

# On Shackleton's Trail



Visits to the Antarctic are limited to heroes, fools, scientists, and tourists. There are no permanent residents in this frigid, otherworldly land.

Icy cliffs and snowy mountains tower above us. A reddish alga stains snowy slopes, and huge fractured ice cliffs of white and blue and green dwarf our ship. Crevices in the ice seem illuminated from within by blue and green neon lights. And everywhere large blocks of ice float at the surface, some with lounging seals aboard.

You understand, as you cruise by Zodiac past icy caves and grottos, why visits to the Antarctic are limited to heroes, fools, scientists, and tourists. There are no permanent residents in this frigid, otherworldly land.

Yet in season (December through February), people come to visit and the animals come to feed and to incubate their young. All but a few hearty researchers leave when the weather changes in March.

Companies like Lindblad National Geographic and Quark Expeditions offer excursions here on small, cozy ships. On them, you'll learn about the place from their scientists and historians, and their experienced guides see to your on-shore safety.

During our two-day sea voyage across the Drake Passage, from Ushuaia Argentina on

Cape Horn to the Antarctic Peninsula, our ship crossed the Antarctic Polar Front, or "Convergence," which encircles the continent in the vicinity of the 60th parallel.

Here, cold, northward-flowing waters from the continent mix with the warmer waters of the southern Ocean. This complex interplay of warm and cold water is filled with billions of krill, which attract all forms of life. (Krill is so plentiful that if you could put the world's population of krill on one side of a scale and the human population on the other, the krill would outweigh the humans.)

## No Flu Here...A Germ-Free Destination

There are no germs on land in the Antarctic. You could handle a penguin corpse without fear of contagion. If you catch a cold or other disease during your visit, you got it from bugs you brought with you. Dead creatures not consumed by scavengers will simply desiccate to papery mummies.

While swift and graceful in the water, the awkward and comical movements of penguins on land prove a delight to watch. Hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of them welcomed us on shore. They squawk and squabble, argue and chase each other, stumble and fall, dive into the surf and come back ashore, climb rocks and ice and fall off, then try again.

We saw hundreds of sea birds wind-surfing the air currents around the waves and diving for food. They can stay airborne for days, or even weeks at a time with virtually no effort, skimming the water and feeding as they go. All court and nest ashore, but once their young are fledged, they return to the sea full-time.

Similarly, seals come ashore to breed and rear their pups, but they return to their salty home when that task is done.

These are not lounge-around-and-do-nothing trips. When we weren't suiting up for shore landings, we listened to talks in the lounge delivered by an extraordinary staff of experts in geology, environment, wildlife, history, and photographic technique. (Professional photographers gave talks at all technical levels. And there were periodic showings and

optional critiques of passenger photographs.)

There were frequent shore expeditions in Zodiacs, which can zip along at between 5 and 10 knots. You can choose to take long, medium, or short walks. Though be aware that footing can be slippery in some places. Some beaches have an air about them. But it's not overwhelming. Nor is the cold. (We tended to overdress for these outings because we did not want to get chilly on shore. That never happened; we were usually too hot.)

Strict rules protect the fragile Antarctic environment. The only vegetation is moss that will hold footprints for dozens or even hundreds of years. You are not supposed to walk on it, and it is against the rules to approach within 5 meters of any animal, but penguins violate rules. These are frequently cute fluffy chicks, who want to stick their beaks down your throat and have you regurgitate some half-digested krill for them. You might feel the urge to pick them up and hug them. This is a bad idea though—they have sharp beaks and toenails.

Our ship, *The Explorer*, lingered several days among the straits and islands of the Antarctic Peninsula and the South Shetlands, and then struck out for South Georgia, a large island (over 100 miles long and about 25 miles across) between South America and Africa.

On the way we converged with the route taken in 1916 by Sir Ernest Shackleton in his famous escape from his ship, *The Endurance*, which had been crushed by pack ice in the Weddell Sea. We cruised slowly past Elephant Island, where he left 22 of his men encamped for 10 months on a bleak and windy beach, with two overturned lifeboats for shelter and penguins and seals for food. He and four of his crew sailed an open lifeboat another 870 miles to South Georgia and then returned to rescue the men on Elephant Island.

## Get Paid to Travel

Author Ray Batson, a graduate of AWA's travel writing and photography programs, has successfully turned his "retirement travels" into an income stream. So can you. You don't need to have ever written a story or shot a "publishable" photo to get started. First step: Put your name on the recipient list for AWA's free e-letter, *The Right Way to Travel*. In it experts share tips about what editors are looking for; where to sell your articles; how to take better, more salable photos; and more. Sign up—no charge—at this special link: [www.thetravelwriterslife.com/eletter/il](http://www.thetravelwriterslife.com/eletter/il).

