

COULD YOU CROSS THE ANTARCTIC CIRCLE?

Brave the journey south to this frozen wilderness and you'll find unclimbed peaks, place names like Exasperation Inlet and Danger Islands, and a British surveying base abandoned due to encroaching ice — all stark reminders that the Great White Continent is hostile to humans. But the hardships are worth enduring for the spectacular landscapes and wildlife

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **NIGEL TISDALL**



ON THE BLEAK AND CHILLY SHORES OF CUVERVILLE ISLAND, BLEACHED WHALEBONES LIE STREWN ACROSS THE ROCKS LIKE A SMASHED ONION. IT'S HERE THAT AROUND 7,000 PAIRS OF GENTOO PENGUINS — THE LARGEST ROOKERY IN THE ANTARCTIC PENINSULA — ARE DEMONSTRATING HOW THE SPECIES HAS MANAGED TO SURVIVE IN THIS SUBZERO WILDERNESS FOR THE PAST 40 MILLION YEARS.

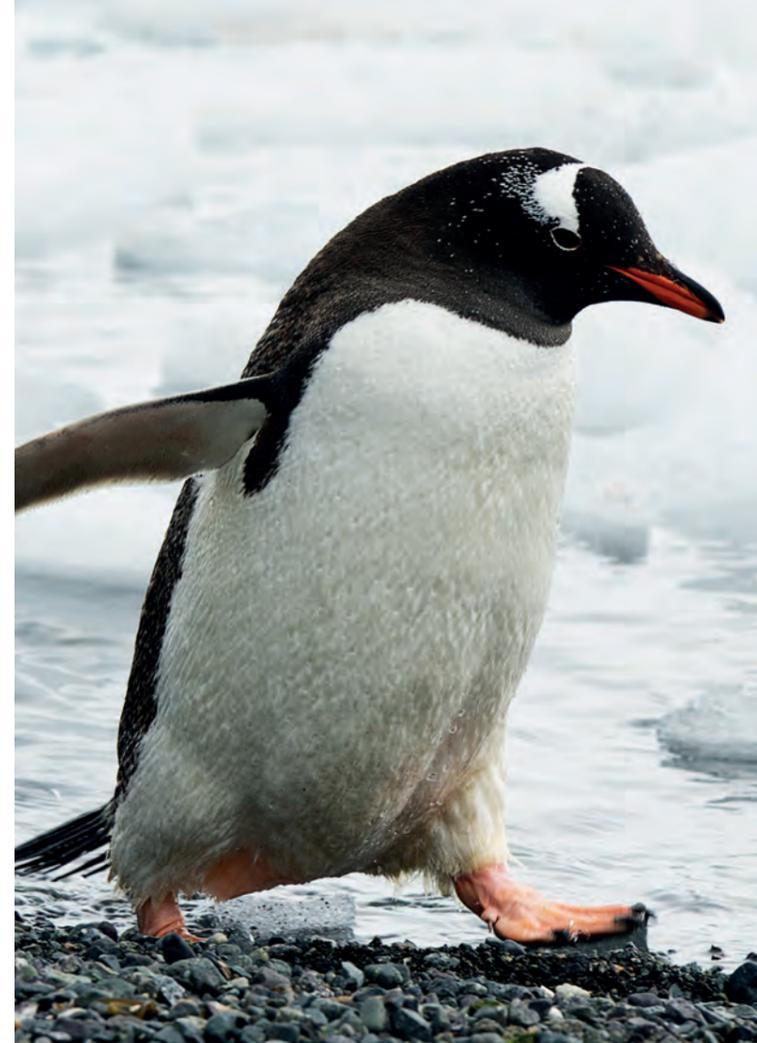
I can be certain about these numbers because among the 92 passengers aboard the *Akademik Sergey Vavilov* — a Russian expedition ship that's been making voyages through the steely waters of Antarctica for over 20 years — is official penguin counter Grant Humphries. A jovial Newfoundlander who works for the nonprofit conservation group Oceanites, he must have tougher nostrils than me, because the stench of this vast, orange-billed congregation is nauseating. Yes, I agree that these 'old men, full of their own importance and late for dinner' — as polar explorer Apsley Cherry-Garrard put it — are supremely watchable. There's that comic waddle, the long commuter-like lines as they tramp determinedly through the snow, and the dazzling aquarobics once in the sea.

