

To boldly go...

It doesn't get much more remote than the Antarctic. This stunning continent, once a truly foreboding place, is no longer beyond the realms of exploration

WORDS MAXWELL ROCHE





As I crack a second vial of Ondansetron (a strong anti sea-sickness solution) into my morning orange juice, I brace myself for the next gut-wrangling roll. Life aboard the

MS Ocean Endeavour, bound for the Antarctic Peninsula, has been, shall we say... 'Internally challenging' thus far. 'Drake Passage' (said in a low ominous voice), the notorious 500-mile stretch of ocean that separates Antarctica from the southernmost tip of South America, froths outside my rain-lashed cabin porthole. Instead of waiting for the drugs to kick in, I decide to take my mind off the nauseating motion in the ocean, don my sports gear, and visit the on-board gym.

I can't help but feel slightly ridiculous as I slip on my trainers, jog down the swaying corridor and skip up the stairs to the deck seven spa. I'm travelling across the most feared stretch of ocean on the planet, to the wildest, most extreme, most remote destination there is, a place that has claimed the lives of many venturesome travellers before me and here I am in skimpy nylon running shorts, after a full English breakfast, on my way for a light gym session, followed by a massage, sauna and spa. Clearly a lot has changed in the 104 years that have elapsed since Shackleton's ship Endurance was crushed and sunk by pack ice in the Weddell Sea 50 miles off our port bow. Feeling distinctly whimpy in comparison to my heroic predecessors, I abruptly decide to pass up the luxuries, pull a U-turn, change into my wet weather gear and start going about my voyage in the old fashioned way, i.e. on deck, face toward the grey horizon, crow's feet ever deepening, squinting to protect my eyeballs from the frigid saline wind.

The shrouding mist clears momentarily to reveal one of the most salient sights I have ever beheld. Using invisible currents and its 11.5-foot razor-tipped wings, a Giant Wandering Albatross glides like a pterodactyl over the ship's wake. It skims inches above the frothing swells hunting for unsuspecting, surface-dwelling fish. The sleek and monstrous bird then soars up and over the ship mere metres from my nose. "They can spend up to twenty years at sea," says a bearded gentleman from over my left shoulder "and they can fly 250,000 miles in a single year."

Time passes and the bird doesn't reappear; as the fog thickens, and the drizzle turns to sleet, my commitment to the deck wains. It is then that providence rewards me with yet another striking and significant sight: my first iceberg. The berg approaches, growing steadily until its sheer vertical walls that rise hundreds of meters out of the black and white surf dwarf the ship. The chap

next to me squints in the direction of its jagged zenith as I do, our necks craning in unison, "That's a tabular iceberg," he says knowingly, "it's cracked straight off the Antarctic ice shelf and because it's so massive, it's floated 400 miles north without melting." The bearded gent then goes on to introduce himself as Michael Hambrey resident glaciologist aboard the MS Ocean Endeavour.

MOUNTAINEERING

Beyond the bow of the Zodiac dingy, above the cobble and black ash beach looms Brown Bluff, a Basalt Tuya (a rare flat-topped, steep-sided volcano formed when lava erupts from below a glacier). As we near the shore I'm struck by its colour. There are colours I expected to see in Antarctica: white for one, certainly blue, but not brown. Icebergs formed by ancient glaciers are scattered all around, some the size of coffee tables and some the size of buses. The only colour that escapes their avaricious walls is long-wavelength, high-energy, brilliant blue. The blue fades to black along their perimeters, suggesting a



"I'M TRAVELLING
ACROSS THE MOST
FEARED STRETCH OF
OCEAN ON THE PLANET,
TO THE MOST EXTREME
DESTINATION THERE IS"

vastness hidden below. As I ponder the vastness of the bergs and the vastness of the place in general, the Zodiac motor dies and we slide up the basalt beach.

We are a team of 12, and the order of the day is not simply to explore the coastline, but to mountaineer high up into the Antarctic hills, an activity reserved for athletic and adventurously inclined explorers, looking to gain a unique perspective.

