

Exploring the White Continent Above and Below Surface with Miss Scuba at the Southern End of the World: *Scuba Dive, Kayak, Mountaineer, Camp, Snow Shoe and Photograph the Southern most part of our World*
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If someone had told me when I was a child that one day I will travel to a place as remote as Antarctica, I would have not believed them, despite the fact that I always was known for dreaming big. Than again, when I was a kid, Oceanwide Expeditions did not exist yet. But now everything has changed.

The once in a lifetime opportunity to document the maiden voyage of the “Plancius Basecamp Expedition” came out of the blue and as such, it was impossible not to accept the invitation. The company has an incredible concept: they offer outdoorsy adventurers the option to pick and choose from numerous activities while cruising the Weddell Sea. Mountaineering, scuba diving, camping, photo workshops, kayaking and snowshoeing are just a few of the many choices.



I pride myself to be a lightweight traveler who can pack all essentials for a month long journey in just a few hours before take off. Both my camera operator, Hilaire Brosio, and I

realized it was an opportunity of a lifetime, so we brought every piece of camera gear we own to document our journey. I have never embarked on a vacation/expedition of such scale. We ended up with six pieces of checked in luggage and four massive carry-ons. Six bags contained underwater camera housings, lenses and lights, while the other four bags held dive gear and extra warm clothing.

Our first stop was in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. Buenos Aires resembles an old European city with its charming buildings and picturesque avenues. Indoor and outdoor cafes are aplenty from where we enjoyed watching the fashionably dressed and polite locals. We were incredibly fortunate to spend a late summer evening having dinner at a restaurant by the city's river walk and drinking fabulous Argentinean Malbec. Later as we took a stroll on the cobblestone streets, we came across a spontaneous tango dancer couple surrounded by our fellow pedestrians. It was like something out of a romantic movie.

The next morning we hopped on a three hour long domestic flight to Ushuaia.

Ushuaia is a beautiful city by the sea with snow capped mountains in the backdrop. It is often referred as "Fin del Mundo", The End of the World, as it is the southernmost city in the world.

Young adventurous people, families and elderly couples filled streets which are crowded with mountaineering stores, wine shops and resort hotels. It appears that Ushuaia is a popular vacation destination amongst South Americans. We only encountered a handful of North Americans and Europeans, however change is on the horizon. I believe we have found the next "it" place for ambitious travelers who seek adrenalin pumping adventure.

We purchased some prosciutto, cheese, pickles, fresh bread plus a bottle of wine at the local market and headed to the beach for an afternoon picnic before boarding our ship, the Plancius.



The Plancius was originally built in the mid seventies, and then was modified in 2009 into a state of the art cruising vessel. It provides a plush observation lounge and an extensive library

with a variety of books on the wildlife and history of Antarctica in multiple languages. The rooms are spacious with plenty of storage and equipped with flat screen televisions. The bar in the observation lounge provides a great setting for stories to be swapped. The espresso machine quickly became my best friend as I was intent of participating in every activity that was offered. How often does an opportunity like this enter into our life?

The two-day crossing through the Drake Passage and Beagle Chanel provided a great opportunity to listen educational presentations about Antarctica and its habitat. The guides on the ship are not only experts in their respective fields, but most also are well versed historians, marine biologists or geologists.



Once we finally laid our eyes on land again, the mysterious Antarctic scene was filled with beautiful blinding white mountains as far as we could see. The drifting blue icebergs contributed a dramatic look to the surreal landscapes.



Finally, on the third afternoon it was time for our first scuba dive. I have been dreaming about diving in polar waters for a long time, but I never thought that day would come. Diving in Antarctica is more gear intensive than most other places I visited. Each diver needed to be equipped with two environmentally sealed regulator sets to avoid problems

with freezing water. We all wore dry suits with several layers of undergarments and most divers opted for dry gloves and a thick hood. Keeping the head and the hands warm is critical to maintain the body's core temperature in a 0 Celsius (32 Fahrenheit) wet environment.



Even though looking at giant whale bones was impressive underwater, my favorite type of dives during our journey, were the ones around floating icebergs. The ten stories tall shiny white sculptures were intimidating at first, but once I calmed my breath, I enjoyed them in a state of awe while descending along the constantly changing wall. I imagined the ice to be smooth underwater, but its texture was covered with dimples. Our dive guide, Kelvin Murray, explained that the even-sized interesting domes were created by the reflection of the sunlight through the ocean's surface.



