

# Antarctica Trip Report

## November 19 – December 6, 2016

**Written by Client Karen Worcester©**

With Greg Smith, guide, with Karen, MJ, Joan, Joyce, Mary Lou, Sigmund & Claire, and Anola & Carmen



### **Sat., Nov. 19 The Falkland Islands**

Our flight left Punta Arenas on time and we landed at Mt. Pleasant Complex, which is a military airport, where no pictures were allowed. But now that was behind us and we were taking small vans over to Stanley, the capital and largest city in the islands. We had about two hours to explore this town built on a small hill overlooking the harbor. The Whalebone Arch next to the church was across the street from the waterfront where South American Tern were dipping into the water as they fed. It is always a treat to visit new communities and see how they present themselves to the world.

Two hours went by very quickly, and before we knew it, we were on a larger bus heading to our ship, the *Akademik Sergey Vavilov*. You could feel the anticipation during the short drive, and as we collected our gear and left the bus, we embarked on the ship, with everyone wearing big smiles. It did not take us long to finish boarding and then shown to our cabins. Our 18-day journey was just about to start

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### Sun., Nov. 20 Sea Lion Island

After a fine dinner the night before and setting sail from the harbor as we slept, we were wakened for breakfast by Nate's gentle morning voice. After a full board breakfast we attended a mandatory lecture on zodiac safety. A general gear swapping in the mudroom ensured that our wellies and wet weather gear didn't swallow us alive, as my first set threatened to do. It was overwhelming being "geared up" in the warm ship and as soon as I had my four layers zipped up I practically sprinted for the loading deck.



I was on the second boat to shore for Sea Lion Island. This gave me lots of time to mingle with the Gentoo Penguin, who were interested and welcoming, walking past in groups of six or ten coming to or from a swim. They had nesting areas here and there, where females sat fast on their two eggs while males looked on, busying themselves by rearranging the nest rocks or borrowing one or two from a neighbor. The Magellanic Penguin are perhaps more charming to look at, with their bands of black and white, but they were fewer in number and perhaps a little shier. We had to watch our step to avoid their nesting holes in the soft peat, both for their wellbeing and our own. They looked and acted very much like the South African penguins we saw last year.



The beach was full of action, particularly because of the dead Orca that was now food for Striated Caracara and Southern Giant Petrel. The Petrel opened their wings over the carcass in an impressive show of ownership. This didn't slow the Caracara from eating their fill; their crops bulged white and parted the feathers on their breasts. These are some of the rarest birds in the world, for though abundant here, the Striated Caracara have a very limited range around the Falklands only. Tussock Bird (or Blackish Cinclodes), Two-banded Plover and Snowy (or Pale-faced) Sheathbill, as well as sleepy (and endemic) Falkland Flightless Steamer Duck all were easy to see





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on the beach. Two-banded Plover were in serious breeding plumage and there were beautiful flowering grasses on the back dunes. We discussed about whether it was Marram grass (introduced) or Cinnamon grass (native). A very large-leaved *Senecio candidans* was beginning to put up its beefy yellow flower heads here and there.

We walked up to a small pond, where two very large teenaged elephant seals tussled. They dwarfed the pond, rearing and snorting and carrying on. Their heads were enormous! Yellow-billed teal and their ducklings watched the spectacle while Magellanic Penguin and Upland Geese sunned on the shore.

Our pace was slow because the show near the beach was so compelling, but others that covered more terrain saw Magellanic Snipe, Cobb's Wren, and more.



As we made our way reluctantly back to the beach to depart, we passed a dozen or more Caracara, fluffed and sunning in a quiet spot among the hummocks. They were nonplussed as we stopped to photograph them, just a few feet away.

Our curry lunch was followed by quiet time for me — it'd been a long time coming! I emerged for Simon's talk on Falkland birds. There are somewhere around 450 Falkland Islands and Sea Lion Island is one to the far southeast of the chain. But we were leaving them now, embarking on our two-day crossing to South Georgia Island. We enjoyed the company of two of the staff — Caroline and Ben — at dinner, and listened to Ben's fireside chat on shipboard superstitions. Examples: bananas, left turns, whistling, green buckets, green plants, red-headed women, clinking glasses, talking through doorways, and elbows on the table.



### Mon., Nov. 21 Scotia Sea

We woke to sun and calm seas, with Black-browed, Wandering, and Royal Albatrosses flying in our wake. What an amazing way to start our two-day crossing to South Georgia.



