



In Search of Terra Incognita

Two hundred years ago, in 1820, Russian Admiral Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen became the first explorer to set eyes upon Antarctica.

This came nearly fifty years after Captain Cook, in 1773, made maritime history by being the first to cross the Antarctic Circle, aboard the *HMS Resolution*.

Prior to Bellingshausen's sighting, existence of a southern continent (the last on Earth to be discovered) was still a mythic speculation. The ancient Greeks had been the first to posit that there must be a landmass at the bottom of the Earth, in order to balance the northern continents. The North was called *Arktos*, the Greek word for "bear," named after the constellation only visible in the northern sky. Thus, Greek philosophers simply surmised that a comparable *Antarktikos* was essential for earth's equilibrium.

This *Terra Incognita* long captured explorers' imaginations, and many set out for distant southern waters in hope of finding the elusive continent. In 1520, when sailing through the strait at the bottom of South America that now bears his name, the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan thought that the land sighted to his south could be it.* But it would take another three centuries to discover Antarctica, lying less than 800 miles away.

By Masha Nordbye

* The Tierra del Fuego archipelago lies south of the Strait of Magellan. In 1578, the English privateer Sir Francis Drake was blown by a storm out of the strait farther south into unknown waters (now known as the Drake Passage) that implied an ocean existed below the South American continent.



The Drake Passage

The risk one runs in exploring these unknown and Icy Seas is so very great, that I can be bold to say, that no man will ever venture farther than I have done and that the lands which may lie to the South will never be explored.

~ British Captain James Cook



The 1870 monument to Admiral Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen on Kotlin Island.

In the spring of this year, I traveled over 4,000 miles across the Southern Ocean to retrace some of the remarkable discoveries made by Bellingshausen – his 1819-1821 expedition also circumnavigated the Earth closer to the regions of perpetual ice than even Captain Cook. During the heroic age of Antarctic exploration, his surveys and observations greatly contributed to the knowledge of this vast and yet mostly uncharted territory.

The expedition shall use all possible efforts to achieve as close to the Pole as possible, search for unknown lands, and not leave this enterprise otherwise than with insurmountable obstacles.

Instructions signed by Alexander I, May 10, 1818

* Bellingshausen's family migrated from Germany to Saaremaa (then known as Osel) in the 16th century. In 1721, the area was ceded to the Russian Empire during the reign of Peter the Great. Thereafter, subjects entering government service who were not ethnic Russians were expected to adopt Orthodox forenames and patronymics. Thus, after receiving his commission as a midshipman, Fabian Bellingshausen (named after his father) took the name Faddei Faddeyevich (for St. Thaddeus of Edessa) — Фаддей а Белинсгаузен.

IN OLD AGE, AFTER MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS OF SERVICE in the Imperial Russian Navy, Bellingshausen liked to proudly state that he had spent 13 years, nine months and 14 days at sea. He was born on Saaremaa,* Estonia's largest island, in 1778, and went on to graduate from the Cadet Corps at St. Petersburg's Kronstadt Naval Academy. A great admirer of Cook's accomplishments, he signed on as navigational officer in 1803 with Russia's first expedition to circumnavigate the globe. After distinguishing himself on this

three-year voyage, the newly promoted captain went on to serve with ships in the Baltic and Black Sea Fleets. In 1818, when Tsar Alexander I authorized a mission to venture farther south than Cook and locate possible lands around the Pole, Bellingshausen was selected to lead it. By then he was a highly experienced explorer and cartographer.

I first took interest in Bellingshausen when I noticed the bronze statue that stands in his honor at Kronstadt on Kotlin Island, west of St. Petersburg. From 1839 until his death in 1852, the renowned admiral acted as the military governor here. As I gazed out over the Gulf of Finland, I couldn't help but imagine what it was like to have set off from this great naval fortress in a sturdy, wooden three-masted sloop for unexplored southern regions, never knowing when or if you would return. The first news of the voyage published in Russia read: "We shall be preparing for a very difficult and dangerous voyage among the giant masses of ice that surround the South Pole; preparing to shut ourselves up in wooden planks for four months and float about above the great abyss of the ocean."

