



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

“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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PHOTOS PROVIDED BY QUARK EXPEDITIONS



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.