Our excursion is being led by Pete Cammel, a jolly Kiwi mountain guide of 40 years and ex-president of the New Zealand Alpine Club; Pete has many coveted summits to his name, Mt Denali and Mt Everest among them. Needless to say we are in good hands. "Welcome to Antarctica," says Pete with a grin once we're all safely on shore "Population zero." I look down and admire my footprints, the tread of my insulated wellingtons clearly stamped into the mythical Seventh Continent. Before we can begin our climb Pete issues us each with a set of crampons



and an ice axe (briefings on the proper use of which have been carried out during our Drake Passage crossing).

Bent double in a semicircle we begin the tactical task of donning crampons with cold fingers. We look up to find that while we've been concentrating on our boots, a solitary Adelie penguin has sauntered its way into our circle. Pete motions for us to move aside and let the little fella pass. After we've all taken a step back, the penguin puts its head back, lets out a hoot, and waddles off toward the water.

Before long hundreds of Adelie penguins (one of the two penguin species indigenous to Antarctica) emerge from behind a giant lump of sea ice and follow in the footsteps of their audacious leader. Pete explains the penguins' lack of concern is due to the fact that they have no land predators on the continent. They've also had little or no contact with humans (except in 1914 when Shackleton ate a couple), giving them no reason to treat us like anything other than a curious inconvenience. What we aren't allowed to do, Pete stresses, is interrupt their natural behaviour i.e. get in their way. Delighted

to have come face-to-face with the emblematic little creatures, we line up single file, all smiles, and begin our journey skyward. The going is easy at first; even the novices amongst us are getting to grips with the crampons. Pete's jolly tones up ahead are accompanied by a chorus of heavy breathing as the terrain steepens.

After an hour or so Pete explains that we are soon to be moving onto glaciated terrain and will need to travel 'Alpine Style'. He helps us into harnesses, and connects us into teams of six using two long ropes. Pete leads and we are advised to follow in his footsteps in order to avoid the many lethal crevasses waiting to swallow us up.

I take a moment to gaze over my shoulder at the vista. Antarctica stretches out on either side of me, and the Weddell Sea, on this the Eastern portion of the peninsula, glitters below. Excepting the MS Endeavour, anchored way out in the bay, and our slender trail of footprints, not a single trace of human existence is visible. This singularity is perhaps the most powerful Antarctica has to offer; the opportunity for a person to stand and look out upon

a landscape totally untouched by, and devoid of, his/her own species.

"Brace, brace, brace!" yells Pete from up ahead. We've been hiking now for two hours and we are approaching the final summit. Unfortunately for one of our party, Ian, an army Captain, the ground has opened up. Ian looks down at his crampons swinging freely, starkly contrasted by the glacial blue at the bottom of the crevasse. Sat in the snow around him, our heels dug in firmly, leaning back to secure the rope, we can only see the top of his head. An Afghanistan veteran, and lover of danger, Ian surprises us with a grin as we pull him to safety. "That's why we rope up," says Pete as we muster on some solid ground.

During our downhill march back to the penguin colony and our Zodiac at the base of the Bluff, Pete bewitches us with calamitous crevasse anecdotes befitting of a man who's spent his life amid snowy and severe topography. Back aboard the Endeavour, showered, watered and with a four-course meal imminent, Ian and I sit with Pete and ply him with pints, angling for further tales of mountain heroism, and the

mighty Mt Everest.

PADDLEBOARDING

"Gooooo morning ladies and gentlemen, gooooo morning," the velveteen tones of our bearded Alaskan expedition leader Solan Jenson, and a lightly swaying ship, wake me gently. It's 6am and we've arrived at 'Danco Island', a new anchorage further south on the peninsula. On the menu today is a portion of Paddleboarding. Apparently there are few better ways of immersing yourself in the Antarctic environment than literally immersing yourself in it. After breakfast, I climb the four flights down to the boot room, where all 200 passengers aboard the Endeavour ready themselves each day for excursions.

