

# ANTARCTIC ADVENTURE

Zippering through icy bays on pontoon boats, hiking up glacial hills, kayaking, or just penguin watching, a cruise through the islands of the Antarctic Peninsula is the perfect bucket-list adventure.

BY DOUG WALLACE  
PHOTOS BY TIM STEWART

► 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 White Desert doesn't have a customs to clear, but the Quark Expeditions cruise 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 this 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 1959 that turned the continent into a scientific reserve, suspending all future territorial claims.

A quick Google search of "things to do in Antarctica" will give you "survive" as one of the main activities. The explorers that started arriving in the early 1800s could attest to that. The real activity, of course, is the journey itself — and this will likely be the furthest you will 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 be now or never.



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## Packing and Getting There

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°C, you'll find yourself outside a lot. Ship corridors in this part of the world generally aren't exactly toasty either.

Next, top up your luggage with light, bright summer clothes; you will first need to spend a few days in Buenos Aires, where it will be full-on summer. 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. Don't forget some kind of anti-nausea medication if you're prone to 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 is often referred to as the End of the World. A few kilometres from famous Tierra del Fuego National Park, a population of over 67,000, was originally an Argentinian prison colony. Most cruise lines will have you landing in Ushuaia the day before you sail.

## Hitting the Sea

Once settled in our cabin on the Ocean Diamond and with briefings by the Quark 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.

Cruise ships that tour the region are generally smaller and more nimble, 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 cruising and our first steps on land. For the kayakers, this was their first stint in the water. Although everyone was more than excited to see their first glimpses of penguins, and there are plenty to see (more than 10 million), the breathtaking scenery was the star of the show. Nothing can prepare you for the beauty of the giant walls of ice, the shimmering vistas across icy bays, and the frosty clouds rolling in low with full sun behind them. 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.

## Some Species Favour the Frigid Temperatures

Despite being a big deep freeze, the Antarctic Archipelago has its fair share of wildlife. You will see different kinds of penguins and seals and will soon be able to tell them all apart. Keep an eye out for whales too.

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

## Port Stops

We arrived at Paradise Harbor the second day for our first landing on the actual continent at Base Brown, an Argentinian research station open

tioned 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

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only during the summer. A trip to Neko Harbor that afternoon was followed by an overnight camp at Rongé Island for those brave enough. 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 now 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: All outerwear is vacuumed by hand at the beginning of the trip, all 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 ques-

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 sense of adventure. 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 with freezing water all around you, and you have to be mentally prepared for that. An approaching storm threatened our last day, making us leave early and head back across the Drake, and back to Argentina to catch up with the real world.

## 134 Hours

Once we walked through our front door back home in Toronto, we sat down and calculated that it took about 100 hours of sailing, 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. [E]



The breathtaking scenery is the star of the show.