Today was an all boat day, which was almost overly filled with activities and lectures about glaciers and glaciation, seabirds, an introduction to kayaking, and tourism in Antarctica. I managed two naps and lots of journal writing. Tea-time (involving a whiskey-spiked black tea) merged with happy hour (involving red wine) and it was all very jolly. Several staff were musicians — Julia is a fine fiddler and vocalist and Nate, the

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Expedition leader sings and plays guitar; they treated us to some nice tunes. Simon played a Turkish banjo mandolin from the 1940s that I covet. For the record, it's a Zeynel Abidino Bayazit, Istanbul.

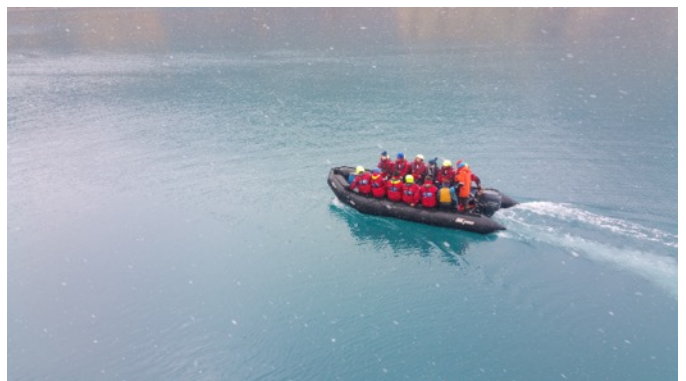
After dinner, Peter the marine mammal expert showed a short clip of himself straddling a very pissed off fur seal so a rope could be cut from its neck. Those fur seals are not to be toyed with!

### **Tues., Nov. 22 Scotia Sea**

Today was grayer and a little lumpier and much colder than yesterday, but it was still quite agreeable, especially when viewing a half-dozen Orca cruising alongside or watching Snow Petrel wheeling off the stern. Jeff gave a great talk on photography, featuring many of his wonderful images, some of which took on the quality of paintings. He reminded us that "photography" means "writing with light." How lovely! He was followed by Peter, who talked to us about fur seals. The Antarctic Fur Seal is one of six species in the Southern Hemisphere. Like many fur seals, it was nearly annihilated by hunting, dropping from a population of 1.2 million in 1822 to very few in 1908. One animal was seen in 1915. Between 1958 and 1977, the pup population grew from 5,300 to 90,000, and now they estimate the population at 4 million, 95% of which are on South Georgia Island. This high population causes impacts of its own, through trampling of the tussock grass, which is important habitat for nesting birds. They feed in great part on krill, so if climate change reduces pack ice, they may have challenges ahead in terms of food supply (though Peter notes that more beaches means more breeding space).

I got fitted for my dry suit and life jacket before lunch and it finally dawned on me that the crazy katabatic winds coming down of the peaks of South Georgia Island could create situations for kayakers.

After lunch we attended a mandatory lecture on South Georgia Island — why it is special, what the risks are, and how to protect it. In keeping with that, we also had a vacuum party in the mudroom, where all our top clothing was inspected and all pockets inverted and vacuumed of any potential seed material.





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When we passed Shag Rock (part of the South Georgia Island chain), we were treated to sun and snowflakes on the back deck, with beautiful white Snow Petrel mingling with Pintado and Giant Petrel. Later we had a terrific Orca and Humpback show from the bridge, and our first icebergs were visible on the horizon. They were huge! And it was far, far colder outside than it had been.

**Wed., Nov. 23**

### **Grytviken / Jason Harbour**

We awoke at 4:30 AM, probably because the motion of the boat had changed so dramatically; it had virtually stopped rocking. We had rounded the northern tip of South Georgia to glassy, flat, and calm seas. Practically unheard of (not to tempt fate, this first morning of kayaking!) .... We stood on the bridge and watched King Penguin and icebergs and fur seal and cracks of dawn shining through shades of gray.



We turned into Cumberland Bay, accompanied by a small snow squall, two degrees Celsius, zero wind, and zero seas. We had arrived in South Georgia!



