

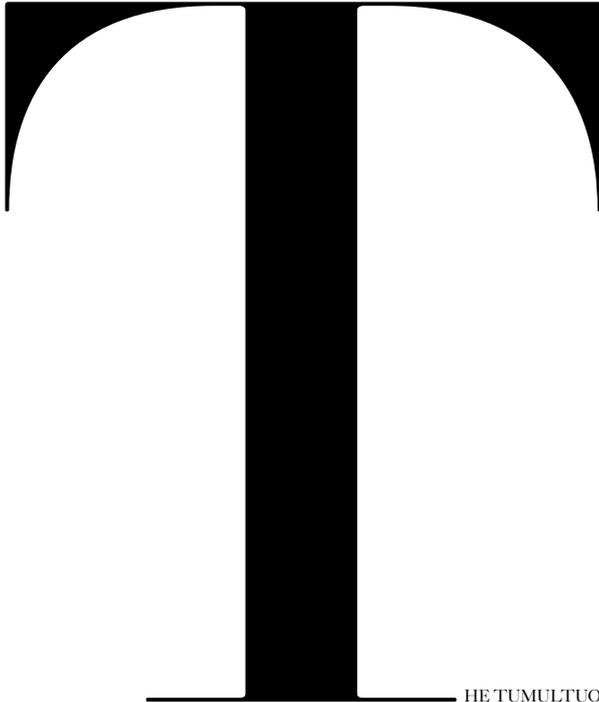
## GOING WITH THE FLOË

Cruising to Antarctica puts you in an ethereal wonderland of ice and snow – if you can handle the 10m swells en route

*TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY TODD PILOCK*



COOL VISTAS  
*Majestic views from the deck  
of the Antarctic Dream*

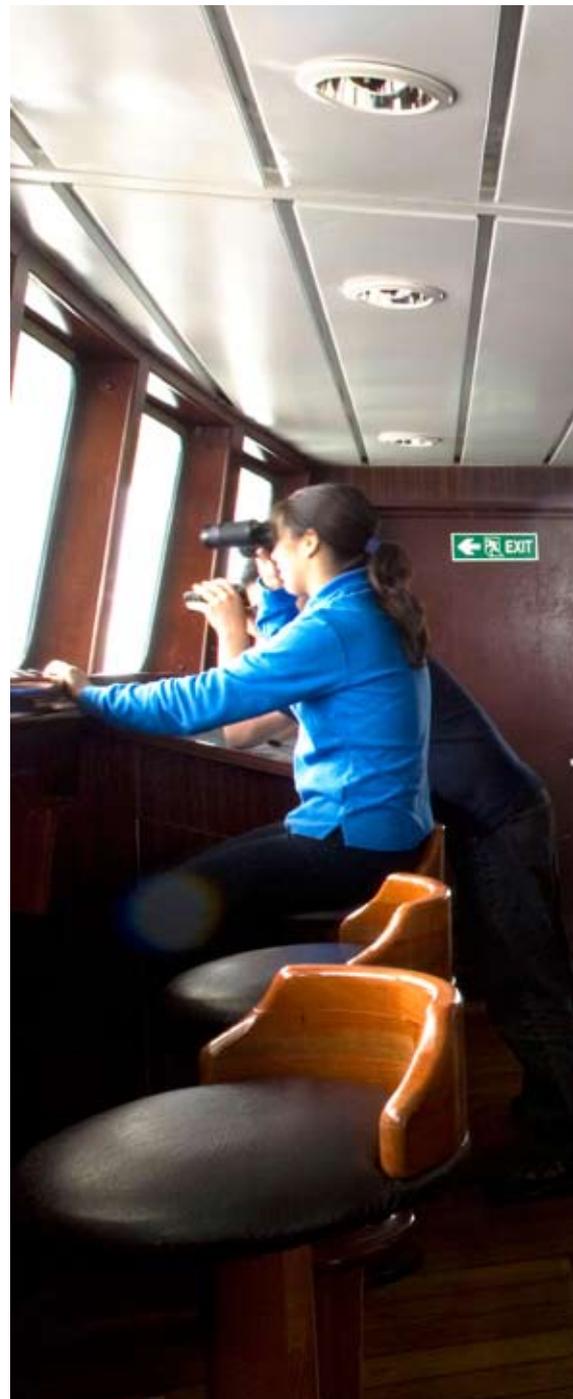


OUT OF THE COLD  
 Right: *The Antarctic Dream's wheelhouse.*  
 Below: *A typical cabin and the passenger lounge*

