RETIREES GO TO ANTARCTICA

As a kid, did you ever watch a television show or read a Nat Geo magazine and then dream of going to some remote, wild place on this earth, once you grew up?? Well, while they are clearly grown up now, and may even be proud to claim "senior" status, three County retirees ~ Susan Mittereder (Government Relations), Merni Fitzgerald (Public Affairs) and Sara Simmons (Civil Service Commission) started talking two years ago about their dream of going to Antarctica. They were soon joined in their plans with Overseas Adventure Travel (OAT) by a fourth retiree, Karen Harwood (County Attorney).

In early January of this year, the four of them started out together by flying to Buenos Aires, Argentina to begin a pre-trip extension to the beautiful and rugged southern Patagonia lake area of Bariloche, a city nestled in the foothills of the Andes. They enjoyed several hikes, rode a chairlift to enjoy the mountainous scenery, visited one of the many craft breweries in the area, rode horses at a sheep ranch in the grasslands of the Patagonian steppe to the east, and then enjoyed a "float" down the Limay River, a popular fly-fishing site. Their enjoyment of these activities was sobered somewhat by a diagnosis that Karen had pneumonia and would be heading back home to Virginia upon their return to Buenos Aires.

Karen graciously accepted her change of plans and cheered on her friends. The group, dubbed the "chicas" (an affectionate term for female friends) by their talented Argentinian guide, Maria, now toured Buenos Aires for several days of sight-seeing and hands-on experiences related to the Argentinian culture. Buoyed by their recent urban activities, the chicas next flew to the extreme tip of South America, to the archipelago of Tierra del Fuego, separated from the rest of South America by the famous Strait of Magellan. They had arrived at Ushuaia (pronounced oosh-wya), the capital of Tierra Del Fuego and the southernmost city in the world and self-described as *Fin del Mundo*, the "end of the world."

While the setting of snow-capped mountains surrounding Ushuaia is dramatic, the weather surely competes with that description, as it easily goes from sunny and warm, to rainy and cool/cold, to near-gale force winds, or maybe snow, all in a matter of an hour or a walkabout in this frontier town!! Because it was only a month after the summer solstice in this southern hemisphere, the city was bathed in daylight for almost three quarters of the day; it would be the same in Antarctica.

Ushuaia is the ideal starting point to embark on a journey that will be different than any on earth, it is fair to say. But the excitement of their entire group was mainly focused on what was to come, as they were now only 600 miles by water from the Antarctic peninsula. As the 88 passengers embarked onto the *Corinthian* on January 17, a blustery day, everyone was excited and a bit nervous. Gathering for a mandatory safety drill, they were introduced by the expedition leader to the reality of cruising in the world's most remote and unpredictable environment: "There is no Plan B. Whatever we do on any given day is the best possible option Antarctica presents, so whatever we do is *always* Plan A!!"

Next, all passengers learned how to prepare their cabins to be “Drake Proof,” a euphuism for making certain that everything was either tucked away or tied down, as the ship would be navigating the Beagle Channel east and then entering the infamous Drake Passage, the most direct route to Antarctica, as well as the most adventurous on earth for seafarers. This is where the sub-polar waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans collide with the frigid waters of the Southern Ocean, creating some of the most turbulent sea conditions on earth.

In general, the oft-dreaded Drake experience going south was not too bad; some passengers got a bit sea-sick during the anticipated two-day journey, but there also was some good luck, as the *Corinthian* had a tail-wind and thus arrived a half-day early to islands off the Antarctic continent. Good news, as this would mean a bonus zodiac landing, after several briefings and a “boot and vacuum” party to remove any seeds or other contaminants that might impact the unique Antarctic environment ~ all part of adhering to treaty requirements for any visitation to Antarctica.

As expedition staff scouted out the landing site, the three chicas and their fellow travelers dressed in their bright red jackets and other gear, in order to make their very first landing on Aitcho Island, part of the South Shetlands, just north of the Antarctic Peninsula. For the next four days, these intrepid travelers, their OAT guides, and expedition staff traveled by zodiacs to various landing sites on Antarctic islands and the peninsula portion of the continent itself. In some cases, due to mostly sunny blue-sky weather and little-to-no-wind conditions (called bluebird days!), the *Corinthian’s* talented captain and his crew were able to navigate to areas where the ship had previously not been able to visit. The goal was to do landings and/or rides each morning and afternoon.

