

Antarctica Trip Report

November 29 – December 18, 2017 | Written by Greg Smith



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**With Greg Smith, guide, and participants
Anne, Karen, Anita, Alberto, Dick,
Patty & Andy, and Judy & Jerry**

Wed., Nov. 29 Ushuaia

We had all arrived by the night before and after a little catch up on sleep and some breakfast we did a late morning natural history walk along the waterfront. We did see a few South American Sea Lions, both Rock and Imperial Shags, Chilean Skua and a Southern Giant Petrel. We were going to head further north but decided

it was time for lunch and time to prepare for our afternoon outing to Tierra del Fuego National Park.

We met our guide, Gaston, at 3:00 PM and headed off to the park. We had four stops planned: Ensenada, Alakush VC, Laguna Negra, and Latapatia Bay. We got to see White-throated Treerunner, Patagonian Sierra Finch, Andean Condor, Black-faced Ibis, lots of geese, and the ubiquitous Austral Thrush and Rufous-collared Sparrow. There really is no mammalian wildlife left on the island, which is unfortunately true of so many of the world's islands. The edge of the bay is the official end of the Pan American Highway, after its twisting run down the Americas. It was just before sunset and everything was glowing with that late afternoon shine. A great way to finish our day before heading off to dinner.

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Thurs., Nov. 30

Ushuaia | Beagle Channel

We weren't due to embark until after 3:00 PM, so we had some time in the morning to finish our walk along the waterfront. As it was a bit on the breezy side, most of the waterfowl were hunkered down on the west side of the natural reserve. Red Shoveler, Crested Duck, and Chiloe Wigeon made up most of those present. The waterfront was playing host to Blackish Oystercatcher, Dark-bellied Cinclodes, South American Tern, and Dolphin Gull. There was one Chimango Caracara that was wreaking havoc with the terns roosting on the grounded St. Christopher. It swooped in and landed on the wreck and proceeded to slowly walk the deck looking for bits-o-terns.



We met some of the *Akademik Ioffe*'s staff in our hotel before boarding the bus for the 1/3-mile drive over to the dock. As we found our rooms and settled in on board, we waited for the wind to abate before slowly moving down the Beagle Channel ... dinner with terns overhead and puffy, cumulus clouds made for a fine start to our eighteen-day journey to the seventh continent.



Fri., Dec. 1

Oversea to the Falkland Islands

We awoke to the sound and awareness of a very gentle roll, always a fine way to develop your sea legs at the start of a voyage! Some made it up to the bridge, while others found the stern where seabirds would actively ride the air wake searching for tidbits churned by the props. Others found the lounge a great place to hang out as we made our way to the Falklands.

We did get a chance to see some Fin Whales, along with a couple of South American Fur Seals and Sea

Lions. Probably the best bird of the day was a Little Shearwater that made one pass in front of the bow. Wilson's Storm-Petrel weren't common, but there were a few dancing along the top of the water in their black and yellow slippers. The two most common birds were giant petrel species and Sooty Shearwaters, both of which were always present when scanning the horizon. And, of course, our first albatross was the Black-browed, but a few Southern Royals also put in an appearance.

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Sat., Dec. 2

West Point Island | Carcass Island

When we awoke this morning, we could see some of the Falkland Islands off of starboard and it didn't take long to reach our anchorage in a protected bay. We could see West Point's ranch house and the small dock, which was going to be our landing location. The ranch house was also going to be our morning tea location after the hike, and a what a fine assortment of homemade scones, cakes, and other treats were there awaiting us when we did finish our five-kilometer hike.

The primary reason for stopping at West Point was their Black-browed Albatross nesting colony on the wind-swept, far side of the island. And also nesting among the foot-tall nests of the albatross were large numbers of Rockhopper Penguins. It was a 2.5-kilometer hike to get there (some did take the local taxi/ranch vehicle ride over to the colony ...), but there was plenty to see along the way: Red-backed Hawk (Variable Hawk); Johnny Rook (Striated Caracara); and the stunning Long-tailed Meadowlark. But it was the nesting colony that stole the show.

All the albatross had to do to head to sea and forage was to open their wings and let the wind take them away. All the Rockhoppers had to do was descend over 500-feet vertically, which took about one kilometer of hopping to get to the sea. But getting to spend forty-five minutes there and watching the interactions, incubation changing of the guard, squabbling and albatross flybys was a special treat. We just sat down in the tussock grass and enjoyed their lives and the story that was shared.

But we did have to head back and re-trace our steps, ... the pot-o-gold at the end was waiting in the ranch house.