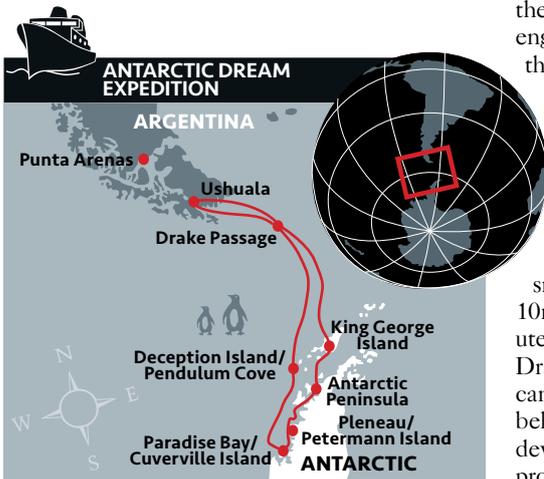
THE TUMULTUOUS ride through the Drake Passage, at the southern tip of South America, is the price you pay to see the Antarctic. Anyway, that's what they say in Ushuaia, Argentina, the embarkation port for a passage to the continent.

"Some crossings are like being on a canoe in a lake," says Bob Rowland, a geologist who has made more than 20 Antarctic journeys as a consultant for the US Geological Survey and a lecturer aboard expedition boats. "Then there are times when you just have to suck it up and get through it."

The 1,000km journey takes two and a half days. You have barely hit open sea before all colors drain away, as if nature hadn't wanted to waste any paint on the trip to the world's basement. The sky is a weary gray, paunchy with clouds; the sea biblically dark. Fish come to investigate the turbulence stirred up by the ship's engines, and birds come to eat them. For the entire journey, we have an escort of albatrosses and skuas, and they, too, are monochromatic: black, white, and gray. I chose this ship, the *Antarctic Dream*, a 39-cabin vessel built in the late 1950s, in part because it was refurbished three years ago, making it one of the newer expedition boats. On this relatively small craft, however, the rises and falls on 10m swells are dramatic. Plates, glasses and utensils clash like cymbals. People compare Dramamine dosages and wonder when they can take another. Some sport small patches behind their ears. I have an anti-seasickness device that looks like a wristwatch and probably works on belief.



**THE RISES AND FALLS ON 10M SWELLS ARE DRAMATIC. PLATES, GLASSES AND UTENSILS CLASH LIKE CYMBALS. PEOPLE COMPARE DRAMAMINE DOSAGES AND WONDER WHEN THEY CAN TAKE ANOTHER**







ON THE THIRD DAY, OUR FALL THROUGH THE  
*RABBIT HOLE OF THE DRAKE PASSAGE IS COMPLETE*  
AND WE ARE IN WONDERLAND





## CHILLING OUT

Antarctic Dream passengers get plenty of opportunities to leave the vessel and explore



☞ The waves do little for an appetite. On the first morning I am among just seven passengers who answer the bell at breakfast. A full buffet is laid out, but saltines and black tea are what appeal.

I go back to my cabin and sleep till lunch, then snooze till dinner. Then, after a day of hard rest, I turn in early, my belly mimicking the swells, until I am startled awake by the sensation of my body lifting off the mattress. I grip the pillow for ballast. It rises with me. The next morning a crew member tells me the secret of never being thrown from bed: sleep on the floor.

On the third day, our fall through the rabbit hole of the Drake Passage is complete and we are in Wonderland. The water calms, and our first iceberg encounter is a 1km long, high-walled rectangular platform whose symmetry looks too exact to be real. The sun comes out and sends a silver streak across one side of it. Color returns to people's faces and to the world around us. Even at a distance, the brilliant blue of packed ice glimmers.

"You were lucky," the first mate tells me on the captain's bridge. "Last time the crossing was rough."

The Antarctic is not for everyone. Offered the chance to visit, one person's eyes light up wondering how and when, while another's squint under knitted brows that say, "What on earth for?"

"This has been a dream of mine for 40 years," says my shipmate Joachim Benemann, a nuclear scientist turned businessman from Germany. "I wanted the feeling of being alone in a great space, to look into the horizon and see no one. I wanted to see the icebergs and feel what it was like to be in this great landscape. It is fantastic."

His wife, like mine, couldn't relate. We both came alone. The 49 other people on board come from 15 countries and four continents, and range in age from a 20-year-old who won the trip in a lottery to a septuagenarian Chilean watercolorist. They're mostly accomplished travelers. A Canadian couple motorcycled from Alberta; a Dutch pair boarded a cargo ship from Antwerp to Rio de Janeiro, and there is an Australian fellow who has vagabonded across 99 countries. "A hundred if my girlfriend lets me count Antarctica," he says.

