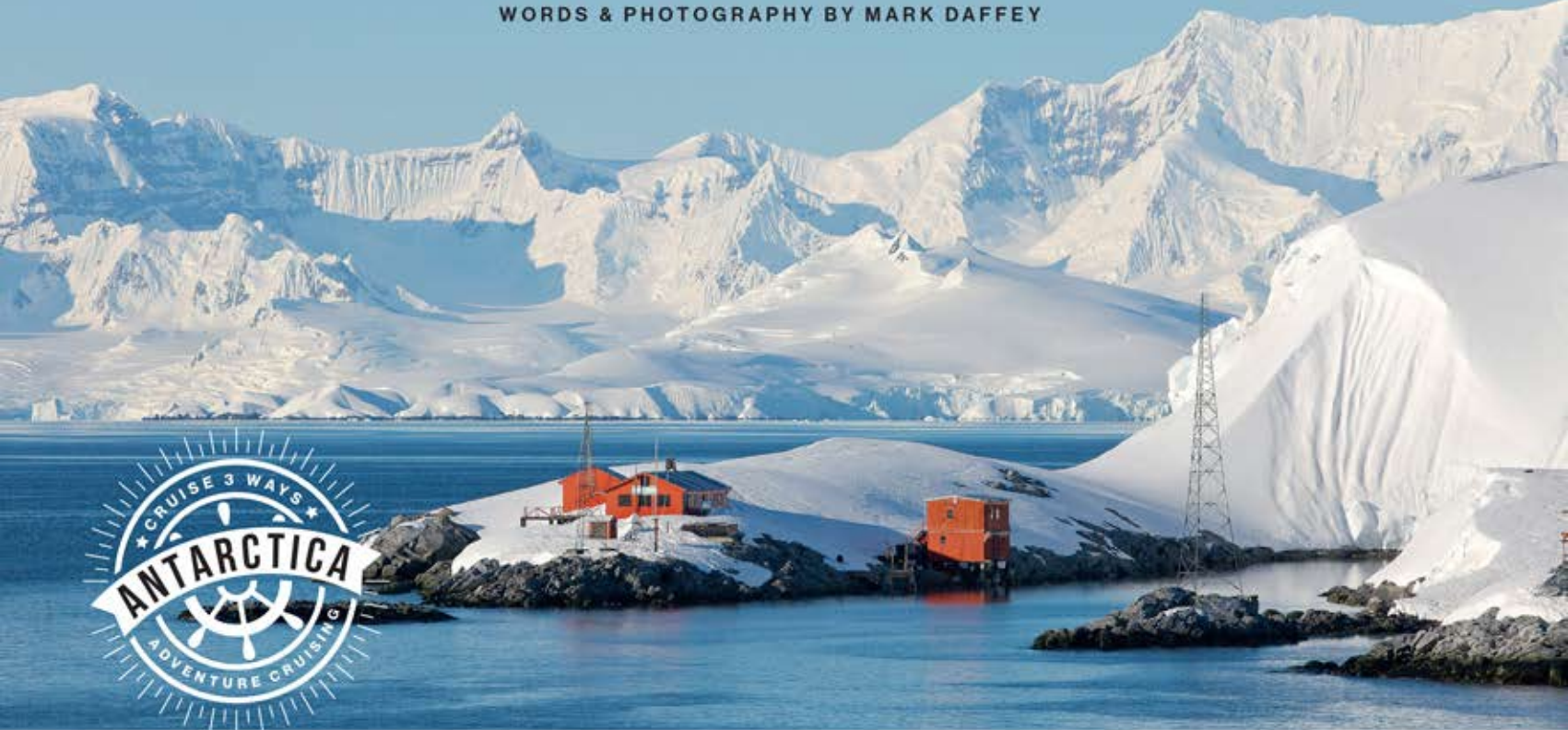


ANTARCTICA

TO THE END OF THE EARTH

Looking for a place that's free from the tourist crowds? Wonderfully wild, the untouched polar paradise of Antarctica feels a world away from everyday life – and it may just be your perfect escape.

