

Antarctica | Trip Report

February 2-19, 2019 | Written by Woody Wheeler



With Host Guides John Carlson, Lori Cohen and Woody Wheeler and participants Alan, Alberto, Anna, Bill, Candace, David, Deborah, Denise, Gail, Glenn, Henry, Joan, John R., John S., Karen, Lieven, Mary, Pat, Sarah, and Syd



Sat., Feb. 2 | Fly to Port Stanley, Falkland Islands

We flew from Punta Arenas to the Falkland Islands on a relatively calm, sunny day for this windy area; a smooth flight on a comfortable LATAM jet. The bus driver who shuttled us from the airport to Port Stanley mixed interpretation with humor. One of his jokes was that he prefers to think of Argentina as Eastern Chile. Clearly, since the Falklands War of 1982, there has been a significant effort to mark the islands as a British stronghold. Some 3,000 live on these windswept islands supported by an economy of fishing, agriculture, and tourism. We spent a few hours in the quaint town of Port Stanley, with its impressive museum and well-preserved historical buildings, all with a distinct British appearance. Along the town shore we saw our first penguin of the trip, a Magellanic Penguin, along with a Chilean Skua, Kelp Goose and a Black-crowned Night Heron.

We then boarded our substantial, comfortable and well-appointed ship, the Akademik Ioffe. Once we checked into our respective quarters, we went through an orientation and safety drill. Soon afterward, we observed from the deck Northern and Southern Giant Petrels, and numerous Sooty Shearwaters. After a subtle red-slice of a sunset, our ship sailed into the night along the eastern coast of the Falklands on the way to a morning adventure on Bleaker Island.

Sun., Feb. 3 | Bleaker Island, Rockhopper Colony, sail for S. Georgia Island

This morning our ship anchored near Bleaker Island where we made forays by zodiac rafts to the shore. This was our first of many such excursions, so it was a warm-up drill. As we approached the island, several Peale's Porpoises surfaced in our wake, one slapping the water with its tail, splashing several of us in the raft.

Upon landing, we walked inland to a wetland that had a variety of birds, including: Two-banded Plover, Silver and Yellow-billed Teal, Chiloe Wigeon and several Correndera Pipit. We continued walking across the short-grass prairie to a point where a gate led from grazed lands, into a natural area with large clumps of native Tussock Grass. Our walk took us to a rocky overlook of the sea where we first heard, and then saw, a colony of more than a hundred Southern Rockhopper Penguins.





They preened, brayed and true-to-their name, hopped onto rocks. They looked like style-conscious, hipster penguins, with their flashy eyebrows and sporty behavior. From our scenic ledge overlooking the ocean, we also saw one lone Macaroni Penguin in the middle of the Rockhopper Colony. Nearby, Blackish Oystercatchers called and perched.

We hiked back to the beach and rode on our zodiacs back to our ship where a buffet lunch awaited us. As our ship headed on a course for South Georgia Island, we settled into an afternoon of bird and wildlife-watching from the ship decks and/or attending the first class offering aboard: Falkland Island Birds and History. We could get used to this lifestyle. As a matter of fact, we did!

Mon. & Tues., Feb. 4 & 5 | At Sea: Falklands to South Georgia Island

Our first full day of sea travel in the South Atlantic was gentle with moderate seas and calm weather. Our time was spent searching for birds and marine mammals on the bridge or on the open decks. Among today's findings were: Black-bellied Storm Petrel, Soft-plumaged Petrel, White-chinned Petrel, and Northern Giant Petrel. Alternately, we took part in interesting/informative lectures on Whales and the history of South Georgia Island. Like the sea, the time flowed by with plenty of stimulating activity.

Around mid-day, the air cooled noticeably, and the atmosphere became overcast as we crossed into the polar convergence zone surrounding the continent of Antarctica. This was a geographically fascinating place where the convergence zone causes ocean currents to mix together and has much to do with the abundant wildlife found in Antarctica. In the afternoon, classes continued on Polar Photography and Albatrosses. Between presentations, our group found their way to the bridge or onto open decks where several species of albatrosses, prions and petrels could be found.

The evening commenced with a fine dinner and fireside chat stories told at the ship bar. All of us were adapting well to the routine of ship travel and finding it to our liking. Our second day at sea began under overcast skies and moderate seas. In the morning we participated in a mandatory deep-cleaning of our outer wear to safeguard against inadvertently bringing bio hazards to South Georgia Island.

Around mid-morning we passed by the first sight of land in several days: Shag Rocks. Named for the colony of Imperial Cormorants, these four sharply-pointed rocks resemble a large reef rising more than a hundred feet above the water. In addition, one Fin Whale was spotted, and we found several new species of birds: Antarctic Prion, Cape Petrel, Gray-headed Albatross and our first King Penguin!

