

# Antarctic Impressions

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As the Aleksey Maryshev sails from Ushuaia (Argentina), the southernmost city of our world, towards the Antarctica, I recall images I've seen and stories I've heard about the Drake Passage, famed for its roughest seas on Earth.



**W**e pass Cape Horn quickly, proceed through the passage, a two-day journey to the Antarctic Peninsula; but the sea remains unusually calm throughout. Though somewhat disappointed in a twisted sort of way to be denied the first-hand experience of the infamous wrath of this famed passage, the calm brought vivid reflections of the months leading to this exceptional expedition, as I watched in quiet admiration, the amazing display of the Wandering and Black-browed albatrosses gliding the skies.

Blessed with the good fortune to travel widely and frequently to many remote and beautiful places, this voyage felt different. The destination is Antarctica, the last great wilderness on Earth; a place that one sees on television and movies, or read about in books or magazines but only a privileged few ever set foot on to admire its beauty in reality. Prior to the expedition, I had been reading about Antarctica, talking to people who had been there, watched programmes about the wildlife, seen images of icebergs and yet anxiety and uncertainty filled

me, for I knew not what to expect. As it turned out, it was stupefying; nothing could have really prepared me for the overwhelming sensory overload I was about to experience.

After two days on a non-stop journey southward, we land on Half-Moon Island, which forms part of the South Shetland Archipelago. Proposing penguins greet us in the distance but quickly disappear as our zodiac approaches the black pebbled beach. After a final equipment check, we're off to our first Antarctic dive. The cold



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takes my breath away, but I acclimatize quickly. Even with the surge and limited visibility, the seascape is surreal. Incredible number of small isopods crawl all over yellow and red algae, hundreds of colourful limpets stick to boulders, odd-shaped fish hide in the pebbles, and the odd penguin rushing through, leaving a trail of fine bubbles. All too soon we leave this scene and return to the island where a new scene greets us – groups of Chinstrap penguins and hundreds of fur seals, soaking in the late summer sun, totally oblivious to our presence; a derelict wooden whaling boat

bears testimony to the sad history of this place. Strict rules by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) prohibit interfering with the animals to protect this unique ecosystem. Abiding, I keep my distance.

Distances are great in Antarctica. Our tight schedule takes us back to the boat and head towards our next destination: Deception Island. The narrow entrance to this ancient caldera is reminiscent of “The Lord of the Rings” landscapes, with jagged rocky cliffs on either side,

Opp. page:  
**THE FATEFUL  
DRAKE'S PASSAGE,**  
known for its turbulent seas,  
crossing is often challenging.

Top:  
**SCUBA DIVING** in the waters of Antarctica is a breath taking experience, both literally and metaphorically. Here the diver checks out a large nudibranch near Cuverville Island.

Bottom:  
**THE ELEMENTS** have carved out a cyan swimming pool-shaped hollow inside this sculptural iceberg.

It has been estimated that should the ice of Antarctica melt, the sea level would rise by 65 metres.

or steam from the on-going volcanic activity rising from the shore. On land, the island offers a spectacle of desolation, with remnants of wooden huts and gigantic rusty steel drums used earlier by whalers and other temporary settlers. The only signs of life are the group of fur seals and penguins - the Gentoo and Adélies penguins that hop in and out of the water, their bodies glistening in the peculiar afternoon light. The seals don't seem too fond of our presence, and make loud intimidating vocalisations to ward off the intruders. We heed them and leave peacefully.

Overnight, we sail through the Gerlache Strait towards Cuverville Island. In the morning, I rise early to admire 2,000-metre tall icy peaks rising straight from the sea, while whales cruise by our boat - the day is starting on a good note. I get ready for a dive near Cuverville Island, while a large colony of Gentoo penguins

looks on. Underwater, the sea floor is made up of giant rocky steps, covered in broad red algae, half-concealing the presence of abundant invertebrate life. Rising to the surface, on the topmost step, I notice a couple of dead penguins lying on the sea floor, their bodies badly torn. Looking up, the reason becomes apparent; a large female leopard seal is feasting on Gentoo penguins near the surface. She catches them with her powerful jaws, and thrashes them around.

In the afternoon, we move the ship to Paradise Bay, and take our first steps on the Antarctic continent itself at Almirante Brown and the Argentine research station. The climb up the snowy slope behind the station was short, for a greater distraction beckoned: humpback whales. Plumes of exhaled air mixed with water rise all around us and tails kick high as the whales dive. When, they grew weary of us, we moved on to Skonthorp Cove, widely held as one of

the most beautiful bays in Antarctica. The sea is covered with brash ice that makes a crushing sound as the zodiac makes its way through. The surface of the water is so still that the nearby mountains reflect perfectly on it. Small icebergs interspersed around the bay serve as resting places for leopard seals. One of them, more curious than the others, treats us to an underwater ballet, coming up occasionally right next to us. This experience leaves everyone exhilarated, myself included. After a long playful moment together, the seal loses interest and disappears in the dark water. We head back to the Aleksey Maryshev and set a course for the Booth Island and the Lemaire Channel, supposedly one of the most scenic passages of the Antarctic Peninsula.