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Have you ever wanted the beautiful Taj Mahal all to yourself? What about Angkor Wat? Did you ever dream of being the only person atop a Buddhist temple at dawn?

Well, I'd suggest you keep on dreaming. Because unless you're a billionaire with deep pockets, I'd say your chances of experiencing these locations sans crowds are next to none. Antarctica, however, is an entirely different story. Its resident population is only around 4,000 at most – which means it's practically, wonderfully empty.

Access to this polar paradise is almost exclusively by water, with cruise ships departing from various ports around the world. Like most, my 10-day Chimu Adventures 'Discover Antarctica' cruise sets out from Ushuaia. And as is often the case, it's raining when we board our ship, the *Ocean Atlantic*. Hail peppers the deck and snow dusts the Martial Mountains overshadowing the town. There's also an approaching storm front – which our captain has chosen to avoid by delaying our departure by three hours, to ensure a smoother voyage across the famously challenging Drake Passage.

Pleasingly, our 48-hour crossing is relatively benign, with our first landfall sighted late on our second afternoon. The snow-splattered sea cliffs of Smith Island – named after English captain William Smith, who discovered the South Shetland Islands in 1819 – rise sheer from the still waters, their peaks concealed beneath a ring of clouds.

While certainly thrilling, catching a glimpse of Smith Island is nothing compared to what awaits us the following morning. I set my alarm for 6am, an hour before breakfast,

This page: The untamed landscape of Antarctica is home to only a few permanent structures.

Opposite page, top to bottom: Cruise passengers take in the view over the moody landscape; The Polar Plunge into the cold waters of Antarctica is a rite of passage for many adventurous travellers.

Smith Island is one of 11 major islands in the South Shetlands.

so I can see Antarctica at first light. But when I gaze outside through my window, I realise that even at this early hour I'm too late. Sunlight already bathes the top half of the slopes.

I climb to the deck to find at least a dozen others there before me, and overhear talk of humpback whales slapping their pectoral fins against the water surface, and of smaller minke whales surfacing close to the ship. I make a mental note to get out of bed earlier the following day.

COULDN'T BE COOLER

As we cruise through Dallmann Bay in the Palmer Archipelago, I'm struck by how much snow surrounds us. Never before have I seen it so voluminous. There's no hint of vegetation; the only visible landforms are the dark rocks along the shoreline. Otherwise, these islands appear like nothing more than giant mounds of dazzlingly white snow.

Moving onward, we sail through the Gerlache Strait to Danco Island. Crabeater seals laze on ice floes, and leopard seals patrol the shore. Danco Island is also home to a large colony of gentoo penguins – and I can smell them before I see them. But the noise is equally jarring. Antarctica is a mostly mute world. Glaciers calving into the ocean may break the silence, and the splash of a breaching whale can be heard from miles away. But the penguins, we're told, recognise each other by their calls – hearty, full-throated trills, with heads tilted skywards like wailing infants.

I don't make the mistake of missing the dawn two days in a row, setting my alarm to go off an hour earlier. After slipping on multiple layers of warm clothing, I clamber up



**SOFT
CLOUDS
GATHER,
CASTING
A PASTEL
HUE
ACROSS
THE
WIDE
SEA**



on deck. Just two passengers have beaten me this time, and there are fewer signs of wildlife. But the gorgeous scenery – of a half-moon hovering above the Osterrieth mountain range on Anvers Island, and of backlit icebergs off Damoy Point on Wiencke Island – more than compensates.

Our next leg, through the Lemaire Channel, is arguably the most photogenic of our entire cruise – which explains its nickname, ‘Kodak Gap’. The observation deck is close to full as we pass by giant shards of rock rising straight from the water, so close at times they seem barely an arm’s length away.

