

Antarctica: a summary

By Peter

“Antarctica? Why do you want to go to Antarctica?”

With few exceptions, that was the response we received when people heard about our forthcoming expedition to Antarctica. I was surprised, as there are so many reasons: it's the world's last great wilderness; penguins, seals, albatrosses and other wildlife to see; the fear that long-haul air travel may become unviable within a few decades; but above all the ice. Masses of it, despite the recent collapse of parts of some of the ice shelves (floating glaciers) and perhaps even the imminent melting of the Antarctic icefields. Another attraction is to follow in the steps of Robert Scott and Ernest Shackleton, two of Britain's most heroic explorers (and incidentally heroic failures – Britain loves failures). The bookshops in Ushuaia, the jumping-off port in Argentina for the Antarctic cruises, have shelves and shelves of books about both of them, in all languages.

So when Naturetrek, our favoured wildlife travel company (this was our 15th trip with them) announced eighteen months ago that it was to charter the whole of a Russian expedition ship to visit not only Antarctica but also the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, we booked our places immediately. The only hurdle to be overcome was ensuring that we would be permitted to take sufficient time off from work to accommodate an 18 day cruise together with a few days added on at either end for travelling. For Ushuaia, at the foot of Argentina on an island called Terra del Fuego, is a LONG way away. It entails a fifteen-hour flight to Buenos Aires followed by a three-hour flight to Ushuaia, from a different airport if you are unlucky with timings (we were). And then you are still some 48 hours sailing time from Antarctica – or rather more if you divert first to the Falkland Islands and South Georgia.

The ship

Our ship, Grigoriy Mikheev, is owned by a Russian institute and leased long-term to a Dutch company called Oceanwide, which uses her for trips to Antarctica half the year and Spitsbergen, Iceland and Greenland in the other half (we have sailed on similar ships to both [Spitsbergen](#) and [Kamchatka](#) in the past). She is remarkably small for an Antarctic cruise ship, taking only 45 passengers or so. In fact, she isn't really a cruise ship at all in the usual sense of the word, judging by the number of lifts and hairdressers she carries (none of either, as the Naturetrek brochure makes clear). And you don't have to change for dinner either, although it was not unknown for other people to don their other fleece in the evenings.

Patagonia

We felt that we couldn't go all that way and not spend a bit of time sightseeing in Argentina at the same time, so we arranged six days in Patagonia (the bottom bit of Argentina) beforehand and a day in Buenos Aires afterwards. This not only broke up the journey but gave a bit of time for our luggage to catch up with us, should it become lost at any stage (it didn't). The ships can't wait for lost luggage to turn up, although Ushuaia has some great outdoor shops presumably for just this eventuality.

So we spent three days in the holiday area of El Calafate and El Chalten in the Andean foothills, enabling us to visit a glacier and to view some excellent wildlife including extremely close condors (cue Andean pipe music as the mighty condor sweeps effortlessly over the majestic Andes etc etc) and guanacos, a delicate type of wild llama that graze on the wide-open spaces of the pampas. It really was wide-open, making Norfolk look like a small cubby-hole. A charming and knowledgeable guide called Martina drove us around to show us the sights and the wildlife.

We also allowed ourselves three spare days in Ushuaia before the ship departed, and again used the services of a local guide, Esteban, whom we can also thoroughly recommend. Ushuaia was formed as a prison colony distant from anywhere, in the same way as the English sent their criminals to Australia. The museum, housed in the prison (now closed), has some astonishing photographs and memorabilia about the old days. If you are planning a trip to Ushuaia, allow a day to visit it as there is a lot to see. The story of the shipwreck of the Monte Cervantes in the 1930s in the Beagle Channel is also worth reading – see the Links page of the website.

