



Part of an old boat deck rots on the beach at Whaler's Bay, which had served as a base for a series of Norwegian factory ships until whale oil prices dropped sharply during the Great Depression. The Grigoriy Mikheev, the ship that carried modern passengers to the White Continent and several of its nearby islands, lies at anchor in the background.

FANTASTIC VOYAGE

Human remnants
abound on the
return journey
from the
White Continent;
if you go, a piece
of your heart will
be among them

**BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS**

In the first part of this three-part series, I explained how I came to take a fly-cruise expedition to Antarctica with a Chilean-based company called Antarctica XXI. I also described the flight between Punta Arenas and Frei Base in the South Shetland Islands and presented readers with a crash course on Antarctica.

In part two, I described the first portion of our voyage aboard the Grigoriy Mikheev, a small Russian-built ship with a hull strengthened to withstand ice and staffed by a Russian crew. I wrote of our stops at Ardley Atcho, Half Moon, Cuverville

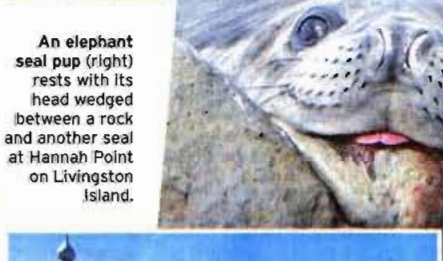
and Petermann Islands, as well as our visits to Port Lockroy (Britain) and Vernadsky Station (Ukraine). I also described our travels through Neumayer and Lemaire Channels and our visit to the White Continent itself.

In this final installment, I describe our stops at Deception, Livingston and King George islands. A box with the end of the story includes a few tips about traveling to Antarctica.

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Once the repositories of whale oil, gigantic steel tanks (left) rust and crumble at the defunct station at Whaler's Bay on Deception Island. The station was abandoned in 1931.



An elephant seal pup (right) rests with its head wedged between a rock and another seal at Hannah Point on Livingston Island.



Tiny Trinity Church (left) sits on a hill above the harbor near Frei Station on King George Island. Built in Russia and reconstructed in Antarctica, it is the southernmost Eastern Orthodox facility in the world.

PHOTOS BY BETH PARKS

Antarctica

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Deception Island

What a difference a day makes! Gone were the magnificent icebergs and jagged snow-covered peaks of the Antarctica we had come to know. A flat blue sea now lay before us, and a dark volcanic formation loomed in the distance.

The dark mound was Deception Island, a ring-shaped island about eight miles in diameter with a restless volcanic caldera in its center. Although permanent glaciers cover a great deal of Deception's surface, deep layers of volcanic ash overlie much of the glacial ice.

The entrance to the flooded caldera is guarded by Neptune's Bellows, a narrow break in the crater's walls through which ships can maneuver into a large safe bay named Port Foster. Once safely past the steep cliffs on both sides of the treacherous channel, the Grigoriy Mikheev anchored inside the caldera in a cove called Whaler's Bay.

Apily named for the whaling activities that replaced sealing in the early 1900s, Whaler's Bay served as a base for a series of Norwegian factory ships until whale oil prices dropped sharply during the Great Depression. The processing method was inefficient and wasteful, and during the 1912-1913 season more than 3,000 whale carcasses reportedly lay rotting in the harbor.

Although the blubber was processed on board the ships at sea, carcasses were brought back to shore and boiled down to extract the remaining oil. The station was abandoned in 1931, and the rusting hulks of the tanks, boilers and derelict buildings still crumble on the windswept shore.

Thirty-five men were interred in a cemetery established in 1908, and a memorial commemorated 10 more who were lost at sea. The cemetery itself succumbed to volcanic eruptions in 1967 and 1969. The only reminders on the beach today are an empty coffin and two wooden crosses that brace themselves against the windswept desolation.

Courtesy whalebones also lie buried beneath the volcanic ash. Sun-bleached vertebrae or bone fragments occasionally emerge on the beach, released from the dark sand by rolling waves and the relentless wind.

After exploring the beach, we climbed up to Neptune's Window, a wide gap in the caldera wall extending to its rim. The window provided an impressive view of the beach, shore and soaring seabirds, making the relatively easy hike well worth our effort and ash-covered pants.

The ship then moved on to Pendulum Cove, where volcanic fumaroles heat the water to a level suitable for bathing. Something pinkish-orange caught my eye on the dark sand, and I bent over to check it out. It turned out to be shrimp-like krill, cooked by the water and looking good enough to eat.

After our crew dug holes in the steaming sand at the beach's edge, they invited everyone to peel off their clothes and go in the water. Those who were brave enough to strip in the cold air lay in the watery depressions and slathered themselves with warm volcanic mud. Those who chose not to strip stood around in relative comfort, the hot sand toasting their feet through their insulated boots.

Livingston Island

Wildlife was one of the biggest draws of Antarctica for me, and Livingston Island promised to be the best of the best in terms of wildlife viewing. This was where we would see the renowned southern elephant seals.

For a few heart-stopping moments, it seemed the sea would be too rough for us to board our inflatable watercraft, the Zodiacs, to go ashore. We literally had to time the swells so we could jump into the bobbing rubber boats without falling overboard. Happily for me, any thoughts or sensations I had of seasickness were overruled by my sheer excitement.

