

Mount Holyoke College Class of 1964
After the Middle Ages Comes the Renaissance!
Special Topics

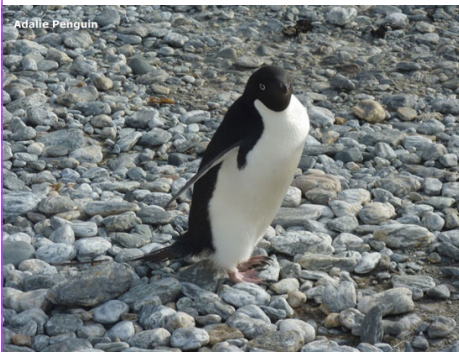
Reflections on a Trip to the End of the World (The Falklands, South Georgia and Antarctica)

Just over a year ago, my sister-in-law Margaret and I joined 62 other adventurers at a reception in a Buenos Aires hotel the night before we were about to embark on an incredible three-week journey. We were a varied group - young, old and in between. There were four families, including that of Sir Peter Hillary, who was one of the expedition leaders. We had traveled from the USA, Europe, South Africa, New Zealand, Israel, and Great Britain. We were all eager to set off on a trip following in the steps of Sir Ernest Shackleton, one of the best-known explorers of the region. Our expedition leaders had traveled extensively in the region and were experts in the history, wildlife, ecology, geology and glaciology of the region. In one presentation, Peter Hilary spoke about his expedition to the South Pole. We soon settled into an easy camaraderie as we lined up to board zodiacs, small rubber boats that took us from our ship to our landings, or wandered on deck enjoying the scenery and looking for birds and sea creatures, or listening to briefings from our expedition leaders, or enjoying our time in the dining room or in the lounge.

We had outfitted ourselves with red parkas, heavy knee high boots for the wet landings and warm clothes for the journey. And, it was cold and windy at times. We were told to bring different weight clothes so that we could layer them depending on the temperature. At times we looked like stuffed red creatures wandering among the wildlife we had come to visit. The penguins came to greet us and were as curious about us as we were about them. Since the regions we visited were so remote, the wildlife did not fear us. We were given strict instructions about our encounters. It was fine if the penguins and baby seals came up to us, but we were not to approach them. Also, in order to minimize our impact on the environment, we were not to leave anything on a landing site, and we disinfected our boots as we left and returned to the ship. Our route was only roughly mapped out, as the weather and tides determined our landings.

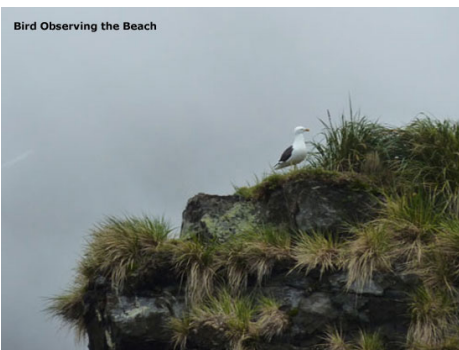
Penguin Photos

The penguins were fascinating. During the trip, we observed six different species - Gentoo, Adelle, Chinstrap, Rockhopper, Magellanic and King. Depending on what month you choose to travel to this region, you experience a different phase of the life cycle of the wildlife. In December, penguins are sitting on their nests or caring for their newly born chicks, and mother seals are feeding their babies. We learned about the differences in behavior of the different species of penguins, including their breeding and nesting habits as well as their migration patterns. The Rockhoppers are especially cute, as they dart from the sea to the rocks. The Kings really do look like they are wearing tuxedos. They strut along the beach, as if heading for an important meeting. However, global warming has had an impact on penguin roosting areas, and some colonies have had to relocate further south. Besides penguins, we observed three different kinds of whales (Fin, Antarctic Minke and Humpback), dolphins, true seals (earless) and fur seals. The "birders" logged 51 different kinds of birds. Several of these intrepid souls seemed to be on deck at all times, scanning the sky, and they had very sophisticated cameras with lenses of impressive length.



South Georgia Photos

We chose to do an extended trip that included the Falklands and South Georgia as well as the Antarctica Peninsula. South Georgia is amazing. It is stunningly beautiful and rugged. This island wildlife sanctuary is inhabited by a huge number of seals and hundreds of thousands of penguins. It was once a major whaling center. Shackleton is buried here. It is a ritual for visitors to South Georgia to toast Shackleton at his grave, and we duly complied.



Gryviken Photos

Especially interesting was our stop at Gryviken on South Georgia. Gryviken was, once a bustling whaling station. The beach is covered with bones and derelict boats. The whaling equipment is abandoned and rusty. There is an interesting museum and a small church, which was decorated for Christmas. Only 12 individuals live in Gryviken. Six of them - representing either the museum, the Government of South Georgia or the British Antarctica Survey -- joined us for dinner on the ship. They were especially appreciative of our invitation, since they have so few visitors.



Antarctica Photos

As we moved further south toward the Antarctica Peninsula, it became colder. The scenery was awe-inspiring: majestic glaciers, icebergs in fantastic shapes, towering mountains covered in snow and ice, beautiful sunsets. You are surrounded by water, ice and snow. As the ship cruises through the channels, you become very aware of the silence and peacefulness, which is occasionally interrupted by cracking sounds, when pieces of glaciers break off and fall into the sea.

