

# Antarctic Adventure

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You wouldn't think a place with permanent ice and snow would be much of a draw. But zipping through icy bays on pontoon boats, hiking up glacial hills, kayaking or just plain penguin-watching, a cruise through the islands of the Antarctic Peninsula is the perfect bucket-list adventure for anyone—thrill-seekers, nomads and romantics alike. If the weather cooperates, and even if it doesn't, this will be a journey you never forget.

Every so often, an immigration officer makes mention of the Antarctica stamp in the very back of my passport. I laugh it off, not telling him that I stamped it myself—the so-called Great White Desert doesn't have a customs to clear, but the staff of the expedition ship I was on laid out stamps and an ink pad one afternoon during a 10-day trip around the Antarctic Peninsula.

So with no borders and no minders, who exactly owns Antarctica? This is a bit of a loaded question, but the simpler answer is: It's a team effort. Different countries have laid claim to bits of this isolated continent over the years, with some entitlements overlapping. In the 1950s, 12 countries set up various stations for research, but it was the Antarctic Treaty signed in 1999 that turned the continent into a scientific reserve, suspending all future territorial claims.

A quick Google search of "things to do in Antarctica" turns up "survive" as one of the main activities. The explorers that started arriving in the early 1800s can attest to that. The real activity, of course, is the journey itself—and this will likely be the furthest you will likely ever get from your house. With stories of glaciers melting in the West Antarctic Ice Sheet, first declared unstable in the 1960s, the time to get down there might just be now or never.

Once you've made the decision to take the plunge, the first order of prep is to fill a suitcase with all your favourite skiwear. While daytime temps in Antarctica's "summer," from December to February, hover around  $-2^{\circ}\text{C}$ , you'll find yourself outside a lot. As well, ship corridors in this part of the world generally aren't exactly toasty.

Next, top up your luggage with light, bright summer clothes; you will need to first spend a few days in Buenos Aires, where it will be full-on summer.

#### PHOTO

Pléneau Island in the Wilhelm Archipelago



PHOTOS

1. Winding through the Antarctic Archipelago
2. Sculptural ice formations near Danko Island
3. Gentoo penguins keep a watchful eye on the kayaks
4. Port Lockroy is home to Antarctica's only souvenir shop

You would be remiss not to take advantage of the weather, even for a day or two. Beyond your usual camera equipment, you're all set; tour companies provide jackets and boots, so you don't have to lug any of that along. Don't forget some kind of anti-nausea medication if you're partial to bouts of seasickness—and even if you're not.

The flight you need next is a four-hour hop straight south from the Buenos Aires domestic airport to Ushuaia, which bills itself as the City at the Bottom of the World. A few kilometres from famous Tierra del Fuego National Park, this city of 65,000 was originally an Argentinian prison colony. Most cruise lines will have you landing in Ushuaia the day before you set sail.

Once settled in our cabin, and with briefings by the expedition leaders completed, the next leg was the most wobbly: crossing the notorious Drake

Passage. This was when the anti-nausea patches came out, and also when we noticed the hooks under our dining-room chairs that would allow us to attach ourselves to the floor if need be. I remember one particular dinner where servers spent more time replacing utensils that slipped off the tabletops than they did delivering plates. We got very good at narrowly saving glasses of wine from tipping over—all part of the fun.

When land was first sighted upon approaching the Antarctic Peninsula islands, everyone was on deck, all smiles and sunglasses. We apparently lucked into some of the best weather of the entire season, which made for perfect picture-taking.

Expedition ships that tour the Southern Ocean are generally smaller and more nimble than the oceanliners many cruisers are used to; all the better to navigate the narrow inlets and iceberg-laden waters. Our first appreciation for the kind of skill required to sail safely in these parts was a 7 a.m. squeeze through the Lemaire Channel, just south of Anvers Island. This was followed by our first day of touring: first Pléneau Island and then Petermann Island, via Zodiac - and then our first steps on land. For the kayakers, this was their first stint

in the water. Although everyone is more than excited to see their first glimpses of penguins, and there are plenty to see (more than 10 million), the breathtaking scenery is the star of the show. Nothing can prepare you for the beauty of the giant walls of ice, frosty clouds rolling in low with full sun behind them, shimmering vistas across icy bays. Some of the ice we were looking at was thousands of years old. I swear I have now seen more different shades of blue than I ever will again.

Despite being a big deep freeze, the Antarctic archipelago has its fair share of wildlife. You will see different kinds of penguins (including the Gentoo, Adélie and Chinstrap) and seals (including the Weddell, Leopard and Crabeater) and soon be able to tell them all apart. All feed on krill, an algae-eating form of crustacean. Keep an eye out for whales. You will also see birds flying alongside the ship, nesting in rocky crags or feasting on krill at the shoreline: blue-eyed shags, Antarctic terns, brown skuas, snowy sheathbills and numerous varieties of petrels. On-board experts share their knowledge of ornithology, marine biology, zoology and geology with insightful talks during downtimes on the

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voyage down and back, as well as throughout the trip.

We arrived at Paradise Harbor the second day for our first landing on the actual continent at Base Brown, an Argentinian research station open only during the summer. A trip to Neko Harbor that afternoon was followed by an overnight camping trip for those brave enough at Rongé Island. Everyone who spent the night on the ice not only survived but actually slept.

At Port Lockroy the next day, we encountered actual humans in the form of a small team of British scientists researching the effects of tourism on penguins. Once abandoned, it has since been rebuilt and also sports a museum, a souvenir shop and the continent's only post office. My sister reported that her postcard arrived in Regina by late spring.



Deception Island on our fourth and final day brought more interesting investigation, through Neumayer Channel and around Whalers Bay. It was here that we came across a British ship policing the region to ensure Treaty rules were being respected. All tour operators take great pains to ensure that tourism doesn't threaten the environment: every piece of outerwear is vacuumed by hand at the beginning of the trip, passengers walk through a disinfecting foot bath embarking and disembarking the ship, and you are constantly being reminded to not let a tissue or anything fall from your coat pocket. Many guests were questioned by these authorities on how well our expedition leaders were doing their jobs in this regard. It makes you realize how fragile this environment is—and how much of an outsider you are.



Deception was also where many brave souls stripped down and ran screaming into minus-one-degree water, part of a polar plunge. From my dry spot on the shoreline, this all looked quite invigorating.

Speaking of invigoration, one of the biggest rushes you get from this sojourn is the actual sense of adventure around you. Anything can happen; your trip is ruled by the weather, not to mention unexpected turns of events. Tales of accidents, medical emergencies and sinking ships make you realize how vulnerable you are in the middle of nowhere, freezing water all around you, and you have to be mentally prepared for that. An approaching storm threatened our last day enough to make us leave early and head back across the Drake, back to Argentina to catch up with the real world.

After walking in our front door in Toronto, we sat down and calculated it took about 100 hours of sailing, not including touring around the peninsula itself, 30 hours of flying and four hours of taxicabs to get to Antarctica and back—truly the trip of a lifetime.

I still feel a bit naughty about stamping my own passport. I mean, it could have just been Hello Kitty, couldn't it? But while it's not official, it's still the coolest stamp I have.