Grytviken is an old whaling station, which still houses the (few) residents of South Georgia. It boasts a very nice historical museum, gift shop, post office, and housing. Back in the day, Captain Cook (and others) brought Norwegian ship rats with him when he visited, and the consequence of that was devastation of shore nesting bird populations, including petrels and the endemic South Georgia Pintail and Pipit; the Pipit lost 70% of their habitat. The South Georgia Heritage Trust embarked on a multi-year, multi-million-dollar rat eradication project. Team Rat (New Zealanders) baited most of the eastern coastline of the island by helicopter. That was finished in 2015, and now they are watching and monitoring to see if they accomplished the

impossible. They are reporting more pipits already on some beaches.

The old whaling station had all the facilities to be self-sufficient including a piggery, a hennery, a blacksmith's shop, a forge, a plating area, a workshop, and a blacksmith. The rusted skeletons of ships and old equipment lined the shoreline. One was the *Petrel*, a whaler. The whalers would inflate the whale carcasses, once shot, and then tow them all back to shore for butchering. A good pair of cutters could clean a whale in twenty minutes. At first

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they only used the blubber, until the governor decided this was a wasteful practice, and required that all parts be used. The meat was chopped and rendered for fertilizer, feed, and other products. The giant cylinders each stored 24 tons of oil. This place used to support about 450 men. They worked hard, seven-day, 12-hour shifts, but a few seasons working here could buy them a farm back home.

The call for kayaking came and I left the tour, ran through the very nice museum, but missed the gift shop. We got fitted with paddles and skirts and paddled past the wrecks from the waterside, watching jousting elephant seals, pintails posing on the rusted wrecks, and terns screaming at us overhead.

Our second landing was Jason Harbor. The beach area was heavy with fur seals, who generally had attitudes about us. We hiked up through the tussock, carefully navigating between small ponds and rivulets, to reach the drier grassland. There we found king penguins — a nice big group of them, resplendent in their sculptured plumage (except the ones that were still molting, and they were ragged, indeed!). The "medium" hiking group, (aka dawdlers) hiked up to a lovely view of the bay and could see the kayakers below, floating among the icebergs. There were lovely mosses and lichens everywhere, and dewdrops magnified their tiny leaves. Three South Polar Skua flew overhead. Antarctic Tern were dive-bombing us repeatedly because they had a nest somewhere nearby. The charming Swedish mother Ana and her daughter were beautiful against the green hillside and white glaciers. Ana married her long-time partner Stewart the next day. We looked but didn't find the South Georgia Pipet, but Joan found one and even got a picture!



### **Thurs., Nov. 24 Gold Beach / Macaronis**

Lots to be thankful for today! We had a 4:45 AM wakeup call this morning, and by then the sun had already been up an hour (as had Greg). Kayaking requires even more layers and gear and by the time I was suited up I had to go tearing out into the cold Antarctic air to cool off. After drinking very measured amounts of coffee before our six-hour shore visit, we were loading zodiacs by 6:00 AM. The early start was well worth it, because Gold Beach was absolutely covered in wildlife. Weaner Elephant Seal pups kept coming up to us, trying to decide if they could suckle a boot. Their mothers leave abruptly and they hadn't gotten used to the idea yet. How could anything so endearing, so huggable, turn into the brutish beach masters that lay here and there, bellowing, snorting, blowing, and charging about? That said, it was dangerously easy to forget they were there. I would fixate on photographing a penguin and turn around to see one snoozing right behind me. And they can move fast when they want to.

There were Giant Petrel feeding on the carcass of an elephant seal pup. They were aggressively attempting to stake out their claim, chasing one another and fanning their tails and generally carrying on. On the south end of the



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beach was the crèche of King Penguin chicks. Oh, my goodness, they were cute. They stand around like little Russian soldiers in furry fluffy coats. They were very nearly the same size as their parents and they followed mom around, begging for food, even though they were fat as can be.



Towards the end of my beach time, Simon the birder set up a telescope on a nesting pair of Light-mantled Sooty Albatross. They were very striking, with white partial eye ring and bill stripe. Then we loaded up for kayaking and spent another hour or so paddling down past the end of the penguin rookery to the spectacular glacier at the far end of the beach. It was especially memorable paddling next to Giant Petrel, who look like water-borne Dodos. Just as we were moving to the kayak to load up, one of the paddlers suddenly flipped, so we watched Stephi's expertise in action as she got her to the safety of the zodiac and then to a hot cup of tea.



