

Eden of the Atlantic

Nick Walton braves the tumultuous seas and wicked winds of the South Atlantic to discover one of the world's most remarkable wildlife destinations.







(From left):
An inquisitive
king penguin
chick; an elephant
seal makes his
presence known at
King Haakon Bay;
breathtaking Royal
Bay.

Even the best laid plans sometimes go amiss. It's the mantra of every well-travelled adventurer, and early into my journey south from the Falkland Islands to remote South Georgia it's apparent that something has gone wrong.

Rumors have a habit of spreading through ships like wildfire, so by the time my fellow guests and I assemble in the bar lounge of the sturdy 90-passenger *Akademik Sergey Vavilov* expedition ship, most passengers have a sense that our 15-day voyage to the South Atlantic has gotten off to a rocky start. Seasoned expedition leader Boris Wise confirms the details; one of the ship's two propellers isn't behaving as should, an issue that was only discovered after we departed Stanley. He confirms, in his charming, calming Canadian way, that this will reduce our speed by 30 percent and throw our plans to circumnavigate one of the most remote islands on the planet into disarray.

I'm not particularly fussed. While the idea of additional days spent battling it out with some of the world's most precocious seas doesn't exactly appeal, this is the nature of expedition cruising, and few itineraries that I've taken, including previous cruises with Canadian polar specialists OneOcean, who are operating this unique adventure, have gone exactly as planned - it's all just part of the adventure.

However, it's indicative of how unique South Georgia is as a destination, and how sought-after it is among a strapping breed of silver-haired would-be adventurer, that some passengers quickly become irate, led in their huffing and puffing by two British lawyers, who we I promptly nickname the 'Walrus' and the 'Badger'. The Walrus is affronted by the mechanical fault, and bellows conspiracy



theories, trying to rally support from a company of somnolent Swedes, while the Badger stumbles over concerns that for the second time he will miss important landings, after a previous cruise was affected by severe weather. Boris takes the heated discussion in his stride and promises us his best efforts as we steam south into the night.

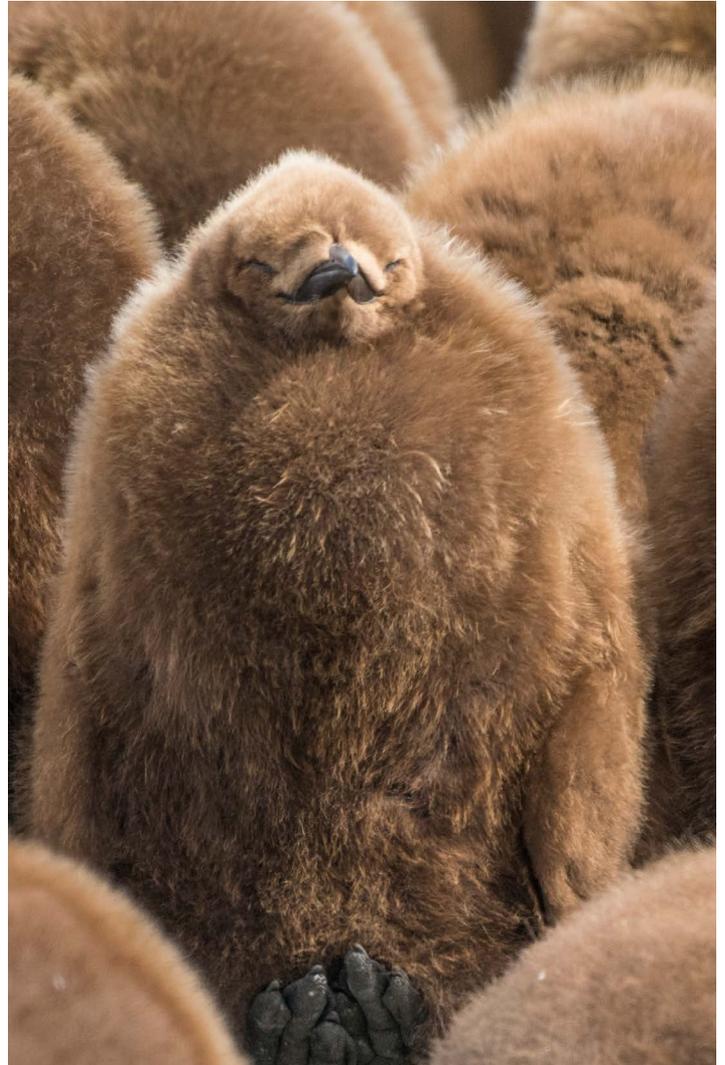
South Georgia is for people who no longer get kicks from Antarctica, and when the likes of Svalbard doesn't thrill them at all. Windswept, wild, and at the mercy of the elements, it's adventure cruising at its best. "If you were to take a giant carving knife, slice along beneath one of the highest mountain ridges of Switzerland, just where the huge glaciers tumble into the valley below, and then drop your slice of mountain, dripping with sugar-icing, into the sea, I think you would get a fair idea of the place," described acclaimed ornithologist Niall Rankin in 1946. Inhospitable, remote, and subsequently rarely visited (even compared to Antarctica, 1,000km to the south), South Georgia is a crucial lifeboat for the many ocean species that require land on which to breed and rear their young. Over two million king penguins call the island their summer home and are joined by hundreds of thousands of elephant and fur seals, and countless sea birds. Think of it as a frozen Galapagos on steroids.