BELLINGSHAUSEN'S EXPEDITION CONSISTED OF TWO ships, the commander's 129-foot (plus 10

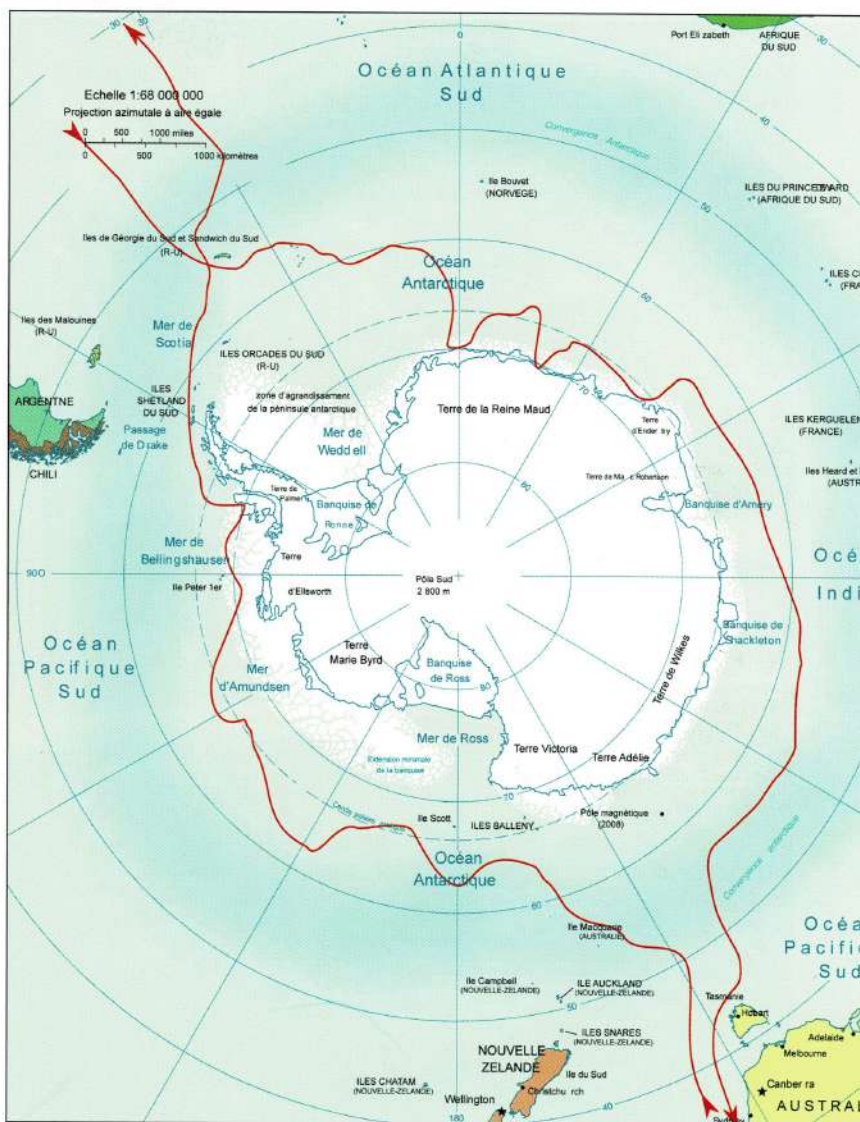
inches) flagship *Vostok* (East) – whose bottom hull was lined with copper sheets for added protection against ice – and the 120-foot support vessel, *Mirny* (Peaceful), headed by Mikhail Lazarev. The officers and crew were recruited as volunteers from the naval barracks according to strict criteria: those selected had to be “fit, no older than 35 years, possess a skill other than seamanship, and have the ability to shoot rifles well.” The full crew consisted of 190 men, including the astronomer Ivan Simonov, the artist Pavel Mikhailov, a physician for each ship, and an Orthodox monk.

