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Antarctic cruise: Sailing in the wake of Shackleton

In Antarctica, Juliet Rix sets out on a voyage to commemorate the centenary of Ernest Shackleton's incredible journey into the unknown



The "seventh continent" is as dramatic now as it was in Shackleton's day – the last great wilderness on Earth Photo: ALAMY



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By Juliet Rix

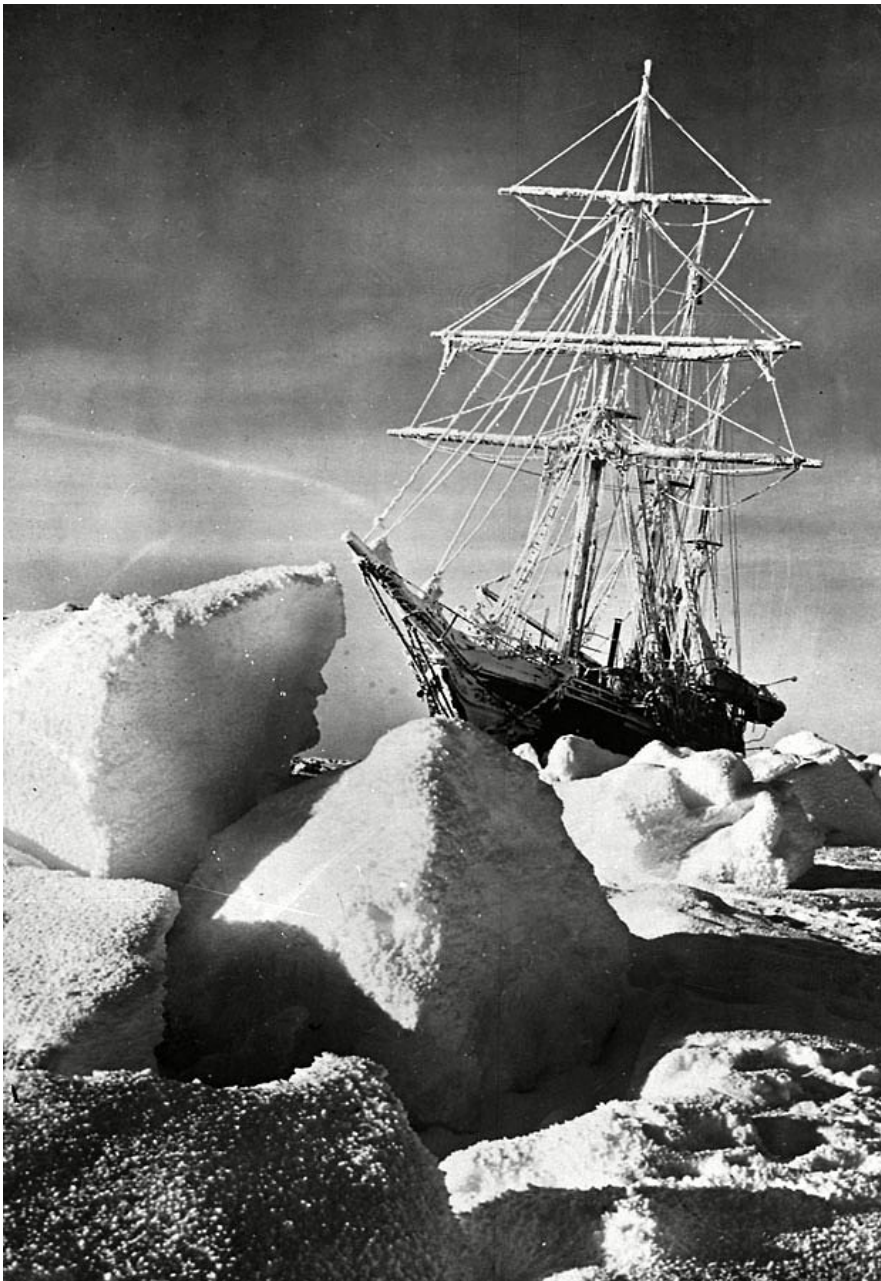
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Standing by a glacial waterfall that braids into streams across the snow-flecked valley below, I look towards the rugged coastline of South Georgia. Tucked between two treeless hills I can just see the rusty remains of Stromness whaling station. This is the view that greeted Ernest Shackleton as he crested the brow of this hill. It meant to him nothing less than life over death and the beginning of the end of one of the most extraordinary adventures of all time.



The rusty remains of Stromness whaling station Photo: ALAMY

In December 1914, Shackleton and his crew set out from South Georgia on the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, intent on making the first land crossing of the Antarctic continent. We, on our One Ocean Expeditions cruise aboard the adapted Polar research ship, the Sergey Vavilov, were following in his footsteps – though, we hoped, not too literally. In early 1915, Shackleton’s ship, the *Endurance*, was trapped and then crushed in the sea ice, leaving the explorer and his 27 men stranded in the frozen wilderness of Antarctica.



