



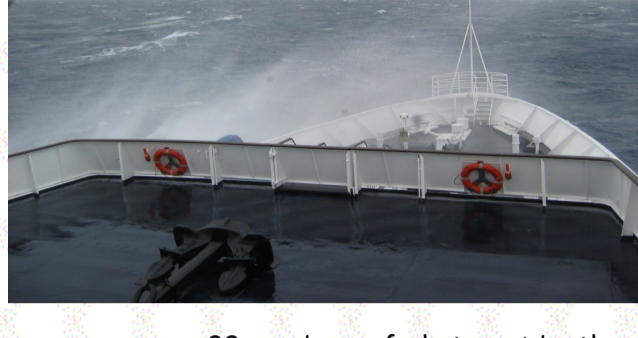
Antarctica

Penguins and Politics; Antarctica

December 2003/January 2004

A trip to Antarctica is something that must be earned. It's more than just writing a check. It's also a test of endurance. We flew three hours to Dallas to connect for our eleven hour oversold and jam-packed flight to Buenos Aires. We spent a day recovering in Buenos Aires. The Argentinean peso has been greatly devalued and things were a lot cheaper than on our previous visit two years ago. Our next flight was for 4 and a half hours to Ushuaia; the world's most Southern city. Madge the GPS said we had traveled for 7000 miles before even boarding our ship to head about 1000 miles further south.

After a short trip to Tierra del Fuego National Park, we boarded the Clipper Adventurer. She's 328 feet long and carried 107 passengers, 69 crew and a dozen naturalists who filled the days at sea with lectures on geology, marine life, birds and polar research. It required almost three days at sea to cross the Antarctic Circle and reach our first destination. The average age of our fellow passengers was 69, ranging from 26 to 93. We were told that the average is much higher on other Clipper cruises. There was a competition to see who would spot the first iceberg. The seas in this area are known to be the roughest on the face of the planet. The Drake Passage lived up to its reputation on the second day. The winds were 50 mph and gusted well over 60 mph. Only about half the passengers made it to the Captain's Welcome Dinner that evening.



Amongst our fellow passengers were 39 members of what must be the world's most serious bird watching club. It seemed like they were manacled to their binoculars for two and a half weeks. There was a bird expert on the cruise staff, but the club brought their own leader. There was clearly a lot of tension to see who would emerge as the chief birdman. The group stood in the bridge and announced their sightings. The others scurried to look and discuss just what species of albatross they were observing. Then, someone would record it along with the date, time and latitude and longitude from the ship's GPS. There were at least three competing spreadsheets onboard tracking the wildlife. We sat with some of them at dinner one night and were asked "Are you a birder?". I learned the hard way that the best answer to someone who uses the word "bird" as a verb is not "Well, I had chicken for lunch".

After a full week's travel, we finally got to land on Christmas Day. This was early summer and temperatures are normally in the 30's, but we enjoyed sunshine and a day in the 40's. We were so far south that the sun did not set on Christmas Day. We used the ship's Zodiacs to make nine landings in Antarctica over five days. There are no piers or docks, so passengers wear knee high rubber boots to jump into the icy water and walk the last few feet from the Zodiac up onto the beach. We saw lots of whales, many kinds of seals and literally hundreds of thousands of penguins. We navigated some narrow ice choked channels and were able to climb some hills near the landing beaches. At one point we went for a swim in an area of volcanically heated waters. The whole continent was completely pristine and pollution free with the exception of the smell of the penguin colonies. Penguins may be fun to watch, but trust me, they smell baaadddd. We didn't see a single piece of man-made litter anywhere on the continent.



We visited areas of Antarctica which are claimed by Britain, Chile and Argentina. Antarctica has no capital and no government, but a treaty limits the activities of the sixteen countries which maintain bases to conduct scientific research. Or so they claim. Every base had a flag, and it was obvious that many countries were supporting the scientists to legitimize future claims in case someone finds some valuable natural resource. I'm not sure how many scientists counting penguins are really required here. The scientists love what they do and don't seem to mind being "used" for nationalistic purposes.