Next up was our first view of Macaroni Penguin. They are named after the strange hairstyle of the same name from the Eighteenth Century. There were a number perched out on craggy rocks just off the shoreline. But the amazing thing was they were also huddled in the tussock grass, hundreds of feet up the slope. There were hundreds, or maybe thousands of them. There appeared to be vertical penguin trails between clumps of tussock grass, and in some areas, every available space was filled with penguin. They are said to be the most numerous of all the penguins.

We had a surprise at happy hour. We were greeted with champagne toasts and got to watch Stewart and Ana tie the knot. Stewart is an ex-expedition leader and he and Ana met here fifteen years ago. Since then they have reared three beautiful children, so they wanted to come back to marry. The very stern Russian ship captain married them.

### **Fri., Nov. 25 St. Andrew Bay / Cooper Bay**

Another beautiful, calm morning! This morning we landed at St. Andrews Bay, home to a hundred thousand nesting pairs of King Penguins. That count doesn't include the thousands of woolly brown chicks standing like little soldiers in their crèche, or the many "teenagers," too young to breed. It was truly a remarkable site, penguins as far as the eye could see! And our landing site was heavily populated with Elephant Seal. The babies once again came up with their big, round imploring eyes, hoping to find mom. I walked towards the north west, picking our way carefully past territorial fur seals, and watching the continuous stream of penguins walking out to the point to decide whether to plunge off. In this case, we learned there were many Leopard Seal loitering out there, waiting for that very thing.

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I walked back the other way, skirting around the backside of the beach area. I saw one poor penguin that looked as though a leopard seal had got hold of him, as his lovely white breast feathers were stained by blood on both his flanks. I completely missed the "supported" crossing upstream, where people were carefully shuffling sideways across, guarded by staff. The riverbanks were lined with penguins. I crossed on my own, ruffling the feathers of a few penguins, as I picked my way through large cobble and fast current. The landscape rose as we hiked up what were probably old glacial moraines. The area is heavily influenced by the two glaciers that hang above the beach, no longer able to calve to the ocean. From the high edge of the slope, you can see penguins for miles, as far as you can see up the beach. Brown babies were thick here, some as large as their parents. They came up, eyed my boots, and posed for yet another picture. It was an absolutely spectacular place!

At Cooper Bay, we found the swell had finally picked up. Nevertheless, the kayakers suited up and went out. The rest of the group stayed in zodiacs. No landing here! We followed the coastline up to an area where vertical cliffs rose out of the sea, in places forming coves. The cliffs looked like the Towers of Mordor. Jaime was testing us, by asking us to follow him into tight coves near shore, turn around, back out, and maneuver between rocks. Then we paddled back into the bay to get closer to the Macaroni Penguin. We could see them way up high in the tussock grass. The swell was picking up and it got exciting loading back on the *Vavilov*. We had to wait while an iceberg passed the bow (barely) and quickly made its way the length of the boat and seaward. Our zodiac successfully offloaded, but there were a few difficulties elsewhere negotiating the rise and fall of the landing platform.

### Sat., Nov. 26 At Sea

Today was a sea day, and the boat had been rocking and rolling since it left South Georgia. So, everyone was feeling sleepy and a little off. I napped between every lecture, and when in the auditorium felt dozy in the extreme.

We heard Thomas discuss *Shackleton: Hero or Villain?* After reading Alfred Lansing's book, *Endurance*, it was hard to imagine him as anything but hero. But Thomas pointed out that his ego may have been damaged on an earlier trip under Scott, where he was sent home early due to scurvy and malnourishment. His proposal to cross the continent was deemed by some, including his captain, to be ill-advised, but he did not





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listen. It is true he made many very good decisions on the trip, but did his ego cloud his judgement about the overall wisdom of the undertaking? In addition, the story is rarely told of the "lost men," the men on the other side of the continent caching food for his party, with no word of his status. Three of them died.

Simon walked us through the many species of penguin here — eighteen if you count the Northern Rockhopper, which is the one with the fanciest hairdo of all. "Penguin" comes from the Latin "pinguis," meaning "fat." The first bird to be called



"penguin" was the now-extinct Great Auk, which was hunted into oblivion for its fat. All penguin couples take turns feeding and incubating young. Out of the thousands of babies that may be present in a crèche, parents recognize the voice of their own. The Chinstrap are the smallest we saw, at 4 kg, compared to the King at 13 and the Emperor at 21 kg. King Penguin are unusual in that their young take much longer to mature than other penguins. They incubate the eggs for 55 days, which hatch in February. By April the chicks are almost full-sized. They overwinter May through September, during which they fast, and many die of starvation. The following December through February they fledged — the longest fledging of any bird.