Over lunch, one of One Ocean's staffers challenged us to guess when we would see our first large floating iceberg. She wanted us to estimate the date, longitude and latitude. Some of us submitted our best-guess estimates, then while we were having dinner, a whoop went up in the room as two icebergs floated by.



Afternoon sightings picked up as our ship drew closer to South Georgia Island. Snow Petrels and Wilson's Storm Petrels flew across the bow. Antarctic Fur Seals porpoised through the water, and a pair of Humpback Whales spouted and dove 50 yards from the ship.

Wed., Feb. 6 | Grytviken, Godthul Cove, South Georgia Island

We awoke to sunny blue skies and calm conditions with temperatures approaching 50 degrees Fahrenheit. The mountain views were in their full splendor. This was a banner day in which to conduct our first South Georgia Island excursion!

Once ashore in the former whaling station of Grytviken, we were greeted by an impromptu party of Antarctic Fur Seals with their pups, the latter playing literally at our feet. One anxious fur seal mother galloped to the beach to watch her pups, remaining vigilant until they returned to the sea. At Ernest Shackleton's grave, we gave "The Boss" a toast of whiskey prior to dumping some on his grave, which is customary. The ship historian spoke respectfully of Shackleton – especially of his 800-mile journey in the 22-foot wooden life boat, the James Caird, from Elephant Island to South Georgia Island – truly an epic feat in the annals of sea adventures.

From here we strolled between seals and King Penguins through the former whaling station of Grytviken as a tour guide provided historic interpretation. Some 175,000 whales were processed here, mostly into oil, but also for meat and other products until the station closed in 1962.

Henry, Gail and Lori joined a small group on a hike to a viewpoint above Grytviken. The trail took them by the church, a lush stream and fields of the Greater Burnet plant with its copper-colored round head. They stopped at two main viewpoints to take in the tiny town and the immense snow and ice-capped mountains beyond. On the walk back to town, the group saw South Georgia Pintails and an Antarctic Tern.

A third contingent of kayakers had dream-like conditions for paddling in Grytviken Harbor. The mountain and island views were absolutely stunning, with seals and penguins lining the shores.

In the afternoon, we all sailed to Godthul Cove, where calm conditions and fair weather continued. Most of us landed on a beach full of Gentoo Penguins, Fur and Elephant Seals. Our first sightings of the endangered and

once nearly extinct South Georgia Pipit took place here. Antarctic Terns flew by, some with small fish in their bills. Northern and Southern Giant Petrels swam close to our zodiacs and at times sat on the beach, taking care to arrange their tail feathers prior to settling in.

Thurs., Feb. 7 | Salisbury Plain, Prion Island - South Georgia Island

Remarkably for this part of the world, we awoke again to partly sunny skies with stupendous views of jagged mountain peaks with huge billowing clouds behind them and massive glaciers coming down to the shore. At the shoreline was a spectacle beyond belief: more than 100,000 King Penguins arrayed on the glacial outwash known as Salisbury Plain.

As the zodiacs arrived, small groups of King Penguins and Antarctic Fur Seals lined the shore. The penguins would now and then rear back, raise their bills to the sky and emit a trumpeting “ecstatic” call. This was a major part of the sound track for our unforgettable morning visit.

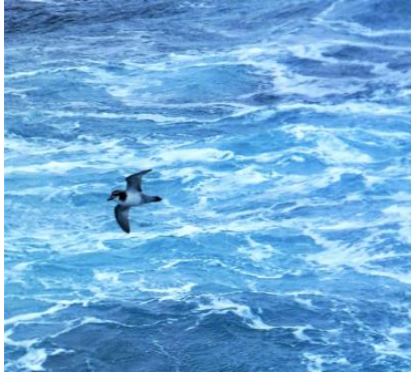
We slowly strolled through this penguin metropolis. Those who paused or sat down often had curious King Penguin companions. One in our party who laid down briefly had penguins gently pecking her.

Following a short beach walk, we reached a small hill covered by clumps of Tussock Grass. At the summit of this 30-foot rise, we were rewarded with an incredible view of a massive King Penguin colony estimated at more than 200,000 strong and extending up the flanks of the mountains. The young King Penguins referred to by sailors as “oakum boys” gathered in creches – nursery groups that provide mutual protection - their fluffy brown feathers blowing in the wind.

Antarctic Fur Seal pups swarmed all over the beach, often scurrying up to us with inquiring wet eyes. Then their parent would call, sometimes rushing over to make certain they were safe. Brown Skuas flew above, patrolling for stray penguin chicks or left-over food. Antarctic Terns, Wilson’s Storm and Northern Giant Petrels flew by, or in the case of the giant petrels, loafed on the beach affording close views of these less-than-pretty tubenoses referred to as the vultures of Antarctica.

