



Antarctica, majestic, stark and beautiful, is the fifth-largest of the seven continents. The coldest, highest, windiest and driest of them all, it was not seen until 1820 and not landed upon until 1821.

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

'Sixty-foot waves? You've got to be kidding! I can't handle 60-foot waves!"

My fellow travelers glanced at each other in a way that suggested more amusement than sympathy. "Get a little seasick?" one asked.

Seasick? I'd once gotten queasy floating on a tube in a swimming pool! I had long dreamed of going to Antarctica, but the thought of spending two days aboard ship on the rough seas of the Drake Passage set my stomach churning. And it wasn't just the two days getting to Antarctica. There would be two more coming back.

The Drake Passage is a stretch of water that flows between Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America and Antarctica's South Shetland Islands. It connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, and its waters are reputed to be the roughest in the world. I read of one wave that towered to an astonishing 100 feet. That's about the height of an eight-story building, and it's certainly nothing I'd ever want to encounter.

While my companions assured me that not all Drake crossings are horri-

OF ICE & MENACE

Spanning the turbulent seas of Drake Passage presents its own daunting start to a voyage to the bottom of the world

ble, they noted there is no way to predict how bad a trip will actually be. A voyage might be fine in one direction and just awful in the other. Their stories of travelers fracturing ribs or legs while just trying to get to the bathroom almost convinced me to give up hopes of ever making the trip.

See *Antarctica*, Page C8

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the first installment of a three-part series by travel writer Beth Parks about her journey to Antarctica. Parts II and III will run May 10 and May 24, respectively.



The Cape Horn Islands (from top) at the extreme southern tip of South America appear beneath us as we begin our flight over the Drake Passage. Flying with Antarctica XXI enabled us to skip a two-day cruise through tumultuous seas. The colorful buildings of the Chilean Base Presidente Eduardo Frei Montalva contrast sharply against their background as we come in for a landing on King George Island in the South Shetland Archipelago. Our Russian-built ship, the Grigoriy Mikheev, waits for us in the harbor at Frei Station.



PHOTOS BY BETH PARKS

Antarctica

Continued from Page C7

But where there's a will, there's a way. The way came to me in the form of a company called Antarctica XXI, pronounced "twenty-one." It offers a flight of about three hours between Punta Arenas in Chile to King George Island in the South Shetland Archipelago off the coast of Antarctica. Once passengers arrive, a ship with an ice-strengthened hull takes them on a six-day expedition to the South Shetland Islands and the shore of the Antarctic Peninsula.

Packing for the trip was a bit of a challenge because of the weather extremes I would be facing. I intended to spend the first few weeks of my excursion in Chile and needed clothes that would be suited to climates ranging from hot and dry to cold and wet. Fortunately for me, Delta Airlines, my international carrier, allowed its passengers to check two bags weighing up to 50 pounds each.

That weight limit did not hold true for the airplane carrying passengers to Antarctica. Baggage, including a carry-on, was limited to a skimpy 33 pounds. While that may not sound like much, it was actually quite adequate. Antarctica XXI stores your excess luggage at the Hotel José Nogueira in Punta Arenas, the century-old mansion where travelers stay at both ends of the journey. The company also provides you with insulated boots as soon as you get off the plane in Antarctica.

We knew we only had a small window of time to make the flight to Antarctica because of the brutal winds, and that bad weather could easily cost us a full day of travel. Our 4 a.m. gathering for departure was postponed a couple of hours, not due to inclement weather in the region but because of a logistical problem in Antarctica.

Despite the delay, we got off the ground without difficulty and were soon flying above the legendary Cape Horn at the extreme southern tip of South America. I chuckled aloud as I watched the massive waves of the Drake Passage swell and collapse below us.

Our plane was a British-made high-winged craft with short run-

way requirements and a capacity for 50 passengers. It was clean, quiet and comfortable, with a cruise speed of 465 mph. It even had a stewardess. The cockpit door remained open during the flight, and we were even encouraged to visit with the crew.

Our expedition was limited to 30 passengers, and excitement aboard the plane soon became downright palpable. We were free to move about the cabin and were already becoming acquainted by the time we approached Chilean Base Presidente Eduardo Frei Montalva on King George Island.

The bright blues, reds, yellows and oranges of Frei Station's buildings and roofs contrasted sharply with the gray-brown gravel and patches of dirty snow. The station's rusting metal huts serve as home to about 80 people in winter and double that in summer.

