

A photograph of a seal pup peering through a hole in a brick wall. The pup is looking directly at the camera. The wall is made of red bricks and has some peeling plaster. The pup is sitting on a concrete ledge. The background is a blurred brick wall.

Reclaimed

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: JOANNA LENTINI
LOCATION: SOUTH GEORGIA

Cold, damp earth pressed against my legs. Despite wrapping myself in several warm layers, a chill crept in. Close to the water's edge, beneath a pall of heavy grey cloud, I waited. Relatively alone for the first time in weeks, I relished every moment as I treasured the wildness of the scene before me. Small bundles of blubber shuffled closer over gently lapping waves, wee heads swayed side to side like a clock's pendulum, and all the while, dark, alluring eyes communicated their curiosity about me. I was something quite new to them.

Holding back the fit of laughter brewing inside, I stepped outside of myself to appreciate the weight of this encounter. By the beginning of the 20th century, Antarctic fur seals had been hunted to near extinction. In fact, the island of South Georgia, in the southern Atlantic, has a dark history of environmental genocide – first with fur seals, later with whales. Fortunately, in modern times, Antarctic fur seal pups have returned in abundance to captivate me and my fellow travellers.

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Appearing fierce at first as we approached, scores of fur seal pups charged towards us and only stood down a foot or so before they reached us. We grew comfortable with these charges after a few landings, and soon realised most were quite innocent. Although rumours circled about the occasional chomp at a booted foot, it was

comforting to see we weren't the only victims of this territorial behaviour. Penguins and other birds are regularly harassed by these spirited greetings. Surely such behaviour is important for survival in this harsh and unforgiving habitat?

But then, as a single pup broke away from the bevy and advanced on me, those toothy tales flashed through my mind. Too late. Before instinct could take over and I could jolt away, the youngster's whiskers were upon me, investigating. I had nothing to fear. She felt her way curiously over my shell jacket, a wild native apparently at ease with the outlander on her territory.

Of the 14,000 travellers who make their way to this British Overseas Territory each year, only the small percentage who visit at the end of the austral summer have some chance of encountering pups. Mature seals are scattered amongst the other wildlife on the island throughout the year but pups are much rarer. Teeming with more biodiversity than the Galapagos Islands, this windswept Garden of Eden hosts 95 per cent of the world's Antarctic fur seal population. Despite its treeless terrain, the island is covered in tussock grass and provides shelter for four species of penguins as well. Chinstrap, gentoo, king, and macaroni compete for space alongside the fur, southern elephant, and Weddell leopard seals. Soaring overhead are eight species of albatross, and 24 species of petrel and shearwater; the sub-Antarctic waters that hug its shores contain humpback, minke, blue, sei, fin, and southern right whales. But this remote island did not always resemble the land before time. In fact, I could see decaying remnants of its haunting past farther down the very shore on which I sat. Rusting relics of a brutal, bygone industry still litter an otherwise picturesque location. 'Keep Out' signs warn visitors of asbestos dangers, and serve as the only barrier between visitors and the dilapidated whaling station known as Stromness. >>





Long ago, it wasn't asbestos the island's inhabitants needed to fear.

Yet, beyond the warning signs, seal pups and penguins wandered as far back as the buildings themselves, ignorant of the chemical dangers. What still lay inside was left only to the imagination. With time, the industrial ruins would crumble and fade, but the destruction they represented ought to serve as a stark reminder to future generations. It was only 13 years after Captain James Cook's discovery of South Georgia that the first sealers set foot on its shores. Between 1788 and 1825, American and British sealers slaughtered roughly 1.2 million Antarctic fur seals for their pelts. Not surprisingly, the species collapsed. By some estimates, fewer than 100 Antarctic fur seals remained on the island in 1916. Given such devastation, perhaps it is wishful thinking to assume history would not repeat itself; yet, as the sealers fizzled away, the whalers were just getting warmed up.