Taking full advantage of today’s good weather, we took another zodiac cruise in the afternoon to Prion Island. Here we were met once again by a contingent of King and Gentoo Penguins along with a large number of Antarctic Fur Seals. Once ashore, we found South Georgia Pipits flitting through the Tussock Grass. Just beyond was as lovely a glacially-carved mountain landscape as could be imagined, including at least seven large glaciers within our view.

We proceeded up a board walk trail through the Tussock Grass to the meadows on top of the island. Along the way, multiple Antarctic Fur Seals were resting, along with several nesting Brown Skuas. On top we saw seven soaring Wandering Albatrosses – an impressive spectacle by the bird species with the world’s largest wingspan, flying by Antarctica’s spectacular ice and mountain landscape. Continuing onto the next viewing platform we saw half-a-dozen nesting Wandering Albatross and one nesting Northern Giant Petrel. The Albatrosses were huge in contrast. They had built up their nests from the ground with earth and sticks, including one occupied nest that was only 25 feet distant from the platform.



Thurs., Feb. 7 | Stromness Bay, Massive Iceberg – S. Georgia Island

Our charmed existence continued today as we once again awoke to sunny skies with temperatures in the low 40s. Our ship headed to Stromness Bay, where we were transported to shore via zodiacs and deposited on a glacial outwash plain. Small groups of Antarctic Fur Seals, King and Gentoo Penguins were on hand to greet us.

Once onshore past the welcoming “committee,” we walked toward Shackleton Falls, following a glacial braided stream bed through marshy terrain. Just above the picturesque 75-foot falls was the point where Shackleton and his five men who had already sailed 800 miles from Elephant to South Georgia Island, made their final descent from the mountains to the whaling station, leading to their and the rest of the crew’s eventual rescue.

As we hiked to and from the falls, we noted miniature wild flowers including the clover-like Burnett plant, Pixie-cap lichen, Antarctic Bedstraw and Antarctic Hairgrass along with multi-colored rocks deposited by retreating glaciers. Brown Skuas menaced just about every flying bird; a few South Georgia Pipits foraged in the glacial till; and a group of giant storm petrels fought over a dead animal they found and were savagely eating. Their tails were cocked, and wings bowed in a grouse-like display.

We returned to the landing beach, once again surrounded by curious and playful seal pups. We then rode zodiacs back to our mother ship after yet another amazing outing in ideal conditions.

In the afternoon, our plan was to land at St. Andrews penguin colony, however due to strong winds and large waves, we were unable to do so. Instead we cruised along the coastline of South Georgia Island where we were treated to an extraordinary combination of Humpback Whale sightings and our first giant iceberg – a towering ice sculpture illuminated by the setting sun.

Fri., Feb. 9 | Gold Cove and Scotia Sea, S. Georgia Island

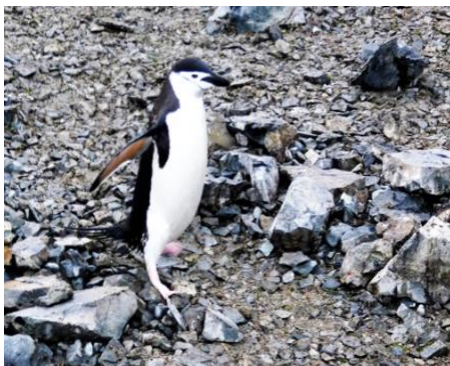
Fair weather was with us again today as our ship anchored in Gold Cove, South Georgia Island. We set out in zodiacs and some in kayaks, in perhaps the calmest seas yet. The zodiacs landed on a black sand beach amid King and Gentoo Penguins and the ever-present Antarctic Fur Seals. While this penguin colony was not as massive as several we had seen previously, it still boasted thousands of Kings and Gentoos against a spectacular backdrop of glaciers, waterfalls and rugged mountains.

Snowy Sheathbills, Brown Skuas, and Giant Petrels patrolled the beach. South Georgia Pipits flitted through the Tussock Grass clumps. Legions of Antarctic Fur Seals with their young pups clambered all over the beach. Forty Elephant Seals basked on the beach. Occasionally one would “gallump” its way to the water doing a heavy, plump version of the worm dance move.

High above in Tussock covered hills, a pair of Light-mantled Albatross had built a nest. A One Ocean staffer put up a spotting scope so we could see a nesting pair of the species that James Lower, author of *Antarctic Wildlife* wrote is “arguably the most attractive of the region’s albatrosses.”

At mid-day, we departed the scenic wildlife extravaganza that was Gold Beach and returned to our comfortable ship for lunch. That afternoon, we all went on a zodiac cruise to search for penguin colonies in the area – particularly Chinstrap and Macaroni. As soon as we entered the zodiacs, we saw large numbers of penguins porpoising through the water. Near the shore of Cooper Island, we first found individuals, then dozens of Chinstrap Penguins. We motored across the bay to the Macaroni colony where hundreds were arrayed along the beach and up a steep talus slope.