The two vessels departed Kronstadt on July 3, 1819 (Old Style), and made a brief stop in England, where Bellingshausen met with Sir Joseph Banks, the famed naturalist who had earlier sailed around the world with Cook. Banks agreed to provide the mission with additional books, nautical almanacs, and navigational charts. Because of the ambitious journey, Bellingshausen also took on two years of supplies, including 65.8 tons of biscuits, 20.5 tons of dried peas, seven tons of oats and buckwheat for kasha, 28 tons of salted beef, over 1000 gallons of wine and vodka, and 500 pounds of tobacco. Sauerkraut, lemon extract, and molasses would help prevent scurvy, and icebergs were to provide fresh water. Four months later, after having crossed the equator, the ships landed in South America, the last opportunity to take on extra provisions.

As Bellingshausen, I traveled from South America southeast by ship towards South Georgia Island, crossing the Antarctic Convergence – a natural boundary where warmer seas meet the cold, northward-flowing waters of the Southern Ocean. I’ll never forget the wondrous views of all the penguins, glaciers and mountains on South Georgia, and making similar observations as Bellingshausen:

On 15 December we sighted Wallis Island, which lies on the western side of George Island, the northern and eastern sides of which had been surveyed by Captain Cook. In order to complete the survey, therefore, I passed around the southern side... which consists of sharp-peaked mountains covered in snow, and the deep valleys which separate them are filled with ice right down to the sea.

Sarah Lurcock, who runs the South Georgia Museum at the old whaling station of Grytviken, explained while indicating a map in the museum’s collection: “On January 17, 1775, Captain James Cook made the first landing on South Georgia, and took possession of the territory for Britain, naming it the ‘Isle of Georgia’ for King George III. Since Cook had only partially charted this 104-mile-long crescent-shaped island, it was not until 44 years later that the Russian expedition completed a full survey of



Map of the expedition.

it; this map of the island remained the best for over a century.”

As the crew celebrated the birthday of their “Most August Monarch Aleksandr Pavlovich,” I also celebrated mine at St. Andrew’s Bay, which hosts the island’s largest king penguin colony. About 150,000 breeding pairs were congregating on the two-mile-long gravel and black-sand beach in front of a spectacular, glacier-filled backdrop. Recognized by their size (second only to the Emperor), this nearly 3-foot-tall bird also stands out with its brilliant golden-yellow plumage.

Two hundred years ago, the astronomer Simonov marveled at the sight. He said it looked like “millions of penguins were standing there, and, since they had never been disturbed before not only were they unafraid of us, but they also refused to give ground... The king penguin is a very beautiful animal... Instead of wings, it has flippers.”

As I traveled around the island, I also noticed chinstrap, macaroni and the smaller and shyer Magellanic penguin,



named after Ferdinand Magellan, who first described the birds (in Tierra del Fuego) as “strange geese.”

When earlier sailors first laid eyes upon the strange black and white birds, they thought the creatures resembled the flightless Great Auk of the North Atlantic; so the Auk's scientific genus *Pinguinus* was used as a naming inspiration.

After we departed South Georgia, the weather quickly deteriorated into strong winds with sleet and hail. From this point forward, Bellingshausen ordered that both ships were to keep in sight of each other. As they neared the Antarctic Circle, the commander noted:

Our sloops were constantly among ice floes... and we caught sight of a remarkably large floating block of ice, the size of a massive building... [Artist] Mikhailov depicted one that even exceeded the height of Saints Peter and Paul Cathedral in St. Petersburg... rising up more than 400 feet above sea level... The formation of such enormous masses astounds the mind.