Livingston Island was worth every smidgen of effort it took to get there. We landed at the island's south side in Walker Bay, rimmed by basaltic knife-edged ridges that descended to gentler slopes festooned with patches of lichens and crustose algae.

Our first stop was at an informal but fascinating collection of articles amassed by scientists and tide line. On the beach above the colorful regional minerals and a mound of such items as fossils, seal jaws and penguin skulls.

But it was the elephant seals I came to see, and see them I did at Hannah Point on the east side of Walker Bay. Probably 70 seals, mostly juvenile males as evidenced by the fleshy trunk-like noses that give them their name,

hot chocolate back on board our ship, a barbecue on the stern and dancing to Russian music did little to ease the pain of leaving. I could taste the salt of tears as we hauled anchor and began sailing past the glacier-covered hills.

King George Island

The crisp clear morning of the following day found us back at Frei Station on King George Island, where a couple of dozen Gentoos penguins greeted us on the cobble beach. Leaving them today meant leaving all of Antarctica behind.

We had little to do after landing but wait for our plane to arrive. Most of us climbed a narrow rugged path above the bay to tiny Trinity Church. The building was constructed of Siberian Pine in Russia, dismantled and then reconstructed in Antarctica by the staff of the Russian (formerly Soviet) Station Bellingshausen. It is the southernmost Eastern Orthodox facility in the world and serves about 30 worshippers. The priest gave us a tour and even stamped our passports with the Bellingshausen seal.

After our tour we walked down the hill to the Chilean Catholic Church, which rested on a knoll closer to the airstrip. This metal hut, painted an eye-popping blue with yellow and maroon trim, would be hard to miss — even in a blinding snowstorm.

And finally, reluctantly, we walked back to the station and relinquished our white rubber insulated boots.

Our plane soon arrived from Chile, and another 30 travelers from many nations quickly disembarked. Their faces radiated with the same excitement ours had shown less than a week before. The newcomers boarded the Zodiacs and began heading out to the Grigoriy Mikheev, even as we climbed into the waiting plane for the flight back to Punta Arenas.

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GOING TO ANTARCTICA?

Trips to Antarctica are not cheap. Although the Antarctica XXI trip begins in Punta Arenas in Chile, most cruises leave from Ushuaia in Argentina. Costs will be determined by such things as the type of travel, length of stay and amenities.

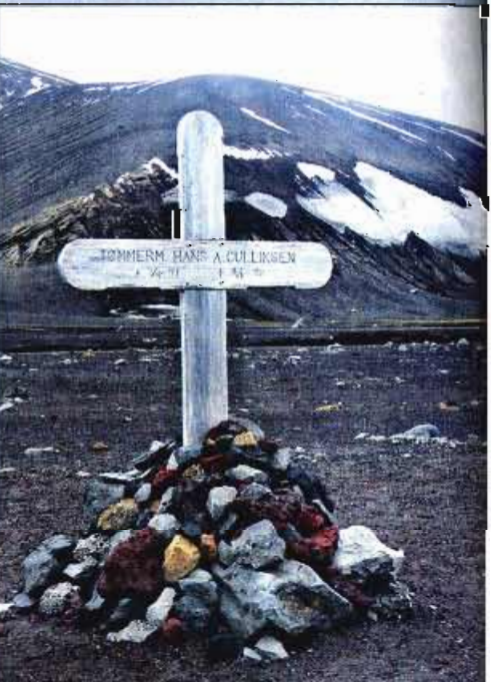
If you are seeking lots of passengers, club life, Jacuzzis and a cruise-ship atmosphere, then Antarctica XXI is definitely not for you. But if you want to avoid getting seasick on the Drake Passage, then Antarctica XXI might be just what the doctor ordered.

I loved every minute of the expedition and would do it again in a heartbeat if there weren't so much world left for me to explore.

Let me offer you a suggestion if you decide to go to Antarctica: don't overpack. I took two large bags because I planned to spend time in widely differing climates in Chile before going farther south. I could easily have gotten by with less, thanks to dressing in layers and the opportunity to wash clothes by hand almost every day.

Buying souvenirs and gear during the Chile portion of the trip put me over LAN Chile Airlines' baggage weight limit of 44 pounds for in-country travel. That mistake cost me \$200. Had it not been for a sympathetic agent, I would have paid that amount every time I took an in-country flight.

You can increase the in-country baggage weight limit to 70 pounds if you book your travel to and from the United States through LAN Chile Airlines. Just remember, you can only take 33 pounds with you on Antarctica XXI's fly-cruise



The Whaler's Bay cemetery, with 35 graves and a memorial to 10 more men lost at sea, was itself buried by volcanic eruptions in 1967 and 1969. This cross was later constructed on the beach in memory of a ship's carpenter.

expedition. The rest of your luggage can be safely stored at the hotel in Punta Arenas.

Antarctica was my seventh and final continent, and I feel as if I left a piece of my heart there. After the trip, I had a drink with a research station manager who was headed back to the continent for the summer season. When I told him how much I liked it, he offered me a job.

"Can you use a biologist or photographer?" I inquired. "Sorry," he said. "That's what I do." Then he grinned and asked, "How would you like to drive a forklift? The pay is lousy, but you can stay as long as you like."

To tell you the truth, I'm still thinking about it. I do know this for certain: If I ever go back to Antarctica, I'll do whatever it takes to skip the dreaded Drake Passage and those monstrous waves.