

# ROUND *the* WORLD

with Michael and Valerie Lewis



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL S. LEWIS + STORY BY VALERIE SEARLE LEWIS

## ICE, SNOW AND PENGUINS:

### A JOURNEY IN THE SOUTHERN OCEAN

For centuries before Captain James Cook circumnavigated the Antarctic continent, myths and fables existed concerning a land beyond the southern oceans. Usually maps showed a strange region to the south labeled 'Terra Incognita.' On several occasions sailors thought they had found it when their ship, blown off course, reached a previously unknown island. Even Captain Cook, who in 1773, sailed farther south than anyone had ever been, never saw the continent itself. Not until a young sailor reported sighting the mainland from Deception Island in 1822 did Antarctica become a reality.



Magellanic penguins (Carcass Island)

Michael and I have recently been to the edge of the land of snow and ice and can now understand the fantasies: Antarctica is, indeed, unimaginable and otherworldly.

To begin with, it's a very long way from anywhere and difficult to reach. When we were on the Antarctic Peninsula in the far north-west tip of the continent, we were 1500 miles from Cape Horn, the southernmost tip of South America. We had sailed from there across seas that are considered the roughest in the world because the winds, known as the Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties, encircle the globe with no land mass to stop them.

## Report From Antarctica, Falkland Islands, South Georgia Islands Trip Date: January 2008

Add to that the dangers of icebergs floating haphazardly in shipping lanes, often in thick fog. In the long Antarctic winter the massive continent almost doubles in size as the sea freezes and ice encircles it. Shipwrecks and lost sailors are part of Antarctic history.

Captain Cook may not have seen the continent but he described seas teeming with whales and seals. Within a few years, hundreds of men were living and working in unbelievably harsh conditions on and around the islands of the southern ocean, catching and processing first seals and later whales. The numbers are staggering. Fur seals were first slaughtered in 1786 and a single ship brought back 5700 skins in one year. Whaling continued for about one hundred years and during that time hundreds of thousands of whales were killed. In South Georgia alone, the records show that 175,000 whales were slaughtered between 1904 and 1965. Both industries died out simply because there were almost no more animals to catch. Today, the fur and elephant seals have made a remarkable comeback but, sadly, several whale species are still struggling to recover.

Our ship, carrying 107 passengers, left from Ushuaia in Tierra del Fuego, at the most southerly point of South America, and headed 300 miles north-east to the Falkland Islands. There the ship's 10-passenger rubber zodiacs landed us on treeless Carcass Island, where a welcoming committee of magellanic penguins stood waiting on the beach in warm sunshine. Later, on Saunders Island, we encountered thousands of very busy gentoo penguins, some watching their chicks, others chattering, or poking a neighbor with their beak, and many marching to and from the sea.

On the rocks higher up rockhopper penguins, with very engaging, if unruly, orange head feathers, also preened, annoyed their neighbors, stroked their mates, regurgitated food for their chicks and hopped down the rocks to the beach. Beyond them, even higher up the



Gentoo penguins (Saunders Island)

slope, were pairs of black-browed albatrosses, each couple devotedly fussing over their single, large, fluffy chick, tightly enthroned in a mud nest. Their ten months of parenting all happen amid the tussock grass on a steep cliff because albatrosses cannot launch their huge bodies off flat ground. When a parent flies off to find food for the chick they may make a round trip of about three thousand miles, to Brazil, for example.

Stanley, the capital of the Falkland Islands, is a remote hangover of British tradition where the architecture, pubs, shops and little streets lined with Land Rovers are reminiscent of 1950's Scotland. The nearby beautiful sandy

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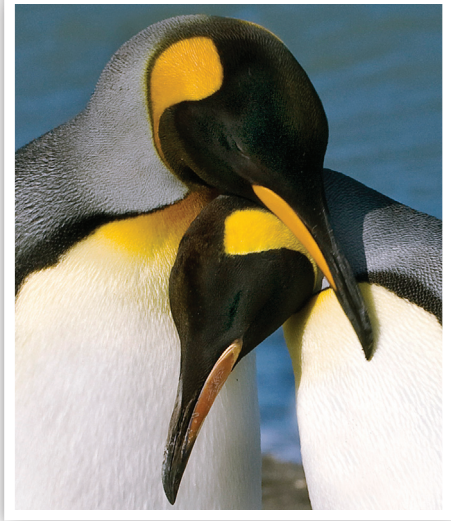


Black-browed Albatrosses (Saunders Island)





Giant petrels (South Georgia island)



King penguins (South Georgia island)



Penguins hitching a ride (South Georgia island)

beaches and dunes are fenced off with barbed wire and signs warning of mines, a sad reminder of the 1982 war with Argentina.

