



# CRUISING ANTARCTICA

## THE LAST PRISTINE WILDERNESS ON EARTH

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARGIE GOLDSMITH

**Y**ou 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 on the Quark Expeditions Sea Spirit who'd planned to jump into the water with me had all copped out, maybe because it was sleeting or because the water temperature was 33 degrees. Except for our ship anchored further 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 or boat hulls poking through the black sand dating back to the days when Deception Island was a whaling center.

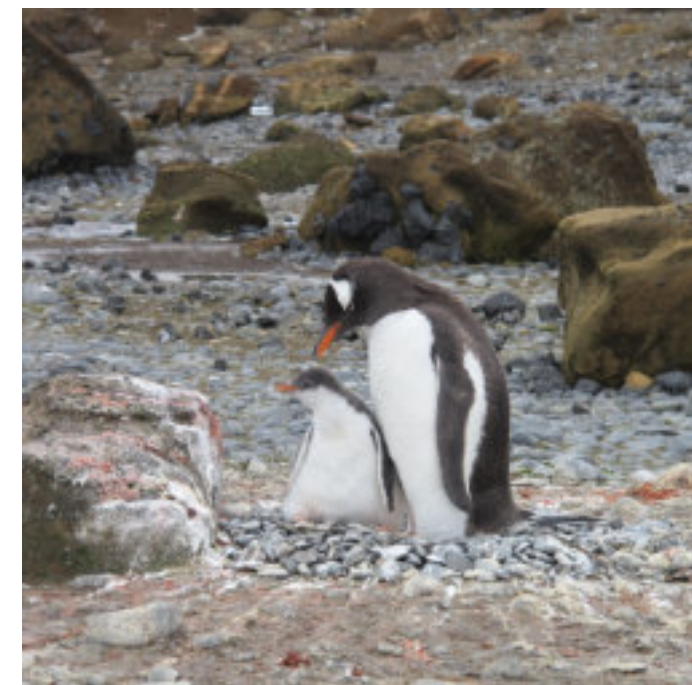
"Come on, plunge in now," someone yelled. Gingerly, I stuck my toe in the water. It was bathtub warm! Maybe that's why it was called Deception Island. I decided to walk into the water backwards,

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 applauded me and snapped photographs.

Antarctica had been on my wish list ever since I saw a rare, signed copy of AURORA AUSTRALIS at NYC's Morgan Library & Museum and was fascinated by British explorer Ernest Shackleton. On the 1907 Nimrod Expedition (on which AURORA is based), Shackleton failed to be 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 and crushed into the sea. Miraculously, Shackleton and his men withstood frigid temperatures and extreme conditions until they were rescued twenty months later. Every one of his 27 crew members survived.

My trip was a totally different experience than Shackleton's. He and his men slept in flimsy tents and ate seal blubber, I was on a luxury 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 by a top marine biologist, ornithologist, geologist, and 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 top of 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.

Further 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 very 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 using their stubby tails for balance and flapped their flippers as though any second they expected to fly. Their crests were spiky and black from which bright yellow "eyebrows" dangled. They reminded me of Keith Richards.

I noticed that each species of penguin had a personality. The Gentoo, who loved to puff up their downy chests, look up into the sky and make whirring sounds like a lawn-mower engine, were also notorious thieves. They built their nests from pebbles, mainly by shamelessly stealing their neighbor's rocks. The Chinstraps had a thin curved line of black feathers beneath their chin, which gave them a faint smile, like the Mona Lisa. 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 chest.

After the Falkland Islands, our next destination was the South Georgia Islands that they 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 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 ten 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 a number of 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 stationary 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 you must stay ten 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 Shackleton 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 he possibly could have survived. And what about his men? When he and five of his men 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 Chilean captain whose ship rescued Shackleton's men in 1916.

For Shackleton, the sea ice and icebergs were his biggest enemy. For us, 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 here than it had going up. "Slide," the expedition leader suggested. Slide? Without a

sled? "Just lie down like Superman and go," he grinned.

I remembered that Shackleton, too, had arrived in a place too steep to descend, so he and his crew sat on the ice and slid down, their first moment of happiness in nineteen 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 down the icy hill screaming for joy, an ideal way to end a journey to the last pristine universe on earth.

