. I plopped down on my belly, torpedoed my arms in front of me, and pushed off, screaming for joy. It was an ideal way to end a journey to one of the last pristine places on earth.