So began an incredible tale of survival that ended only in the middle of 1916 – a centenary being marked by a series of Shackleton voyages to Antarctica next year (see Sail on: more Shackleton voyages, opposite).

ADVERTISING

The “seventh continent” is as dramatic now as it was in Shackleton’s day – the last great wilderness on Earth: one moment ethereally calm and stunningly beautiful, the next lethally harsh.

“The wind is at 30 knots and we can’t find protection so we won’t be launching the Zodiacs this morning,” announced our expedition leader at breakfast one morning, as snow and fog swirled between us and our scheduled Antarctic landing.

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The next day, however, on Cuverville Island we sat with jackets off amid glacier-striped hillsides, watching penguins – cartoon-like red-beaked gentoos – waddling, tobogganing and climbing unconscionably steep slopes, streaking the mountainsides with penguin highways. We watched them bow in courting display, laboriously collecting stones from the beach to build their nests, flappily mate, and settle on the nest to lay.

Shackleton relied on catching penguins for food. We were governed by animal protection: Antarctic wildlife must not be approached closer than 16ft, we were firmly instructed. But nobody told the penguins, and the gentoos were as curious as we were, waddling over to take a closer look at us, poking an exploratory beak towards our abandoned jackets (would this make a good nest?).



Gentoos penguins Photo: GETTY

Cruising by Zodiac was equally rewarding. A Weddell seal lolled on the ice while penguins streaked like torpedoes through crystal-clear water and pods of porpoises loitered between the luminous blue icebergs and the “berg bits” that floated like giants’ bath toys.

Even when struggling against the elements, having set off from the pack ice in lifeboats little larger than our Zodiac, Shackleton and his men appreciated this fairy-tale ice-scape. Captain Frank Worsley wrote: “Swans of weird shape pecked at our planks, a gondola steered by a giraffe ran foul of us, which much amused a duck sitting on a crocodile’s head.”

Ice is fickle; it cracked beneath Shackleton’s feet, driving him from floe to floe until, after six months of camping on the ice, there was nowhere left to go

There are no flesh-and-blood crocodiles in the Antarctic, but the frozen south’s equivalent – a reptilian-faced leopard seal almost as long as the Zodiac – circled our rigid inflatable a yard or so away, peering inquiringly. Cameras whirred but hands stayed in the boat. The second largest predator in the Antarctic is capable of puncturing a Zodiac, and the sea-leopard, as Shackleton called it, attacked one of his men. It was quickly shot, providing a welcome blubber-fried dinner.

We cruised past ice-churches and ice-arches and through crackling brash ice. A berg transformed before our eyes: a giant ice-flower crashing into the water, leaving only the broken stem. Ice is fickle; it cracked beneath Shackleton’s feet, driving him from floe to floe until, after six months of camping on the ice, there was nowhere left to go. Desperate for land but at the mercy of the wind, the group finally stepped on terra firma at Elephant Island, the first people ever to do so.



Sir Ernest Shackleton died in South Georgia in 1922 Photo: GETTY

Others had seen the island, but no one had managed to land – and neither did we. The seas here rarely allow it. But we saw from the deck the tiny strip of desolate rocky beach named Point Wild after Shackleton’s right-hand man. He was left here in charge of 21 men, to survive an Antarctic winter with nothing but two upturned boats for shelter.

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The expedition banjo – deemed essential by Shackleton as the *Endurance* went down – was pressed into morale-boosting service each Saturday night. In our cosy ship’s bar, we gathered after dinner for one of many talks and entertainments. Our bird guide, Simon Boyes, more often seen on deck pointing out wildlife, sang us a song written by Shackleton’s expedition physicist for Frank Wild:

*“My name is Frankie Wild-o and my hut’s on Elephant Isle.
The walls without a single brick and the roofs without a tile.
Yet nevertheless, you must confess by many and many a mile,
It’s the most palatial place you’ll find on Elephant Isle...”*

In truth, though, the 22 Elephant Islanders were desperate for the return of “The Boss”, who had set out with the other five men in the third ragged lifeboat, the *James Caird*, to cross 800 miles of the roughest, coldest seas in the world to seek help in the nearest human settlement, South Georgia.



Shackleton and his team make camp in Antarctica Photo: GETTY

As we sailed the same waters in our solid, 385ft ship, spray bounced off the windows of the bridge high on deck six. We exchanged looks, all of us imagining what it must have been like to be out in gale-force winds in a 20ft open boat.

For Shackleton, even land brought little respite. South Georgia's weather forced him and his men ashore on the bleak south of the island. We arrived in the north to be greeted by one of nature's spectacular sights: a beach full of grunting, burping elephant seals – mothers, pups, and waiting bulls roaring at any incursion by another male; bolshie barking fur seals snapping at anything that moved; and tens of thousands of king penguins and their adult-sized fluffy brown chicks squawking, moulting and just hanging out waiting for summer.