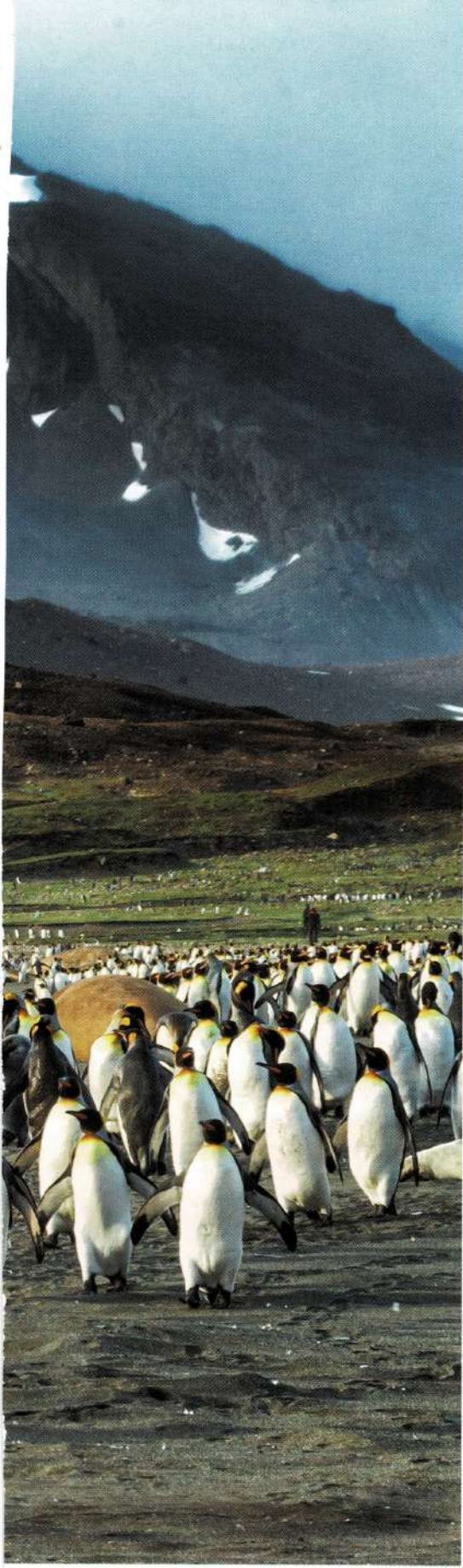
Another member of the crew also observed that “great numbers of birds, such as albatross and petrels, followed us constantly and... four huge whales sported between the ice floe and the sloop. Now they plunged into the marine abyss, now they reappeared on the surface and let off their spouts with a wild noise. The entertainment gave us great pleasure.”