The daily explorations included places with names like Arctowski Station on King George Island, Penguin Island, Esperanza Base, Brown Bluff, Mikkelsen Island, Cierva Cove, Orne Harbor, Dallman Bay and Melchior Islands. Everyone learned to walk among the delightful penguins (chinstrap, adelie, gentoo) and to peer carefully at the seals, especially the leopards, but also the Weddells, the elephants and the Antarctic fur seals. They spotted 100% of the continent’s flowering plants, all two of them, including the Antarctic hair grass and pearlwort. Most prolific of all to observe and photograph were the birds that plied the sea skies ~ small, large and very large. To name a few ~ the Northern giant and other petrels, brown skuas, black-browned and also the giant wandering albatrosses, cormorants, kelp gulls, terns, snowy sheathbills, and sooty shearwaters. And a few sharp-eyed humans saw dusky and hourglass dolphins and humpback whales as they broke through the water’s surface.

Who in the world ever told them there would be nothing to see on this trip, but ice and more ice?? This had been a constant observation from friends, when they heard of their Antarctica travel plans! Just wait until they tell them about the 900 species of invertebrates that lurk below the surface of the water in the Antarctic Peninsula. Tiny critters like algae, diatoms, krill, and copebods, which they were able to observe from their zodiacs, and which offer scientists from across the world a wealth of study.

Beyond the more serious aspects of the trip, there were always moments of fun, both planned and spontaneous. On the second expedition day, as the sunny weather continued, the restaurant crew surprised everyone with a barbecue outside on Deck 5 aft, with music, singing, and a party-like atmosphere. And then there was a polar plunge the next day in Mikkelsen Harbor, where a number of brave souls, including Merni and Sue, went into the sea, surrounded by bits of ice; it was a spontaneous decision and they held hands and ran in together, laughing all the way. Great fun. On day four, the *Corinthian's* passengers experienced a more typical western Antarctic day, with spitting rain/snow and foggy conditions, but no wind. Despite the weather, many were able to trek to the top of a mountain off Orne Harbor on the continent, a feat for which Merni can also claim bragging rights and the joy and rewards of a gorgeous view!

While everyone on the trip loved the daily expedition landings, sometimes it was the quiet times on the zodiac tours that were most poignant. The expedition teams turned off all the motors and everyone had the experience of floating, surrounded by ice, and simply listening to the complete silence, broken only by the creaks of moving ice, in this awesome, magnificent, pristine environment. It brought tears to the eyes of the most hardened soul and a feeling of being both fortunate and privileged to journey to a place where previously only courageous explorers could once go.

It was now time to say goodbye to Antarctica, as the *Corinthian* captain high-tailed it north at a fast clip to avoid a storm bearing down from the west, toward the Drake Passage. The trip had started in Ushuaia at 54 degrees South latitude and had reached all the way down the coast of Antarctica to 64 degrees South, just two degrees shy of the Antarctic Circle at 66 degrees.

While words seem inadequate to capture the experience of visiting the seventh continent, it was unforgettable, one that lives in the mind's eye forever. Traveling to this white wilderness was the type of adventure that simply enriches your life and soul, but also creates a new sense of responsibility borne of such fortune ~ to make certain that such places can and will continue to exist on this planet. The 36 hour journey back from Ushuaia to Dulles Airport on January 27 was a bit rough for the chicas, but it was the "back to reality" of returning home that was really tough. It was like coming back from another planet, but in a good sense; a recalibration of sorts had taken hold, deep within, that perhaps comes only when one has been touched by the best of Mother Earth.

And, little did anyone know at that time, that the enjoyment of this January journey would soon be tempered by the pandemonium that was about to beset this planet earth, by a tiny new virus that was reportedly circulating in China. We are all now exploring our "new normal" as we shelter at home, and traveling only in our memories, for now. When this pandemic is over, may we never again take for granted so much of our day to day lives and routines, and our togetherness with our fellow men/women.

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(Author is Susan Mittereder. She and her fellow travelers ~ Karen, Merni and Sara had already planned a future group expedition cruise/trip in the summer of 2021 to Norway/Svalbard in the Arctic, the polar opposite to Antarctica. While the future of international travel is unknown at this time, there is hope. Contact Sue if you are interested.)