

## PENGUIN'S PARADISE

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COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

Expeditions to Antarctica have come long way the past 100 years. The ships are made of steel rather than timber, some are equipped with active-stabilisers to reduce the rolling in heavy swell and you don't have to spend months huddled under an upturned life-raft, eating penguins to survive. The early explorer's sense of adventure is still alive, however, and the most authentic expeditions still take at least one photographer with them.

The Antarctic Peninsula offers the most scenic locations and abundant wildlife for visitors who want to experience the edge of the world. Islands and bays pepper the rugged coastline and pre-historic glaciers creep off the mainland and into the ocean.

With the arrival of summer the floating pack-ice retreats and narrow sections of rocky shores are exposed. The warmer weather between December and March provides the barest of breeding habitats for several species of penguins and birds, plus making it possible for our adventurous expedition crew to navigate the coast.

Against a backdrop of snow-covered mountains and narrow passages the surface of the sea is a landscape of constant change as ice formations come and go.

But the ice-bergs are the show-stoppers. The weathering of sun and wind on the irregular ice surfaces result in a dazzling array of shapes, textures and colours. Sunlight catching the pristine ice yields aqua and blue tones that don't exist anywhere else in nature.

Getting up close to ice-bergs is best achieved with Zodiacs; specialist rubber dinghies that take up to 12 passengers. From the safety of the Zodiacs, life on the ice is revealed. Sleeping seals and playful penguins are often seen taking a break from their sub-surface feeding, and watching the penguins fling themselves out of the water is both comical and amazing.

This is what makes expedition cruising in Antarctica special, the chance to get off the ship and be a part of the scenery.

Peregrine Adventures have over 8 years experience operating Antarctic expeditions, and 'getting off the ship' is their speciality. Weather permitting, they aim to do at least one zodiac cruise every day, and ideally a shore landing as well.

Luck was definitely with us, and for one special night we had a chance to camp in Antarctica. As twilight dimmed the sky, our little patch of peninsula gave accommodation to a few dozen passengers, one seal and hundreds of penguins. There wasn't much sleep that night, but no-one seemed the least bit disappointed.

Most shore landings last a couple of hours, long enough for some short hikes or just spending time with the penguins.

Taking a few moments to sit and watch them is time well spent, and soon the characters and conflicts of the individuals become compelling viewing. Gentoo Penguins in particular are very social and very active. I watched one industrious fellow pebble-collecting for his partner's nest by venturing a few meters up the hill, causing a ruckus of squawks from the nest-owners, and stealing a single stone. One by one he would thread his way through angry beaks to penguin-lift another pebble.

Each time he ventured off to steal another one, however, his own collection would be raided by yet another nest-builder nearby. Such is life among the Gentoos.

Most of Peregrine's Antarctic voyages will get you up-close with Chinstrap, Adelie and Gentoo Penguins while visitors to South Georgia will definitely encounter the King Penguins that call the

islands home. Emperor Penguins, the tallest and hardiest species made famous by the movie "Happy Feet", occupy the coldest climates deep inside the Antarctic Circle and are not as easily reached.

If your spirit for exploration is not completely quenched by artistic ice, squabbling penguins and hikes across the landscape you can always add a few kayak excursions to the trip. When you pre-book this option you'll be provided with sea-kayaks, dry-gear and the chance to paddle instead of Zodiac when the conditions are suitable.

Novice kayakers are well cared for; starting with an information pack to help prepare before the journey, introductory lessons when you get aboard the ship and the option of double kayaks so you can buddy-up on your first few outings.

Passenger and first time Antarctic-kayaker, Sarah Williams, explains, "When you're moving through the brash-ice you can hear the trapped bubbles of air crackling all around you and fragments banging against the hull. Then you paddle alongside an ice-berg and you feel really small and insignificant."

Sarah was also visited by Minke whales while kayaking, a moment of stillness that she will remember for a lifetime. Wildlife in Antarctica is often just as curious of us as we are of them.

The final leg of our expedition took us through the Penola Straights, a few degrees north of the Antarctic Circle. On a cloudy day with still water we found our ship surrounded by Humpback Whales in search of food. From the bow of our ship we spotted pods of whales in every direction, and watched the show with a camera in one hand a glass of red wine in the other.

Breaching whales feeding on krill make a fitting finale to any exploration of the peninsula.

It was now time to head north and we prepare ourselves for the two day ocean passage to reach Argentina and our flights home. The days spent en-route became another feature of the trip, as each of our crew members shared their specific expertise in a series of presentations. During the long voyages out and back we were treated to their wisdom and enthusiasm, enriching our appreciation of this unique adventure.

As one of our crew explained at the end of his lecture, "The essence of any adventure is the certainty of the unexpected", and adventure is exactly what we got.