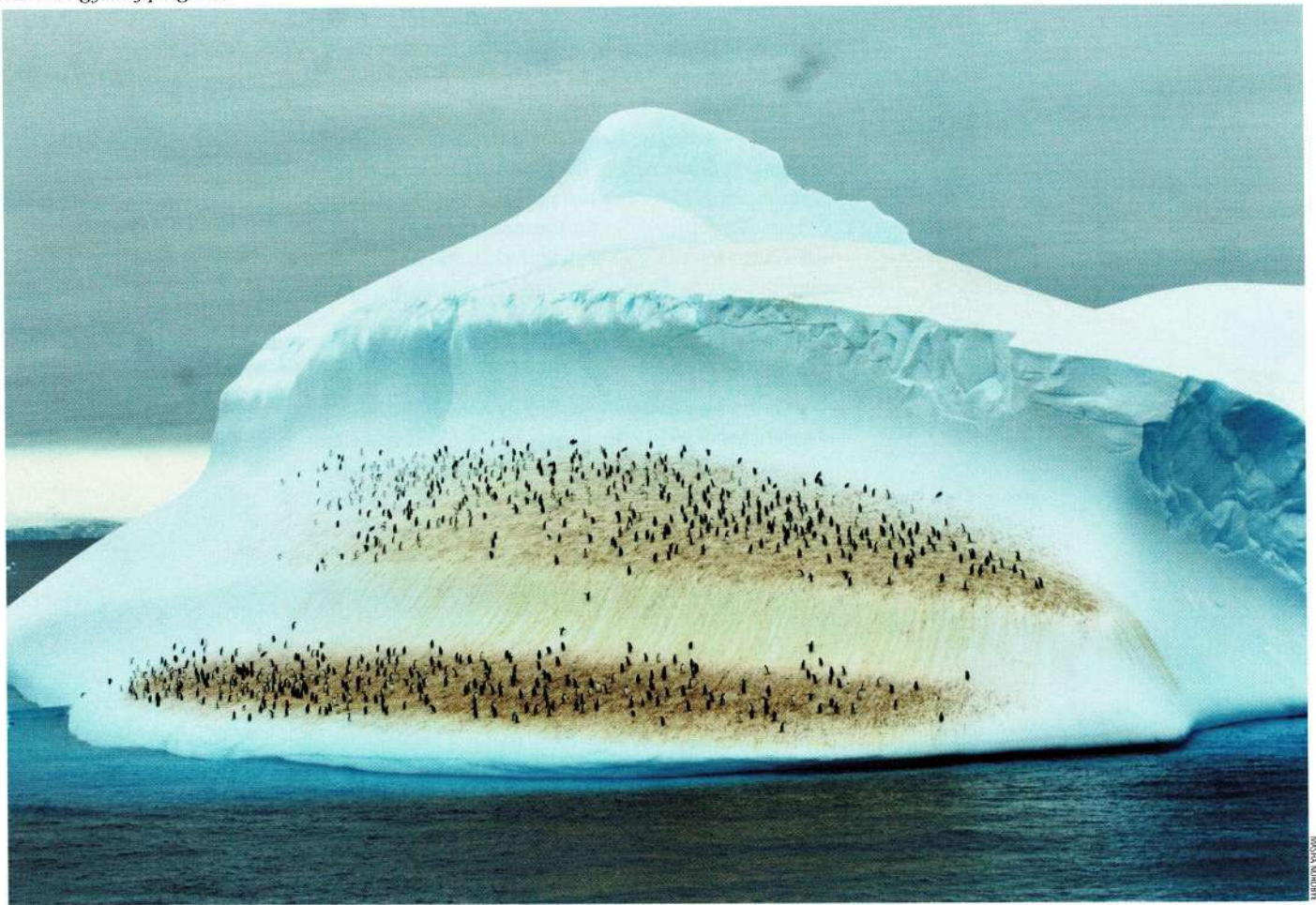
As our own ship cruised past the southern tip of South Georgia, Black-browed albatross and Cape petrels soared above us amidst the streaming bands of cumulus clouds. And then, several days later, just as Bellingshausen, we astonishingly came upon our own enormous block of ice – actually one of the largest in documented history. Known as A68, this monster block of glacier, weighing one trillion tons, calved off the eastern coast of the Antarctica Peninsula In July 2017.* As it drifts and makes its way closer to the pull of the South Atlantic, it will eventually be swept ever northward to warmer climes and ultimately certain doom.

Luckily for us, the normally choppy seas were calm as a bathtub, and we motored out in smaller zodiacs to have a closer look. Imagine floating in the middle of nowhere to suddenly witness a gargantuan tabular iceberg, measuring over 2200 square miles and be surrounded by spouting humpback whales. With the same amazement of past explorers, I gazed in awe upon this massive chunk of glacial ice that had formed tens of thousands of years ago.

THE CELEBRATION TO WELCOME IN THE NEW YEAR OF 1820 WAS commemorated with a hearty dinner of *shchi*, soup made of pork and sour cabbage, and then the commander toasted for a successful trip with generous amounts

* In February 2020, A-68A began moving into open waters. On 23 April 2020, a chunk measuring about 175 sq km broke free from the iceberg, dubbed A-68C.





* Geographical coordinates are expressed by latitude and longitude. Latitude measures the angular distance of a place north and south of the equator, defined as 0 degrees; the North Pole is 90 degrees north; the South Pole 90 degrees south. Longitude is the angular distance of a place east or west of the 0-degree Prime Meridian at Greenwich, England. St Petersburg's latitude is N59°93'; the expedition was at a similar latitude, but in the South. The Antarctic Circle lies at an approximate latitude of 66.5 degrees south of the equator.