While cruising along in our zodiacs for good looks at the Macaroni colony, we were spotted by a Leopard Seal. It proceeded to swim from boat-to-boat, raising its large head out of the water for better looks, and even breached near our zodiac as a show of force or perhaps play. It then visited the kayakers, adding significantly to the excitement of their day. The grand finale to the day was a barbecue dinner held on the open deck of our ship, while it cruised through the incredibly scenic Drygalski Fjord. We bid a fond farewell to South Georgia Island and embarked upon the same voyage that Ernest Shackleton and his five-man crew took in 1916, in a 22-foot life boat, in reverse.





Sat. & Sun., Feb. 10 & 11 | At Scotia Sea, More Giant Icebergs

We had gentle seas and moderate winds in which to cross the Scotia Sea. When equipped with the proper gear or “rugged up” as our Canadian ship hosts were fond of saying, one could be on deck in reasonable comfort.

On deck this morning we sorted Antarctic Prions from Blue Petrels. Both of these species fly close to the water and blend into its blue/gray colors. Occasionally a Snowy Petrel or a Common Diving-Petrel would also fly by. It was surprising to see any species making a living in the middle of the cold, stormy Scotia Sea. As One Ocean Ornithologist Christopher Di Corrado said in his seabird presentation: “To survive – no thrive - in one of the most feared and inhospitable places on earth is remarkable.”

Meanwhile inside our ship, presentations on Pinnipeds and Charting Coastline Depths were offered to keep us well-informed. One Ocean staff has knowledgeable, passionate staff who give these talks. More presentations and sea-viewing continued in the afternoons. Those on the decks witnessed a similar set of birds combined with a prolonged aerial standoff between a Skua and an Antarctic Prion.

In the late afternoon, a group of Fin Whales swam by, spouted and rose just above the water line. One surprise whale appeared briefly – a Southern Right Whale – to add to the diversity of whale species seen on the trip.

On the next day, we had our first exposure to Antarctic sea conditions and weather. Large icebergs often came into view and snow flurries fell. By mid-morning, blue sky appeared, and visibility improved. Our hearty crew of open-deck observers saw Wandering Albatross, Blue Petrel and a Fin Whale among other species.

Just after lunch, we were notified of the presence of a massive floating ice formation. We came to the bridge to see several 75-foot tall icebergs dead ahead. The crew of our ship expertly maneuvered between the massive bergs. Later in the afternoon, a 28 kilometer-long, 100-foot high tabular iceberg came into view. It was so large that it calmed the portion of the sea we were travelling through since we were on its leeward side. This berg has a name/number and has been around for seven years. According to the NASA website: “Iceberg B09F was first found in the Amundsen or Eastern Ross Sea, it was the 9th iceberg named from that origin, and was the sixth fragment from Iceberg B09.” Hard to believe that this island-sized iceberg was just a fragment of Iceberg B09!

Mon., Feb. 12 | Scotia Sea to Elephant Island

On a cold, misty morning, those of us on the bridge made out the first glimpse of land in several days: Elephant Island. It was here in 1916 that 22 of Ernest Shackleton’s men camped for 128 days on a rocky, narrow spit of land. It was also here that Shackleton took 5 men with him on the 800-mile voyage to South Georgia Island in a 22-foot life boat – one of the most amazing sailing feats of all time.

Having read *Endurance* and having seen photos of the surroundings gives an impression of Elephant Island as a rugged, inhospitable place. Seeing it in person, and not even being able to land there today due to rough seas, underscored this impression. Like South Georgia Island, it has huge, vertical peaks with massive calving glaciers flowing down from them to the coast. It is hard to spot any level ground on the shore, much less a suitable campsite. Large floating icebergs passed nearby, big waves crashed ashore. It is a miracle that Shackleton's men survived here as long as they did.

Along with the fascinating human history associated with this place, we saw Fin, Humpback and Orca Whales surfacing. Multiple Cape Petrels followed the ship, and Southern Fulmars and South Polar Skuas were suddenly common.

Tues., Feb. 13 | Antarctic Peninsula!

Who expected to see sunshine in Antarctica? As we pulled into Active Bay and along the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, we had it, along with relatively calm seas. This provided an excellent opportunity for a zodiac cruise and kayak paddle. Our group did both!

We started among numerous small chunks of ice known as "brash." We began seeing wildlife on ice. Our first Adelie Penguins were seen early and often, calling in crow-like tones. They entertained us by seeming to play "King of the (icy) Hill." They would ascend the hill and then slide down often. The chicks struggled mightily to climb out of the water onto the iceberg. Will power eventually triumphed after much back-sliding.

