



King Penguins strutting back to their colony at Fortuna Bay, South Georgia Island. The Hurtigruten vessel, MV Fram, at rear.

ANTARCTICA REVEALED

If you go, pack carefully for the most remote South

By Katharine Fletcher | Photos by Eric Fletcher

Penguins. Humpback whales. Tales of the undaunted British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1915 expedition. Ice, glaciers, mountains and snow. Kayaking amid icebergs and growlers ("baby" icebergs). Camping on the Antarctic Peninsula, that reaches out toward South America.

Depending on weather and sea ice, all this awaits voyagers bound for Earth's southernmost continent, as Eric and I did on Norway's Hurtigruten cruise line's 19-day Antarctic expedition last year.

We boarded ship at Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world, and set out on some of the Earth's unruliest seas: Drake Passage between the tip of South America and the outer islands of Antarctica, and the Scotia Sea in the south Atlantic. We went ashore to hike and visit rockhopper penguin colonies in the Falkland Islands, and king penguin colonies on South Georgia Island's emerald landscape.

Then after two at-sea days, Antarctica! We visited research stations and chatted with the

scientists; kayaked alongside mushroom-shaped icebergs; and camped at Neko Harbour beside a boisterous Chinstrap penguin colony and awoke to the grinding cacophony of calving glaciers.

Five at-sea days fed our brains with information and explanations about this new world by expedition scientists. German geologist Steffan Biersack transformed geomorphism, tectonic plates, and the ancient continent of Gondwana into a human framework: "When you step onto Antarctica, you are stepping onto the ancient rocks of South Africa!"

Truly, Antarctica and its neighbour islands of South Shetland, South Georgia and Falklands generate the superlatives.

To prepare for this harsh land and heaving seas, start by thinking flexibility. Voyages here are called "expeditions" not "cruises" because Mother Nature rules. Sea ice, wind, precipita-



Hurtigruten's boots were quite comfortable on the varied elevation of South Georgia's seven-kilometre Shackleton trail.



tion and sea swells higher than 10 metres determine whether vessels can land. Sea ice trapped a Russian ship here in January 2014, despite the latest technology, meteorological tracking and an experienced captain.

Our expedition leader Anja Erdmann greet-

ed us one day with, “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! Because of sea ice, we won’t be able to reach South Shetland Islands. We thank you for your flexibility!” Despite disappointment, we sailed on.

Another useful preparation is medical.

Waterproof pants, jackets and protective gear for cameras come in handy for the many trips ashore.

There are motion sickness patches. Take them. Our Transderm patches helped us through hours of serious five- to seven-metre swells on the Scotia Sea between Falklands and South Georgia islands. They made us sleepy but kept our meals down.

To think about what to wear, start at ground level. Hurtigruten provided boots. As experienced hikers, we know a hike is only as enjoyable as your feet are happy, so we had brought our own – needlessly, it turned out. The on-board neoprene boots were fine for disembarking with dry feet from pilot boats for off-ship excursions. And for hiking. We took on South Georgia’s “Shackleton hike,” seven kilometres following the explorer’s route to a whaling station at Stromness. There he got help to return to Elephant Island and save his crew from starvation after their ship perished in Antarctic ice.

Hurtigruten gives each passenger a cozy souvenir windbreaker, so we didn’t need our own. Although Canadians understand layering and cold, some passengers from milder locations brought only cotton or woolen sweat-



Tenting on Antarctic Peninsula, Neko Harbour.

ers as their “layering.” Micro-fibre shirts, woolen pullovers, and long underwear provided perfect layering. Leave cotton at home.

And take flexible, waterproof pants for pilot boat crossings: sometimes we got drenched as we sliced through the waves.

Top it all off with protection from sun and wind. A wide-brimmed hat plus tuques, micro-fibre or woolen scarves, and gloves (or mitts) to keep Antarctic winds at bay. Suntan lotion and sunglasses are a must. We spent happy hours on deck, exposed to the sun’s reflecting rays off the ocean.

Under the “food for the mind” heading, Hurtigruten stocks a multi-lingual (English, French, German) library. Alongside the lectures, this meant we needed none of the reading material we took. And the on-board movie nights were fun.

Wi-Fi was unreliable. I used my iPhone for photos and infrequent social media communications. Eric took his DSLR camera and tripod. Next time we’d take a GoPro: one passenger took terrific videos of penguins ascending from the ocean to their colony. Pack extra batteries and chargers, plus zip-lock and larger waterproof bags to keep everything dry.



Before you go, do some research. Trips to Antarctica are pricey, a once-in-a-lifetime experience for most people, so being prepared is smart. Start with websites | Hurtigruten’s is www.hurtigruten.com/en/explorer-voyages/

Kayaking at Vernadsky Ukrainian Research Station among mushroom-shaped icebergs.

antarctica, but phone, Skype, or e-mail if you have questions. It’s your trip. ■



STUDENTS ON ICE

Geoff Green of Chelsea, Que. founded this company in 1999 to take students by ship to Antarctica and the Arctic for environmental education. Company spokeswoman Ashley Brasfield said polar regions are the company’s focus because they are

“cornerstones of our global ecosystem and offer students a powerful and experiential learning environment.”

Call that hands-on-learning for kids. Brasfield said the ratio of students to educators is two to one in “oceanography, glaciology, ornithology, geology, exploration, polar history, art, music, Inuit culture, sociology, business and innovation.” Glaciology research on Antarctica’s Koerner Ice Cap is a feature of the Antarctica trip. Browse www.studentsonice.com to discover more.