But now I'm here, standing right beside them, it's abundantly clear this is no paradise. There are fearsome blizzards to tough out, and the constant threat of attendant south polar skuas, which mercilessly swoop down from on high to demolish the penguins' carefully nursed eggs whenever they feel peckish. It's a miserable scene to witness — the gentoos futilely squawking their disapproval while the predator takes a murderous nibble, then abandons the rest. "Most penguins will lay two eggs," explains our expert ornithologist, Steve Bailey, who seems inured to such trauma. I feel better after hearing that, especially when he adds that it's late in the season so the eggs are most likely infertile anyway.

That evening, in the *Vavilov's* panoramic top-deck bar, I sip a The Thrill of the Krill (gin with Campari) as Grant tells me his gentoo tally doesn't include non-breeding pairs and chicks. His scientific rigour appeals to my enthusiastic shipmates, who mainly hail from America, Canada, Australia and the UK.

No one travels to Antarctica idly — a trip here is a costly, once-in-a-lifetime adventure, and this sense of purpose instils a commendable camaraderie. Aided by the 22-strong team of guides, naturalists, photography experts and a staff largely drawn from the Pacific Northwest — we eagerly share wildlife sightings, help one another to master the complexity of digital cameras, and lend a hand as we struggle into our polar-grade outdoor gear and life jackets.

Unlike most voyages that set off from the southern tip of South America every austral summer to sail around the islands and bays fringing the west coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, our journey has a specific goal.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT: Gentoo penguin; the expedition ship, *Akademik Sergey Vavilov*; ruined whaling boat, Mikkelsen Harbor; rigid-inflatable boat excursion

PREVIOUS PAGES: Close encounter with an iceberg near Pléneau Island



FROM TOP: Glacier-viewing in Paradise Harbor; sparring fur seals
RIGHT: One Ocean Expeditions guide



IT'S DEFINITELY NOT A CRUISE. "WE DON'T LIKE THE 'C' WORD," QUIPS ASSISTANT EXPEDITION LEADER CODY BURWELL AS HE OUTLINES A PROPOSED ITINERARY THAT SEEMS TO FALL APART ALMOST AS SOON AS HE UTTERS IT

We've chosen to venture further south than others in an attempt to cross the Antarctic Circle, the most southerly of the five major circles of latitude. Make it to this seriously remote destination, and you really have accomplished something rare and wonderful.

Reaching this snowy grail is by no means a given, which is why One Ocean Expeditions, the organiser of my 11-day odyssey departing from Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands, bills this as a 'quest'. And it's definitely not a cruise. "We don't like the 'C' word," quips assistant expedition leader Cody Burwell as he outlines a proposed itinerary that seems to fall apart almost as soon as he utters it.

Our initial plan, after two days sailing south, is to make our first sighting of the continent at Elephant Island, the desolate isle in the South Shetlands archipelago, where, in 1916, polar hero Ernest Shackleton and his men sought refuge following the loss of their ship *Endurance*. I study the maritime charts up on the bridge, and notice the place names that have been slapped onto this harsh world; it's clear that those before us had much worse to contend with. Exasperation Inlet, Danger Islands, Cape Disappointment — there's even the rather brilliant Punta Shiver.

Instead, we first behold the Great White Continent at Turret Point on King George Island, the largest of the South Shetland Islands — a fitting place to start as 2019 marks the bicentenary of the accidental discovery of the archipelago in February 1819 by Englishman William Smith. He was the captain of *The Williams*, a cargo-laden brig that had been blown off course while trying to round Cape Horn. Although unable to land, Smith returned that October to step ashore, raise three cheers for King George III and proudly plant the Union Jack.