Franco gave a talk on the making of Antarctica. It is interesting that the Falklands broke off of South Africa, whereas South Georgia appears to have derived from South America. In the last 50-million years, the Scotia Sea opened up, allowing a cold Antarctic current to circumnavigate the continent, which drives important major currents all over the globe. There is a rift zone in the vicinity of the South Shetland Islands, and Deception Island is an active volcano.



Dave the bartender concocted the ideal happy hour cocktail, "ginger aid," which involved whisky, cucumber, lime juice, and a stiff dose of fresh ginger. Just what the doctor ordered ... so I ordered two!

Jeff the photographer gave a fireside chat about his making of the documentary, *Liberia '77*. An interesting story, contrasting his memories of it as a child with the way he found it in the present after years of oppression. One consequence was that the people were forced to destroy their photographs. So, he and his brother started a website to collect pictures of Liberia from the past, and they set up a

museum exhibit of it in Monrovia. People were hugely grateful, as in some way they'd felt their memories had been restored.

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### Sun., Nov. 27 At Sea

Now time was flying — we'd been gone over a week! Today was our second day of crossing the Scotia Sea, and because of the headwind last night, we wouldn't arrive at the Antarctic Peninsula until afternoon tomorrow. Most of us had been a little queasy and sleepy and the sharing and trading of ginger had been most popular.

Peter gave a talk on toothed whales, including Sperm, Beaked, dolphin, and porpoise. The Sperm Whale is fascinating. The “melon,” half embedded in its skull, is a fibrous sac filled with spermaceti oil. It is thought to transmit sound and possibly affect buoyancy. Sperm Whales dive over three kilometers deep, and as a consequence have a large amount of myoglobin in their muscle tissue to carry oxygen. They live in a matriarchy, with a social structure much like elephants. Many of the beaked whales have two teeth only and suck in squid for dinner. Toothed whales will occasionally beach themselves, probably in part because their sonar doesn't work well in shallower water, and possibly also related to disease and parasitism, or magnetic anomalies near the coast.

Jeff gave us a quick look at how to use Adobe Lightroom to improve our photos, and then it was time for our mandatory intro to the Antarctic and a gear cleaning party. They'd done a great job (and are required to) with gear cleaning between stops. We stepped into a boot wash between each landing to make sure no seeds or other biological material was transferred, and the cleaning parties included inspection and vacuuming of all Velcro, cuffs, pockets, etc.



### Mon., Nov. 28 Antarctic Peninsula

What a wild array of predictions as to when we would reach the Peninsula! A 2:00 PM arrival changed to 9:30 PM overnight due to wind, then to noon, then back to 2:00 PM. All meaning the wind had been highly variable, but overall it had flattened out a bit. Thomas gave a lecture on the Antarctic treaty system: IATO. International law requires discovery and permanent occupation in order to lay claim to land. There is no overall sovereignty here, but seven countries (Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, Norway, United Kingdom, and New Zealand claim slices based on exploration and proximity), and the slices of some (United Kingdom, Chile, Argentina) awkwardly overlap (there is still a simmering hostility between Argentina and Britain). The U.S. and Russia recognize no sovereignty.

The origins for the treaty come from organized international scientific research events that took place in 1875, 1927, 1950, and 1958, that included twelve countries and 40 research stations. In the spirit of that cooperation, these twelve countries negotiated the treaty, and now 53 countries are signatories and 29 have voting rights (based on operation of permanent research stations). China is now conducting serious research, but started out badly, just to get voting rights (bulldozing a penguin colony to establish their station, playing Chinese music to penguins as “research.”



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There have been attempts by a few countries to establish "occupation" (Argentina has taken pregnant women there to give birth in Antarctica). The treaty requires that activities be for peaceful purposes only, that there is freedom of scientific research, and that no acts support or deny claims of sovereignty. The "Protocol for Environmental Protection," in force until 2041 and modifiable then only by unanimous vote, designates the Antarctic as a natural reserve dedicated to peace and science, and bans mineral extraction and exploration. Any country could violate the rules to exploit resources, but it is a hard environment to work in, especially without the research resources of the treaty members.

