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The wonders of Antarctica

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Ashley Hay travels and experiences the remote beauty of the Antarctic.

This is what it's like to wake up on a Russian icebreaker and see Antarctica for the first time - its land, its light, its weather. It feels like a moment I wanted to be in when I was little: somehow, while I was asleep, I've walked up to the right wardrobe and pushed my way through fur coats to the White Witch's Narnia of C.S. Lewis' imagination. It's an achingly wintry beauty.

And it's the strangest thing, but standing on the bridge of the Akademik Ioffe as she heads towards Petermann Island - at 65°18', we're still 130km north of the Antarctic Circle but as south as we'll go - my eyes are convinced I'm seeing icy castles and turrets, the way 18th-century sailors saw forts and churches in the rocks of new, unbuilt places. We're good at turning anything into a simile or a metaphor - *it was just like ... it reminded me of...* But this place is like no other. It is beyond words.

"So interacting with penguins," says one friend back at home, "follows the same protocol as lap-dancers." Which is true. Don't get within 5m, but if they choose to approach you, sit quietly and politely while they nibble your camera cord or sniff your foot. On Petermann Island, you hear them before you see them - their call falls between goose and donkey. Their guano ("it'll be worse than dog poo," another friend has warned, "it'll be so stinky") smells vaguely fishy but fairly mild. They're prolific, and easy to anthropomorphise, perhaps because they were clearly designed by a panel of cartoonists after a long lunch.

"Ah yes, the universe is unfolding as expected," says Jacques Sirois, the expedition's ornithologist. "Here we have gentoo penguins" - he indicates their orange beaks - "and here a colony of late-moulting adielies" - their heads solid black, with a single line of white around their eyes. In this rare place where rigorous take-nothing, leave-nothing, low-impact ecotourism ethics can be enforced, the penguin protocol is serious. As David McGonigal, the Australian writer and photographer who's leading this trip, has warned everyone: "At this time of year, the penguins are in the last stages of moult and starving, and survival's a matter of fine degrees. Any energy they expend avoiding you may be fatal."

But the universe is not quite unfolding as expected - or, rather, the way it unfolds is changing. Not so many years ago, you'd have found mostly adielie penguins in this place; it was too cold, too far south for the gentoos. Now the gentoos predominate, one piece of evidence of the rapid warming that parts of Antarctica are experiencing, estimated at 2.5° in the past 50 years - four times the global average. Ice shelves are retreating - some collapsing altogether - and places thought to be part of the continental mainland have lost all their ice, revealing them as islands. "This summer alone," says John Johnson, assistant expedition leader, "we were in places that are always frozen and they weren't - and places that are never frozen and they were."

"It's the rate of warming that's the concern," says Phil Rouget, the expedition's marine

mammal specialist. "One or two degrees difference could mean the presence or absence of sea ice. If you have no sea ice, then you have no breeding ground for krill. If you have no krill, then you have no food chain, and large animals who depend on krill - seals and whales - just die."

The world's oceans are busy with ships collecting information about all this. The Ioffe herself is a research vessel, her availability one of a confluence of circumstances that's expanded polar tourism. Her completion in 1989 coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This left her, like other Russian icebreakers, without funds for year-round research and so available for lease by travel operators. For 200 days a year, Melbourne-based travel company Peregrine charters the Ioffe and her sister-ship, the Vavilov, to carry tourists through Arctic and Antarctic waters - the advantages of the arrangement being not only the icebreakers' access but their ability to carry enough Zodiac inflatables to take every passenger off the ship for two- to three-hour landings or cruises.

Each excursion is its own adventure: leopard seals frolic at arm's length, fur seals swim over to peer at you; you're dwarfed by passing icebergs that loom like buildings, walk among the rusty detritus of the whaling industry or look through the water to see a humpback swimming below. You climb glaciers; you raise your arms like a penguin's wings at penguins that raise their wings in return.

There's a spontaneity to them, too: unlike most organised holidays, Antarctic itineraries can't be set or guaranteed - they're decided as each voyage goes along, changing for weather here, ice there. The last trip of 2004-05's summer began with pessimistic meteorological forecasts, but the Ioffe found leas and harbours for the maximum number of off-ship outings its days could hold - 11, including an overnight camp (see page 93).

The brochures emphasise that these ships aren't five-star, but they have fine cabins - from those with communal bathrooms up to those with ensembles and capacious lounges - facilities for lectures and films, a bar, sauna and gym, and far too much good food. "We have a new pastry chef on board," one of the expedition leaders sighs early on. "It's always a dangerous thing."

If Antarctica's fragility is one reason to visit sooner rather than later, being able to travel by icebreaker is another. "Polar ships have a service life of about 30 years, and as the other, older ones go out of commission," says McGonigal, "it's possible the number of visitors who can get here will drop."

"Or perhaps the industry will shift to larger boats and fewer landings," says Rouget. "A lot of the big boats that come down here don't do landings at all. They just cruise by."

It's less than 100 years since someone worked out how to manufacture whiter-than-white white, replacing dangerous lead-based paints with more stable titanium dioxide. According to colour historian Phillip Ball, it's "foremost of today's pigments" - the most widely produced colour, and the most popular.