Frei Station is one of the most important research stations in Antarctica. Its airstrip handles about 50 intercontinental flights each season. It also serves as a hub for about 150 intracontinental flights to other bases.

Once fitted with our white insulated boots, we ambled down to the cobble beach to wait for the Zodiac inflatable watercrafts to come in and transport us back out to the waiting ship. Dozens of penguins entertained us as they waddled along the strand or arched their way through the waves like little porpoises.

And so this was it: We were finally in Antarctica. We travelers had come from a variety of countries and spoke languages that ranged from Norwegian and Flemish to Italian and French, but we all knew we were stepping into an amazing and long-awaited dream.

Our first Zodiac boarding, as would be most of those to follow, was a wet one. It required our standing in water deep enough for the rubberized craft to float without getting hung up on the beach. I'm only 5-foot-1½, so getting in and out of a bobbing Zodiac can be a bit of a challenge. Thanks to the crew and other passengers, though, I always transitioned safely and never wound up in the drink.

I wasn't quite certain what to expect of our ship, the Grigoriy Mikheev, as photos and sketches

can both be deceptive. To my delight she turned out to be every bit as striking as her pictures had suggested.

Designed in Russia as a research vessel, Grigoriy Mikheev was built in Finland in 1990 and later converted in the Netherlands for expedition cruising. She is sleek, white and clean, and she features a sophisticated anti-roll system that reduces her undulations on the choppy Antarctic seas.

The Mikheev's enthusiastic and highly experienced Russian crew of about 20 handled her beautifully during the voyage. The ship offered passengers such comforts as a small library, lounge, bar and private baths. International chefs took great pride in preparing our meals, and complimentary wine was provided to all who wanted to partake.

While the ship's itinerary may be similar to that of others plying the waters off the Antarctic Peninsula, the Mikheev is a mere 210 feet long by 42 feet wide. She has the ability to enter places that larger ships simply cannot go. She carries just 46 passengers and expedition crew, giving travelers more opportunities for landings to see wildlife and the myriad spectacular sights the region has to offer.

Before I get into the details of what we actually saw during the expedition, let me first give you a crash course on Antarctica itself.

Antarctica is the fifth largest of the seven continents. All but the Antarctic Peninsula, which reaches out from the continent's northwest side toward South America, lies below the Antarctic Circle. The circle lies at about 66 degrees 33 minutes south latitude and marks the point where the sun is first visible 24 hours a day on Dec. 21, the summer solstice in the Southern Hemisphere.

Speculation about Antarctica's existence stems back to the first century A.D., but the continent was not seen until 1820 and not landed upon until 1821. Most of us know it as the location of the South Pole, the southernmost point on the face of the earth at 90 degrees south latitude.

Depending on the time of year and the amount of ice that extends from the land, Antarctica covers roughly 5.4 million miles. That's about one and a half times

the area of the United States.

Antarctica remains in an ice age and carries the reputation of being the coldest, windiest, highest and driest of all the continents. Despite the abundance of snow and ice, it is classified as a desert, with the continent's total precipitation averaging only about 5 inches per year. That precipitation is pretty well limited to the coastal areas, with the highest amounts falling over the Antarctic Peninsula.

Only a few nations claim territory in Antarctica: Argentina, Australia, Britain, Chile, France, New Zealand and Norway. Those claims pretty much go unrecognized except among the nations themselves. Neither the United States nor Russia has laid claims, although they both maintain research stations there. Countries generally cooperate with each other in the spirit of scientific research.

The continent has remained politically neutral since the Antarctic Treaty signed in 1959 went into force in 1961. The treaty was designed to regulate international relations with regard to Antarctica, which for treaty purposes includes all land and ice shelves south of 60 degree south latitude.

Antarctica has no native human population. Land animals are well adapted to cold and include such swimming critters as seals and penguins. Don't bother looking for polar bears, though. They live in the Arctic at the opposite end of the globe.

Ice covers up to 98 percent of Antarctica and ties up perhaps 90 percent of the world's fresh water. The ice averages about a mile deep and has a maximum depth of almost three miles. If all that ice melted, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, the world's seas would rise by an astounding and catastrophic 240 feet.

You won't find much plant life in Antarctica. About all that grows in the ice-free areas along the coast are mosses, liverworts, lichens, bryophytes, algae and fungi. Visitors are urged not to step on them, as injured plants may take years to recuperate or may not be able to recover at all. Ironically it is sometimes difficult not to trip over penguins and other wildlife while trying to avoid the plants.