Franco gave a talk on glaciers and ice. Ice lays down rings just like trees, and some ice has been dated at 1.2-million years of age. When ice is compressed until there are few oxygen bubbles in it, it becomes clear turquoise blue.

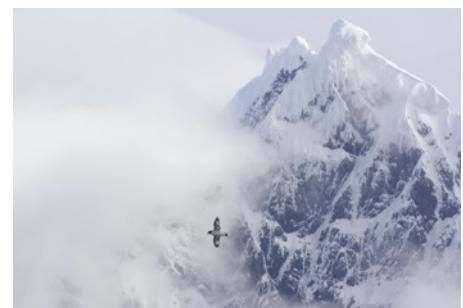
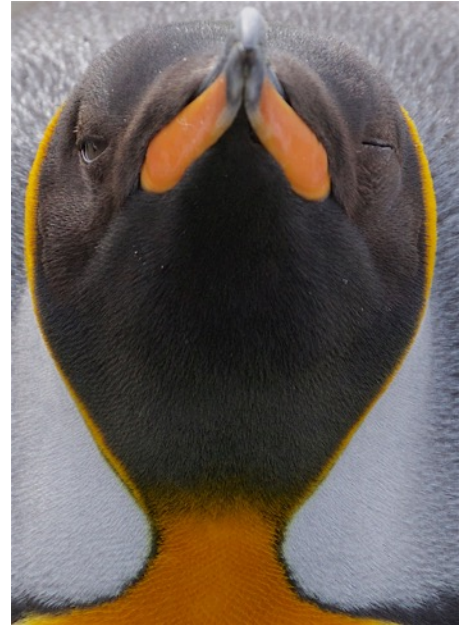
Alpine glaciers originate at high elevation and deposit lateral, medial, and terminal moraines as they advance or retreat in glacial valleys. Continental glaciers form huge ice sheets over flat expanses of land and form ice shelves where they meet the ocean. They average 2 km in thickness! In order of size, one might encounter brash ice, growlers, or bergie bits floating in the water. Icebergs may be tabular, dry docked, wedged, arched, blocky, or pinnacled. Sea ice is called grease ice as it is forming, and pancake ice results from the spinning and rounding of pieces of pack ice.

Light passes through sea ice, allowing algae to grow on its bottom. This forms the basis for planktonic life, krill, and the rest of the food chain. The ice is also simply habitat for resting, breeding, and escaping from predation.

We caught a view icebergs off Elephant Island through the fog. We were at Point Wild, where 22 of Shackleton's stranded men lived for four months awaiting rescue. It was a desolate place, with forbidding, steep cliffs, high winds and rough seas. Island peaks played hide-n-seek with us as we rounded the point. Since a landing or zodiac ride was precluded by the weather, we took our lunch-time dessert out on the bow, played music, danced, drank hot chocolate with Bailey's, and watched the fog lift off the cliffs for a quick view before vanishing again.

### **Tues., Nov. 29 Kinnes Cove / Brown Bluff**

This morning we awoke to icebergs. Lots of them! They were mostly of the tabular variety, some a football field or more in length. The lighting was amazing and our before-breakfast time in the lounge was fantabular!



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We kayaked and Zodiac'ed around Kinnes Cove as it was too rough for a landing. This was my first good look at Adelie Penguin (this area has a colony of 20,000 pairs). We paddled up to view them sitting on little ice ledges overhanging the water. One ledge crumbled beneath them with a big commotion and they scrambled not to take an unplanned plunge. The water is deep blue and crystal clear and we could see the kelp (which must be *Macrocystis*) going all the way to the floor. One bergie bit appeared to be lit up with blue lights from underneath, the water was that clear and the ice that blue. We got a good look at Crabeater Seal (a misnomer — they eat krill) lollygagging on a small berg. I stopped to take a picture, and in that few minutes was blown far too close to them. A couple of times I struggled a bit as the wind carried me to places I really didn't want to go. But it was a great outing, and we were met at the mudroom with steaming mugs of hot lentil soup.



Our afternoon landing was made dicey by weather, and we steamed past the Durville Monument (a cone shaped peak) and Petrel Station (where petrol is available) seeking shelter from the intense katabatic winds that were coming off the top of the glacier at about 100 km/hr. The view from the bridge was dramatic with picturesque icebergs, swirls of wind-whipped water forming micro-hurricanes, and brilliant sun shine.