Dissent continues as we putter along through towering swells over the next few days, but it does little to dull my enthusiasm as we select wet weather gear, learn how to board the ship's zodiacs, and attend lectures by resident photographers and naturalists on South Georgia's unique ecosystems. The



journey has been billed as a 'Photographic Symposium' by OneOcean, which makes sense in a destination coveted by wildlife shooters, including both the Walrus and the Badger, who prowl the decks with ice-flecked whiskers and long lenses, hoping to snap pictures of the dexterous storm and snow petrels and illusive wandering albatrosses that escort the ship south. The authentic and controversial seal skin suit the Walrus sports has tongues wagging across the ship.

Moods are lifted with the first sight of land - the Shag Rocks - jagged shards of ancient mountaintop upon which great waves heave themselves with a roar that can be heard kilometers away. By morning we've arrived in the relative shelter of King Haakon Bay, a deep-set cove wreathed by glaciers on South Georgia's northwest flank made famous by Sir Ernest Shackleton, who landed here in 1916 after escaping the ice during his ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. It's a breathtaking first glimpse of South Georgia, with towering peaks playing hide-and-seek among silver clouds, and grey petrels swooping low over a frozen beach populated by snorting, grumbling Southern elephant seals.





(Clockwise
from top left);

King penguin chicks are a huge drawcard to this remote island; sunset breaks through the low clouds over South Georgia; a black-footed albatross; Boris Wise watches over a penguin colony.

Of all the remarkable wildlife that seduces travellers so far south, these huge seals are a massive drawcard. Mothers nurse their new arrivals, jet black, baying woolly little pups with huge glassy eyes, while their fathers jealously guard their harems from potential Lotharios. Life as a male elephant seal isn't easy; male bulls - or "beachmasters" - can weigh in at four tons and each patrols a spot on the beach the size of a studio apartment. During summer, when the beach is packed with elephant seals, young males must run a gauntlet of territorial males. Fights often erupt with a symphony of deep roars that ricochet off the cliffs, accompanied by great plumes of steam as males slam into each other like staggering drunks and cling to flesh with their few sharp teeth.

Things in the engine room haven't improved, and that night Boris makes the bold decision to flip the itinerary on its head so that we

travel counter-clockwise around South Georgia, avoiding the strong winds coming in from the east and using our time wisely. The Walrus, the Badger and a small posse they've assembled demand compensation and grumble into their hot chocolates.