One night after dinner we headed to shore and spent the night camping on ice. After watching the star filled sky for a while we eventually entered our tents and drifted into deep slumber. The wind was blowing outside our igloo tent with a fierce might, but we were cozy

in the subzero sleeping bags that Oceanwide Expeditions provided us with. We woke up to the sound of penguins chatting away at 4 a.m. and walked out into the fresh snow for an hour and took some amazing photos of the seascape before heading back to our ship for breakfast.



The next day the weather gods smiled upon us and we were treated to a blue sky and sunshine, so decided on a kayaking excursion along the coast. We paddled for hours navigating between slabs of floating ice. The extraordinary view from the kayak was grand. It gave me a chance to reflect on Antarctica and life in general. When you are away from the chaos of civilization both your thoughts and senses are uncluttered and feel more finely tuned than I have ever experienced.



We were lucky to be in the right place at the right time to witness one moderate size iceberg turn upside down and change its color from vanilla to vivid light blue. This 180 degree change created a loud cracking noise. It was incredible to both hear and see Mother Nature's

power in this pristine setting.



After a brief scenic zodiac cruise in the afternoon, we opted for hiking in the snowy mountains. At the bay we strapped on our snowshoes, put on sunglasses and off we went to explore. We climbed several peaks and on one of the slopes we slid down on our bellies, just like the penguins! Hiking in fresh snow powder on top of layers of ice that is thousands of years old was incredible. I felt as if we were walking in between the folds of the earth's history. On average Antarctica is the driest, coldest and windiest continent in the world, and has the highest elevation. Snow doesn't really melt here, it just keeps on piling up layer upon layer. As we approached the top of one crest, the sun suddenly pierced through the clouds. The marine fog quickly cleared and the valley below filled with ant size people came into focus. It was a spectacular site to behold.



Once we arrived back at our basecamp we spent several hours documenting the Gentoo penguins. It was awe-inspiring to experience them from such short distance. Penguins are very curious and not scared of humans in the slightest. They have no reason. People do not harass or feed wild animals in Antarctica. All wildlife here is protected and our guides made

sure that no one distressed the birds. Our visit was in March, which is the end of summer here. By this point this spring's chicks had grown tall and were in the middle of trading in their furry down feathers for the more solid winter attire that allows them to swim. Some looked extremely funny, while others were just simply adorable.



We were fortunate enough to also dive with penguins one afternoon. It was very difficult to take pictures of them as they are incredibly fast underwater. Unlike on land, where they are trotting around awkwardly, in the water penguins fly effortlessly with the speed of a bullet. We encountered numerous bypasses by them during our dive as they were checking us out curiously. After we surfaced our group spent another hour snorkeling amongst them. They seemed to love the zodiac boat as well as the interaction with the divers.



On several dives we were accompanied by seals. Fur seals were the most daring and curious, but occasionally a crab eater seal would investigate our presence. On one dive we were lucky enough to dive with a leopard seal. A few of our divers were treated to a very rear encounter with this creature. They witnessed the leopard seal catching a penguin and spending the next 20 minutes eating it. It was an intense experience. Particularly because this seal was

considerably bigger than our dive buddies. While it was tough to see the seal peel the penguin like a banana and have it for lunch, you have to bear in mind that they has to eat, just like us.



Our 11 day journey through the peninsula was an ever changing affair with nature. The weather often changed by the minute. One moment the sky was clear blue, the next it was snowing and another hour later the wind blew the clouds away and it was sunny again. As our expedition leader Rinie van Meurs advised us, “You do not take a trip to Antarctica, Antarctica takes you on a trip.”



My wildest expectations were exceeded when on our journey home we were approached by two humpback whales. They stayed next to our ship for hours, curiously looking at us, and making sounds through their blowholes. These gentle giants looked and sounded like the composers of the ocean as they emerged from the sea waving to us with their fins. I wish I could have been in the water with them.



A number of the passengers on our trip were returning visitors to Antarctica. I was especially impressed by the vast age diversity of my fellow travelers. The youngest were 6 and 7 year old brothers, while the eldest person was 84. It was great to see the elderly enjoy the outside activities just as much as the kids, of course on a different scale than the younger adventure hungry travelers. But nonetheless, they were just as satisfied and fulfilled at the end of each day's activities.

There were 114 passengers from 17 countries on board the Plancius with us. I enjoyed sitting with different people at every meal and hearing their stories of the day and about their diverse backgrounds. Most of my new acquaintances had one future destination in common: The Arctic. A few had already visited, while many others are planning on going there next. Who knows, I might get to take another adventure of a lifetime to the Northern most point of the world and photograph polar bears. One can only hope...



For more information regarding this trip please refer to: www.miss-scuba.com and www.oceanwide-expeditions.com