† Just several days after Bellingshausen's first sighting, a British expedition, led by Edward Bransfield (and captained by William Smith), spotted from their ship several distant mountains standing on the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. They had returned to the area of the New South Shetlands, discovered (after having been blown off course in the Drake Passage) and named by Smith a year earlier in February 1819. The first substantiated landing on the Antarctic mainland was not made until 1895.

of rum punch. As they pushed southward, progress was severely hampered by the ever-thickening ice floes. Simonov indicated, "we determined our latitude and it was not far short of the latitude of St. Petersburg,* but the climate was very different. It was midsummer here, but the constant fog, snow and frequent frosts made us long even for a Russian winter."

On January 15, the *Vostok* and *Mirny* became the second and third ships in history to traverse the Antarctic Circle – 47 years after Cook had first crossed this demarcation. Then, during the next day, while sailing along the northeastern edge of the continent, at positions S 69°21'28" and W 2°14'50" (and again on February 6 at S 69°7'30"/E 16°15'), Bellingshausen remarkably recorded: "There beyond the ice fields... a main of ice was sighted, the edges of which had broken away perpendicularly, which stretched as far as we could see, rising to the south like land." The ships had approached within 20 miles of the Antarctic mainland and detected

ice shelves in an area now known as Princess Martha Coast in Queen Maud Land.† This is considered the first actual sighting of *Terra Australis Incognita*.

During the following weeks, Bellingshausen went on to describe steering his ship *by ear* in tempestuous seas between relentless ice floes in heavy fog and snow. Finally, at the beginning of March, as the Antarctic summer was coming to an end, he decided it was time to head north for New South Wales (Australia).

Our passage had taken 104 days, during which the men had endured great hardship, both from constant high winds and the dark, foul weather. With snow often falling, the sails and rigging were iced up all the time. The result was that even steering the ship itself became not just heavy, but very laborious.

On March 30, they safely reached Port Jackson (Sydney) and spent the next seven

months repairing the ships and exploring warmer Pacific waters. After returning to Port Jackson, Bellingshausen received the information that William Smith, an English sealing captain, had the year before discovered a new group of islands, situated some 600 miles south of the tip of South America, which he had named the New South Shetlands (*Novaya Shetlandiya*). With this intriguing news, the Russian commander decided to undertake a second voyage. Thus on October 31, 1820, both ships set out on a course back through the Southern Ice Ocean to explore the other side of the Pole.

MOST DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ANTARCTIC CONTINENT BEGIN WITH these superlatives: it is the coldest, windiest, highest, and driest continent on Earth. Larger than Europe, it contains about ninety percent of the world's freshwater ice; and, at its deepest, the ice layer is nearly three miles thick. Thousands of cubic miles of glacial ice break off the coast each year, turning seas into iceberg alleys. As our ship ventured closer to the Antarctic Peninsula, hundreds of icebergs of all shapes and sizes dotted the horizon. Older bergs exude a tapestry of vivid hues of green, blue, yellow, red or even black, resulting from refracting sunlight and other concentrations of materials that were trapped within the slow-moving glacial ice. Smaller chunks of disintegrating icebergs, known as *bergy bits* and *growlers*, added to the parade of floating ice, often with penguins and seals hitching a ride upon them.

The artist Mikhailov painted a similar picture, and Simonov curiously ventured onto a large berg:

I left the sloop in the small jolly boat and went onto an ice floe filled with penguins... It was most amusing to watch how they position themselves so that the swell helps them throw themselves onto a floe... The ice hills [bergs] were enchanting to look at as some were like enormous buildings with flat roofs, others resembled hills with variously shaped caves and grottos with a very clear, transparent, sky-blue color that added a brilliant shine to the floe... We even came across some that were exactly like bridges, triumphal arches or the ruins of ancient castles.

Bellingshausen then went on to gain for Russia the honor of discovering the first lands beyond the Antarctic Circle, on the northwest side of the continent: On January 10, 1821, he wrote: "we were delighted by the sight of land... I named it Peter the Great Island, after the founder of the Russian Navy... We then met nothing until 17 January. On that day, in beautiful clear weather, we sighted a high cape extending north from a coast that was likewise covered in snow and continuous ice. I made so bold as to honor it with the name of His Imperial Majesty – Alexander I Coast," the largest island



Above: Grytviken, site of the South Georgia Museum.
Below: Holy Trinity Church, a Russian Orthodox church built on King George Island near Bellingshausen Station and consecrated in 2004.