Most historians consider this to be man's first proper encounter with Antarctica, although the momentousness of the event took a while to sink in. 'A new land has been discovered,' the *New-York Mercantile Advertiser* reported tersely, adding that 'the Captain landed, found it covered with snow, [with] an abundance of seals and whales — no inhabitants'.

No surprises there, then — my fellow travellers and I have been gazing into the glassy crevices of luminous blue glaciers and admiring colossal mountain peaks that have never felt the tread of a human's boot; their snowy flanks strangely splashed with a pink algae that suggests there's been some dreadful massacre. But as we now follow in Smith's wake, nosing about the snowy wilds in a warm, ice-strengthened ship kitted out with a sauna, masseur and excellent chocolate brownies, I still feel like an explorer.

Each day brings fresh revelations — it could be the vast and humbling size of an iceberg, or the distant thunder from an unseen avalanche. Up in the ship's well-stocked library I read that the Macaroni penguin is so named because its golden crest reminded sailors of the dyed hair of 18th-century dandies newly returned from their Grand Tour of Italy. Down in the presentation room, there's an illuminating lecture on the penchants of pinnipeds — who would've guessed that crabeater seals don't eat crabs?



If my shipmates and I have a common interest it's the wildlife of Antarctica, which, thankfully, survived the spate of hunting that followed Smith's discovery. The clarity of the dry, dustless air this far south is extraordinary, and our sightings are assiduously recorded on a chart that fills up fast: 600 Antarctic prions (a seabird), 100 southern elephant seals, a lone fin whale... In nature's frozen church, penguins line up together as if posing for a school photograph and seals float around on ice floes without a care in their pristine world.

A LINE IN THE SNOW

"So what's left on your Antarctic wish list?" I ask Steve Bailey, who's worked on over 50 such voyages and done sufficient travelling to tick off 7,949 of the world's 10,514 bird species. "Spectacled porpoises and a Type D orca," he replies instantly. Apparently there's only been a handful of sightings of the latter.

I'm happy enough that we spy humpback whales for seven consecutive days, including a close encounter where everyone shrieks with delight as a pair slip through the waves with a balletic grace that seems quite ridiculous for a mammal that's as long as a bus and weighs up to 47 tonnes. On another day we sight around 60 of them, which perhaps explains why, when another is spotted during dinner, only a few passengers get up to admire it.



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DETAILLE ISLAND IS WHERE A BRITISH SURVEYING BASE WAS ABANDONED, LEAVING BEHIND A CLUTCH OF LONELY WOODEN HUTS THAT HAVE REMAINED FROZEN IN TIME

On the sixth day, thanks to a streak of favourable conditions, we make it to latitude 66° 33' 39" — the Antarctic Circle. Out on the observation deck, jubilant celebrations are held against a backdrop of sunlit icebergs and snow-dusted lifeboats. Jamie Sharp, our kayaking leader, plays a mellow tune on his guitar, and Katie Murray, our historian, reads out accounts of how earlier explorers chose to acknowledge this famous line in the snow. Captain James Cook was typically understated with a diary entry, Roald Amundsen went wild with an extra cup of coffee, while French naval officer Dumont D'Urville donned full fancy dress.

There's a further reward for getting so far south — Detaille Island. This is where a British surveying base was set up in 1956, then abandoned three years later, leaving behind a clutch of lonely wooden huts that have remained frozen in time, their period interiors now cared for by the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust. "You're all very, very lucky," our guide, Kaylan Worsnop, reflects as we tramp through the wilds to what would surely crown any list of the world's 100 greatest sheds.

"I've made it to Detaille four times," she explains, "and this is the first one where the conditions have been favourable enough for us to get inside." Carefully brushing the snow off our boots, we suddenly step back into a world of Lifebuoy soap and bakelite radios, where a young Joan Collins graces the cover of *Weekend* magazine with cigarette in hand, and the after-dinner entertainment is Tennyson's poems or a round of Scrabble on the homemade board.

Even more remote communities await as we wend our way north. In the Argentine Islands, Academician Vernadsky Station is home to a dozen Ukrainian scientists and 3,000 gentoo penguins. Inside its well-heated wooden cabins is a small souvenir shop and a post office (letters sent from here do arrive, eventually), along with the world's southernmost bar, whose shots of vodka-based moonshine make a splendid 10am stiffener.