Now came two days of steaming south-east across the southern Atlantic to the wild and magnificent island of South Georgia. We were followed by elegant albatrosses and giant petrels, endlessly wheeling and gliding over the waves in a slow motion ballet. Smaller storm-petrels would also appear, but they were more like slalom skiers, swooping, turning and diving. On the second day, as the mist cleared, we were excited to see our first iceberg. It was a gigantic, flat slab of glistening ice, and soon there were others. Some had been eroded by the sea into strange and beautiful shapes; others

revealed huge archways and caves. The ice was sometimes a blinding white, sometimes a deep aquamarine or purple. Closer to the land there were icebergs with penguins hitching a ride, or using them as fishing platforms.

While we had read accounts of the brutal lives of the whaling and sealing men who worked and lived on South Georgia, our heads were mainly filled with the heroic deeds of the famous Antarctic explorers, notably Amundson, Scott, Mawson and, in particular, Ernest Shackleton. During an attempt to cross the continent in 1915, Shackleton's ship was crushed by pack ice and sank, yet he brought all twenty-eight of his men safely home, after an epochal journey across one thousand miles of ice and hundreds of miles of raging seas. He died some years later while en route to Antarctica once more, and is buried on South Georgia at the small settlement of Grytviken, where we visited his grave in the little cemetery there.

At the peak of the whaling industry Grytviken was the largest of the processing centers where, although every part of a whale was used commercially, the oil produced by boiling blubber was by far the most important and valuable product in a pre-petroleum age. Today, all the oil storage tanks and the processing buildings are maintained as an outdoor museum, along with the little, shiny white church and the station manager's house. A rusting whaling ship with a harpoon gun mounted at the bow sits at the dock.

When we rode in the zodiacs through a choppy sea and landed at Right Whale Bay on South Georgia there was a strong, icy wind and sleety rain driving across the huge beach. At that moment

we appreciated every item of the multiple layers of clothing we had brought halfway round the world. The thousands of king penguins, however, standing around in huge groups as far as one could see, appeared to accept this summer weather quite equably. We had to dodge the hundreds of fur seals which lay all over the sand, especially the females with pups, who barked and made a show of scaring us off. In contrast, the next afternoon, there was a still sea and brilliant blue sky at Fortuna Bay while we strolled past the enormous elephant seals stretched out side by side or even on top of each other, belching, yawning and eyeing us with large, watery stares. As we walked through spongy grass toward the glacier at the head of the bay, we were also stepping on thousands of white feathers shed by the king penguins which molt at this time, each bird losing and replacing 20,000 feathers, while dropping 50% of its body weight in the process.

Two more days of sailing through rough seas brought us to the ill-famed Elephant Island, where Ernest Shackleton left most of his exhausted men while he and five others rowed 800 miles to South Georgia to seek help. Shrouded in fog, its rocks and cliffs appeared to us as grim and daunting as the men, marooned there for four months, described them.

As we headed farther south the summer nights were becoming shorter and lighter. When we



Church (Grytviken settlement)





Icebergs (Antarctica)

left the wild Southern Ocean and reached the shelter of the South Shetland Islands to the west and the Antarctic Peninsula to the east, the seas became much calmer. In brilliant sunshine and pure, clear air we could not help but gasp at the dazzling snow, ice, glaciers and icebergs all around us. Chinstrap penguins on Half Moon Island fussed over their big, fluffy chicks just like all the other penguin parents we had seen, while a lone macaroni penguin watched them from a rock. Seals gazed languidly at us from the pebbly beach and gentoos had their own discussions on another part of the island.

Deception Island is a collapsed volcanic cone. Its caldera forms one of the safest natural harbors in the world – in spite of the fact that the volcano is considered merely dormant and last erupted in 1970. It has been used, at

different times, by sealers, whalers, both the British and Argentine navies, and research scientists. Sulphurous steam rises from the black sand on the beach which, in places, is scalding hot. Some of our party stripped to their swimsuits and took a dip in the thermally heated water – while the air temperature must have been around freezing!