Bellingshausen
Station,
Antarctica.

in Antarctica and thought to be an actual part of the mainland until 1940. The body of water in which they sailed at this location is today known as the Bellingshausen Sea.

I landed on the Antarctic Peninsula and firmly planted my feet upon the frozen ground of *Terra Australis*. Only seventy-five miles to the north was the point where Bellingshausen's expedition had completed its last survey around the southern end and eastern side of *Novaya Shetlandiya*. While standing on an icy-cold bluff and looking out towards those islands, I toasted Bellingshausen with 100 grams of vodka and his favorite motto, "Fortune favors the brave."

In the midst of such a treasured moment, little did I realize that I – like past bold explorers – would soon be thrust upon an unsuspecting passage of potential peril. Our captain had received the startling news that, due to the coronavirus, Argentina was about to close its borders. If we did not make it back to a harbor within the next several days, our ship would be stranded in Antarctic waters. And this would not be a quick nor easy dash, for we had to cross the infamous Drake Passage, one of the world's

roughest waterways, owing to its deadly gales, strong currents, and towering waves. There's an old maritime saying: "Below 40 degrees south latitude, there is no law. Below 50 degrees, there is no God."

So it was into these mythic waters that we forged ahead on the 700-mile journey north from the Antarctic Peninsula. Over the next several days we were in the area where the Atlantic, Pacific and Southern Seas converge, creating a roaring mix of winds and currents that meet no resistance from any landmass. The next morning, with cloudy skies and increasing winds, the ship seemed to encounter Poseidon's wrath, as waves surged up and crashed over the top of the upper decks, causing the ship to violently pitch from side to side. I tried to imagine being battered by these life-threatening elements in a worn-down wooden sloop with only a chronometer and sextant for guidance. Now, as I looked out my window upon these immense and roiling waves, all those Antarctic stories – no longer limited to the pages of a book – had become frightfully real.

The astronomer Simonov was equally terrified as the two ships pushed through the wild waters:



I stared in awe at the boiling abyss of the sea... The whole expanse was ridged with foaming waves. A single large gust had torn away the staysails and half the main and bent open the iron hooks... The storm was so violent that the sailors themselves told us they had never before seen the like... Divine Providence alone saved us from the danger that menaced us.

It seemed like forever that we endured our own Great Drake Shake, but our vessel finally cruised safely into Ushuaia's harbor at the bottom tip of South America with little time to spare.

BY THE END OF JANUARY 1821, AFTER HAVING ENDURED frequent storms, Mikhail Lazarev, captain of the *Mirny*, reported that the "*Vostok* had been so weakened that further attempts to the south appeared impossible. The continuous pumping of water was tremendously exhausting for her crew... Rot had appeared in various places, and, on top of that, the blows inflicted by ice floes obliged Captain Bellingshausen to conclude his exploration a month sooner than otherwise, and put his mind to the return journey."

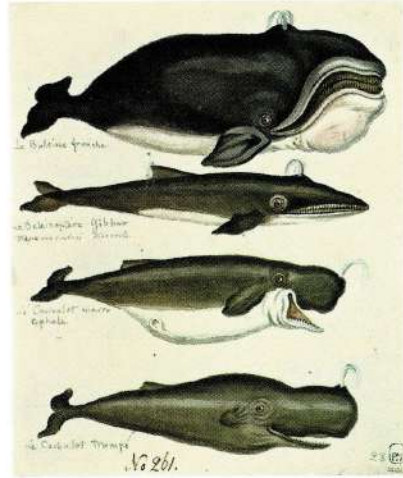
After having made repair and resupply stops at various ports along the way, the expedition arrived safely back at Kronstadt on July 24, 1821, ending a voyage that had lasted two years and 21 days (527 of these spent at sea). They had covered 50,000 miles and crossed the Antarctic Circle six times.