The next day, in Paradise Harbor, we step ashore at Brown Station, an Argentine

FROM TOP: Wooden hut on Detaille Island; passengers capturing the moment on a rigid-inflatable boat cruise





base ostentatiously painted in its national colours. It's our first opportunity to set foot on the Antarctic mainland, where we eagerly climb up to the summit of a hill covered in deep snow, then slide back down on our bums like mischievous schoolkids. This central section of the Antarctic Peninsula is also home to one of its star sights, the Lemaire Channel — a narrow strait bordered by steep, snow-clad mountains. It takes us an hour to sail through at a speed of eight knots, a regal journey during which we're blessed with vistas so dramatic it would've been appropriate to blast Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries* over the public address system.

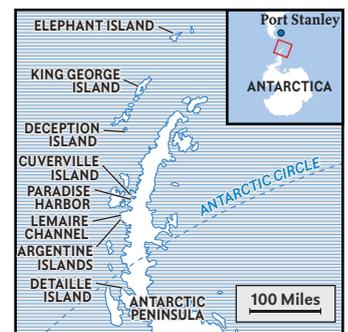
Leonid Sazonov, our highly experienced captain — and Lenin lookalike — from Kaliningrad, stands in silent command as we glide past sugary peaks. There's a further test of his skills two days later when we're invited to the bridge at 6am to witness him guide us through a 755ft-wide channel known as Neptune's Bellows. This marks the entrance to Deception Island, a C-shaped volcanic island in the South Shetlands. The mighty, rusting ruins of a whaling station litter its black sands while steaming, thermal waters are just about warm enough for a bracing dip.

"I knew this would be a good adventure," a fellow traveller reflects, "but not this good." We all agree we're glad to have not chosen a larger ship (those with over 500 passengers can't make landings), or a more luxurious one, where gourmet dinners and turn-down fripperies would seem out of place in such an elemental world. As we return to King George Island at the close of our epic, 1,600-nautical-mile voyage, the weather seems sad to see us go. Flecks of snow dance around the decks and thick grey cloud clamps down on the barren hills like a heavy saucepan lid.

There's a collective groan as we all simultaneously receive a text message welcoming us, variously, to China, Uruguay, Chile — which, we presume, has something to do with the many international scientific stations here. It's been a phenomenal privilege to visit a continent that just two centuries ago was undiscovered, and to behold its Edenic wildlife and majestic landscapes. As Shackleton put it, "We all have our own White South." And now I've found mine. □

ABOVE: Taking the plunge at Deception Island

ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

Expedition cruises to the Antarctica Peninsula sail from the ports of Punta Arenas in Chile, Ushuaia in Argentina and Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands. LATAM flies from Heathrow to Punta Arenas and Port Stanley via Santiago, and to Ushuaia via Buenos Aires. Flight time: 21h.

Itineraries often combine a two-day sail south from the tip of South America or the Falkland Islands to the South Shetlands with a charter flight back from the largest of the latter, King George Island. All ships vary their routes and excursions within the Antarctica Peninsula according to the prevailing weather, sea and ice conditions. Trips ashore are by rigid-inflatable boats with full wet-weather gear provided.

When to go

The season runs from late October to late March, with voyages aiming to cross the Antarctic Circle sailing in January and February, where temperatures average from 0C to -34C.

More info

International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators. iaato.org
 UK Antarctic Heritage Trust. ukaht.org
Lonely Planet Antarctica. RRP: £18.99.
Forgotten Footprints: Lost Stories in the Discovery of Antarctica, by John Harrison. RRP: £20 (Parthian Books)

How to do it

ONE OCEAN EXPEDITIONS offers 10- to 21-night voyages to the Antarctica Peninsula, departing from Ushuaia, Punta Arenas and Port Stanley, from \$8,895 (£6,780) per person excluding international flights. This is based on a triple share cabin and includes all meals, lectures, excursions and expedition gear. oneoceanexpeditions.com