It did not take us very long to get to Carcass Island, so shortly after anchoring offshore, we were walking on the beach. This part of the island was full of Magellanic Penguins and their nesting burrows, all on the narrow spit of land we walked across to get to the "other beach."



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As we walked across this narrow stretch we got to see four of the more common/obvious plants of the Falklands: tussock grass, cinnamon grass (a native), marram grass (introduced), and the gray, fuzzy-leafed cabbage plant (*Senecio candidans*). It was under the marram grass that the Magellanic Penguin would nest. Standing guard at their burrow entrance were numerous sentries, there to make sure no interlopers thought they could pass.

The nesting Gentoo Penguins were colonial in their above ground nests. What should have been piles of pebbles with one or two eggs were reduced to piles of soil given the paucity of hard material. Any piece of soil-laden grass root was definitely a prize. As males surreptitiously picked away at other nests to add to their own nest, the females were listening for the first tell-tale peep from within their eggs, letting them know that their next generation was about to break free from their hardened home of the last thirty-some days.



Sun., Dec. 3 Port Stanley

We started our morning by motoring into the narrow channel that is home to Port Stanley. It was a “brisk” breeze and overcast as we got to the Zodiacs, but we were mostly dry for the ride in. It was a good day to be bundled up as we got onto a bus for a short drive over to Gypsy Cove. The wind kept up as we got to see Magellanic Penguins on a pristine, white sand beach that almost encircled a turquoise bay. What made it so special was the fact that the beach was off limit to people because of potential land mines from the 1982 war. Not the worst thing for sure.



A few of us then headed off to look for Rusty-breasted Dotterel and the soon-to-be Falkland Pipit. We found both and then walked back to town where we split up. Some went to the museum, some to explore, and some

to support the local businesses. But what made this so much better was the fact that the breeze died completely and the sun was out. Perfect short-sleeve shirt weather.

We were back on board and motored out to a relatively flat Scotia Sea with the same weather and began our two-day crossing to South Georgia. This had been a very fine day to experience the Falkland Islands and was our last stop before we set sail for the wonderful, wildlife-filled island of South Georgia.

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Mon., Dec. 4 & Tues., Dec. 5 Heading to South Georgia

The seas did have a bit of a blow going on but nothing too tumultuous. None of the group felt any illness, so that made for a lot of bridge birding where we got looks at two species of prions, numerous Wandering, Gray-headed, Southern Royal, and Black-browed Albatrosses. White-chinned Petrels were not uncommon and we also got to see Orca, Fin and Humpback Whales. Lots of great lectures helped pass the time between meals if the bridge



wasn't the place you wanted to be. But if you wanted to see some of the huge albatrosses, you had to pay your bridge dues.

Wed., Dec. 6 – Fri., Dec. 8 Eisihul | Salisbury Plain | Gold Harbour | Stromness | Grytviken | Jason Harbour

We awoke as the ship was getting ready to anchor just off the NW tip of South Georgia near Bird Island and at the mouth of Elsihul Bay. This morning would be a Zodiac cruise around the perimeter of the bay, a bay with a few beaches, but all crowded with Antarctic Fur Seals. As we circled the bay our first find was a colony of Macaroni Penguins, some lounging on rocks, while further up the slope a fine-sized colony were nesting. In the tussocks adjacent to the colony we saw numerous nesting Light-mantled Albatross and Gray-headed Albatross (here and around the bay). Any beach of any size was littered with sausage-like Southern Elephant Seal weaners, and this year's brand-new crop of fur seals. The attendant bulls were doing their best to lose mighty amounts of body mass, and you could actually see the loss in the rear part of their bodies. Near these newborn seals were the attendant Giant Petrels battling cleanup. This was a wonderful introduction to South Georgia Island and its rich wildlife heritage.



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It was a cold, rainy (light-rain) afternoon as we anchored off of Salisbury, but that didn't stop our fine expedition staff from getting us ashore. We were each given one trekking pole and instructed how best to keep the belligerent male Fur Seals from taking a bit out of us. We walked just under a mile through seals and King Penguins to a small hill on the edge of a quarter-million nesting penguins. The shaggy-looking "Cousin Its" were grouped into crèches amidst hordes of adults. This is the largest colony of its kind, and here it was all about Kings, and not marine mammals.

Staff didn't think the chances were too good to get into Gold Harbour (most people's favorite landing) given that we were supposed to have a good blow. But when we awoke, the wind had yet to start. So we Zodiaced ashore before breakfast and found large numbers of Kings, Fur, and Elephant Seals, Gentoo Penguins, and of course the attendant Giant Petrels. Show stealers were definitely the Elephant Seal weaners, who took any opportunity for a stopped/stooped person to advance and try and snuggle. And they usually got their way. But then that predicted wind did start to gain speed, so we headed back to the ship for breakfast.

