

Antarctica - A Trip of a Lifetime

by Sue Neukirch

Photos courtesy of Sue Neukirch, Fred Braun, Ray & Cecile Schutter / Nov - Dec 2002

As I await my flight out of Mount Pleasant Airport, Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, I realize I've fallen in love. Antarctica, South Georgia Island, and most of all, the Captain, staff, and crew of Clipper Cruise Lines' ship the "Clipper Adventurer" have won my heart. From my observations over the past 3 weeks, I'm not the only one. I know the other passengers feel the same way.

There are many names. Terra Incognita, the Unknown Land. The white continent. ANTARCTICA.

The destination itself is **unfathomable**. Until you go. Then the delicate balance between rugged pristine beauty, the remoteness, the surprising abundance of life, and the harshest unforgiving elements on Earth becomes clearer.

The early explorers, Amundsen, Scott, and Shackleton understood this. That's what lured them and made them risk, and in the case of Scott's party, lose their lives. The people that work on Antarctica, at the bases and in tourism, feel it. That's what draws them. They call it "going to the Ice". There are 3 U.S. Antarctic bases. Palmer Station (which we were lucky enough to visit) is located on the Antarctic Peninsula. McMurdo, is located on the coast of the Ross Ice Shelf. Also known to the Antarctic community as "Mactown", the people that work there are called "Coasties". Then there is the epitome of remote. Amundsen-Scott South Pole station. The people that live and work there are called "Polies". It takes a special type of person to brave the conditions Antarctica offers. The coldest temperature reading known to man (-128.13 F) was taken in 1983 at the Russian station, Vostok, located on the Polar Plateau. That reading did not include "wind chill".

The abundance of life is diverse. Penguins, seals, and whales are the main species that can be seen. There are at least 7 types of penguins, 4 types of seals, and 5 types of whales. The most amazing life is what you can't see. We were fortunate enough to have Rick Price, a freelance wildlife cameraman who has done specials for the Discovery Channel's "Life in the Freezer", on board with us. Rick was a Commander of a British Antarctic base and also a marine diver. He brought slides he's taken on his numerous dives under the Ice. The crystal clarity of the water, and the diversity of marine life is astounding. There are fish that have a type of "antifreeze" that allow them to live in the coldest water on earth. Some of the other forms of marine life can only be found in Antarctic waters. The colors of some of these creatures is incredibly vibrant. If you ever get the chance to watch any documentary on Antarctica, I suggest you do it. It's educational and truly amazing.

For me, Antarctica holds a special place in my heart. The feeling of freedom and adventure is enticing. Literally, this is the last place on earth. No phones, no time clocks, no bureaucratic nonsense. Antarctica has no government. The Antarctic Treaty is the only law that's there. It covers mainly the environment and is ratified by many countries. You can find a plethora of information on the web on numerous sites if you type in "Antarctica" or "Antarctic Treaty".

South Georgia Island is an Antarctic island and a real treasure. Unfortunately, it was most well known for its whaling and sealing days. Thankfully, the seals have returned. I was lucky enough to have a

"close encounter of the special kind" with a baby elephant seal. She was 300 pounds, and 3 months old. The expedition staff suggested quite often to just sit down and let the wildlife come to you. My husband Bill and I did, and in Golds' Bay, we were blessed that this precious baby trusted us and was inquisitive enough to come over

and visit. (Regretably, the sealers of old took advantage of that fact.) She flopped onto the beach, and came over to see who these strange "seals" in red parkas were. I laid down on my stomach on the black sand, she put her adorable snout up to my forehead, and snorted a "hello". Bill put his hand out to her, and she nuzzled it and tried to see if it was "mom". Then she decided that she wanted to check out the rubberized duffle bags with the life vests in them. She flopped on top of them, and rooted around to see what was up with these odd things. That was truly one of the most amazing moments in my life. To come so close to nature in such a way brought me to tears. It was indescribable. My heart has been touched forever.

Captain Philipp Dieckmann, the Expedition staff, and the crew of the Clipper Adventurer are, in my opinion, the best in the business. Julio Preller (the expedition leader), Rick Price (the mammal guy), Simon Cook (the bird guy), professors David and Dorinda Dallmeyer (geologist, and historian and environmental law, respectively), Brad Rhees (zodiac driver), Rene Preller (zodiac driver), Mick (the naturalist), Sharon (the Cruise director), Samantha (the Purser), Louis (the hotel manager), Gary, Tony, Eddie, Rosewitha, Linda, and sweet Arth (the bartender). It sounds like the cast of "The Love Boat". Arth would see me coming down the hall and would have a glass with ice and a can of Ginger Ale ready for me. Even if I hadn't thought about having anything to drink, I accepted it because I realized that he was attentive enough to remember what I (along with the other 57 passengers preferred), and the surprising fact that Antarctica is a desert, therefore, you have to stay hydrated. The rest of the crew behind the scenes, the dining room staff, the housekeeping staff, and engine room staff, are just as special. Everyone goes out of their way to make you feel welcome and comfortable. I feel as though they are all friends now. My appreciation and heartfelt best wishes go out to each and every one of them. I highly advise anyone, if you have the chance to go to this hauntingly beautiful, last place on earth, DO IT! It will stir your heart, and make you appreciate all who have come before you.

