



ANTARCTICA

# A TOUCH OF CHILE ON ICE

*If your idea of cruising is about science, discovery and adventure, this fresh offering from a Norwegian line will leave you awestruck.*

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It's 10:15pm. I've been on the outer deck for hours, thinking I'd retreat to the comfort of the lounge in a few more moments. But as minutes turn into hours, the landscape converts perfect blues to violets and magentas, with scattered sea ice the only blemish for miles in the oily calm conditions. This wild continent of famed winds and violent weather can turn on the charm like nowhere else. I'm in Wilhelmina Bay, off the Antarctic Peninsula, and my expectations have been turned upside down.

Expedition cruising has become the tip of the spear for an industry experiencing continued growth searching for its next frontier.

In an effort to offer once-in-a-lifetime experiences in fragile environments, Hurtigruten has managed to put itself at the head of the pack with its new hybrid-powered ship voyages to Antarctica.

As the first cruise line to introduce hybrid-powered ships, Hurtigruten are influencers. "In my opinion," says the CEO, Daniel Skjeldam, "companies not taking sustainability seriously will not be around in 10 years."

Its sustainability efforts are a source of company-wide pride and it doesn't stop there. While other cruise lines clamour to enter the expedition space, Hurtigruten are specialists and have been exploring since 1893.

Its experience is evident in its seamless excursion operation.

These small-ship expeditions are perfect for active cruise-goers, offering immersion into local environments, experiences and micro-cultures; an antidote to traditional mega-ship cruising.

The Chile to Antarctica voyage on *MS Roald Amundsen* provides a peppering of untouched micro-sites,

with remote Chilean villages, Patagonian exploration and intimate wildlife encounters with awe-inspiring, small-ship-only Antarctic landings. If your idea of cruising is less about unbridled opulence and more about science, discovery and authentic adventure, this fresh offering from a disruptive Norwegian expeditionary cruise line will leave you awestruck.

## SMALL VILLAGE STOPS WITH PERSONAL ENCOUNTERS

Our cruise follows the west coast of Chile, embarking at Valparaíso (about 120kms from Santiago) and heading to Puerto Natales, navigating fjords and passing the Five Nation Glaciers in the Beagle Channel, before defying the Drake Passage, justified as the price of reaching the (hopefully) calm Antarctic bays.

Heading toward Patagonia, the Chilean fjords boast myriad misty waterways, kelp forests and waterfalls. This forested, riverine environment is the setting of our first landing; Puerto Edén, a small hamlet. Population: 50.

Misty rain saturates the air, unsurprisingly, as one of the wettest places on earth. I stop to take a photo of a charming house on the fjord, when the smiling occupant emerges speaking to me in Spanish.

Understanding about every other word with my limited Spanish, we chat. Within minutes, Hector, the local ranger as it turns out, is serving us his homemade *sopaipillas* (pastry), as we drink wine together and hear his stories about orcas that frequent the small bay behind us.

Cruising through the southern fjords, Chilean Patagonia is home to Puerto Natales, the gateway to Torres del Paine National Park. About an



**Clockwise from above:** On foot in Patagonia; The fjords are spectacular; Expedition boats offer close-up exploration; The Gentoo penguins are curious about visitors; Seals can be enjoyed in their natural environment.

hour's drive from town, we start our day-long excursion. The weather is unpredictable and wild, so when Patagonia gifts us with a day of reasonably clear skies, granting visibility of arguably what is the most dramatic mountain scape in the world, even the raging winds become tolerable.

## EXTREME ENVIRONMENT

Pre-eminent in this critical biosphere, is the Grey Lake. The drab water is mired by powdered rocks crushed by the movement of glacial ice. Icebergs appear to glow from within, sitting in stark relief with almost too much colour to be real.

The winds are extreme, but fittingly so, pounding the ice into crystals that clink spectacularly against the stones of the beach.

Elsewhere within the park I spend time observing a new-born guanaco (a camelid), with its cautious herd grazing the rolling hills at the foot of the Paine Massif.

THERE IS NO MORE MAGICAL PLACE ON EARTH.