As quickly as the weather changed for the better in Port Stanley, this was the day for it to go in the opposite direction. By the time we reached Stromness, a whaling village that was instrumental in starting the 1982 Falklands/Malvinas War, the wind was blowing and the snow was heading in a horizontal direction. Some folks opted to hike up to Shackleton's Falls (the last obstacle for Shackleton between him and finding rescue for his men) and take in what view the snow left. Others wanted to go view the Gentoo colony, which had unfortunately moved further back into the mountains. A few decided they wanted to stay on the beach and see just how aggressive the fur seals were to one another. The wind died towards the end of the landing, and the snow turned into flurries, so we got to see a bit more of the landscape as we left the bay.



Grytviken is right around the "corner" from Stromness and that is where we started out day. It looked like that four inches of snow had beat us to the church and

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Shackleton's grave site, both of which were going to be an important part of our visit.

We had a group from the UK on board who were members of Ice Tracks, who made sure that explorers of the poles during the Heroic Age were not forgotten. Their founder had personally been responsible for finding Frank Wild's (Shackleton's right-hand man) ashes in South Africa and making sure they were buried next to Shackleton. On this voyage they had Antarctic explorer and retired British army officer Henry Worsley's ashes to bury on the hill above Shackleton and Wild. Worsley died in January 2016 in an attempt to cross the continent unaided. His wife, daughter, and son were with the group and they were kind enough to invite the entire ship to a service at the church and to the burial of Henry's ashes. In between the two events, we all drank a toast to the two buried below and then left a sip in our cup each for their graves. Worsley attempted to complete Shackleton's Nimrod expedition, where he tried to walk to the South Pole but ran out of supplies. He tried to complete this epic trek, but fell ill and died shortly after being picked up.

Grytviken is all about whaling, and there is a smattering of the usual suspects there, but the highlight on the wildlife part of this bay is the number of endemic South Georgia Pintail. A unique and touching day.

Once again, this morning of snow and winds changed into a fine day for our final landing on South Georgia at Jason Harbour. The clouds disappeared and so did the wind, so we got to see some stunning landscape, our final look at Kings and just a few more Antarctic Fur Seals before starting our two-day sail to the Antarctic Peninsula.

Sat., Dec. 9 & Sun., Dec. 10 Sailing the Scotia Sea



We had another two-day sail ahead of us, and we were ever hopeful of relatively calm seas, and again we were rewarded! There were swells, but not large ones, there were winds, but not strong ones. We had more Fin and Humpback Whales, also Bottle-nosed Whale, along with all those amazing pelagic bird species. The two days passed by much more quickly than expected, but then maybe that was partly because of the seas.

Mon., Dec. 11 – Fri., Dec. 15 The Antarctic Peninsula

We sighted Elephant Island late in the afternoon; the island plays so richly into the Shackleton epic, and we were able to see Point Wild where the majority of his crew remained with Frank Wild. It was determined after moving to the south side of the island that kayakers would be the first out, with the rest of us following in Zodiacs. After the first two people tried to set foot on the island, it was determined that it was only going to be a Zodiac cruise. What a fortunate decision! We ended up next to a Chinstrap colony and that was located next to a Cape Petrel colony that was placed between glaciers. But it was the Chinstraps (or one specifically) that provided some wildlife drama.



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We had been alerted to a Leopard Seal ahead of us, and we motored towards it as it sank between the waves. Right next to the Zodiac a penguin porpoised out of the water (a very long porpoise-like move as opposed to the traveling version), and then did it a second time. And immediately after the second jump the Leopard Seal exploded out of the water while making a 180-degree turn to follow the penguin. The next time the seal surfaced, it had the Chinstrap and was only 10 – 50 feet away from most all of the Zodiacs.

The next day we would awake in the middle of the tabular trail, where icebergs roam north from the Ross Ice Shelf to the south. And when we did get up, there were tabular bergs all around us! Dramatic, huge, blue and white, finely sculpted, raw, undeterred, and there were hundreds of them. What an astonishing sight to wake up to!

Our first stop on the Peninsula lay just ahead of us and that was Hope Bay. But the wind had picked up so much that getting out in the Zodiacs would have been a challenge. So, we continued down the Antarctic Sound past more bergs, penguins, and petrels until Paulet Island came into view. Paulet Island at this time of year is very close to the edge of the pack ice, if not surrounded. November and December are the least likely months to visit this island in the Austral spring/summer. And when the pack ice is near, that is where you will find Adélie Penguins. They like to forage under the pack ice, and that is their niche. So we landed at Paulet on the edge of an Adélie nesting colony that held at least 100,000 pairs of these tuxedoed torpedoes! And right in the middle of them was a significant slope of nesting Antarctic Shags with all ages of young. The blue eyes and yellow carbuncle of these birds makes for a mystical look right out of the book Dune.