Boris' move pays off, and after enjoying a calm night cruising in the lee of the island, we arrive at Gold Harbour (named for the 'fool's gold' or iron pyrites found here), on South Georgia's southeastern tip. The sun struggles to penetrate thick cloud cover and cast light on a landscape of high cliffs tumbling down to hills of Arctic heather and a wide, open beach.

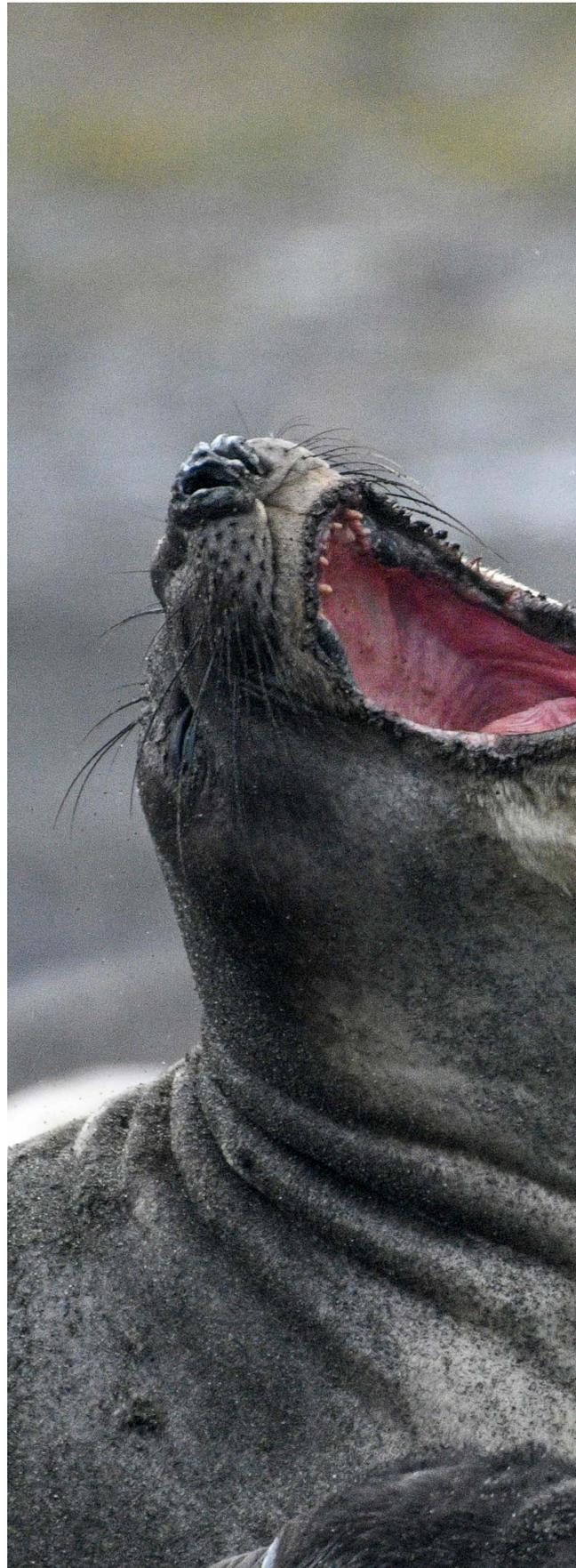
We hear (and smell) the king penguins well before we can distinguish individual animals. The colony stretches far down the beach, literally tens of thousands of birds, those still in their winter down resembling furry rugby

(From left);
Guests explore by
zodiac; elephant
seals battle it out at
St Andrews Bay.

balls, the rest resplendent in their yellow-accented tuxedos. They huddle together, a cacophony of sound as they gossip en masse.