With a casual dress code onboard, the atmosphere is relaxed, becoming home-like for the 18-day journey. Design efficiencies include motion sensor doors, in-room electric air cupboards for drying wet gear, and modern accents in birchwood and granite throughout the ship, presenting a pleasantly chic Scandinavian mood.

After a morning expedition, or daring to take the legendary 'Polar Plunge', the sauna, with its floor to ceiling windows becomes ever-inviting, not just for warming up, but for whale watching, too, as several lucky guests boasted. Other pastimes include soaking in two hot tubs and an infinity pool with water efficiently heated using the engine room's waste heat.

The ship isn't just beautiful, it is a technical and environmental marvel, starting with its much-lauded battery systems. At any one time, up to four engines produce electrical power. The battery system stores surplus power, intelligently feeding back to the ship in a process called 'peak shaving'.

Fuel savings are approximately 20 per cent, reducing about 3,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per year. "The future is to run this ship on rotten fish," says Captain Kai Albrigtsen, referring to plans to fuel ships with liquefied biogas from organic waste.

Down to the smallest detail, like utilising waste heat or digesting all organic waste onboard, environmentally, this vessel and its operation are at the forefront of sustainable exploration.

### ICEBERG MAJESTY

Fortunately, the ship's technology, with active stabilisers, and its PC6 ice-class rated, wave-piercing hull, handle the conditions in the Drake



It is estimated that at least 12 million penguins live in Antarctica.



### DEFYING THE DRAKE

Traversing the Drake Passage is likely to be on the bucket list of many an intrepid explorer seeking a challenge. Sailing through can be an exhilarating adventure, following in the footsteps of Charles Darwin and the *HMS Beagle*. However, modern vessels are more than capable of handling the waves.

Passage deftly. Even so, eight-metre waves and strong winds lay some passengers out for a day. This made the first great iceberg sighting even more momentous, signalling our arrival into Antarctic waters. The enormous tabular iceberg, over 80 metres high, appears to have its own ecosystem, swarming with seabirds like wandering albatross and Cape petrels, and has its own Gentoo penguin colony to boot.

Reaching Yankee Harbour in the South Shetland Islands, the calm of the water and the endless mountains are equally unexpected.

Wearing our boat-issued sterilised boots, to keep the environment pristine, we board the expedition boats for landing.

It's serene, devoid of pollution and the only scents and sounds come from the Gentoo penguin rookery.

They squawk, waddle and slide across the snow. The expedition team delineates areas where guests can explore, avoiding wildlife disturbance, but the curious penguins ignore this completely, walking along our path unreservedly.

Scientists have determined that penguin stress rates are not affected by maintaining a distance of five metres, so we keep to this range.

Inquisitive penguins, on the other hand, disregard this rule, too. As morning clouds recede, we enjoy Antarctic sun and silky conditions, as did one sunbathing leopard seal resting on a single floating iceberg, with its joker-like smile, still stained with penguin blood.

The following days are a procession of experiences that defy expectation, from mountain hiking to a Chinstrap penguin rookery in Orne Harbour, to snowshoeing and kayaking through sea ice at Half Moon Island.

Each landing is diverse and spectacular, until Antarctica delivers its impossible calmness, even more staggering given its reputation as the planet's windiest place.

Whether slow cruising the ice-laden waters in expedition boats, or holding position in Wilhelmina Bay at sunset, when stillness settles on Antarctica, there is no more magical place on earth.

My small-ship, Antarctic journey, with intimate and personal experiences along the way, is undeniably transformative, featuring local discoveries to landings at pristine locations and abundant wildlife encounters, defined by curious mutual fascination.

What makes it even more memorable is Hurtigruten's visionary approach and recognition that sustainable cruising is just as good for guests as it is for these fantastic, pristine environments. 

### VISIT MINDFOOD.COM

Want to see more Gentoo penguins? The additions to the sub-Antarctic penguin family at Sea Life Kelly Tarlton's Auckland are off to a swimmingly good start to life. [mindfood.com/penguins-auckland](http://mindfood.com/penguins-auckland)