The next morning, we awoke to slightly overcast skies as we anchored off of Half Moon Bay. This elliptical bay and the onshore geology are home to Chinstrap Penguin colonies. There were a few Gentoos that hung out around the periphery, along with a few Elephant Seals, but for the most part this is a Chinnie island. Lots of interesting nesting behavior going on, along with petty pebble theft and males putting on their best displays. Oh, those Southern Elephant Seals, they were hanging out with that big old antique sealing boat out on the beach.



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Our afternoon was spent winding our way to Deception Island, and then through Neptune's Bellows, the famed opening into the collapsed caldera. Still overcast and there was some horizontal snow putting in an appearance. But by the time we anchored, the snow had disappeared and we had to make a choice as to what we wanted to



explore. The buildings of the historic whaling station, or a long hike, or a shorter hike up to Neptune's Window were some of the challenges. Most everyone got up to the Window where the next break in the caldera was beginning to happen. Humpback Whales spouting offshore and Cape Petrels nesting along the cliff walls just added to the kayakers three hundred feet below.



We awoke to a slow cruise up the Neumeyer Channel and then anchored offshore of our last Chinstrap colony visit. And this was our first visit to what a lot of the folks wanted to experience, to step on the Antarctic continent. There was that first step, and then a hike up the adjacent hill, where exposed rocks were used by the Chinstraps for nesting and by us for views of the surrounding mountains. We were headed to our second stop of the day when we got distracted by another pod of Orcas, and this group was on the hunt. Spreading out every which way around us. It might have been a Minke Whale; someone thought they saw a blow in the area that was different from those of the pack of killers. But it was an experience to watch this drama unfold, even though the hunt was apparently unsuccessful. We then headed out to visit a small Gentoo colony that was on

the other side of the isthmus from Port Lockroy. We got some very good looks at Weddell Seals, and were able to get inside a restored Antarctic hut. All of this in the midst of a few patches of bare rock that housed the 200 or so nesting Gentoos. The attendant Sub-Antarctic Skuas were raising a little heck with the colony as evidenced by the empty eggshells.

We finished the day with a very slow cruise into Paradise Bay, aptly named with snow/glacier-covered peaks and the flat, glassy calm waters. Floating bergie bits dotted the water in the late afternoon sun, just in time to light up a breaching Antarctic Minke Whale. This was almost too surreal as everyone stayed outside watching the Kodak-moments just floating by. Well almost everyone, as there was a group who were going to camp on the continent for the night. While getting this group ashore, the sunset and lighting just kept getting better, it was a phenomenal light/night, and a privilege to be there experiencing the Seventh continent.

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Our final day on the icy-white continent started at Dorian Bay with a landing at the last Gentoo colony that we would get to visit. Again, it was exposed rocks for the penguins, but it was the exposed shoreline that provided the entertainment.

Gentoos were launching and landing and bathing, just putting on a show for all of us that were spending our last morning here before heading north. And a lot of us were taking in what we had experienced for the last sixteen days as we gazed over the iceberg-laden bay the Gentoos called home. A Zodiac cruise of the bay awaited us as we finished our final landing on the Peninsula.



Our final afternoon along the peninsula was spent Zodiac cruising around Fournier Bay, where there were usually numerous Humpback Whales. And it was that way as soon as we started down the gangway, we could see whale spouts all around us. Not a lot, but certainly enough to get excited about! And that was how we spent our last three hours on the peninsula, watching at least fifteen different whales diving for and feeding on krill. Whales would blow bubble nets near the Zodiacs and then lunge feed, they would surface near the Zodiacs, and some would wave their long pectoral fins and then slap the water surface. Quite a display was put on for those of us out on the Zodiacs and kayaks. A fine way to end this portion of our nineteen-day trip on the *Akademik Ioffe*.



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Sat., Dec. 16 – Mon., Dec. 18

The Drake Passage

What more was there to say about this crossing, other than it was very calm and flat. We cruised through a group of at least one hundred Humpbacks, along with a few Fin Whales, all on their way south to the Peninsula for their summer krill fest. On our final afternoon, Cape Horn came into view and that was our clue that tonight we would be anchored in the Beagle Channel. Perfect for our Captain's Dinner on the night of the 17th. All that was left was the docking of the ship in Ushuaia on the morning of the 18th, and one more surprise. ...



Photos by Greg Smith