The first whaling station, known as Grytviken, was erected in South Georgia in 1904 by Carl Anton Larsen – a Norwegian explorer-turned-whaling tycoon. The name Larsen may sound familiar, as he is known for discovering the Larsen Ice Shelf, which forms a major portion of the Antarctic Peninsula. Sadly, Larsen's endeavour, the production of whale oil, led to the construction of five other independent whaling stations on this otherwise uninhabited and remote wilderness. Thus, the seed Larsen planted ultimately led to the demise of 175,250 whales over six decades in the waters surrounding South Georgia. And not long after Grytviken was erected, Antarctica began producing around 70 per cent of the world's whale oil. Larsen went on to be known as the founder of the Antarctic whaling industry, and rightfully so.

While the governor of the neighbouring Falkland Islands and the manager of South Georgia enacted laws to protect females with

calves, requiring whalers to secure licensing, the advent of the factory ship allowed for whalers to create their very own whaling stations on the high seas. With the whalers just beyond South Georgia's jurisdiction, and more whales to choose from, production accelerated. Greed unchecked, the supply of whale oil began to exceed demand, causing prices to fall and the industry to collapse. The remaining whalers turned to elephant seals for their oil. Thankfully, by this point, previous exploits around the island finally led to fixed quota restrictions and mandatory licensing – probably saving the species.

As I walked through Grytviken – the only one of six retired whaling stations that is accessible – I knew that Antarctic fur seals now greatly outnumbered the visitors, researchers, and seasonal administrative staff. Amongst the rusted vats and machinery relics, docile pups snoozed on the rubble. When considered in context, the bizarre juxtaposition of



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environmental warfare, the survivors' descendants, and a serene, mountainous backdrop was almost too much for the senses.

Kneeling down beside one of the vats bearing the engraving 'Blubber Cookery', I admired the fur seals scattered about – completely tranquil and oblivious to the haunting irony of the detritus around them. In the distance ahead, a chalky white Norwegian church could be seen, and behind me the cemetery where Sir Ernest Shackleton is buried. It is rare for a person to reach this remote corner of the world without having heard the tale of Sir Ernest Shackleton and the crew of the *Endurance*. For some, crossing the treacherous terrain of South Georgia, as Shackleton and six others did in 1916, to save themselves and 20 crew mates stranded on Elephant Island, is considered a sort of pilgrimage. In fact, over the weeks prior we had retraced Shackleton's footsteps – from the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula to the craggy speck of land known as Elephant Island, and finally some 1,200km north-east to South Georgia. He died here of a heart attack years later, long after their successful rescue, on a final expedition that has become known as the last chapter in the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration.

Back on the shores of Stromness Harbour, my new pinniped friend settled down on the gravel beside me, and I drifted off in thought. I conjured images of what these sub-Antarctic beaches must have looked like when Shackleton and his men arrived. Surely, at the beginning of the 20th century, an Antarctic fur seal must have been quite a rarity. I pondered the innate need some of us have, including myself, to explore new places – and the environmental exploitation that seems to follow such pursuits. While the era of men who discover new worlds by ship has long

since passed, many of our modern-day explorers use spacecraft and submersibles to reach undiscovered country. And for those of us who aren't astronauts or aquanauts, we simply follow in the footsteps of the great explorers that came before us. While we aren't claiming new lands for kings, we are answering a calling within us to explore. In some ways we are exploring ourselves – our limits, fears, and curiosities. We are fortunate to have the opportunity to do so, as travelling to the ends of the Earth was once limited to a specialised minority.

As I watched the animals scattered along the shoreline, a pang of guilt set in. I realised the hypocrisy in judging those that came before me. I might not have been wielding a club or harpoon, but I travelled thousands of miles by air and sea to South Georgia. The impact of carbon emissions are not as obviously destructive as the exploits of whalers or sealers, but such voyages are quietly exploitative nonetheless. A changing climate has been creating a new storm for the wildlife of South Georgia. Glaciers around the island are currently retreating at a rate of one metre per day, and the acidity in the Southern Ocean has been rising faster than anywhere else on Earth. The effect this will have on the food supply for the Antarctic fur seals and all the other wildlife in the region is unfathomable.

Despite their tragic past, the fur seals around South Georgia have made a promising recovery. On the brink of extinction, the pinnipeds went to work rebuilding their community, and today the island boasts four million, forming the largest marine mammal aggregation anywhere on the planet. For now, on the surface, things seem OK. Unfortunately, the challenges they once faced have simply been replaced with new ones – also caused by humanity, but infinitely more complex.

@joannalentini