

Trip Review



Antarctica Explorer

By Pat Ballard

“When you get home and someone asks you to describe this sight before your eyes, what will you say?” None of us on the bridge of the ship could find the words to answer the man. Incredible, awesome, unbelievable, breathtaking, stunning, all seemed inadequate choices. I think our silence said it all.

On this particular morning we had been called to the bridge at 7 AM. Around us were huge icebergs carrying gentoo penguins and seals, glaciers that were miles long, and snow covered mountains. We watched the birds, dozens of varieties, including the white albatross, cormorants, shags, snowy petrels. We were in no hurry to go to the dining room for breakfast.





The Beginning

On December 14, 2001, my husband Rich and I, and 49 others, boarded the Akademik Loffe in Ushuaia, Argentina. We were welcomed with an enormous, mouth-watering, array of fruits, cheese, wines, sandwiches and cookies. Early evening we left the dock for the Beagle Channel. Chile was on our starboard, Argentina on our port, and sea lions and Magellanic penguins along the shore. We were thrilled!

Early morning of Day Two we entered the Drake Passage. As this stretch of water is where the Pacific and Antarctic Oceans meet, it is known to be one of the most unpredictable bodies of water in the world. Frequently the passage through here is rough causing more than one passenger to take motion sickness medication. Other times it is referred to as the Drake Lake because it is calm, though this is not typical.

Our first sighting of whales came early on our second day while in the Drake Passage. Two Seis, the third largest species found in the southern ocean weighing about thirty tons, were very visible off our bow, as were three Minkes which are the smallest of the great baleen whales weighing about ten tons. The Minkes were so close to the ship that we actually had to look over the rail to see them gliding along just under the surface of the crystal blue water. Fortunately, this was not the last time we saw these wonderful creatures.

Passage To A World Of Icebergs & Glaciers

Once through the Drake Passage, icebergs are constantly visible. They vary in size, of course, with some being 150 feet tall above the water and several times larger under the water. They are awesome sights. Their crystal white and blue colors are outstanding. Many of them are extremely old and the wind has carved them into interesting shapes such as dragons, lions, battleships and even the Sphinx.

I've seen glaciers in the Himalayas and New Zealand, but none that compared to the size of those in Antarctica. As snow is deposited each year onto the Antarctic mountains it begins to consolidate to form ice. Due to the pressure produced by its own weight, this ice moves, or flows, toward the ocean. These flows become known as glaciers. Sometimes these can be miles long and miles wide. When these glaciers finally reach the ocean their own forward movement and the action of the ocean cause pieces of varying sizes to break off, or calve. The pieces that break off become known as icebergs. This calving proved to be very exciting to watch from the Zodiacs. One exceptionally large one caused an extremely large ocean swell when it broke off which sent all of us in our Zodiacs scurrying out of the way.



Gifts Of The Zodiac

Every day, at least twice a day, we left the big boat and made excursions by Zodiac. These are unique watercraft. Made of heavy rubber, self-bailing and virtually unsinkable, they are extremely sturdy in all sorts of water and ice conditions. They comfortably hold twelve people plus a driver. Passengers sit along the pontoon sides with their feet planted in the middle. The Zodiac cruises were spectacular in that we could get very, very close to the icebergs, closer than I ever imagined possible.



There were days when the Zodiacs artfully carried us through thick brackish ice and, on one occasion, even onto the ice! We thought we might have to be towed off by another Zodiac, to the great embarrassment of our driver, but he managed to free us and off we went again to look for seals and penguins among the ice flows.



Landings

Our first Zodiac landing took place at Michelson Harbor, Trinity Island. We stood among hundreds of Gento and Chin Strap penguins and two Weddell seals. Here is a little secret Antarctica picture books never show: penguins are very dirty birds. They're usually covered in dirt from their nesting area, and their rookeries give off a pungent odor. On the other hand, the books also can't communicate what a complete thrill it is to be among them. I spent two hours here simply watching them sitting on their nests and interacting with each other. The best part was watching them take their daily bath along the shore. They roll around in the shallow water using their flippers to scrub themselves. They then rub themselves on the rocks to put the finishing shine on their newly cleaned bodies. Unfortunately, they then return to the dirty rookery and the whole cycle begins anew.



At Nikko Harbor we actually set foot on the Antarctic Continent proper. This was especially appreciated by the passengers who have made it their goal to visit all seven continents. For many, this was their seventh.

Other shore excursions included Deception Island in Foster Bay where an old whaling station can still be explored. Deception is really a volcano where one side has opened to the sea. The ship sails through a very narrow entry way called Neptune Bellows. It's a dramatic maneuver: The captain has to hug the entrance on the right side because a ship is submerged on the left side and there is a huge rock underwater in the middle. You can almost touch the mountainside as you enter the caldera.



Half Moon Island (part of the Shetland Islands) was another stop that far exceeded anyone's expectations, even those of the guides. An audible "WOW" came from our Zodiac as we landed. Not only were there plenty of Chin Strap penguins to enjoy, but we also saw two Weddell seals, a Fur seal, three teenage Elephant seals and a Leopard seal. This was the first time the staff had ever seen a leopard seal on land, as they are usually spotted only on ice flows or in the water. One very nice hike and four rolls of film later, our Zodiacs took us back to the ship.

On the way back through the Drake Passage the captain took us very close to Cape Horn. We didn't even need to use telephoto lenses to photograph the caretaker's house on the point. What an unexpected pleasure to get so close.

Life On Board

The Akademik Ioffe was built in the late 1980's as a Russian Research vessel. It is 386 feet long with an ice reinforced hull and stabilizers making it a very stable ship, perfect for both Antarctic and Arctic waters.

Total passenger capacity in comfortable cabins is 110. Cabins include doubles with private baths, triples with shared baths and full suites.

Each day there were lectures given on the history of the area or on the marine life and vegetation. These talks were by the naturalists and historians who are part of the staff, all of whom were Canadian or Australian. One morning we learned about glaciers and icebergs and in the afternoon we studied the lives of penguins. Another day we learned about Shackleton, Scott, Mawson and the other famous explorers. Between Zodiac excursions and lectures, our days were filled with wonderful learning experiences and a lot of fun.





The fifty-three member crew responsible for the actual running of the ship are all Russian, including the affable Captain. We didn't often have the chance to visit with them, but when paths did cross we found the crew to be very friendly, accommodating and eager to practice their English and to teach us a few Russian words.

The food was wonderful. Not only was it plentiful, but it was also delicious and varied. One day we even had a "barbecue" outside on the stern. Chicken, ribs, hamburgers and lamb were cooked along with various vegetarian dishes and delicious salads. The sky was a perfect blue, the winds were calm and the setting was perfect. Couldn't ask for a better barbecue!

Whenever I attempt to describe each day in full, I use the words "incredible" and "unbelievable" so much that they begin to lose their meaning. I remember a quote from one of my travel companions: "I go to bed at night reluctantly and I wake up the next morning excitedly looking forward to the surprises that the day will bring. I'm never disappointed."

