



A pair of chinstrap penguins, which get their name from the strip of black feathers that runs across their white chins, appear to dance on a strip of beach on an island in the waters off Antarctica.



A juvenile leopard seal, one of the chief predators of Antarctic penguins, basks on an ice floe near Cuverville Island.

SPRAWL OF THE WILD

BY BETH PARKS
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

The voyage

We got underway shortly after boarding the Grigoriy Mikheev, a sleek white 210-foot-long ship with a Russian crew. Designed in Russia as a research vessel, the craft was built in Finland in 1990 and later converted in the Netherlands for expedition cruising.

Ardley Island

After a few hours at sea, we dropped anchor off Ardley Island and took inflatable watercraft called Zodiacs ashore. We wanted to see nesting penguins, and Ardley in no way disappointed us. The island supports a huge population of up to 5,000 breeding pairs of Gentoos, easi-

ly identified by their bright orange bills and snow-white headbands.

The temperature on Ardley hovered slightly above freezing, permitting our comfortable exploration of a virtual penguin paradise. In addition to Gentoos, we also saw chinstraps and one Adelie penguin, as well as Antarctic terns, Dominican gulls and Southern giant petrels.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the second installment of a three-part series by travel writer Beth Parks about her journey to Antarctica. Part I, which described getting past Drake Passage, appeared in April 26-27 editions; Part III will appear May 24-25.

A Zodiac, a compact inflatable watercraft, maneuvers around ice floes in the waters off Antarctica.



Antarctica has large populations of Gentoos penguins, such as this adult bird feeding its young.

PHOTOS BY BETH PARKS

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Despite tending their eggs and chicks, the birds seemed completely unconcerned by our presence. Tour companies, including ours, urge visitors to stay at least 15 feet away from animals to avoid disturbing either them or their habitats. Sometimes, neither the terrain nor the wildlife species themselves make it possible to honor such a gap. Walking quietly in single file helps to minimize the impact by visitors.

It was mid-December and summer was rapidly approaching. We discovered that the sky never completely darkened at night, with each sunset merely metamorphosing into the sunrise of the day to come. On clear nights, the sun shone so brightly that we often wore eye masks for the sake of restful sleep. But on this night, our first at sea, the sun remained a silvery disk behind a thin veil of falling snow.

Aitcho Island

The skies were gray the next morning when we anchored off Aitcho Island, pronounced "H-O" for Britain's Hydrographic Office. We zipped our anoraks against the biting wind and landed the Zodiacs at the island's eastern end. There, we made our way in single file among the delicate cushion mosses, algae and lichens that blanketed the snow-free portions of the frozen ground.

Gentoo penguins nested everywhere and fuzzy gray chicks thrust their heads into their parents' mouths seeking warm meals of regurgitated food. Brown skuas with 4-foot wingspans picked their way between the rocky ground nests looking for unattended eggs and vulnerable chicks. Here and there an empty eggshell lay, drained of its contents by the feathered predators.

Chinstrap penguins, too, nested on Aitcho Island in great numbers. The chinstrap gets its name from a strip of black feathers that runs across its white chin and connects the sides of its black cap, making the cap look a bit like a helmet.

Of these two penguin species, Gentoos are considerably larger and stand about 3 feet tall. Depending on where they are in the breeding and molting seasons, adult males generally weigh between 12 and 18 pounds and adult females between 11 and 16 pounds. Their size makes them the third-largest penguin in the world, after the emperors and kings. Gentoos can streak through the water at speeds up to 22 miles per hour.

Seals are common in Antarctic waters, and we encountered our first Weddell seal at Aitcho Island. Every now and then a whiskered face would pop out of the water and stare directly at us. These placid pinnipeds with large, appealing eyes seem a bit on the chubby side, which simply adds to their charm. They live farther south than any other mammal and can even be found in the far-southern waters of McMurdo Sound.

The Weddell seals' calm nature once made them an easy target for sealers and the men who wielded branding irons. Unfortunately, the nature of the seals' blubber tended to prevent their wounds from healing. Now, both the Antarctic Treaty and the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic seals protect these creatures from human exploitation.

Snowy sheathbills also greeted us on Aitcho Island. These white, plump, dovelike birds with a wingspan of about 30 inches get their name from a horny sheath that covers a portion of their bills. Unlike other Antarctic bird species, sheathbills are not true seabirds and have no webbed feet for swimming. Brash and opportunistic, they serve as nature's garbage collectors and scavenge just about anything they can grab or carry with their beaks.

Half Moon Island

Our next visit was to the small, crescent-shaped Half Moon Island, where the rotting remains of a wooden dory dating back to sealing days rested on the cobble beach. Half-filled with snow and partially green from mosses and algae, the dory interested us far more than it did the penguins that waddled past it on their way to the shore.

Another attraction at Half Moon Island was a colony of nesting Wilson's storm petrels. These dark birds with tubes on their bills have a wingspan of about 16 inches and are among the smallest and lightest seabirds in the world. Because they spend the entire year at sea except for the breeding season, it was a real treat for us to find them nesting in crevices within a short distance of the water's edge.

After returning to the ship, we spent the night sailing through the Bransfield Strait, a 60-mile-wide body of water that separates the South Shetland Islands from the Antarctic Peninsula.

This now looked like the Antarctica I had always imagined. Ice and icebergs surrounded us as we approached our southernmost destinations. It was in the strait that the MS Explorer struck an iceberg and sank on Nov. 23, 2007. Fortunately, all 154 passengers aboard that ship were rescued.