Joining the Adelies were scattered Antarctic Fur Seals and South Polar Skuas. Flying above and around us were Kelp Gulls, Wilson's Storm Petrels, and Antarctic Terns – the latter sometimes hovering and chattering above our boats. A Minke Whale cruised only 30 yards distant from us, rolling and rising. All of these sightings were against a back drop of frozen, snow-covered vertical terrain, completely dominated by mountains, glaciers and rock. No vegetation was visible. This was vintage Antarctica.

We were greeted back to our ship with a cup of hot chocolate and Baileys Irish Crème – a delightfully warming treat. The last two groups to return reported seeing Crabeater and Weddell Seals. Our collective first excursion in Antarctica was productive and inspiring.

The afternoon excursion went to Brown Bluff, our first chance to set foot on the Antarctic continent. Our approach was full of icebergs and great anticipation. Once ashore, inquisitive Gentoo Penguins greeted us. Some young ones came close to nibble on our boots. Snow Petrels, Cape Petrels, South Polar Skuas and Kelp Gulls were abundant. Our time on the beach allowed us to observe Gentoo and Adelie Penguin behavior. Often, we saw young Gentoos chasing adults in hopes of getting fed.

The wind picked up and we had a bumpy, exciting ride back to the ship. One group spotted three Leopard Seals and another Crabeater Seal to top off our first day on the peninsula.

Wed., Feb. 14 | Valentine's Day at D'Hainant Island & Mikkelson Harbor

Although it snowed several inches last night, this morning's weather was sunny, clear and calm – a perfect day to explore D'Hainant Island in Mikkelson Harbor. The surrounding mountains were full of glacial blue ice, gleaming in the sun. An Antarctic Fur Seal was perched head up on a rock, a sentry for our landing and the wildlife we were about to see.

On the island, we took a walk through a Gentoo penguin colony and up to a fine viewpoint. Many of the Gentoos were in various stages of molting, which made for interesting visuals. The highlight for many of us were the excellent views of the four Weddell seals on the fresh snow; they seemed oblivious to us. In addition, Antarctic Shags were flying around us, along with South Polar Skuas and Antarctic Terns.

The occasional crow-like call of Adelie Penguins, the whoosh of spouting whales, and the sudden crack of calving glaciers creating a large wave... are the sounds of Antarctica. Every cove we pulled into was a scenic wonder. They all have extremely rugged snow and ice encrusted landscapes, jagged rocks, cliffs carved and polished by glaciers. Is there any place on earth that has more noataks (rock towers surrounded by snow and ice)? Probably not.

Penguins porpoise, whales roll and blow, skuas, shags, terns and petrels fly by. A Snowy Sheathbill fluttered onto the ship deck, pecking in shallow pools of water for something to eat. The air is fresh and clean most of the time, except when downwind from a penguin colony.

Our afternoon excursion was an extended zodiac cruise through Cierva Cove. We travelled through massive icebergs and brash. Penguin Island was our first destination, and full of penguins it was, Chinstraps up and down the slopes. We enjoyed watching them walk up and then slide down the ice.

We then went towards an Argentine Refugio with many more penguins but no people in sight. The ice thickened near the shore, so we turned around and went further out, away from the ship and Penguin Island, to watch humpback whales! We estimated that there were eight humpbacks in the vicinity with three very close to our zodiac. All of the zodiacs were in the area, and all had the thrill of hearing the whales spout and show their tails. The waters were thick with Chinstrap Penguins, porpoising and a White-morph Giant Petrel was in sight as well.

Fri., Feb. 15 | Brown's Point, Neko Harbor

On an unusually calm morning, we arrived at the southernmost point of our journey in Paradise Harbor. A short zodiac transfer through bergies took us to the rocky shore of Brown's Point, an Argentinian field station that today had eleven researchers and one doctor. The latter spoke with us about their work and life at the station. They are conducting studies on ice fish, a species of commercial and ecological interest to Argentina.

The other "occupants" of Brown's Point are Gentoo Penguins. We made our way through part of their colony as they calmly watched. At this point, we were on a snow-packed trail that led to a rocky outcrop and a prominent summit overhanging Paradise Harbor. Outstanding views of the Gentoo colony, glacial landscape and iceberg-laden bay could be had from this vantage point.

For the balance of the morning, we cruised Paradise Harbor in zodiacs in and among the brash while keeping an eye out for seals and whales. Most had good looks at Crabeater and Leopard Seals. All had multiple sightings of Humpback Whales.

The scenic grandeur of mountains, glaciers, floating ice and sea has become a constant. And the sea here is alive with penguins, seals, whales and birds. It literally churns with life, including the rivers of tiny krill that support the Antarctic wildlife. Massive swarms of krill comprise the vital broad base of the Antarctic food pyramid.

