

My Fair Lady

The truth is, I have no idea what to expect and I am really nervous. I have never been on an icebreaker ship before. I have not crossed the notoriously volatile Drake Passage nor have I been to a continent that is an ice sheet and uninhabited, research stations aside.

Perhaps this is why I feel as if I am not present in my body as I stand by the luggage carousel at Ushuaia airport. I feel like I am on the cusp of a journey into the abyss aboard a small metal ship that is supposed to break ice. To a place far away – a place that is the coldest, driest and windiest continent on the planet.

It is early morning and rays of sunlight peek through my hotel curtains. I look out the window and see *her*. She is down the hill on the edge of town docked to Ushuaia's pier. She looks dainty and perfectly symmetrical, and her foxy-red hull beautifully offsets her white upper decks. She looks serene and relaxed as she takes a break on the Beagle Channel.

She, is my eighty-metre expedition icebreaker ship, my home for the next eight days and my transportation to and from Antarctica.

I board the ship, go to my cabin then decide to explore her decks. Up the stairs, down the stairs and off the ship I go. I walk to the end of the pier. I am afraid. I feel ill. I feel claustrophobic even though I am outside.

She does not look like she can break ice. She does not look like she can sail the sixteen hundred nautical miles to Antarctica and back. And, she does not look like she can hold her own on the Drake Passage: "the roughest stretch of water in the world." What if a swell flips her? What if she sinks? I am in a state of nervousness (and by "nervousness," I mean panic).

But there is no turning back. I dig deep down to my place of bravery and board the ship again. I go to my cabin, turn around and leave. I walk back to the end of the pier, sit and look at her. She, put simply, scares me.

Surely, no one on the ship wants me to perish at sea so I board her a third time and this time I stay put. The ropes untie from the pier and the captain turns her around.
Destination: Antarctica.

Ushuaia: Latitude 54° 48' 0" South, Longitude 68° 18' 0" West.
Antarctica: Latitude 64° 51' 0" South, Longitude 62° 30' 0" West.
Travel time: fifty-six hours.

In the evening, I stand outside on the stern's lower deck as we sail through the Beagle Channel. In less than two hours we will begin the crossing of the Drake Passage. If I lie down on the deck and stretch my arm below, I suspect I can touch the water. I am, y'know, a little apprehensive. How on earth is this ship going to cross the Drake?

I look to the mountain on the side of the channel. It is strange. I see an outline of a woman's face etched in snow and feel comfort from this. She speaks to me as if to say, "it will be OK."

During the two-day uneventful weather-wise crossing (thank goodness) – The Drake Lake as called when calm – I attend entrancing lectures, view a beaked whale in the distance, watch humpback whales do acrobatics above the sea's surface and chitchat to fellow passengers and expedition guides.

The expedition guides intrigue me. I mean, look at their lives. They are researchers, professors, adventurers and wanderers. They are passionate and deeply believe in what they do. They spend months at sea, explore remote lands and experience a life that is not typical.

It is seven in the morning and we are sailing through Errera Channel. I eat breakfast quickly because soon, we will do our first landing on Antarctica and I am stratospherically excited.

Layered in long underwear, yoga pants, lined nylon pants, undershirt, long-sleeved tee-shirt, fleece sweater, scarf, parka, hat, gloves, mitts and knee-high rubber boots, I waddle like a penguin on deck to board a zodiac.

Although, I may be a bit overdressed because the weather is perfect – plus six Celsius, not a cloud in sight. We ride the zodiac to shore in Neko Harbour and for the first time in my life I meet a penguin. Actually, I meet many penguins – so dang cute I want to pinch their chubby bellies.

I follow our expedition guide in deep snow up a small mountain. The views from atop are epic, authentic and virginal. The air so pure and clear, I feel as if I can reach out and touch the snow-covered mountains in the distance. It is peaceful and exquisite and I feel alive. I look down and there she is, our beautiful ship, a ship I am growing fond of and more importantly, trust in her sailing powers. She is anchored in water with icy bits.

I sit in silence. I am in a place where nature is the ace card. Words simply cannot articulate the oodles of feelings running through me. Antarctica is hubba-hubba: gorgeous, voluptuous and ravishing.

Returning to the ship in the zodiac, our expedition guide views a minke whale in the distance. She swings the zodiac around, motors toward the sighting and turns off the outboard motor. We drift silently. We have no idea what this whale will do. It is at once adrenaline tingling and bloody scary because essentially, we are exposed. We may as well be sitting on a rubber duck.

The minke whale pops-up his head beside us, swims around then dives under our zodiac. My heart pumps profusely. I am having a rendezvous with a creature so magnificent it is jaw dropping. I am in a land that is wild and spotless, a land that seems far away from what we know as Earth.

The Antarctic sun casts a mid-evening radiance over the snowy mountains when we arrive by zodiac to a piece of land where hundreds of Adélie penguins are to-ing and fro-ing.

It's show time folks and the comedy act goes something like this: the female penguin sits on a bird-type nest made of stones. Underneath, tucked into her dense feathers, lay her eggs. Her mate penguin shuffles about in search of more stones for the nest and generally ventures only as far as the next nest where he tries to pinch a stone.

Sometimes he is successful, sometimes not, and sometimes the penguin owning the nest being pinched, squawks and chases the pincher-penguin away. It is a cheering-worthy performance – foreign and humane, memorizing and entertaining.

Ten thirty in the evening and we are back in the zodiac. The marital luminosity of snowy mountains, glaciers, sea and sky are brilliant. The sunset's rays sashaying upon dramatically nature-crafted glaciers would add depth to any cinematographer's composition.

“Who wants to see something organic?” asks our expedition guide. It is getting cold but the lure for magnificence outweighs the warmth of the ship. Motoring along in the zodiac, we look for magic and find it – a mammoth and spectacular iceberg that looks like a polar bear's neck and head. Golden hues from the midnight sun light the iceberg in all its glory and the cobalt-coloured sea seems to set it on a platform.

Five o'clock in the morning – blame it on twenty-four hour daylight confusing my sleep cycle – I am on the bridge. She, is seducing me with her mighty powers and superior sailing abilities. And I am fascinated by life on an expedition ship. It is free-spirited, unconventional and storied. This journey to Antarctica is unleashing something in me and I think there is no turning back.

“It is not that life ashore is distasteful to me. But life at sea is better.” ...Sir Francis Drake.

It is our last landing and a storm is brewing. The wind howls, blizzard-snowflakes zigzag chaotically about and it is frosty. For the first time on this trip, I experience Antarctica's ferocity.

The seawater crashes up on the rocky shore and with it, chinstrap and gentoo penguins fling in and out of the water. It is Antarctica at its best – wild, mad and fantastic. However, if we don't get back to the ship soon, motoring in the zodiac will become dangerous.

Back on board, the captain turns the ship around. Destination: Ushuaia. Travel time: fifty-six hours.

The Drake Passage is not so kind on our return as we sail through gale force winds. But she is brilliant. She broke ice in Antarctica and now she rides the Drake's waves beautifully. She rolls back and forth like a rocking chair, rhythmically swaying from right to left, left to right. When she pitches, seawater slaps the bow then slithers back into the sea. She is oh-so brave, and she keeps us safe as she sails ahead in the disorderly Drake Passage.

“By George, I really did it.” I sailed to Antarctica and back and lived to tell the tale. Oh my fair lady, how could I have ever doubted you?