



# ANTARCTIC

Dan Avila cruises to the end of the Earth on the world's newest and greenest expedition ship, discovering that Antarctica can turn on calm perfection. Photos by Dan and Zora Avila.

# CALM



An Antarctic expedition cruise is about doing, not just seeing. Snowshoeing up a mild mountain to watch humpbacks in the neighbouring bay, kayaking in iceberg-laden waterways, hiking to a mountaintop chinstrap penguin colony or stripping down to take the plunge in the painfully freezing waters.

On this journey, the fabled land of extremes holds back from a show of force. Instead, we witness serene conditions and delicate beauty, including a never-ending sunset at Wilhelmina Bay, where colours fade from fiery oranges to deep mauve and magenta and the only disturbance to mirrored perfection is aggregating sea ice. The voyage is so moving, it converts even the most nonchalant observers into Antarctic sentinels, passionate that this place should remain revered and protected. And that sentiment is all the more appropriate when exploring on one of the greenest ships ever built.

I am with my wife (a fellow photographer) on the first Antarctic voyage for MS *Roald Amundsen*, the latest ship in Norwegian expedition cruise line Hurtigruten's portfolio. This, a diesel-battery hybrid no less. She is brimming with 'green' tech and was built specifically for polar exploring, drawing on 126 years of cruising knowledge.

Expedition cruising is not the same as classic white-ship offerings. There are no casinos or cabaret, no water slides and wave pools. Instead, there's an expedition team with scientists, historians, ornithologists and marine biologists. Guests participate in bonafide citizen science, or learn how to nail the best wildlife or iceberg photo. This is a voyage of discovery, education and, in particular, participation.

#### From one continent to another

Our cruise starts in Valparaiso, Chile, tracking south through wild Chilean fjords. "Actually, this feels much like my home in northern Norway," says Øystein Knoph, our host for the trip. We are in one of the purpose-built expedition inflatable boats idling in the English Narrows, confirming the slack tide for the ship, which is required for safe

passage. I dip my hand in the water. It feels like a thousand needles before numbness sets in within seconds.

"You're doing the Polar Plunge, right?" asks Øystein with a grin, referring to the famously painful Antarctic swim that has become a rite of passage. "Yeah, probably," I say, as I start to search for viable, masculine reasons that will justify a face-saving withdrawal.

The Chilean leg of the trip revolves around a full-day excursion into the famed Torres del Paine National Park in Patagonia, which delivers what Antarctica fails to – ferocious winds and a sense of pure power that demands complete respect. Walking along the stone beach of the Grey Lake, the horns of the Paine Massif are in full view with iridescent blue icebergs pummelled into ice chunks clinking on the shore.

Before returning to the ship, we hike a trail at the base of the massif seeking the blue lake that feeds a waterfall marking the starting point of the trail. Eager as we are to reach the lake, we never make it. Instead, we sit in the Patagonian fields enthralled by a small family of guanaco, including a newborn guanquito that grazes and plays in the shadow of the mountain.