The calm weather held in the afternoon as we glided into neighboring Neko Inlet. Once again, we found ourselves among giant icebergs, calving glaciers and jagged peaks. As our zodiacs came to a halt on a rocky beach, One Oceans lead guide Kaylan spotted a hauled-out Weddell Seal. We ambled to a safe distance from the seal and took photos. Once in a while it would raise its big, rounded face, to gaze at us with its long whiskers and Cheshire cat grin. Some even heard it sing in its other-worldly tones.

Our group followed a snow trail upslope to a viewpoint into the Gentoo colony and beyond. All ages and different moults of penguins were on display. Chicks begged adults for food; parents methodically and repetitively added rocks to their nests. Others stood tall, filled their chests with bills to the sky and bellowed out ecstatic calls in donkey-like tones. Half-a-dozen South Polar Skuas flew circles around the penguin colony hoping for a stray or wounded chick.

Twice while we were at this viewpoint, we heard loud cracks followed by ice slaps calving off a nearby glacier. Our zodiac trip back to the main ship was an adventure. We came across four Humpback Whales spouting, rolling and raising their flukes during the short ¼-mile crossing.

Sat., Feb. 16 | Charlotte Bay Whale Watching Spectacular

Under cool, calm conditions, our ship pulled into Charlotte Bay, passing an elaborate giant iceberg with two arches. The ice-carved natural beauty is non-stop in Antarctica. We were amazed at the many gorgeous natural shades of blue. The photographers on the trip really enjoyed capturing these and many other spectacular sights.

After breakfast, we geared up for a zodiac cruise in Charlotte Bay. Once our rafts were loaded with passengers and took off, our guides/pilots immediately spotted the whales that were all around us. As we motored toward one group of whales, another group of Humpbacks passed close by. This proved to be the start of an amazing whale show for the next three hours. During this stretch we observed from close range (within ten yards and sometimes beneath our boats), many facets of whale behavior such as: bubble net feeding, spouting, diving with flukes rising at the end, fin-slapping and breaching. Incredibly, we even heard whale vocalizations, such as grunting and groaning from beneath the water. At least thirty Humpback Whales feeding on krill put on a phenomenal show that our group witnessed from zodiacs and kayaks.

Our afternoon outing was to Portal Point. In light snow and moderate seas, we rode zodiacs a short distance to a rocky beach. Five South Polar Skuas flew up to “greet” us, some soaring just a few feet over our heads. Once ashore our group walked the two trails marked by One Ocean staff with poles in the snow. This kept us a safe distance from seals and prevented us from disturbing penguin colonies. It also kept us on a safe track. One trail led to a snowy hill top with a terrific view of the floating and land-based ice forms. The other led to a former British Base, that was abandoned and removed after the Treaty of Antarctica was signed, in 1962.

A pair of Weddell’s Seals dozed in the snow, sometimes casting a sleepy gaze at us. We departed after a nice final walk for this trip on the Antarctic Peninsula. On the zodiac transfer back to the ship, we were delayed by the sighting of two resting Humpback Whales. They stayed mostly in one place, floating above the surface within 20 yards of the raft, for at least 20 minutes. Watching them from the zodiacs provided a quiet, meditative end to our excursion.

Sun., Feb. 17 | Deception and Half Moon Islands

Early risers were treated with a view of Deception Island in the distance with its tall rocky flanks dotted with snow. In the bridge, our approach into the narrow neck of the caldera was super quiet as the Captain carefully navigated the ship into this unique geological feature, avoiding the infamous huge underwater rock. A mix of giant petrels, Storm Petrels, Cape Petrels, Wilson’s Storm Petrels and a Black-browed Albatross greeted us in the morning light, as well as a large colony of Chinstrap Penguins on the port side of the rocky slope.

As we entered Whaler’s Bay, we noted that a Norwegian research vessel shared the cove with us on this peaceful morning – in great contrast to a morning in 1969, the last time there was a volcanic eruption here that



destroyed a research station. The remains of a former whale processing facility were visible on the black sand beach, as well as numerous fur seals that lined the shore. Two tents were on the slopes; later we learned the research vessel was picking up researchers after their two-month stint in this remote and special place.

Our landing took place on the black sand beach, with the aroma of a volcanic hot springs wafting over us. Some of our intrepid cohorts would later plunge into these heated waters. This was an easy landing and a nice beach for walking amid the slowly-decomposing structures of another former whaling station. As we hiked along the beach, a One Ocean guide presented us with a tiny Spider Crab that looked like a cross between a crab and a jellyfish. When released in its proper orientation, it blended in perfectly with its salt water surroundings.

