

ANTARCTIC DREAMING

Taking the polar plunge and spending a night on ice are just two highlights of a 10-night cruise in one of the last truly wild places on Earth.

Words & photographs Jocelyn Pride

There are two ways of doing this. Slow or fast. Both are likely to be excruciating. As I peel off the first of my four layers, a small group of the tuxedo clad icons of the south waddle boldly to within a beak's reach of my feet.

There's a strict five metre human to wildlife rule in Antarctica but no-one's mentioned that to the penguins.

With a flurry of flipper slapping and bickering they jostle for prime position and watch wide eyed as I doff my gear. Their honking and chattering seems to be saying, "Are you really going to do it?"

Am I? The "polar plunge" has almost become a rite of passage for adventure voyages to Antarctica. "We usually choose Whalers Bay on Deception Island," Aaron Lawton, One Ocean Expeditions' fearless expedition leader and a veteran of more than 100 Antarctic voyages, explained earlier in the day.

"It's inside an active volcano and the water is warmer, sometimes it's even like hot springs." Not today.

About a quarter of my shipmates are up for the plunge. Others poke around the eerie ruins of the abandoned whaling station or hike to Neptune's Window to overlook the lunar landscape of the crater. Like all the expertly guided activities with One Ocean, it's a choose-your-own adventure.

With the penguins rapidly losing interest I commit. Racing along the blackened volcanic pebbles I splash into the shallows and "plunge". It's all over in a matter of seconds.

As I scramble ashore, teeth chattering and goose bumps ballooning, I'm met with open arms holding towels and jackets. And by the time we pile into the Zodiac and head to the ship (more importantly the hot tub), I feel exhilarated.

Immersing myself into the frigid Southern Ocean wasn't something I'd ever thought about doing. I don't even like swimming. But that's the draw of Antarctica. A frozen land filled with stories of the human spirit pushing above and beyond to interact with one of the last truly wild places on the planet. >



Our voyage started eight days earlier with the ships' 92 intrepid travellers hailing from eight countries boarding *Akademik Sergey Vavilov* in Stanley, Falkland Islands. Talk of crossing the dreaded Drake Passage dominated early conversations. "The weather and sea conditions will be what they'll be," said Aaron. "Whatever it's like down there, we're going. This vessel has seen it all before."

Akademik Sergey Vavilov is one of the best in the biz for cruising the polar regions. Although built as a scientific research vessel, it doesn't skimp on comfort. My ensuite twin cabin has exceptional storage space, a large picture window that opens, a writing desk, fluffy bathrobes and gorgeous fragrances toiletries. Some suites have separate lounge areas and the piece de resistance in polar luxury is the One Ocean suite with a bathtub overlooking the bow.

There's a huge bar/lounge, open-seating dining room, gym, sauna and the hot tub.

Most importantly, with a highly experienced Russian crew led by Captain Valeriy Beluga who has made more Antarctic crossings than any other captain, we're in safe hands. And the extra bonus of this 10-day itinerary? We only sail one way.

Over the past few years the cruise-air model has gathered momentum with more than 60 Antarctic Air flights in and out of the Frei Montalva Chilean Base, King George Island each season. Flying back to Punta Arenas gives us two extra days on the peninsula and helps alleviate the seasickness psychological barrier. Fortunately we sail with Lady Luck and the Drake is more "lake" than the notorious "shake".

When the *Vavilov's* GPS clicks over the 60th latitude south parallel, we cheer and lay bets on when we'll see our first iceberg. "Each of you will find your own Antarctica," says Aaron. "Be prepared for a sensory overload." No truer words could be spoken.

One afternoon as we float in Zodiacs through a crystal palace of towering icebergs delicately sculptured into archways, staircases and columns, a puff of misty whale breath shoots into the air. "Whale at two o'clock," Aaron calls. We peer over the side and the shape of a Minkie whale emerges catching the light in the mirrored water. Posing for photos, the whale nods within centimetres of us before playfully flipping over and gliding to the next Zodiac.

On another Zodiac cruise, we explore Wilhelmina Bay. It's like being in a bathtub full of whales. We catch treasured glimpses of barnacled heads, tailor edged pectoral fins,



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wise eyes and the pretty underside of flukes as the humpbacks gorge themselves on krill.

Every day we also have our penguin fix. It's breeding season and the rookeries are full of chicks. Basking in Antarctic sunshine at Damoy Point, I sit for hours drinking in a day in the life of gentoo penguins. The delicate way a couple exchange egg warming duties, squabbles over pebbles to build the perfect nest, the squawk of hungry chicks. Other times we kayak beside porpoising penguins or watch them sliding along the penguin highways joining the rookeries with the sea.

With sensory overload and virtually 24/7 daylight it's easy to forget to sleep. Fortunately, the regularity of meals reminds us to eat. Breakfast is buffet style, lunch and dinners table service. We dine on dishes such as confit of duck with sweet potato, baked red snapper with champagne butter or mushroom risotto cakes and sip wine (alcohol is an extra cost) from an international list. Food intolerances are well catered for and each meal offers a vegetarian option.

At night, nature brings more entertainment than any floor show. Streaks of pink, yellow, red and purple paint the sky as the midnight sun melts into the horizon and electric blue icebergs drift past in a sea of fairy floss pink. One night we even leave our creature comforts behind for a night on the ice. Camping – minus the tent.

Cocooned in a snow bivvy surrounded by the sound of whales blowing, seals singing and the crackling of glaciers, I find my Antarctica in the simplicity of just being. A couple of penguins bunker down beside me, but I'm too addicted with happiness to tell them they're breaking the five-metre rule.

• The writer was a guest of One Ocean Expeditions

HIGHS: Camping on the ice, skilled and enthusiastic guides and the open-bridge policy.
LOWS: Nothing, unless expedition cruising doesn't float your boat.
BEST SUITED TO: Anyone with a sense of adventure and a medium level of agility for getting on and off the Zodiacs. Great for multi-generational groups of travellers.



Clockwise from above: breaching whale; Akademik Sergey Vavilov; whale spotting by Zodiac; gentoo penguins; kayaking



FACT FILE

CRUISE LINE: One Ocean Expeditions
VESSEL: Akademik Sergey Vavilov
STAR RATING: 2
PASSENGER CAPACITY: 92
TOTAL CREW: 63
PASSENGER DECKS: 4
TONNAGE: 6,230
ENTERED SERVICE: 1988
FACILITIES: Massage/wellness room, library, bar/lounge, outdoor hot tub, sauna, plunge pool, gym, multimedia room, presentation room, boots and outer layer clothing provided.
BOOKINGS: 10-night Quest for the Antarctic Circle on Akademik Sergey Vavilov, including flights from Punta Arenas to Stanley and King George Island to Punta Arenas, from \$10,695 triple share, oneoceanexpeditions.com