We did manage to land on an unmarked spot near Brown Bluff that was reasonably sheltered from the wind. It was a fairly steep rocky shoreline, mostly devoid of snow, but hosting quite a few Adelies. It was a scramble up the slippery rocks, weighted down by wellingtons and pounds of outerwear.

The Adelies were comical, with their wild white eye ring, running with their flippers akimbo, hopping between rocks, stealing pebbles, scooting up snowy slopes, and sliding back down. In amongst them there were quite a few nesting Gentoos, too.



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We didn't get back to the boat until almost 7:00 PM, but squeezed in one of Dave's famous happy hour cocktails before dinner — this one was a Southern Sapphire, which was just the color of the blue ice we'd been seeing and a refreshing combination of Sapphire gin, Lillette wine, and just enough blue curacao to turn it that magical color.

**Wed., Nov. 30**

### **Half Moon Island / Deception Island**

Today we landed in Half Moon Harbor, named of course for its half-donut shape of an old caldera. The weather was cold and snowy, and not as blowy as yesterday, but I had a leak in my neckwear (which is extensive) and the wind had a real bite to it. Upon landing we learned there was a very, very rare sighting of an Emperor Penguin here amongst the Chinstrap colony of maybe 4400 pairs. He was a youngster, maybe two years old, and very sleepy. I heard he put on a bit of a show towards the end of the landing, but by then I had trudged back to catch a Zodiac back to the ship. This site had three species of penguin (as we saw Gentoo, too). The Chinstraps were not a tidy lot. Many had soiled their breast feathers and the Eau d' Penguin was intense in places. Many were sitting on eggs. They made their trudge down to the water to feed and then back again, clean-breasted, to the duties of parenthood.

This afternoon we were to explore the giant caldera of Deception Island. This still an active volcano that erupted last in 1969. The opening into the crater, Neptune's Bellows, is relatively small — hence the “deception” is that it looks like a “solid” island for most of its perimeter. The Bellows are tall, vertical cliffs, and as the boat passed through, the waves crashed and the waters swirled. The wind speed picked up even more as we were landing and it became clear that no landing was going to happen today. It was blowing and snowing and rocking and foggy, so we convened in the lounge for a look and a quick rundown by Thomas. Steam was rising off the beach in areas — this was the opportunity for a swim, and though my suit was on I was somewhat relieved that I didn't have to add that particular item to my checklist. Instead, I jumped into a tepid hot tub on deck, which was painful enough (the lid had blown off a couple of hours before). That was sufficiently awe-inspiring that I spent the next 20 minutes in the sauna, warming up.

Port Foster is a good port in a storm, and a yacht joined us there in anchorage. The remains of a whale processing area were still there, though the bones have been removed and the fuel tanks were riddled with holes cut by the



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British to prevent German refueling. We could still see the boilers and the remains of an old hangar. This area is an SSSI, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, where plant regeneration post-eruption is studied.

This evening, Jamie (the other kayak leader) talked about his amazing paddle around the four main islands of Svalbard. This was a 71-day epic journey and tale of man living with Polar Bears, which were a constant danger and delight. They kept night watch and fenced themselves off with electric wire, but still they managed to have a close encounter through the tent with a young bear trying to lick up some pudding she had stolen.



### Thurs., Dec. 1

#### Spert Island / Mikkelsen Harbour

We awoke to brilliant sun and near cloudless sky, and oh, such icebergs! It was still too bouncy to paddle though. We were anchored at Spert Island. The beautiful snowy face of the cliffs hid an opening into a magical cove surrounded by tall cliffs, with multiple openings out to the rest of the world. In some openings, we could see icebergs being tumbled by the surf, turning and rounding and grinding down to giant ice balls. Further down the coast we entered a cove that ended at a causeway where the lapping of the sea had eaten away the ice until a series of archways had been created. The "Emperor Penguin" alert went out and we all gathered to view another plump penguin having a snooze on the ice. Greg spoiled it by getting a nice picture of his red Gentoo bill. But what a fatty!