From here, we hiked up a short trail through volcanic basalt spires that led to a gap called Neptune's Window, with striking views of the other side of the island and the sea below. Cape Petrels and Wilson's Storm Petrels fluttered by, and several South Polar Skuas cruised by in their aggressive, purposeful way.

On the way down, several of us marveled at a large rock with several kinds of lichen – a few of the only species that can survive in this harsh climate. Playful, curious fur seals flagrantly disobeyed the rules about staying away from the historical boat on shore. Instead, they climbed onto it, posing as if they were captains of the decrepit ship.

Meanwhile, the hot spring swimmers were toweling off and warming up after their invigorating hot followed by a cold plunge into the partially heated waters of the submerged Deception Island crater. Of our group, Alan and Bill were the ones to have joined the brave swimmers. This was yet another varied, interesting and memorable excursion in a unique place within the broader unique continent of Antarctica.

At first glance, our afternoon outing looked like might be cancelled due to bad weather. By the time we reached the beach of Half Moon Island in the zodiacs, however, the snow subsided, and the weather calmed. Calm and gray conditions prevailed: Perfect!

The one penguin species we hoped to see more of was Chinstrap and here they were in large numbers. They made certain that we noticed them by walking right up to us and standing picturesquely on snowfields and rock outcrops with lovely mountain and glacier scenes behind them. We wandered above and below the Chinstrap colony as they sat and watched, preened and took walks of their own.

South Polar Skuas were abundant, as were penguin carcasses for them to eat. Kelp Gulls, Snowy Sheathbills, Antarctic Shags and Wilson's Storm Petrels – birds we had come to associate with this continent, along with penguins of course. Antarctic Fur Seals were numerous and active on the beach. This was a fitting last excursion for our trip, because it combined many of the elements of Antarctica that make it so special.



Our last evening aboard the Akademik Ioffe featured a Russian meal, and a formal thank you to the Russian ship crew and the One Ocean staff for a truly wonderful, professionally run journey. This was followed by a stupendous multi-media presentation by the ship photographer, Dave Shaw. Each of us received a copy of this wonderful show about the trip we had just experienced.

Mon., Feb. 18 | Return to Punta Arenas, Chile

On our final morning, we enjoyed a nice full breakfast which prepared us for what turned out to be a long day. Despite fair skies and partly sunny weather, the wind was very strong and the seas high. Consequently, One Ocean deemed our zodiac shuttle with luggage to the shore of King George Island to be unsafe. We waited patiently for calmer conditions. They came in the mid-afternoon and we had an uneventful crossing to the island and its rustic airstrip.

A nice compact DAP Airlines jet lifted us above the turbulent winds into smooth air for a two-hour flight over Drake Passage. We arrived in Punta Arenas in the evening and checked in for a very sound sleep at the appropriately-named Dreams Hotel. We wondered aloud how we would ever put this incredible trip into perspective when we return to our respective homes. One thing is certain: it will be impossible to forget.

Pre-Antarctic Trip Extension to Torres del Paine

Tues., Jan. 29 | Punta Arenas to Puerto Natales





Early this morning, we departed as a group on the Torres del Paine extension of our journey. Just a short distance from our hotel, we stopped along the Straits of Magellan on the Punta Arenas waterfront that the city has made into a park and pedestrian trail. There we saw hundreds of Imperial Cormorants roosting on old pilings and pier remnants. Mixed in were a few Rock Cormorants, Dolphin, Kelp and Brown-hooded Gulls, and Chilean Skuas. Our first looks at Giant Southern Petrels and Black-browed Albatrosses also occurred here. As we took off in our van, we could see whales blowing on the horizon. Our guide, Ricardo, said they were Sei Whales and that it was unusual that so many were in the vicinity this year. What a promising start!



Just a few miles northeast of Punta Arenas, we stopped at several ponds surrounded by marsh land. They were loaded with birds, including: Southern Lapwing, Upland Goose, Ashy-throated Goose, Flightless Steamer Duck, Baird's and White-rumped Sandpiper, Buff-winged Cinclodes, and Two-banded Plover. Following these first two productive stops, we headed north into the Patagonian steppe.



New birds and wildlife appeared as we drove into this wide-open country, such as Lesser Rhea, an ostrich look-alike, and Guanaco – a llama cousin. Small flocks of Least Seedsnipe, a lovely Tawny-throated Dotterel, an Armadillo, and Grey Fox were among our roadside sightings.

As we pulled into Puerto Natales, Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans paddled along the shore. We then checked into a comfortable hotel overlooking the harbor and enjoyed our first meal together after an outstanding first day.

Wed., Jan. 30 | Milodon Cave, Torres del Paine National Park

Early this calm and mild morning, a few of us ventured to the waterfront to investigate the bird activity. We were rewarded with the beautiful sight of Black-necked Swans paddling by with Cygnets riding on their backs.