Falkland Islands and South Georgia

The Falkland Islands and South Georgia are two British dependencies in the South Atlantic, best remembered by people our age for the “conflict” in 1982 following an attempted grab by the Argentines, who know them as the Malvinas and show them as Argentine on their maps. There are plenty of reminders of the conflict 26 years ago: many of the beaches remain fenced off for fear of mines being washed onto them. There are precious few roads on the two main islands, and none at all on the others. The usual means of transport is 4x4, for good reason. It’s a remarkably civilised place with the 2,800 inhabitants using the English language, accepting English currency (although they also use their own Falklands Island coins, similar to ours and doubtless minted in Llantrisant as ours are) and buying Waitrose-branded groceries in the one supermarket in Stanley. For a six-month stay, it would be extremely appealing – so long as the six months were their summer.

South Georgia is something quite different. “Near” on a globe, but still 48 hours from Stanley at 12 knots through stormy seas, it has no permanent human residents apart from a few civil servants to police the 200 mile fishing zone and to make sure that Argentina doesn’t invade again. The island’s claim to fame is that until as late as the 1960s it was the centre of the Southern Ocean’s whaling industry, with some eight or nine processing plants operating throughout the summer months. Most of the plants are too dangerous to approach now but one, in Grytviken, has been made safe (at some enormous cost) and one can wander around the machinery (now in the open air, as the corrugated iron sheds in which it was contained have either collapsed or blown away, and so been removed), marvelling at man’s inhumanity to whales. It was a different time back then of course, but that doesn’t make it right, any more than it excuses slavery. Grytviken alone was responsible for the death of some 175,000 whales of all kinds, and that doesn’t include the other whaling stations on the island, or the whaling processing ships. If 100 years ago there were as many whales around South Georgia as there are now penguins and fur seals, it must have looked fantastic with spouts in all directions. (It is an ill-wind of course. The penguins and fur seals have multiplied so prolifically in part because there is now so much more food in the seas, without all those whales wanting it.)

And the wildlife is not just prolific, but breathtakingly tame – see the photographs on the website. The general rule is that you have to keep five metres away from the wildlife. The wildlife isn't subject to this restriction with you, however, and often comes right up to you. And the five metre rule is impossible to keep to anyway when there are penguins and fur seals in such numbers. There simply isn't any room on the beaches for people if you adhered to that rule. Research is going on as to whether human visitors to penguin and fur seal rookeries is causing any disturbance. Currently it appears that animals that are visited by people are (unexpectedly) *more* successful than the control group, probably because the predators (mainly skuas and giant petrels) are kept away. But of course the predators have to eat something – so the control group probably fares worse than the group with the human visitors.

Antarctica

And so to Antarctica. This was every bit as good as anticipated, and we had astonishingly good weather, with one completely fine day in which the blueness of the ice shone out at us. (It was gloriously ironic that the temperature in London fell to minus 10° C while we were away, leading to a headline in the Evening Standard "It's colder than the Antarctic".) And on several other days it snowed on us, to show its scorn for us during the Antarctic summer (the lupins and other flowers in Ushuaia kept coming as a surprise to us. We kept having to remind ourselves that it was summer).

It is not possible to explain Antarctica in words, so you will need to look at the photographs on the website. We landed at two locations on the Peninsula itself, and on a number of islands as well. Since most of the coastline comprises either huge cliffs or even more massive glaciers, there are virtually no landing places at all.

The trip back to Ushuaia was exciting as well. The Drake Passage, which separates the Antarctic Peninsula from Cape Horn at the foot of South America, is renowned for its stormy seas, although there are occasions apparently on which it is as still as a millpond. Not this time: we had a force 8 gale for most of the way, although we had found our sea-legs by then. So all we had to worry about was crockery and cutlery shooting across the table as the ship lurched at an angle of up to 35 degrees according to the instrument on the bridge. That is a lot of lean.

Conclusion

Returning to the UK after four weeks away has been most unpleasant. Hauled back into the 21st century after four weeks of being sheltered in a cocoon formed (while at sea) having no contact with the outside world and (in Argentina) an inability to speak Spanish. We must book another holiday forthwith.