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Unfortunately for Shackleton, there were no seals or penguins where he landed, and he and his starving companions were forced to poach albatross chicks from the nest. We saw these vast babies sitting stolidly on their tussock grass mounds just feet away. We were treated to a rare show, as a wandering albatross parent (the largest flying bird on Earth) swooped in and regurgitated fish-mush repeatedly into its primeval pink beak for its squawking offspring to consume hungrily.



A ship explores the coastline of South Georgia Photo: ALAMY

Shackleton needed more than dinner, however, and the only way to the whaling station now lay over the treacherous glacier-divided crags of this hostile sub-Antarctic island. Shackleton, Worsley and Tom Crean set out through appalling weather, racing against the onset of winter. They trudged, climbed, scrambled and slid, guessed routes and retraced their steps, until at 7am on May 19 1916 they heard the first sound of civilisation since December 1914: "Never had any one of us heard sweeter music," wrote Shackleton, than the steam whistle calling the Stromness whalers to work.

We saw this very brass whistle in South Georgia's only settlement, the tiny British outpost of Grytviken. It hangs in the museum along with the remnants of the almanac Worsley used to navigate from Elephant Island and a replica of the – astonishingly tiny – James Caird itself.

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Unlike Stromness, where we approached the buildings no closer than 200m (656ft) due to uncleared asbestos, the Grytviken whaling station has been restored. We wandered between the rusty carcasses of blubber boilers and whaling ships, to keep a local tradition in the small hillside cemetery. Sir Ernest Shackleton died in South Georgia in 1922 and we gathered around his grave, which, unlike any other, faces due south. Ray McMahon, a veteran of Antarctic exploration and an inveterate on-board storyteller, led us in a toast (a plastic cup of whisky) to “The Boss”.

As custom dictates, we threw the second half of the amber nectar on to the grave of the man who will always be remembered for the astonishing achievement of bringing every member of his expedition home alive.



A memorial to Shackleton Photo: GETTY

Shackleton, Worsley and Crean stopped at the top of the hill behind Stromness and shook hands in understated but heartfelt celebration, before slithering through the icy water of the falls on to the plain below. After 39 hours of non-stop trekking, a year without a change of clothes and 18 months in the harshest wilderness on Earth, they walked into the whaling station manager’s house.

The building is still there, awaiting funds for renovation. It is possible to do the “Shackleton Trek”, the last 3.7 miles of his journey from Fortuna Bay to Stromness, but we arrived too early in the season and the snow was too deep, so we walked out from Stromness to the waterfall and clambered up its mossy side to see the view that meant so much to Sir Henry Ernest Shackleton.

Shadowing Shackleton

The ice-strengthened Akademik Ioffe and the Akademik Sergey Vavilov are operated by One Ocean Expeditions (oneoceanexpeditions.com).

Juliet Rix travelled with Steppes Travel (0843 778 9926; steppestravel.com), which offers 18-night voyages to Antarctica (sailing from Ushuaia) from next month until March 2016. Prices start at £7,995, including shore excursions and specialist clothing. Flights excluded.

Cruises sail from Ushuaia in Argentina. British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) flies daily from London to Buenos Aires, where flights connect to Ushuaia. A return flight costs from around £700.

A set of rare medals awarded to explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton for his Antarctic expeditions will go up for auction at Christie’s in London on October 8.

The set includes the Royal Geographic Society’s Silver Medal, awarded for his part in the landmark British Antarctic expedition aboard Discovery, valued at between £20,000 and £40,000.

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There are several Shackleton voyages taking place next year Photo: GETTY

More Shackleton voyages

Expedition ship Silver Explorer (0844 251 0833; silversea.com) will mark the 100-year anniversary of Shackleton's Endurance expedition with three Antarctica voyages in January, February (this voyage is waitlisted) and December 2016. The 18-day voyages visit the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, Elephant Island and the Antarctic Peninsula. From £13,550 per person including excursions but excluding flights.

Quark Expeditions (020 3514 2712; quarkexpeditions.com) is offering a 16-day South Georgia and Antarctic Peninsula: Penguin Safari, with visits to South Georgia's famed king penguin rookeries, historic whaling stations and Shackleton's final resting place. Prices start from £6,700 per person travelling on Ocean Endeavour. Includes return flight and some excursions. Available from February 9-16 2016.

A 16-night voyage through the fabled Northwest Passage on board the privately chartered Akademik Ioffe departs for the Arctic in August 2017 with The Ultimate Travel Company (020 7386 4646; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk). The Akademik Ioffe took part in the search for the recently discovered HMS Erebus, part of Franklin's doomed 1845 expedition. Arctic expert Dr Huw Lewis-Jones will join the cruise. Prices from £8,840 per person including return flight.

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