South of here, the vistas open up to a stunning spectacle of islands, mountains and ice. “Most people come down here for the wildlife, initially,” says the ship’s polar glaciologist, Gerard Baker, “but the majority return because of the ice.”

In time, I come to realise that the scale of Antarctica is what astounds me most. Mountains and glaciers positively dwarf the Zodiacs. And when my fellow cruise passengers spread out along ridge lines where they’re silhouetted against dramatic backdrops of craggy, snow-caked mountains, they are mere specks in comparison. I’m moved by the contrasting conditions as well. Yesterday’s clear, sunny weather allowed us to see the wrinkled mountain summits and added colour to our photos. Then over breakfast this morning, soft clouds began to gather, casting a pastel hue across the wide skies. In brooding conditions like these, the icebergs are mesmerising, turning cobalt blue – a sign of older, densely packed ice.

Our third day in Antarctica is our first setting foot on the continent itself. Until now, we have only stepped ashore on islands. But at Paradise Harbour, a truly pristine frozen

landscape, we’re able to climb an icy hill behind Almirante Brown Antarctic Base – an Argentinian research station left unoccupied for most of the year.

Again, gentoo penguins huddle on the rocks around the base, just along from a colony of imperial blue-eyed shags nesting on a cliff face. Out on the harbour, the crew’s resident whale expert, Ursula Tschertter, tracks a minke whale swimming beneath her little motorised dingy. And across the inlet, the rare spectacle of an iceberg rolling over sets off a mini tsunami.

TAKE THE PLUNGE

We sail on to Neko Harbour after lunch, and it’s here that we share the beach with strangers for the first time. A research vessel is anchored across an expansive bay hemmed by glaciers and littered with ice floes, and two American scientists from the ship amble along our beach, collecting who knows what while a Weddell seal slumbers among a gentoo colony. I can’t help but feel a little miffed by their intrusion, but I imagine their thoughts mirror mine.


More than anywhere else, it’s here that the penguins’ antics enthral me most. Though they are so graceful in the water, they’re incredibly clumsy on land. I lose count of the number of times they trip over their own feet, their flippers flailing helplessly behind them. Then, ever-so-awkwardly, they’ll right themselves using only their beak.

“Penguins can be therapeutic,” says Sandra Petrowitz, the ship’s photographer, as I watch them. “You just can’t be in a bad mood around them.” On that, she’s absolutely right – they’re guaranteed to put a smile on your face.

Just before dinner that night, 70 passengers undertake the Polar Plunge, diving, jumping and back-flipping into Neko Harbour’s hypothermic waters. Some exit the water almost as soon as they’ve entered it, but what impresses me most is that no-one backs out. Still, nobody braves the two-degree water twice either.

My shower that evening is hotter than usual, as we cruise north to the South Shetland Islands. East of Smith Island, Deception Island is the caldera of one of just two active volcanoes in Antarctica, which last erupted in 1970. Our entry is through Neptune’s Bellows, a 230m-wide gap into the sunken caldera that sheltered Norwegian whalers – and, later, British military personnel – early last century. Crumbling World War II aircraft hangars and barracks still occupy the black sand beach in Whalers Bay, alongside the hulking remains of rusting whaling station boilers.

Further east, but part of the same archipelago, Half Moon Island is our final port of call before we undertake the two-day sail back to Ushuaia. Again, the island is home to an unoccupied Argentinian base, as well as plenty of fur seals and chinstrap penguins.

The landing is perhaps the most relaxed we’ve had, with plenty of time to just sit and listen to the penguins squawking like seagulls, or to watch the bachelor seals squabbling. As I return to the Zodiac, a juvenile fur seal charges at me with teeth bared. Perhaps he wants me as a sparring partner, in preparation for when he’ll have to stand his ground against his peers? Or perhaps, like me, he’s just annoyed at having to share his territory with someone else. I could hardly blame him, could I? 

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