Twenty-four hours of light bleaches out the structure of a day, so ship life becomes organized by meals and debarkations, either onto land or into the inflatable dinghies.

Opinions on the food are mixed. A Dallas woman, one of five Americans on my journey, reviews every course like a harsh

judge on *Iron Chef* and uses her fork to push what she doesn't like to the edge of the plate. As something of a foodie myself, I rarely agree with her. Given the circumstances, I'm impressed by the variety and quality of what is always a multicourse lunch and dinner, with beef, game, fish and seafood, including krill, the tiny shrimplike creatures that are a staple of whales' diets. How we manage to get fresh produce even in our second week becomes a matter of admiring speculation among the passengers, and every meal ends with a sumptuous table of sweets and desserts.

Such feasts can be soporific, but unfortunately, so are the lectures, with undergraduate-level speakers sometimes reading from PowerPoint presentations. The recitation of facts is too basic for real scientists and too relentless for casual learners. The room designated for these talks is below deck in a dark and dreary space and when the lights go out for the PowerPoints, so do I.

We spend a lot of time together in the dining room, which has four big sofas and plugs for laptops, choosing conversation over the lectures. The social scene divides between English speakers and Spanish speakers. The two Ukrainians make do with their own society.

What all of us have in common, though, is the great fortune to be here. Almost everyone leaps at the chance to go ashore at our first stop, King George Island, to climb a windswept 300m incline whose hard crust of snow cracks on contact, sinking you to your knees every other step. We know what we're after: possessing a place by feeling it underfoot and taking in a good view.

The summit greets us with a vista arranged from snow and ice, water and clouds. Wind-shaped figures called *sastrugi* arch out from curvilinear ridges. Ice crystals compress into sapphire. Beneath the surface of the water they are a creamy turquoise and when the sky is clear, as it is now, the cerulean reflection on the sea is otherworldly.

Photography is a big part of the collective mission, and we are a mobile superstore of equipment and amateur consultants. Even out here on the ice, the conversation never ends. "JPEGs are no good," one fellow is telling another in a typical conversation. "In this environment you must shoot in RAW."

Perhaps it's body heat produced by the hike, but at first it doesn't feel all that cold, either. Then the wind sweeps the hilltop and blows in some weather. Robed in layers of Under Armour and wool, plus masks, liners, and hand-warmers, I welcome snow ☞





**SHIP TO SHORE**  
*Zodiacs regularly ferry passengers to shore and places the ship cannot navigate*

**PASSAGE IS LESS ARDUOUS ON A BIG SHIP, THE EXPERIENCE ONCE YOU ARRIVE IS ALSO LESS EXCITING, SINCE SMALLER VESSELS CAN NAVIGATE TIGHTER SPACES**



blowing horizontally and the single-digit wind-chill factor.

We glissade (make sleds of our backsides) and zip down the hill in no time. In his exuberance, one fellow leaps forward, hands and feet pulled back like a skydiver, and plunges headfirst downhill.

IN MID-DECEMBER, THE Antarctic summer, a colony of Chinstrap and Gento penguins are in their rookeries, cawing and carrying pebbles for their stone nests as males and females take turns warming their large, speckled eggs. They waddle down to the water to wash off the rust-colored guano that stains their pelts and produces a pungent odor that within days becomes expected with each landing. An elephant seal rests nearby, occasionally bellying up toward the penguins, which seem unperturbed but make space, just in case.

Lately, Antarctic travel has come in for some criticism as its popularity has grown from a few hundred daring tourists when it started 40-odd years ago to more than 46,000 last season. That's still not mass-market tourism, but the region's growing attraction has evoked howls from some quarters.

Other ecologically minded travelers see no problem with Antarctic popularity. They argue that visits raise awareness, while the operators themselves have a vested interest in protecting the Antarctic's purity, since that's what their customers are paying to experience. An industry organization, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), lacks legal authority but ostensibly oversees the industry. Every visitor to the Antarctic continent gets a lecture on dos and don'ts, like keeping proper distance from wildlife and making sure to avoid even accidental littering. IAATO's rules, especially the one that limits ships from disembarking more than 100 passengers at a time, are an argument for traveling by icebreaker or expedition boat. Although the Drake Passage is less arduous on a big ship, the experience once you arrive is also less exciting, since smaller vessels can navigate tighter spaces. And, if there are fewer than 100 passengers, you can disembark or ride in Zodiacs for as long as the ship's program permits. On large cruises, the best you can do is sign up, wait your turn, and keep moving so everyone gets a chance – and some big cruises don't offer disembarkation at all. For me, the seasickness is a small enough price to pay for the experience.