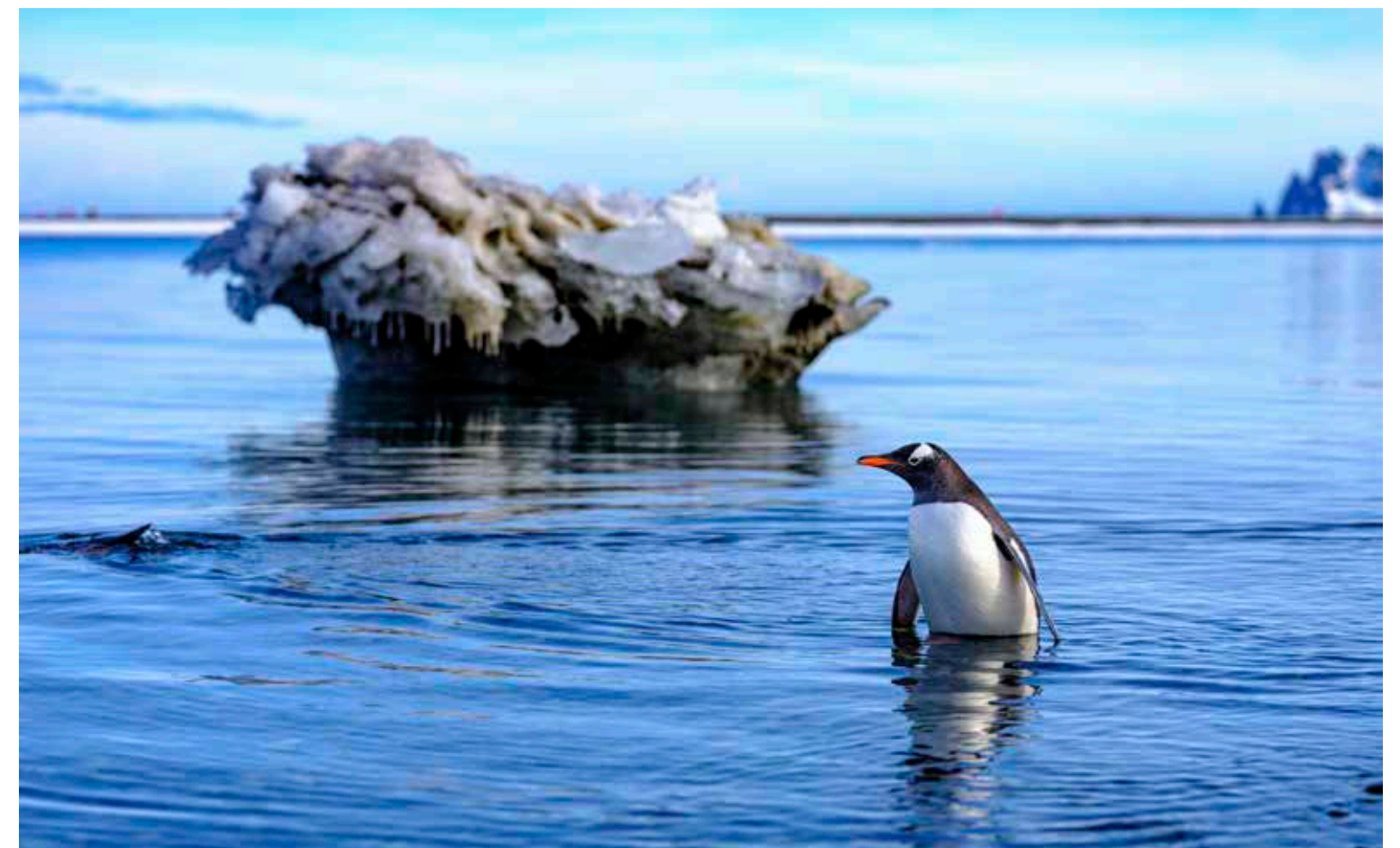
#### Crossing the Drake Passage

The thought of crossing the Drake Passage, the wild stretch of water between Cape Horn and the South Shetland Islands, has dissuaded many a would-be explorer. Setting off from Ushuaia, the winds hit over 80 knots with swell above eight metres. But the boat's technology – stabilisers and the patented wave-piercing bow – ensure a manageable sailing. The weather improves markedly during the two-day crossing.

The Drake crossing provides time for Antarctic preparation. All passengers are required to be familiar with IAATO rules, established for the protection of the continent and its wild inhabitants. Each landing is limited to 100 guests at any given time, and all must wear Hurtigruten-supplied boots, sterilised between landings. The minimum approach distance to wildlife and the strict no-souvenir policy is clearly explained.



Previous page: MS *Roald Amundsen* cruising past a crown-like iceberg Above: The ship is designed for polar regions Below: A curious gentoo penguin







### Ship shape

A visit to the bridge with MS *Roald Amundsen's* captain Kai Albrigtsen is like stepping into the future. The state-of-the-art ship is bristling with tech. The ship's dynamic positioning eliminates the need to use an anchor in sensitive environments, and massive twin counter-rotating bow thrusters can blast this PC6, ice-class-rated hull through a metre of sea ice.

The green tech is *Roald Amundsen's* notable point of difference and a sense of pride for team Hurtigruten. Looking like a sterile bank of super computers, the ship's batteries are central to the much-lauded hybrid power system used for 'peak shaving' power demands, significantly saving on fuel consumption.

full nesting construction mode (they are the least abundant of the penguins found on the sub-Antarctic islands, with a total breeding population of approximately 387,000 pairs), we set out on inflatables to slowly cruise around the inner harbour's sea ice and glacial walls. The light is indescribably beautiful; the sun is bright, yet hangs low, creating colour and dimension that is simply soul-nourishing.

The cute-faced Weddell seal is unfazed by our arrival, while a bull elephant seal gives us a glorious mouth gape before nodding off again. Yet it is the powerful leopard seal, encamped near the gentoo colony and with a face like a smiling assassin – still stained with blood – that is the most awe-inspiring.

*"This is not an ice sheet like the Arctic – this is a mountainous continent, and it is grand"*

"The future for us is to run this ship on rotten fish," says Albrigtsen, referring to plans to run the brand's fleet on liquefied bio-gas made from organic waste.

### The end of the Earth

Our arrival at the serene bay of Yankee Harbour sets the scene for what turns out to be four days of incomparable landscapes and experiences. As we prepare to depart the ship from the 'black box', the expedition launch area, excitement quickly builds. The OXO diesel outboards quietly and effortlessly push the rigid inflatable landing boats across the inky black, eerily calm water, edging us toward land.

Setting foot on Antarctica is quite an emotional and overwhelming experience. The landscape is far more beautiful and diverse than I ever expected. This is not an ice sheet like the Arctic – this is a mountainous continent, and it is grand.

Despite our compliance to minimum wildlife approach distances, the gentoo and chinstrap penguins clearly haven't been given the memo. Not only are they unconcerned by human presence, they are humorous, playful, social and inquisitive. After walking around the natural harbour to the rookery to visit the gentoos in

After 18 days on the MS *Roald Amundsen*, it is clear why expedition cruising is surging in popularity. Smaller vessels are more intimate and allow direct engagement with destinations. Small ports with real communities and authentic, tactile experiences in the wildest destinations inspire the inner explorer in passengers, who are indelibly marked by what they do, not just what they see. ♦

### Travel file

**Cruise**  
[hurtigruten.com.au](http://hurtigruten.com.au)

**Getting there**  
The voyage starts with transport from Santiago, Chile, to Valparaiso on the west coast. Qantas flies to Santiago direct from Australia daily. [qantas.com](http://qantas.com)



Scan this code with your mobile device to unlock a video Dan and Zora Avila shot while cruising in Antarctica.

Clockwise from top left: Icebergs in the Drake Passage can tower over passing ships; a pair of gentoo penguins; the mirrored surface of Wilhelmina Bay at dusk; tenders allow close encounters with icebergs; a Weddell seal, which can weigh up to 600 kilograms