Next, we followed the path of Ernest Shackleton's heroic journey in 1916. He sailed a badly leaking 22-foot open boat for 16 days across 800 miles from Elephant Island to South Georgia using a sextant for navigation. The beach where he left most of his crew for 135 days was too densely surrounded by ice to allow for landing when we arrived, but we caught a glimpse of his starting point through binoculars. Our passage to South Georgia was considerably more comfortable. The Clipper Adventurer covered the distance in two and a half days while the GPS and autopilot kept us on course, and the lobster tails in the dining room were delicious. One of the best parts of small ship cruising is that the bridge is open 24/7. On the first evening at sea we saw a huge whale just 6 feet off the starboard bow, then felt a thud. We didn't see the whale again. The Captain ran to the bridge to find the starboard stabilizer damaged. The Chief Engineer was unable to repair the damage and, as the only witnesses, Cheryll and I were asked to sign a statement for the ship's owners and the insurance company. We befriended the Chief Officer, Rory Warner. Rich won the prize for spending the most time on the bridge and got to practice his celestial navigation during a sunny period. Rory had his birthday on the same day as the Captain's Farewell dinner. Rich paid back Rory for his kindness by presenting him with a list of the "Top Ten Benefits of Being Chief Officer on the Clipper Adventurer". He took the abuse in good spirit and we were invited to dine at his table.



South Georgia island has literally millions of king penguins. The beaches are covered by fur seals, which charged at a few of our fellow passengers. At one stop we hiked to a lookout to see a 20 by 35 mile iceberg. That's twenty times the size of Sterling Heights. Ernest Shackleton landed here on the opposite side of the whaling stations and hiked for 36 hours across the mountains and glaciers to get help. We landed at an abandoned whaling station and retraced the last mile or two of his journey up to a waterfall. We spent New Year's Eve with a champagne toast at the Norwegian church in the "town" of Grytviken. It's a former whaling station where the manager's house has been converted into an interesting museum, but the rest of the town is being torn down to get rid of the asbestos. Ernest Shackleton is buried in the Grytviken cemetery near an Argentinean soldier who was killed during the Falkland Islands War in 1982. We cruised along the coast and made several landings, one in the middle of a blizzard. The weather changes quickly, and another evening we anchored in a quiet fjord and enjoyed a barbecue on deck.



Next we set sail for 800 miles to the Falkland Islands. There were no more icebergs after the first evening and boredom started to set in on the second day at sea. Upon our arrival in the Falklands, Mother Nature rewarded us with what is a rare occurrence in this part of the world. We had a sunny day with light breezes to enjoy the nature on what had been formerly sheep ranch land. Most of the sheep were gone as the world is not very interested in wool anymore, but we saw rock hopper penguins, shags and albatrosses nesting together, oblivious to the tourists only a few feet away.

Our original itinerary was to spend two and a half days in the Falklands, then our charter Lan Chile flight would bring us to Santiago. That was not to be. It seems that the Argentinean government has yet to come to grips with their loss of the 1982 Falkland Islands war. They still consider it an Argentinean territory and insist that flights land in Argentina and clear Customs and Immigration, something which Lan Chile refuses to do. So instead, we got to spend another day at sea and return to Ushuaia. The side benefit for the Argentineans of this policy is that all the provisioning gets done in Argentina and we all get to pay departure taxes. Until this policy is changed, we hope that you'll consider joining us in keeping Argentinean destinations out of your travel plans and Argentinean wine off of your table.

We flew from Ushuaia to Santiago, Chile. Cheryll and I left the group and flew to Puerto Montt and rented a car for three days to tour the island of Chiloe. It was a beautiful clear evening during the ferry ride. It was unforgettable to watch the full moon rise behind the perfectly shaped Osorno Volcano. We drove the length of the island and visited several towns, some quaint 200-year-old wooden churches and an old fort. We met an artist selling small watercolors who spoke some broken English. He asked us where we are from, and we answered Michigan. He excitedly switched to Spanish and told me that he had just seen a report on CNN where there are battles going on over General Motors' promotion to give away 1000 free cars in the USA. The world is indeed a small place.

We drove to Chiloe National Park and went hiking through a lush, dense forest and then through sand dunes to a beautiful nearly deserted beach. Our final evening was spent having dinner and drinks watching the sunset at a "palafito"; which is a house built on stilts out over the water. This was our fourth trip to Chile, and we continue to enjoy the warm hospitality.

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