Near Pleneau Island we come upon an area known as "Iceberg Alley" – like ↵

❖ Monument Valley in deep freeze. The aquamarine ice below the surface spreads into the azure in the cracks and fissures of floes and bergs. Spires soar toward the sky. A balustrade of icicles girds a platform of ice, entirely blue. One iceberg looks like an enormous block of quartz, another is set in angel's wings. Some surfaces are etched like someone began sculpting a frieze but left off before a clear image emerged. Others are planed and polished, wind and water having done their handiwork. Shapes elide, structures stack up and you can't begin to guess at the process behind it.

At one point, we turn into an alcove and find ourselves in the hollow of an iceberg, a cul-de-sac of shimmering blue with walls of ice of varying shapes and heights. "It changes every time you come," said Julio Preller, an onboard naturalist. "Next week it will all be different." We come upon a colony of penguins and the water is so clear and still that you can see them swimming as if through a pane of leaded glass. They're as graceful and powerful below as they are goofy above.

THERE IS A kind of mania to accomplish things in Antarctica. A few years ago an American couple became the first people to last a winter here in Iceberg Alley. They lived on a 13m boat in 24-hour darkness broken only by the Southern Lights. They weren't the first who tried; the risk, apart from running out of supplies, is that freezing ice will crush your boat.

In December 2007, a Philadelphia man attempted to become part of the fastest unsupported team to hike to the South Pole. He made it a third of the way before reaching for his satellite phone to make a rescue call. (His partner had dropped out with a torn ligament.)

"An Antarctic expedition is the worst way to have the time of your life," wrote Apsley Cherry-Garrard in his classic memoir, *The Worst Journey in the World*. Part of a small team of scientists who wintered in Antarctica to study penguin eggs, his descriptions of managing in bitter cold and darkness are enough to give a healthy reader hypothermia-phobia. Among other things, he details the extreme effort of moving around or eating, of letting a sleeping bag thaw until it was soft, which is to say liquefied, enough to climb in. It's a genre of literature that leaves you feeling a lesser person for being civilized and lacking in heartiness.

A LOT HAPPENS in fleeting moments in Antarctica: ice floes bob on the surface and ❖



THE LOCALS  
*Antarctic visitors can get  
close to penguin colonies*



WE COME UPON A COLONY OF PENGUINS AND THE  
WATER IS SO CLEAR AND STILL THAT YOU CAN  
SEE THEM SWIMMING AS IF THROUGH A  
PANE OF LEADED GLASS





### ICE BREAKER

Above: *Breaking ice.*  
Below: *The Antarctic Dream*

**OUR LAST NIGHT ON CALM SEAS HAD EVERYONE IN A FESTIVE SPIRIT, A SORT OF EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY, FOR TOMORROW ... WE SHALL SUFFER IN THE DRAKE PASSAGE AGAIN**

then, unexpectedly, an iceberg begins to heave. Ready to turn over, it pushes swells under the Zodiac. In one strait, a pod of whales appears, blowing spouts under the water to create a net of bubbles in which to trap a meal of krill. The horseshoe inlet at Deception Island, a live volcano, is half-frozen, and the ship breaks through ice, splitting open a lane of water, an incredibly satisfying feeling.

“Why is he breaking ice when there is open water right there?” someone asked.

“Possibly,” I said, “because he can.”

Something happens to your sense of time here: it compresses like the crystals of blue ice, then falls away like a calving glacier. Without the interstices of darkness, day falls into night, which you only notice when someone says, “Is it really midnight already?” You realize, almost surprised, that days have passed en masse. It seems awfully sudden, even a misfortune, to realize that it’s time to leave.

Our last night on calm seas had everyone in a festive spirit, a sort of eat, drink and be

merry, for tomorrow... we shall suffer in the Drake Passage again. After the revelry, the wine and whisky were put away, and if you listened carefully, you could hear the crinkling of Dramamine tablets being ejected from the packaging.

This time, though, the Drake gave us a free pass. Storm systems were moving in from either side, but there was a lull between them that let us barrel through at a considerable average speed of 11 knots, returning so far ahead of schedule that the captain detoured to give us a view of Cape Horn.

By 6am we were within 10km of the Cape, at the southernmost tip of South America and had a silhouetted view of its dark peaks. Clouds hung low, like curtains pulled not quite all the way down. Soon enough we entered the Beagle Channel, with forests on either side, and the world resumed its familiar dimensions. There was traffic from other boats and eventually the houses and buildings of the port came into view. After all of our liberating isolation, it felt like waking up to reality from a happy dream. ■