"Hi all I'm Meghan," says Meghan, "I'm your SUP (Stand-up Paddleboard) supervisor... but you can call me SUP SUP. And this is Cheli," says Meghan "Your SUP Assistant... but you can call her SUP ASS." Cheli, who we later uncover to be the most experienced polar guide on the whole expedition, puts a finger to her brow and salutes.

It's not long before we're knelt on our boards, floating slowly in separate



directions away from the Zodiac. One by one, we get to our feet and begin to paddle after her. After twenty minutes or so we're all feeling considerably more confident, gliding noiselessly and hitherto avoiding an impromptu swim.

As we paddle across the natural harbour, we enjoy levels of serenity that could only be thought possible on a man-made reservoir. Serrated mountains rise vertically out of the polished sea, and gigantic glaciers creep reluctantly down from their summits. I notice a girl named Trudy up ahead, stroking with purpose toward the base of the mightiest glacier. I put in a few extra strokes to catch her, and we drift to a halt thirty or so meters from its base. The fractured face of the glacier towers above us. As the glacier flows toward us and toward its imminent doom, its progress is extraordinarily... audible. An irregular grinding and cracking can be heard echoing out from beneath the ice as immeasurable pressures build and release. "Antarctic Thunder is what they call that" says



Trudy matter-of-factly.

CAMPING

To celebrate our last night in Antarctica we've decided to relinquish the cosy confines of the ship and camp out 'on the ice'. We have elected to snooze with nothing between us and the elements except a fleece-lined waterproof bag. With only two hours of semi-darkness and an expected overnight temperature of -10 Celsius, I'm not sure how much sleep I'll be getting.

Before we turn in Ian, Trudy and I pull up a pew down by the beach at Dorian Bay. We poke fun at the 95-stone Crab-Eater seals as they roll around clumsily with their bellies full of fish, yawning and groaning. "Ironically, they don't eat crabs," says Trudy, as Ian hands around a hipflask of 16-year-old Scotch. After a warming draft we part ways and disappear off to our respective ice coffins. I lie awake a short while with just my eyes and nose protruding from the bivvy, listening once again to the sounds of 'Antarctic Thunder'.

"Wake up Sleeping Beauty!" shouts Ian from the water's edge. I peer above the wall of my ice trench to be blinded by the newly risen sun glinting off fresh snow. When my vision returns it reveals a completely abandoned campsite. Ian can just be made out waving energetically from the last remaining Zodiac readying for departure on the beach. Contrary to all expectation, I have slept for a full eight hours.

WILDLIFE

As we motor below the imposing ice-strengthened bow of the MS Endeavour

for the very last time Jimmy's radio crackles. "They've spotted some humpbacks," he announces. "There she blows!" hollars Jimmy, as the whale spout blasts visibly on the horizon. The next spout is so close the savoury mist, caught by the gathering wind, spatters across our faces. "Ok" says Jimmy cutting the motor "Now we let them come to us." "HHhhooooogh!!" goes the 49-foot, 36-tonne humpback whale as she surfaces within touching distance, her calf close behind. The noise that erupts from her blowhole is so loud, and so deep, that it shakes my very bones. "Woohoo!" screams Jimmy, "I have never been that close to a Humpback!"

CONCLUSION

Quark Expeditions have been offering ice-strengthened adventure cruises in both the Arctic and Antarctic regions since 1991. They have the experience, knowledge and expertise not only to get you there, and to keep you safe, but also to educate you in every minute facet of the continent. At your disposal will be Glaciologists, Marine Biologists, Ornithologists, in fact nearly every type of Ologist you can imagine, which means, whatever your particular interest, birds, bergs or marine beasts, your questions will never go unanswered. Antarctica is our wildest wilderness and ultimately the last to succumb to human exploitation. Get there before they do!

Quark offer expeditions to Antarctica November to February each year. Visit their website for more details quarkexpeditions.com/gb