



Polar Extreme

*Sailing through the unexplored land of Antarctica on an expedition vessel, **Iroshini Chua** discovers a colourful world with an ever-changing ecosystem that begs to be conserved*

SECRET MEETING
Chinstrap penguins appear tiny compared to the mammoth iceberg that they have congregated on



INTREPID EXPLORERS Clockwise from top left: The expedition vessel, *Akademik Ioffe*, navigating the icy waters of Antarctica; an adult Gentoo penguin sheltering its chicks from falling prey to Antarctic birds; a curious humpback whale pokes its head out of the water; the view from the infinity pool at Arakur Ushuaia Resort & Spa overlooking the town of Ushuaia and the Beagle Channel

WE SAW ITS HEAD peeking out of the water twice, a mere 100m away from our vessel. Then, silence. The quietude stretched for what felt like eternity, but in reality, it was just a few seconds. I could feel my heart racing as we spotted the mammal's dorsal fin approaching our Zodiac boat. All 10 passengers on the boat instinctively crouched down and gripped tightly onto the safety rope as the fin sliced through the chilly Antarctic waters as the animal closed the distance between us with purpose.

In a flash, the head of the 15m-long humpback whale soared above the water next to our boat. If I wanted to, I could easily reach out and make physical contact, but my mind was clouded with the prospect that I would only survive 3min in these icy-cold waters should our Zodiac be capsized by this magnificent animal. To our surprise, she was gentle and gracefully circled the boat. She was as curious about us, as we were about her.

So far removed from any glimmer of civilisation, our extraordinary experience was

concealed to the world by ancient icebergs, absorbed into our minds and carved into our hearts. No one will ever fully understand what we encountered that day except our companions on this breathtaking expedition, but that is the nature and wonder of the secrets of Antarctica.

THE LAST BARRIER

Organised by Lightfoot Travel, my expedition to the seventh continent with my husband Kevin began at the “end of the world” in Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world. Our luxurious abode, Arakur Ushuaia Resort & Spa, a member of The Leading Hotels of the World, is set on the edge of granite rocks and overlooks snow-capped craggy peaks and the Beagle Channel; we were privy to the same panorama from our bed.

We started the day soaking in the view from the resort's outdoor infinity pool, after which we embarked on a guided hiking trail in the Cerro Alarken Nature Reserve to explore native forests of lenga trees; the crisp fresh air relaxing, readying us for Antarctica.

IMAGES: KEVIN AND IROSHINI CHUA



ICE AGE The writer and her husband Kevin (left) take on their first camping experience at Dorian Bay; a crabeater seal (below) resting on a free-floating drift



WILD WANDERS Small Adélie penguins that were separated from their colony

The next day, a sense of adventure swept over us as we boarded our expedition ship, *Akademik Ioffe*, alongside our fellow passengers, who had come from the far corners of the earth for the common purpose of sailing the Southern Ocean for 10 days. Operated by One Ocean Expeditions, the purpose-built oceanographic vessel is ice-strengthened and has complex internal stabilisers.

Our travel coordinator had arranged for our luggage to be sent ahead of us to our deluxe en-suite cabin. It was located on the sixth deck, which was great as it gave us swift access to the bridge and observation decks to witness any ocean action, but it also gave our quads a massive workout!

As we explored the ship further, we found modern and cosy touches, including a lounge, dining room, library, fitness room, massage room and plunge pool. Behind the scenes, the resident Russian crew expertly steered the ship from a 1980s James Bond-style control room with an unwavering commitment to our safety.

That night, as we tucked into our scrumptious dinner prepared by the Russian chef on board, our expedition leader Boris Wise introduced us to the One Ocean Expeditions team, comprising an ornithologist, historian, naturalist, marine biologists, mountaineers and photographer. For many of us, Antarctica was the last continent in the world to discover.

"Now, let's talk about..." said Boris, "The Drrrake!" We laughed nervously. I had fretted for months about crossing the dreaded Drake Passage (the barrier between South America's Cape Horn and the South Shetland Islands of

Antarctica), notorious for being the roughest stretch of water on the planet. However, to our massive relief, Boris went on to explain that we had escaped the wrath of the Drake and its "Drake Shake", as a storm the night before had produced waves 35m high, thus ensuring that our passage across the "Drake Lake" would be a smooth sail. The Drake Lake crossing was hardly devoid of adventure though; we gently slid up and down our bed as we slumbered—luckily, we had duly "Drake proofed" our cabin that night.

As the rocking subsided to a sheltered stillness, grandiose icebergs, carving glaciers and marshmallow mountains announced our arrival in Antarctica. Navigating the incredibly scenic but narrow Lemaire Channel, also known as the Kodak Gap because its picturesque setting, was nothing short of breathtaking.

The expedition vessel's capacity is capped at 97 passengers, which meant we were able to do two off-ship excursions on smaller Zodiac boats each day. Before each trip, we would

head to the ship's dedicated mudroom where we would be completely bio-secured before disembarking, to avoid introducing non-native species to the pristine winter wonderland.

WINTER WONDERLAND

Our first shore landing was as overwhelming as it was spectacular. We were thrilled by the playful antics of a colony of Gentoo penguins on the rocky shore on Petermann Island. There were noisy chicks chasing the adult penguins to peck on their regurgitated food; moulting teenagers standing perfectly still as if having been caught in a game of "Simon Says"; a group of penguins walking right up to us with unreserved curiosity; while others matter-of-factly changing the direction of their slushy path to slide down the slopes on their bellies. The resulting chaos looked like a massive pillow fight had broken out, as penguin feathers were strewn everywhere.

With a temperature of -2°C and no signs of snowfall, we took the opportunity to camp beside a colony of sleeping penguins at Dorian Bay, a cove on the northwest side of Wiencke Island. We also decided to plunge into 2°C frigid water at Deception Island, which is the caldera of an active

volcano in the South Shetland Islands archipelago. I somewhat reluctantly decided to endure both activities, and now have two certificates and the bragging rights of my virgin camping experience being on none other than Antarctica!

The day after, we were on our way to Wilhelmina Bay (affectionately known as Whale-mina bay) to catch sight of some humpback whales. But it was the Gerlache Strait that delivered: whale blows, flukes and dorsal fins everywhere. The humpback whales logged and bubble-net fed so close to the boat that we could pick up their vocalisations. The whale research team managed to tag a couple of the whales, and we had the special privilege of viewing this incredible footage 24 hours later.

The ecosystem in Antarctica is changing dramatically faster than most other places on the planet, and diminished ice cover sadly affects the phytoplankton and krill, which in turn reduces the food source for the area's prolific marine life. As we visited the Vernadsky Research Base and sent our obligatory postcards to our kids from Antarctica, I couldn't help but wonder if their generation would still have an Antarctica to enjoy, as we know it today. 🐧



BLAZE OF SUNSET Watching a technicolour sunset from the observation deck of the *Akademik Ioffe*