



Rockhopper penguins and (far left) an iceberg that looks like Sydney Opera House. Below: Sue with king penguins on South Georgia

# PENGUIN PARADISE

**A**ntarctica is a place I've wanted to visit for years. I yearned to see icebergs, penguins, dolphins, seals and whales. So last October, when a friend, Angie Butler, suggested I join her on a special centenary voyage her company Ice Tracks had organised honouring one of the most incredible adventure stories of all time – Sir Ernest Shackleton's doomed Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition – I didn't hesitate. Among the passengers were to be at least a dozen people descended from the 28 men who survived...

## DAY 1 All aboard!

We departed from the world's southern-most city, Ushuaia in Chile, last night on our ice-strengthened vessel Akademik Sergey Vavilov and this morning at breakfast is my first chance to size up my fellow passengers. There are 93 of us, ranging in age from 18 to 78, but what most have in common is an interest in or a personal connection with Sir Ernest Shackleton's expedition 100 years ago.

## DAY 2 A dolphin escort

Our first destination is West Point, one of the Falkland Islands. As we near the stony bay in a dinghy we acquire an escort; two Peale's dolphins, glancing at us over their shoulders as they pass. We wade ashore and trek to a colony of magnificent black-browed albatrosses and cute little rockhopper penguins, all nesting together on the cliffside. The albatrosses swoop low over our heads, their wings outstretched to an awesome span of up to 3m. The rockhoppers move in skips and jumps and have little yellow tufts either side of their heads.

## DAY 3 A slice of England

Our next stop is Port Stanley harbour, a clean, neat little town with gift shops, a post office, a cathedral and a museum. It's strange to be so far from home and yet be among English voices, using English money and seeing cars driving on the left and red phone boxes. Back on board Angie, who's written a biography of Shackleton's right-hand man, Frank Wild, gives a talk. I'm learning so much more about the incredible feat of survival these men achieved.

## DAY 6 Shackleton's footsteps

After breakfast we're all out on deck to watch South Georgia getting nearer. We're going out to King Haakon Bay – where Shackleton and his five companions landed in 1916, and where



*Breaching whales, majestic icebergs and penguins galore – Sue Cook opens her diary from a magical Antarctic voyage to mark the centenary of Shackleton's most daring mission*

very few human beings have ever set foot. A gaggle of king penguins greet our landing. Elephant seals lounge about like great grey rocks as Alexandra Shackleton, Sir Ernest's great-granddaughter, and Henry Worsley, a distant descendant of the Endurance's captain, perform readings from accounts of the famous expedition.

## DAY 7 P-p-p-penguins ahoy!

Out on deck I marvel at the scenery. Snow-streaked mountains against a ginclear sky. Soon our dinghies are heading towards Salisbury Plain on the Bay of Isles. It's the smell we notice first – a blend of musky seal and penguin guano. Then, as we wade onto the seal-strewn shore, it's the sound – throaty hoots and honks and tiny squeaks. Finally, as we crest a ridge, the sight is gob-smacking. King penguins as far as the eye can see. Half a million at least – adults and chicks. The chicks are so funny; big fluffy brown things, some plodding

behind a parent in the hope of a nice goblet of regurgitated lantern fish, others waiting presumably for Mum or Dad to get back from their day's fishing. Sometimes they rush about flapping and knocking each other over.

## DAY 8 A touching service

This afternoon we visit the now disused whaling station at Grytviken where Shackleton found help. Up the hill is the little cemetery where he's buried – he died here from a heart attack when he came back on his final expedition in 1922. A tiny wooden church was built nearby and there's a service to mark the centenary. Each of the descendants reads a tribute and hymns are sung. It's a sweet, very sincere service.

## DAY 9 Beautiful bergs

My first icebergs! One floats by with a fur seal sitting on it. Today's visit is to Gold Harbour on the south-western end of South Georgia. King penguins, gen-

too penguins (smaller than kings, with little pink feet) and fur seals lie all over the place – and each other. The young seals are gorgeous. One comes up and nudges my leg, looking up at me with huge soulful eyes.

## DAY 12 Whale tales

Hundreds of black and white cape petrels have been flying alongside us. A finback whale surfaces three times then, with a flick of her magnificent tail, dives down deeper and disappears. The world of crowds and cars, noise and fumes, emails and deadlines is so far away.

## DAY 13 Antarctica at last

It's -3°C outside and we put on an extra layer for our trip to Aitcho, one of the tiniest of the South Shetland Islands and our first footfall on the Seventh Continent itself. We spend a happy hour among chinstrap penguins, whose black band running beneath the chin makes it

look like they're wearing helmets. Many are fixated on collecting little stones for their nests. Sometimes they snatch a stone from a neighbour's nest when they think no one's looking – and usually get a peck for their trouble.

## DAY 14 Is that a dragon?

Our guides take us on a dinghy cruise among the icebergs this afternoon. They're like sculptures. One looks like a dragon, another like a tortoise, another looks just like Sydney Opera House. Penguins, seabirds and seals are camping on some of them as we watch a baleen whale and her calf forge their way across the wide ocean.

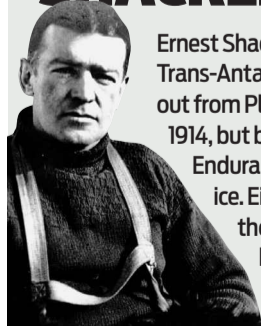
## DAY 15 Frozen fairyland

The ship's gliding gently into fairyland! We are surrounded by snow-covered peaks swathed in strands of white cloud and vapour. Icebergs of all shapes and sizes glint in the sun, casting reflections in the mirror-like water.

## DAY 19 A sad farewell

The Drake Passage has a fearsome reputation, but today we cruise peacefully alongside Cape Horn. We have to have our bags packed and outside our cabins before breakfast tomorrow morning. If only I could pack the scenery, the wildlife and the touching tributes to a great British hero. They will live in my heart for a long time to come. ■

## SHACKLETON'S EPIC JOURNEY TO SAFETY



Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition set out from Plymouth on 8 August 1914, but by January 1915 his ship Endurance was stuck in pack ice. Eight months later when the pressure of the ice began to crush the ship the 28-strong crew

abandoned her and she sank. They spent months on the drifting ice until Shackleton decided a risky voyage in the ship's remaining lifeboats was the only option, and in April 1916 they set off for Elephant Island 350 miles away. Once there, he and five crew headed for inhabited South

Georgia 720 miles away in the 20ft lifeboat James Caird, which they reached after 16 days. Shackleton trekked across the island to the Grytviken whaling station with two of his men and a mission to save the 22 left behind on Elephant Island began. They were rescued in August 1916. All had survived.

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