The mission undertaken was deemed a complete success, and was proudly publicized in the journal *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* (Domestic News):

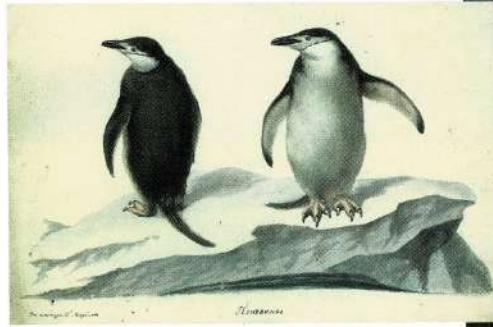
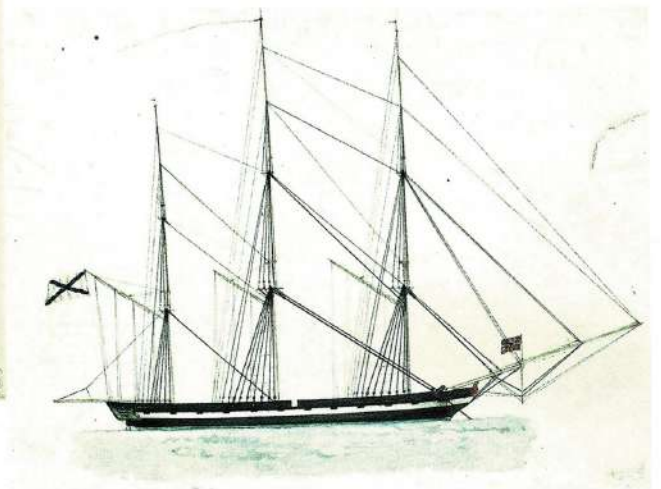
No Russian voyage has been so remarkable in respect of navigation, or crowned with such important discoveries, as the expedition which set out for the South Pole in 1819 under the leadership of Captain Bellingshausen... We were delighted by their arrival at Kronstadt... The Emperor also honored his Argonauts with a visit, and was so kind to examine attentively the rare specimens brought back from areas never previously visited by Russians, as well as the volume of pictures by Mikhailov, who was the expedition artist.



In 1949, the original sketch album of Pavel Nikolayevich Mikhailov (1786-1840; self-portrait, above) was discovered in the collection of Moscow's State Historical Museum. In 2012, the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg published both a Russian and an English edition of reproductions of drawings and watercolors made by Mikhailov during the expedition.



Mikhailov's sketch of the *Mirny* and, below, of the *Aurora Borealis*.



Ironically, Bellingshausen never claimed to have spotted the continent, but with the coordinates recorded in the ship's log and his noted observations – which were analogous to what the location is known to look like today – he is commonly credited as the first to have sighted the Antarctic mainland.

As Cook, the Commander concluded: "I held most of my course beyond the polar circle or near it as much as the winds allowed. But if a great southern land does exist, it must lie far inside the ice fields and be covered by them, and there is no way to detect it."

In 1831, Bellingshausen published a two-volume account of his experiences: *Double Investigation of the Southern Ice Ocean and the Voyage Around the World, 1819-1821*.^{*} Over a century later, the first Russian scientific bases, *Vostok* and *Mirny*, were established on the Antarctic continent, and many commemorative coins and stamps have been issued over the years in honor of the famous expedition.

Indeed, in 1789, little could a young Russian cadet have imagined, as he began his lessons at the great Kronstadt naval base, that his future exploits at the bottom of the Earth would even lead to a crater on the far side of the moon being named for him. ❶

* An English translation of these volumes (Двукратные изыскания в Южном Ледовитом океане и плавание вокруг света в продолжение 1819-1821) was edited by Frank Debenham, one of the surviving members of Robert Scott's ill-fated 1910-1913 Terra Nova Expedition to the South Pole. It was first published in London as *The Voyage of Captain Bellingshausen to the Antarctic Seas, 1819-1821* Volume I-II.

russian life

THE WORLD'S BIGGEST COUNTRY, IN A MAGAZINE

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Penguins on Georgia Island, Antarctica
Photo: Monkeygreen