Our group set out on a northward course for Torres del Paine National Park under partly sunny, cool and breezy conditions. The air is absolutely fresh here without any residual smoke or odor from vehicles, jets, farms or fumes of any kind. The light has a clarity and brilliance far beyond that of most other places, accentuated by the low northern angle of the sun.

Our first stop was the Giant Milodon Cave. It began with a hike through an elfin forest, populated by a variety of birds including: Rufous-tailed Plant eater, Flame-eyed Diucon, Patagonian Sierra Finch, and White-tufted Elaenia. The cave itself is gigantic and features a life-sized sculpture of a Milodon that stands at least 12-feet tall.

We continued northward to the park entrance which has staggering views of the Torres del Paine massif. In this incredibly scenic area, we started seeing groups of Guanaco along with Southern Caracara, Cinereous Harrier, and our first Andean Condors. Following another spectacular drive, we arrived at the Gray Lake trailhead. Here we had a picnic lunch prior to hiking to Gray Lake with its huge aqua blue and white ice bergs washed up on the beach from a calving glacier at the far end of the lake.

While hiking along the lake shore we noticed an Andean Condor soaring with its feet extended as it came in for a landing. Luckily for us, it did so on a rocky outcrop just 100 feet above us where it preened and perched for several minutes prior to taking off once again. This was a magnificent sighting of one of South America's most iconic birds.

On the wooded trail along the lake, we also had good looks at a White-chested Tree Runner, more Patagonia Sierra Finches, Austral Parakeets, and Austral Thrushes. A female Torrent Duck perched on a rock just below a suspension bridge that we walked across.

On the return trip to Puerto Natales, we stopped at several breath-taking view points of the mountain scenery as well as birding spots where we found Spectacled Duck, Speckled Teal and Chilean Flamingo among others. Our final stretch to Puerto Natales, a Guanaco on a ridge top in a rigid position on high alert. We watched and waited to see if a Puma might emerge. Although it never did, the anticipation of seeing one was very exciting. Eventually the Guanaco on sentry duty trotted off and re-joined his herd.

Thurs., Jan. 31 | Torres del Paine National Park, Lodging at Ranch

Today as we drove back into Torres del Paine from a different direction, the clouds gradually lifted, exposing views of the ruggedly beautiful Paine Massif. On our several days in this famous park, we saw the "Torres" from many different angles, light and cloud conditions: all were sensational.

Meanwhile, along the roadside, we spotted a variety of birds and wildlife ranging from a Gray Fox and hundreds of Guanacos, to a Mourning Sierra-Finch feeding her chick on top of a wooden fence. At the aptly-named Laguna Azul (Blue Lagoon), we took a scenic (is any place not scenic around here?) hike along the shore. Yellow-billed

Pintail and Speckled Teal were seen together here, giving the group time to learn how to identify them. The clouds continued to part, opening up the best views of the Torres we had seen so far. The majesty of these spires and the surrounding peaks and glaciers cannot be overstated.

We enjoyed a picnic lunch with a clear view of the Laguna, the towers and peaks behind. Afterward, we headed to Paine Falls, a high-volume waterfall that has carved a beautiful canyon. The Torres loom behind providing yet another jaw-dropping scene. Three Torrent Ducks – two females and a male – enhanced this lovely scene as they navigated through the powerful white-water currents below.

In the late afternoon, we pulled into a working ranch and lodge to spend the night. It too boasts a magnificent view of the Torres and a large lake in the foreground. Our group was happy to get out and explore this vast ranch, complete with sheep and horses, on foot. Tonight's dinner was a special treat: barbecued lamb over an open pit fire served outside in true gaucho style. The food was delicious and the atmosphere spirited.

Fri., Feb. 1 | Return to Punta Arenas via Torres del Paine

We awoke to a sunrise illuminating the Torres del Paine. A family of Hog-nosed Skunks made an appearance including one that played with the ranch dog ... remarkably without spraying him.

On the way out of the lodge, we hiked into a wooded area including large standing snags with nesting cavities. There we found four Magellanic Great Horned Owls. The two young were perched together, their heads bobbing and twisting to look at us, while the adults calmly watched from their nearby perches. How special it was to meet an entire family of this recently split (into Magellanic) species!

The drive back to Puerto Natales featured more phenomenal scenery along with Gray Foxes and a second Armadillo. We stopped for lunch in a nice wayside restaurant then paused at a series of ponds by the side of the road that had Black-necked and Coscoroba Swans, Crested Ducks, Silvery Teal, White-winged and Red-Gartered Coots. In the late afternoon, we returned to Punta Arenas to meet the rest of our group and to embark upon our big adventure to Antarctica.

Photo Credits

A big thank-you to Woody Wheeler and David Zippin for providing photographs for this trip report.