## Need to Know Before You Go

We have had a positive experience with these companies:

**Lindblad Expeditions;** 96 Morton Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10014; tel. 1-800-EXPEDITION or 1-212-765-7740; website: [www.expeditions.com](http://www.expeditions.com).

**Quark Expeditions;** 47 Water Street, Norwalk, CT 06854; tel. 1-800-356-5699 or 1-203-852-5580; e-mail: [enquiry@quarkexpeditions.com](mailto:enquiry@quarkexpeditions.com); website: [www.quarkexpeditions.com](http://www.quarkexpeditions.com).

Both use small cruise ships with capacities of 50 to 150 passengers. All have private cabins with windows or portholes, individual climate controls, private bath, luggage, and clothing storage. Electrical outlets accommodate 120 to 240v appliances. Both have Zodiac and kayak cruising; Quark uses Russian Icebreakers on some of its cruises, which can travel to parts of the polar region areas not accessible to other ships, and also has helicopter flight seeing.

Summer seas in the Antarctic are gentle most of the time, but sometimes the Drake Passage can be a bit rowdy. Medication for sea sickness is available on board. Both companies have staff physicians on call day or night.

The ships have pleasant lounges, libraries, and dining rooms with open seating. The food is consistently excellent.

Tour prices depend on length and destination, and average \$10,000 to \$20,000 per

person—up to \$35,000 per person for long trips. Air fare is extra.

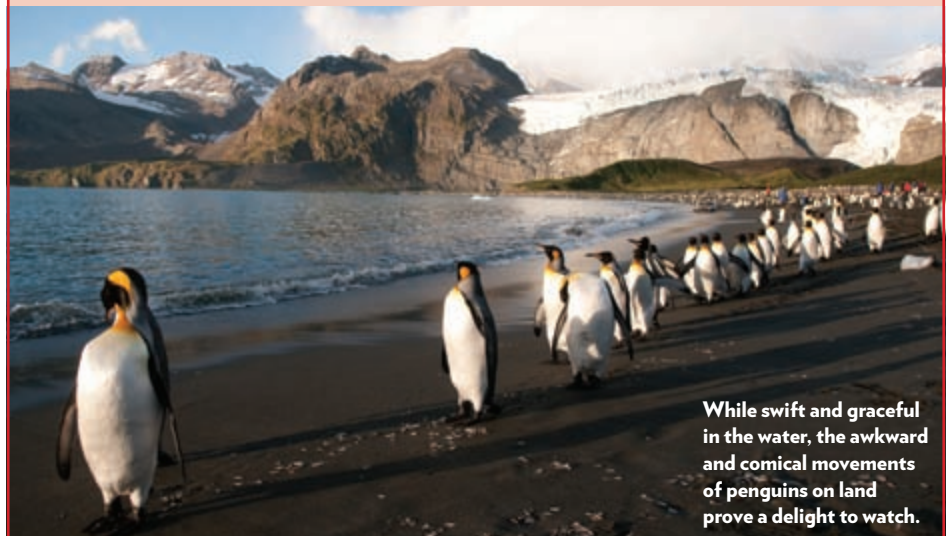
Both companies provide warm and water-resistant souvenir parkas. I'd recommend sturdy walking shoes or boots for hikes. Zodiac landings usually involve wading in shallow, but very cold water, for which waterproof over pants, long underwear, and waterproof knee-high boots ("Wellies") make sense.

Shipboard dress is casual, with one or two special dinners or cocktail parties, when some, but not all passengers dress up a bit. Always bring a camera and lots of film or memory chips. Small point-and-shoot cameras give excellent results, but serious photographers may want something fancier. Bring binoculars, too.

## Antarctica Fast Facts

Antarctica is as large as the U.S. and Mexico together. It is the driest (3 inches of rain a year) continent in the world. It is also the wettest, with 90% of our planet's fresh water supply locked in its ice; if it all melted, sea-level would rise 150 feet. It is the coldest (minus 130° F has been recorded), and is the highest (the altitude of the South Pole is greater than 10,000 feet MSL). And it is the windiest. A 2-year study recorded average wind speeds of 45 mph, with gusts to 150 common at Cape Denison.

On the other hand, summer weather on the coastal regions is usually delightful; between 30 and 50° F, usually fair, and rarely windy.



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