In the afternoon, the kayakers took off from Mikkelsen Harbour toward the west end of the bay, where a string of small islands hid lots of treasure. We picked and scraped our way through chunks of brash ice until reaching clearer water around the islands. We sat for a long while watching a very curious Gentoo Penguin swim among our boats. He finally couldn't stand it anymore and popped into Uli's boat, landing on Uli's lap (skirt). The Go Pros came out and the penguin accommodated, swimming under and around us for quite some time. He went ashore, thought about it, and came back out for more. Meanwhile, opposite us there was a huge commotion as a chunk of ice made its way into the sea with a rolling roar like thunder. On the backside of the islands, blue-eyed Antarctic Shag flew low overhead with beaks full of nesting material that they were taking back to their colony atop a high bluff. I watched a Giant Petrel put his landing gear down and then run for quite a distance before slowing to a stop. It was an absolutely beautiful paddle.



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We celebrated the gorgeous day with a barbecue on the stern deck, surrounded by gleaming, white mountains and glaciers. I collapsed into bed somewhere around 9:00 PM, getting nowhere close to making the fireside chat with Simon, and sleeping until Nate's gentle voice woke us up.

**Fri., Dec. 2**

### **Paradise Bay / Cuverville Island**

Today was full. It was stunning weather again, with sun and beautiful clouds that bore no ill will towards us. We spent the morning in Zodiacs on Wilhelmina Bay. This was another tightly enclosed bay ringed by mountains and glaciers. Thomas was at the helm and we spent a lot of time inspecting ice: fast ice forming a wide shelf off of the mainland (and preventing us from setting foot on the continent), the beautiful dimpling of icebergs, the crunching and popping noises they make, the shades of turquoise and aquamarine, the light passing through small pieces, lighting up their bubbles like diamonds. A Snow Petrel was in the water feeding on krill, flapping and ducking and jabbing against a backdrop of bluest ice. Gentoos watched us inquisitively from their icy rafts. Antarctic Tern swooped and chattered above us as they scooped up krill for breakfast. Crabeater Seal lounged on the fast ice here and there. We passed icebergs that defied description (at least by my limited capabilities); sculpted shades of white and blue, glowing from beneath, with grooves and notches and arches and holes and spires ... each one a unique sculpture of time and weather.



After lunch we took a paddle around Cuverville Island, where the largest colony of nesting Gentoo Penguin made their home. The island was a single mass of rock on the backside, with vertical cliffs that rose out of the water to great heights; Antarctic Shag found nesting spots here.

We had a sunset hike at Orde Landing, finally a location that was *on* the seventh continent so that we could say we'd set foot on the continent; as all this time we'd been landing on islands.

**Sat., Dec. 3**

### **Wilhelmina Bay / Dallman Bay**

It was our last day of sailing along the peninsula, and it wasn't without the dramatic scenery filled with ice, snow



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and more calm waters. We sailed into Wilhelmina Bay, full of all different types and sizes of ice, all floating on the calmest azure-blue water! This bay was also the site of the Argentinian research station (and probably the most stunning setting). All of those in Zodiacs were able to get close to the station, but those of us in kayaks were a little further away. You could make out the Gentoo nesting colony among the buildings, even at a distance.



We had to leave this postcard-setting and move towards the north. The seas in the channel between the islands were still very calm, but the blue skies were starting to fill with light-gray clouds, broken light-gray clouds. These clouds laid out dappled patches on what appeared to be snow-covered domes on the east side of Anvers Island. Very dramatic in one sense and almost surreal given the uniqueness of the setting. This made everyone get their cameras out, whether it was a professional or a phone. There really is nothing like the Antarctic!



And then just off of the starboard bow there was something laying/standing on a small piece of ice. We had just seen a Chinstrap or two and some Gentoo, but all of a sudden this was much larger, a second Emperor Penguin! This time an adult on the floating ice, and it was standing in one of the remaining shafts of brilliant sunshine! Stunning in the late-afternoon light that had massaged the snow-shuttered landscape, this Emperor stood and watched as we glided past its iced throne. A fitting end to our time on the seventh continent, as ten minutes later we had left Dallmann Bay and were in the southern-most parts of the Drake Passage.

### Sun., Dec. 4 – Tues., Dec. 6 Drake Passage / Ushuaia

We had two days to cross the “Drake” which allowed us to watch Jeff’s entire *Liberia* ’77. We also got to view Jaime’s Svalbard documentary. We were so fortunate to have the caliber of staff on this journey and also fortunate that they were incredibly capable story-tellers.

Our farewell dinner was in sight of Cape Horn, home to the sixth continent.

We awoke on the morning of December 6 to find the Straits of Magellan staring into our windows, and for those that took the last morning as a respite from the wilderness we had been experiencing, they didn’t see that pier was straight off the starboard side.



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