But white's tricky, so hard to believe it really is Newton's perfect amalgam of the whole spectrum's richness. Antarctica lets you see some of that richness, its white not just whiter-than-white but also layers of blues and greens and every shade in between, so luminous that the continent, its waters and its icebergs look lit from within.

I'm a cyanophile, and I'm in heaven: I've found a landscape whose cracks and crevasses burst open to reveal electrically iridescent blue. The colour intensifies as more and more air is pressed out of the ice, a process that can take millennia as it moves from the centre of the continent out to its seashore edges.

"If you carved the front off these glaciers," says the trip's kayak wrangler, Mo D'Armand, in the middle of Paradise Harbour, "the whole section revealed would be that blue."

Heading back to the ship, her Zodiac moves so fast that falling snowflakes appear as horizontal lines. Yet against this prettiness, you see Shackleton in his open boat, Scott just stepping outside, Mawson strapping his soles back to his feet. Wherever we go, people wait with their cameras for the moment there won't be another soul in their shot, trying to catch the edge of the isolation, the slight insanity of this place.

If seeing Antarctica feels privileged, then hearing it is magic. Under full sun in Wilhelmina Bay, a pod of humpback whales divide themselves among us. "Give them a bit of attention," says Rouget. "Clap and cheer - they love it." And we stamp and hurrah and the whales swim closer. They dip and surface, looking at us, almost within reach, and roll and wave. "Now listen," says Rouget, lowering a hydrophone into the water's dark, clear blue. And there, beneath the constant stutter of krill, are the harmonics of round echoes and clean almost electronic tones. You're eavesdropping on these enormous creatures.

In the sky that afternoon, the clouds smudge with circular rainbows as cold, fast winds turn their water particles to ice. "Yes," says McGonigal dryly at dinner, "today was all right, wasn't it?"

And "all right" has to cover it, because to catalogue every experience - from hourglass dolphins and albatrosses, through five species of seal, two sorts of whale, petrels, terns, skuas, and four different penguins (including six muppet-like macaronis with their toupees of bright yellow feathers) - would produce a long string of empty superlatives. Wonderful, you say, and awesome, and brilliant, but you've worn these words out on everyday things in other places and you're silent in the face of something you want so badly to explain.

Old mariners like James Cook believed you went "out of the world" when you headed into the planet's deep south. And as the Ioffe turns and heads north through the Drake Passage, people talk of re-entering the "real world", with its news and ready email and mobile phones and wallets and keys for locking doors - none of which exists on the ship.

On these homeward days, the ship's conversations bristle with topics that press against where we've been: climate change, the explosion of fur seal numbers as they fill the gap in the biomass left by whaling, the deaths of well over 100,000 albatrosses each year from long-line fishing, the amount of pollution in the ocean when whales' carcasses have to be treated as radioactive waste. "Should we worry about the impact of tourists like us down here?" someone asks. "Should we worry about terrorism in the polar regions?"

With fewer than 20,000 tourists each year, tourism's impact is arguably negligible. As for terrorism at the world's ends, as Iceland's president has said, it's arguably a non-issue, too. If you need something to worry about, Sirois suggests, think about overfishing or the long-range transport of airborne pollution. The world's air currents can carry matter sprayed over the US

to the Arctic or Antarctic within days, making apparently pristine white space already more polluted than you'd think.

The Kyoto Protocol came into effect as we left the world; Alaska's reserves slithered closer to drilling as we came back. Antarctica remains a "continent devoted to science and peace" thanks to the Antarctic Treaty, and the Madrid Protocol that, among other things, forbids exploitation of its mineral reserves. Compared with how the rest of the world works, these safeguards can look as fragile as the environment itself, buttressed against human nature by physical facts like isolation and extremity. But the world scooped Antarctica into its industry once before, and the thing that stopped that plunder of species for their oil - seals, then penguins, then whales - was a new romance with petroleum.

At home again, photographs shrink Antarctica to tiny rectangles that might just catch the edge of vastness, of richness. To have been where most people will only dream of is a profound and disquieting thing; it is to be colonised by a new world. Which means this. Somewhere in my mind now, I'm always there, exhilarated by the cold and leaning over the edge of a small rubber boat as it skims the water's burnished skin. Trying to get just a little closer to the iridescent brilliance of that beautiful icy blue. I

Ashley Hay travelled with Peregrine. For information on their expedition-style voyages, call 1300 854 444 or visit www.peregrineadventures.com

CAMPING

Peregrine also offers travellers the opportunity to camp on the continent. That's you, in a bag, on a mat - no tent - at -5°, with snow falling. You may not have the soundest night's sleep but you're warm and dry (once you've positioned yourself to stop the soft water torture of snowflakes hitting your cheek), as you listen to the crunch of icy overhangs breaking or the squawk of an inquisitive bird. And much as staff insist on bladder control, it's worth needing to go to the loo (OK, it's a barrel) at four in the morning for the sleeping huddle of penguins you pass, the whale frolicking in the water, the way the ship's orange lights bounce off the clouds and the snow so that the whole bay glows. You feel like you're the only person in the world.

Voices in the wilderness