Cuverville Island

Morning brought an eerie whitish glow along the horizon beneath the dark and scudding clouds. We boarded the Zodiacs after breakfast and landed on Cuverville Island, a small island dominated by slopes and a massive, high-ridged rocky outcrop.

Cuverville Island supports perhaps the largest Gentoo penguin populations in all Antarctica. As I look back through the thousands of photos I took during the expedition, the ones of Gentoos against Cuverville's gray-brown bedrock and blue-hued ice floes remain among my favorites.

A rather strenuous trek through deep snow took us past what our expedition leader termed a "penguin highway." Penguins used this crisscrossed net of trails to ease their passage on the slopes as they made their way to and from the sea.

Stained pinkish-tan by their tracks and guano, the highway stood out dramatically from the whiter snow through which it cut. Penguins on the trail reminded me of wobbling black raisins as they struggled to climb the steep incline to their nests.

As we zipped our way through the oddly shaped icebergs of the Errera Channel on our way back to the ship, a dark gray form became apparent at the edge of one of the floes. It turned out to be a leopard seal, the legendary predator of Antarctic penguins. This one was a juvenile.

The leopard seal's sleek spotted body and streamlined head made it seem almost as reptilian as a snake. We could barely control our excitement as we approached it, knowing this might be our only chance to get a close-up picture. The seal opened its eyes a couple of times in curiosity, yawned and then promptly drifted off to sleep.

Port Lockroy and Lemaire Channel

I normally liked to take a quick nap after lunch, but as we entered the spectacular Neumayer Channel, I knew there would be no napping on this day. The mazelike channel presents no visible exits from within because of its sharp S curves. With its narrow passage and majestic cliffs, Neumayer Channel is one of the most photographed waterways in Antarctica.

After exiting Neumayer Channel, we anchored in the natural harbor of Britain's Port Lockroy on the west side of Wiencke Island. Once used for whaling and military operations, Port Lockroy later became a research station. It was renovated in 1996 and is operated now by the United Kingdom Antarctic Heritage Trust as a museum, post office and souvenir shop. The small staff will stamp passports for anyone who asks.

After we left Wiencke Island we approached Lemaire Channel, the strait that lies between Booth Island and the Antarctic Peninsula. As if to welcome us, Mount Scott and other mountaintops emerged from the clouds and regaled us with their splendor as sunlight struck their peaks.

If we thought Neumayer Channel was spectacular, it was certainly no match for Lemaire. This 7-mile strait, filled with icebergs and hemmed in by precipitous cliffs, bears the affectionate nickname "Kodak Gap." Once you see it, you'll know why.

Petermann Island

Our next stop was Petermann Island, a snow-capped piece of land that lies south of the Lemaire Channel. Less than a mile long, it is home to the southernmost breeding colony of Gentoo penguins in the world.

We dropped anchor in the cove with the unlikely name of Port Circumcision. The moniker was bestowed because the cove was first spotted in 1909 on Jan. 1, the traditional day for celebrating the Feast of the Circumcision. The 1908-1910 French Expedition spent its winter there.

Only a few human signs now remain at Petermann Island, including a cairn and an abandoned Argentine hut. Penguins nest around these landmarks and a cross that stands on a rocky outcrop. The cross is a grim reminder of the dangers of this region and commemorates three men who lost their lives trying to cross the sea ice from Faraday Station to Petermann Island in 1982.

Petermann Island gave us excellent looks at both breeding blue-eyed cormorants and Adelie penguins. Adelies are those little tuxedo-clad critters that most people envision when they think of Antarctica. They sport distinctive white rings around their eyes that make their eyes look almost blue from a distance. Smaller than both Gentoos and about the same size as chinstraps, they stand about 2 feet tall and average about 10 pounds.

Of all the penguins we saw during our expedition, Adelies were the most fun to watch. They seemed to scamper over the rocks, tobogganing on their bellies through the snow whenever it sped their progress.

Adelies fiercely compete for nesting sites and seem to delight in stealing small stones from their neighbors to construct their own circular nests. Like Gentoos and chinstraps, both male and female Adelies incubate their eggs. It's hard to distinguish males from females in all three species, and the incubating parent does not feed while on the nest.

The White Continent

Before landing on the White Continent itself, we zipped our Zodiacs through a lovely body of water called Paradise Bay. Mountains towered above the bay and we skirted the cliffs along the shore looking for wildlife. Our search paid off in the form of several crabeater seals.

Despite their name, crabeater seals don't eat crabs. About 98 percent of their diet consists of Antarctic krill, shrimplike invertebrates that drift in large schools called swarms. Although most of us are unfamiliar with crabeater seals, they outnumber all other seals and are also said to outnumber all other large mammals except for humans. It was a real thrill to see them up close.

When we finished cruising Paradise Bay, we landed on the White Continent at the abandoned Argentine Station Almirante Brown. The base was burned by in 1984 by a disgruntled Argentine physician who did not want to spend the winter. It now serves as home to a colony of Gentoo penguins, whose members watched us toast each other with champagne that our crew brought along to celebrate the landing.

A 165-foot slope behind the base provides an excellent view of Paradise Bay and gave us the opportunity to play penguin ourselves by sliding down the hill face first or on our backs. Sliding causes friction that melts the snow, so if you get the chance to make this run you might want to bring a sheet of plastic or nylon to keep you from getting soaked. The Zodiac ride back to the ship can be a chilly one.