Early next morning, a short-lived break in the cloud cover drapes the breathtaking scenery in a warm glowing orange light. As we cruise slowly along the narrow channel,

I spot Humpback whales swimming just beneath the surface as Leopard and Fur seals lie on floes watching us sail by, undisturbed. The weather takes a turn, and I am brushing off snow from my dive equipment before plunging at the foot of Vernadsky, a Ukrainian research station formerly known as British Antarctic Survey Base Faraday (made famous by its discovery of the hole in the ozone layer). On this dive I come across dozens of giant nemertean worms stacked up like gargantuan spaghetti, sessile sea cucumbers feeding on passing morsels, odd-looking many-armed sea stars, and several species of nudibranchs; but the star of the show for me was the playful young leopard seal that greeted us at the surface after the dive. After a quick dash to the boat for a change of clothes, we find ourselves back at Vernadsky to meet the residents. The vodka bottle I spotted earlier underwater rang a sad reminder of the relentless pollution of the oceans by

human activities, while hinting the rather alcoholic afternoon we were going to share with our hosts in the Southernmost pub on Earth!

Sobering after an agitated night on rolling seas, crossing of the Antarctic Circle, the first light of the following morning reveal the awesome sight of large tabular icebergs in the distance. It is incredible to imagine that these massive blocks of ice, each larger than many football fields put end to end, are actually small fragments of much larger ice shelves. It is clearly the end of the season, and only a few scattered colonies of Adélies penguins are around on Detaille Island, sharing the place with a few dozen Weddell and Fur seals. Our attempts at landing on the island are thwarted by choppy seas and icy rocks. Instead, we meander across brash ice through a field of icebergs sculptured by wind and sea into fantastic shapes. Some of them are probably several thousand

Left:  
**A FUR SEAL** on Detaille Island checks out unexpected visitors, ready to dive in at the first sign of danger.

Right:  
**A LEOPARD SEAL** reclining and relaxing on an iceberg in Pleaneau Bay.





Left:  
**RED AND GREEN SNOW**  
on Petermann Island with  
Mount Shackleton in background.

Below:  
**A LARGE LEOPARD SEAL**  
on an iceberg in Pleneau Bay  
ponders whether to come down  
and play with the divers.

Large black boulders, broken in many pieces, as if hewn by a giant axe, jut out from the red and green snow cover.

years old, judging by their amazing deep blue hue, clearly visible through large holes in the more recent layers of white ice and snow. My mind wanders off for a while, and I remember an earlier discussion with the expedition crew on global warming. It has been estimated that should the ice of Antarctica melt, the sea level would rise by 65 metres. The actual figure might be much higher, as the continent would be buoyed by the incredible “weight-loss”, resulting in an even higher rise in sea level. This issue, the topic of heated debates appears very real and terrifying as we manoeuvre around the gigantic floating blocks of ice.

Leaving those bleak thoughts aside, we head north to Petermann Island the next

morning. The scenery appears somewhat chaotic, and it takes some time for me to take it all in. Large black boulders, broken in many pieces, as if hewn by a giant axe, jut out from the red and green snow cover. They bear testimony to the intense temperature fluctuations that take place on the continent between seasons. Although muted, the colours of the algae mixed within the snow seem vibrant in contrast to the last few monochromatic days. Some Adelie penguins still remain on the island, though most adults have already taken to the sea and won't return until the next breeding season. Comical juvenile penguins pluck their down frantically, making way for their permanent waterproof feathers before moving to the sea. A short distance away, a single pair of Fur seals vies for attention,

vocalising loudly in a mock combat. My mind wanders and ponders over the incredible feat of Ernest Shackleton, almost a century ago, as I admire in awe, the reflection of the mount named after him in a large dark rock pool.

Later in the day, we enter the legendary iceberg graveyard of Pleneau Bay, for a breathtaking zodiac cruise and snorkel session. The scenery is simply surreal and ineffable. There isn't the slightest breeze in the air, leaving the sea as flat as a mirror; a thin strip of yellowy sky is

painted across the horizon radiating a nice warm light, while a dense cover of grey clouds overhead appears within reach. It almost feels like we have entered another dimension. Around me are icebergs of all shapes; from tall spires, to semicircular and even fishtail-shapes reflecting perfectly in the serene sea. Everywhere I look, I see Leopard, Fur and Crabeater seals lazily sprawled on floes, or swimming around the boat. We were even treated to a snow petrel performing a strange ritual, jumping back and forth between the icy water and the base of a sloping iceberg. Eventually, I give in to temptation and slip into the ocean for a snorkel encounter with some very curious and interactive Leopard seals. They seem curious and playful, but their large size and sharp teeth command respect and prudence. Several hours seem to have passed in only a few minutes, and we return to the Aleksey Maryshev before dark. As we sail through the Lemaire

Channel again, northbound this time, we are escorted by a score of Leopard seals, and several humpback whales.

The next morning, we proceed to our last scheduled stop at the Melchior Islands in the middle of Dallman Bay, on the edge of the Drake Passage. The seemingly inhospitable sight of the jagged black rocky islands jutting out of the sea is warmly tempered by the greetings from dozens of Fur Seals and a handful of penguins. We manoeuvre the shallow passages between the islands carefully, and this hazard is soon overwhelmed by the beauty of the ice-topped mountains surrounding the bay for dozens of miles to the north and south of us, bathed in lime-yellow light, and disappearing into the clouds above. We circle several stranded icebergs in the bay on their way to the open ocean, before bidding our farewell to Antarctica.

My disappointment with the calm seas on the way to the continent was more than assuaged by the northbound crossing. The Drake passage lived up to its reputation, with 5m-high waves splashing over the sides of the boat for two days, while a thick fog masked anything beyond the bow of the ship. On the morning of the third day, we finally sailed through the Beagle Channel on dead calm water, and quietly reached Ushuaia where the first light of the morning hung three rainbows over a deep pink horizon, a befitting finale to an incredible journey. My Antarctic impression is an Elysium on earth. Check out [www.ElysiumEpic.org](http://www.ElysiumEpic.org)

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