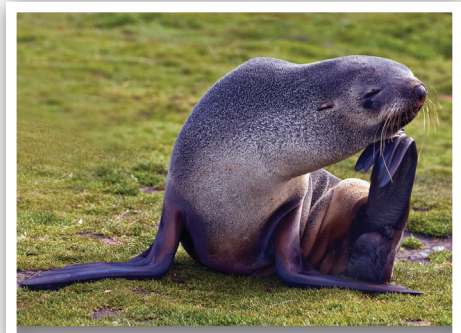
The grandeur of Antarctica was in full evidence over the next two days. In brilliant sunshine and under a luminous sky mirrored in the sea around us, with icebergs, snow and glaciers in every direction, the world became a palette of white, blue and black with a rich range of those hues. We gazed at majestic peaks where glistening black rock was visible beside massive amounts of blinding white snow. Occasionally, the snow could be pink, yellow or green caused by algae living within it.

The Antarctic continent is composed of massive mountains and is the highest of the continents. The accumulation of snow over millions of years has compacted to create an ice sheet which is close to three miles deep in some places and very gradually slides toward the coast, in the form of glaciers. While only the peaks of the mountains in the interior are above the ice sheet, at the coast, along the Peninsula where we traveled, the mountains are visible in all their magnificence. The countless glaciers flowing down and between those mountains come right to the water's edge, forming fearsome cliffs in which eerie blues and purples mix with grays and the ubiquitous whites.

The captain sailed our ship very slowly up imposing Andvord Bay, a fifteen mile-long fiord, because the water was littered with chunks of ice of all sizes and shapes. Our landing at Neko Harbour was significant because we were stepping onto the continent itself. There, on top of a dome of snow, we tried to absorb the staggering unspoiled beauty of the place and the utter stillness,



Chinstrap penguins (Half Moon Island)



Seals (Half Moon Island)



only broken occasionally by a sudden sharp explosion, indicating that a glacier had calved or an avalanche of snow was roaring down a mountain. Gentoo penguins there busied themselves with penguin business, as others did later in the day at Port Lockroy. That tiny rocky island with an imposing name, seemingly at the end of the world, boasts a miniscule museum, manned in the summer by three Brits, with memorabilia from its days first as a whale processing centre, then a British second world war monitoring station, and finally a scientific research station. Those three human residents had joined the summer migration to Antarctica of hundreds of research scientists, who go to the bases maintained by some twenty nations around the continent. They work frantically during the brief austral summer and when they leave only about 1,200 brave souls remain to face four months of darkness, ferocious gales and the lowest temperatures on earth.

In the evening, after our visit to Port Lockroy, came perhaps the most breathtaking of all the panoramas on our trip when we sailed between the mountains of the continent and Booth Island through the very narrow Lemaire Channel. The sharp clarity of the air and the water, the summer evening sunshine, and the feeling that we could reach out easily to touch all that snow and ice, left us with a powerful memory of the unspoiled splendor of that place. To top off an incredible day we then took to our zodiacs at ten o'clock for a rendezvous with adelie penguins, the only penguin species beside emperors to breed predominantly on the continent proper.

On our last day in Antarctic waters whales charmed and excited us with displays close to the boat. In the morning a pair of humpbacks cruised around and around, perhaps feeding



Glaciers (Antarctica)

on a swarm of krill, the minute sea animals which are similar to shrimp and the primary food for many seals, whales and birds. Their humps rose to the surface and sank over and over again, sometimes followed by a tail. Occasionally they raised a white flipper or a gnarly head replete with blow hole exhaling misty breath. Unusually, there were also orcas very nearby. Two adults and a young one, they too engaged in a dance, moving in circles while rolling their large fins in and out of the water. Since they are carnivores they clearly were not interested in the same food as the humpbacks. Later, the ship lay still and quiet for almost two hours while we were entranced by a pair of humpbacks even closer than our morning friends. On two occasions one of them came within ten feet of the ship, presumably to examine us. Since the water was so clear,

we could easily see most of its huge body and those distinctive white flippers.

With such a farewell we faced the dreaded Drake Passage back to Tierra del Fuego with great fortitude. Two days of the worst seas in the world seemed a small price to pay for the privilege of observing the pristine glory that is Antarctica and the islands of the southern ocean. As it happened, Nature continued to be generous, allowing us an unusually easy crossing and a rare clear view of Cape Horn. ✚



Unspoiled grandeur (Antarctica)



Humpback whales (Antarctica)