



In Shackleton's wake

#ANTARCTICA #ADVENTURE

One of the greatest survival stories in history is at the centre of an expedition to the end of the Earth. *By Jocelyn Pride*



THE SEA SUCKS DEEP INTO the rock crevices as chinstrap penguins clamber and slide, oblivious to a ship full of peering eyes. There’s a roar as a rogue wave sends a sheet of spray skyward and I catch a glimpse of a bronze bust illuminated against the rocks. A wisp of beach in the Southern Ocean might be an odd spot for a museum, but this is Point Wild, Elephant Island, a site immortalised in maritime history.

It’s day 10 of our 23-day ‘Antarctica Complete’ voyage on board the 132-berth *Greg Mortimer* with Aurora Expeditions, and as Mother Nature is whipping up a storm, our hopes of jumping in the Zodiacs to cruise closer to Point Wild are dashed. Instead, we stand riveted as expedition leader Ashley Perrin recreates the scene where Ernest Shackleton and his 27-man crew set up camp here in April 1916 after their ship, *Endurance*, was swallowed by ice in the Weddell Sea and they sailed north for five harrowing days in three lifeboats.

“They turned two of the lifeboats upside-down to make a hut,” says Ashley, the wind snatching at her words. “With no hope of being found, they modified the third lifeboat; Shackleton selected five crew members and set sail for South Georgia with only a sextant to guide them.” Four months later, Shackleton returned on *Yelcho*, a Chilean Navy ship commanded by Luis Pardo, to rescue his men. The bronze bust of Pardo on the site of the *Endurance* crew camp is a powerful symbol of survival.

A COMFY RIDE
The soul-stirring Shackleton story is omnipresent throughout our journey. News that the wreck of *Endurance* was located in ‘remarkable condition’ in March 2022 was announced a couple of weeks before our embarkation in Punta Arenas, Chile. And as the itinerary covers South Georgia, we’re sailing through the history books. In contrast to *Endurance*, the *Greg Mortimer* is poles apart when it comes to

creature comforts – expedition cruising with plush cabins, three-course dinners served with Chilean wine, a full gym and outdoor jacuzzis. Named in honour of Aurora’s founder, it’s the first passenger ship built using Ulstein X-bow technology, designed, in the words of Captain Oleg Klaptenko, “to cut through waves and ice like butter” and able to maintain a speed of 10 to 12 knots with greater stability. And with a carbon-neutral accreditation, sustainability is at the forefront.

THE FROZEN CONTINENT
Antarctica is the focus of the early part of our voyage. “Find your own moments – they’re the ones you’ll remember,” assistant expedition leader Dan Stavert says at our initial briefing. As we cruise in Zodiacs (or paddle kayaks) through crystal galleries filled with sapphire-tinged sculptures; gaze into the eyes of seals lazing on icefloes; hike amid colonies of penguins; feel

TRAVEL FACTS

Aurora Expeditions’ Antarctica cruises run from October through to March. The 23-day ‘Antarctica Complete’ itinerary (ex Ushuaia, Argentina) is scheduled for 13 March to 4 April 2023. auroraexpeditions.com.au

OPENING PAGE:
Antarctica’s scenery is breathtaking in its icy scope.
TOP, FROM LEFT:
Kayaking through the growlers;
a curious crabeater seal; the
Greg Mortimer cuts a fine figure;
a king penguin tends its chick.
All images © Jocelyn Pride

whale breath on our cheeks from blows of sleeping humpbacks; and listen to the crackling, popping and swooshing of the ice, I feel layers of pent-up pandemic emotion peel away. I’m not alone. I see it in the eyes of my 79 fellow passengers. We run out of superlatives and are at times lost for words. And then there’s South Georgia – a hauntingly beautiful, rugged sub-Antarctic island. Once the scene of massive whaling stations, now home to one of the largest concentrations of wildlife on the planet.

BACK FROM THE BRINK
It took Shackleton and his pared-back crew huddled in the *James Caird* a mind-numbing 17 days to sail from Point Wild to South Georgia. The *Greg Mortimer* does it in three. We sail into King Haakon Bay as the sun peeps over the jagged mountain range. Puffy cotton clouds reflect in the glacial waters, cormorants and

petrels circle the ship and a couple of humpbacks breach in the distance. A handful of curious fur seals and elegant king penguins welcome us to our first landing – Peggotty Bluff, where 106 years ago, the Shackleton party stumbled to shore. However, their ordeal wasn’t quite over. Help was on the other side of the island. So, running on what could have only been pure adrenaline, Shackleton and two of his men scaled the glaciers and slid down icy slopes on a perilous 50-kilometre trek to raise the alarm at a whaling station. Over the next few days, we immerse ourselves in the otherworldliness of South Georgia. Then, in a swirling mist at Grytviken, we pay our respects to Shackleton at his final resting place; a tiny cemetery amid the rusted, derelict industrial machinery of the former whaling station. “Here’s to the boss,” says Steve Martin, *Greg Mortimer*’s historian, as we clink paper mugs filled with whisky. ☺