They're not alone. More elephant seals wallow in the surfline or roar and joust on the beach; a sleek leopard seal patrols off shore; shy but feisty fur seals hide in the emerald tussock of the dunes; opportunistic brown skuas glide just above the penguin colony, looking for weak chicks; and stealth bomber-like white-chinned petrels soar effortlessly on the sea breeze that whips across this enthralling landscape. With guidance from the ship's naturalists, we gently approach the penguin chicks, who are patiently waiting for their parents to return after months feeding in the Atlantic. The adorable little furballs are more inquisitive than cautious and I'm soon surrounded by chirping, singing penguins hoping I might have a spare mackerel in my backpack.

That afternoon, when the sun finally bullies its way through the canopy, we celebrate the beauty of our destination at Royal Bay, sailing along the base of the spectacular Ross Glacier, a towering wall of vivid blue ice that climbs the ancient valley into peaks topped with brilliant snowcaps.





(Clockwise from
top left);

The rusting hulls
of whaling ships
at Grytviken; king
penguins fresh from the
surf at Gold Harbour; a
new elephant seal pup at
King Haakon Bay.

St Andrews is a coveted destination for South Georgia-bound travellers and our landing here, on a wide, flat beach backed by low hills, almost brings a smile to the Badger's face. Here, among the 150,000 king penguins of an almost year-round colony, we're guided through the specialist techniques of wildlife photography by Gerhard "Guts" Swanepoel, a South African naturalist with his own photographic safari business in southern Africa. While many of the "resident photographers" disappear at each landing to fill their own Getty's portfolios, leaving passengers in their wake, Guts sticks with the group, giving suggestions on alternative compositions, shutter speeds and ISO with infinite patience and humor. He's a saving grace for many guests who had signed up for the trip with hearts set on returning home with their own images of this majestic landscape.

That afternoon there's time to delve into man's often destructive role on South Georgia. While the island is now fiercely protected, it wasn't long after South Georgia's discovery that sealers and whalers arrived from Europe, killing a total of 175,250 whales at stations like Grytviken, the rusted remains of which lie at the end of a deep inlet. Here, we pause for a moment to toast the bravery and resolution of "The Boss", Sir Ernest Shackleton, at his final resting place overlooking the bay, before joining scientists from the nearby British Antarctic Survey base, the only people to live on South Georgia, to explore the hulking hulls of whaling ships and the beautifully-preserved egg yolk-yellow Whalers' Church.

The ship's many avid birders have their moment one chilly morning at Prion Island, a lonely, weather-whipped rock in the Bay of Isles that's a rat-free sanctuary for albatrosses. Special permission is required to visit this vital





reserve and we're rewarded with spectacular displays of aerial acrobatics as black-browed, grey-headed and light-mantle albatrosses join giant, storm and cape petrels in soaring over the undulating landscape at breathtaking speed. A 'waddle' of Gentoo penguins watches, seemingly amused, as the Walrus lies on the beach in his seal suit to get a photo. Many of us are half expecting an opportunistic orca to mistake him for an easy breakfast.

Despite the mechanical issues (and the grumblings they cause), we've managed to land at all of South Georgia's top destinations, a miracle in itself, but Boris has left possibly the best for last and we arrive at Salisbury Plain in the afternoon, amber light bathing this vast penguin rookery in gold. It's a spectacular last glimpse of the island, a vast plain populated by 60,000 king penguin chicks, snow covered Pyramid Peak towering over the bay behind, and I rest my camera gear beside a trio of inquisitive rug rats to soak up this unforgettable sight

before the four-day crossing back to civilisation.

Chances are, if the prop hadn't malfunctioned, the high winds and foul weather of earlier in the week would have made landing at many of the east coast sites impossible, so I raise my thermos and give a toast to Mother Nature, to OneOcean's expert crew, and to the blissful unpredictability of travel in the world's farthest flung corners.

Travel Essentials

Fly: American Airlines from Hong Kong to Punta Arenas via Dallas. www.aa.com

Cruise: OneOcean's next South Georgia in-Depth Photography Symposium is November 7-21, 2019 aboard the line's new RCGS Resolute, from US\$13,195 per person, twin share. www.oneoceanexpeditions.com