

Lois' Big Adventure

First Penguin Sighting

The first penguins to be sighted were the extremely rare *Sydney Feral Penguin*, this species is only seen in December and they disappear by the 12th day of Christmas (5/6/7 January depending on your religion). These particular penguins were seen in St Johns Road, Glebe where they were thriving in an environment of beanbag beans and Styrofoam packaging. Unlike other species of penguin which can have populations decimated by animals such as cats, these seen to enjoy the company of a particular tabby which was often observed dozing in the afternoon sun with them.



Campbell Island & Albatross

After one day of heaving in the heaving Southern Ocean on board the Akademik Shokalskiy, we arrived in Perseverance Harbour in Campbell Island, which is a subantarctic island to the south of New Zealand.



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During the day we climbed up to Col Lyall saddle where there was a colony of *Southern Royal Albatross* nesting. The photo is of me (in the blue) and a nesting albatross (in the white) in the foreground with Perseverance Harbour in the background.

At length did cross an Albatross,
Thorough the fog it came;
As if it had been a Christian soul,
We hailed it in God's name.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Unfortunately it is difficult to estimate albatross populations as they can only conclusively counted when nesting and while most of the adult albatross will nest every two years some (usually the younger adults who did not breed successfully in the last season) will nest every year, furthermore they do not commence nesting until around six years of age. Therefore I proposed the following calculation to determine the total number of albatrosses.

$$\text{Population} = (a \times 2N) + [(1 - a)N] + [(y \times F)M] + J$$

Where

N = The number of albatross counted at a nesting site multiplied by 2. As each bird represents a nesting pair only one bird will be counted at the nest.

a = Percentage of the albatross population that are nesting on a normal 2 year cycle.

1 - a = Percentage of the albatross population that are nesting on a one year cycle.

y = The number of years that fledglings spend at sea before they commence breeding.

F = Number of fledglings produced in a season.

J = Number of juvenile albatross hanging around the nesting site that have not paired up.

Naturally production of such a formula resulted in a number of blank looks from the other passengers and automatic labelling as the *Cruise Weirdo* a label that was only reinforced by my further behaviour.

Penguin Apartments on Possession Island

After more heaving seas and pack ice we reached the Ross Sea where the first land fall was Possession Island, this is one of the small islands that dot the coast of the Antarctic continent in the Ross Sea. After four days at sea we were eager to get off the boat and stretch our legs so we gladly went ashore to frolic on the frozen guano on Possession Island.



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The wooden structure is a lifeboat from a US vessel that was washed overboard in the 1940's; a group of enterprising *Adelie Penguins* have turned it into luxury penguin accommodation. Adelie Penguins have quite a sophisticated approach to real estate location, as there are only a finite number of nesting locations (gently sloping beach plus space for a nesting colony). Furthermore some individual sites are prone to flooding. When coming back from a feeding trip the penguins must travel through the colony to get to their nest, this can antagonise other penguins on nests who will peck at the visitor.

Consequently the preferred site for a nest within a colony is close (but not too close) to the beach, reasonably sheltered, not up too high a slope (those little legs have to walk up the hill) and for safety reasons (skua attacks) surrounded by other penguins nesting. As penguins adopt a "first in best dressed policy" the quality sites are the first sites to be occupied at the beginning of the nesting season. In short make it home late and you are out in the sticks, which is not only social death but also has a greater chance of chick death.

Antarctic Toothfish

While travelling through the Southern Ocean we were buzzed by the Te Kaha (NZ Navy Vessel) and its associated helicopter, as they thought a Russian Icebreaker full of tourists was an illegal fishing boat (not too bright these kiwis). Possibly one of the reasons that they thought we might be fishing was that some large fishing floats had been stored on deck, these floats were for the Janus, a NZ fishing vessel which was carrying out exploratory fishing of the *Antarctic Toothfish*.

We rendezvoused with the Janus in the pack ice off Cape Hallett and they showed us what an Antarctic Toothfish looks like.



Normally I would say that the Antarctic Toothfish is the ugly one, however in this photo that description could be somewhat confusing. The Antarctic Toothfish is the big slimy thing in the foreground. The crew of the Janus gave us a Toothfish which we had for lunch the next day, anyone who regards this fish as a delicacy hasn't tasted a bit of Sydney Shark.

Mount Erebus

Mount Erebus is one of those mountains that seduces you, it constantly changes colour with the changing light, it even turns pink at sunset. At 13,000 feet it dominates the landscape around Ross Island in a way no other landmark can. Although it is a live volcano it wasn't doing anything dramatic (Krakatau style – fire, brimstone, lava etc..) while we were there.

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Following the Air New Zealand crash the subject of air safety and Mount Erebus was a rather sensitive one, and some of the passengers personally knew some of the people involved in the accident and the subsequent investigations, consequently this is not a subject to bring up when the passengers comprise 30% kiwis.



As we were below the Antarctic Circle we were into 24 daylight which becomes confusing in working out what time it is, as the daylight as a greater degree of consistency but is also difficult in ascertaining what direction landmarks were. Normally I work out compass direction using the sun and the time of day, and in this location that was impossible.

Scott's Hut

Visiting the explorer's huts was one of the highlights and we visited three in all.

- Scott's 1911 Terra Nova Hut at Cape Evans
- Shackleton's 1908 Hut at Cape Royds
- Scott's 1902 Discovery Hut at Hut Point

Although all these huts are all located on Ross Island, the island is approximately 80 kilometres end to end so it is not an idle stroll between them.

The huts and their surroundings certainly made you appreciate the endeavours of the early explorers and the degree at which they were facing genuine unknowns. The thought of spending an Antarctic winter without any communication or supplies from the outside world in one of those huts would fill me with dread.

Furthermore the degree at which the hut constituted the difference between life and death for the explorers, was reinforced as although they were below freezing inside they were far warmer than outside. You could appreciate what comfort they could bring when it was blowing a blizzard in the middle of winter.

The huts were pretty much as they had been left with stores and personal belongings scattered around. Some of the items included: seal blubber for cooking, lighting and heating; cured hams, tins of biscuits and coca; photographs; sleeping bags and clothing.

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Those enterprising Adeline Penguins with their keen appreciation of the principles of Penguin Real Estate had converted the old stores dump into an attractive suburban-style nesting colony, complete with attractive water views.

Rugged Outdoor Facilities – Shackleton's Hut

As a typical Australian I cannot resist a good outhouse photo and those hardy explorers liked to have their conveniences convenient. Although this particular outhouse lacks a modesty screen (remember they were all blokes).



Again those enterprising Adeline Penguins with an eye for a quality real estate location have moved in to take advantage of the sheltered site, however it does lack water views. You can see that the penguins don't actually use the toilet, being fairly uninhibited little creatures they just go wherever they feel like it. Those little green splotches were everywhere in Antarctica including the pack ice.

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The Sauna Club

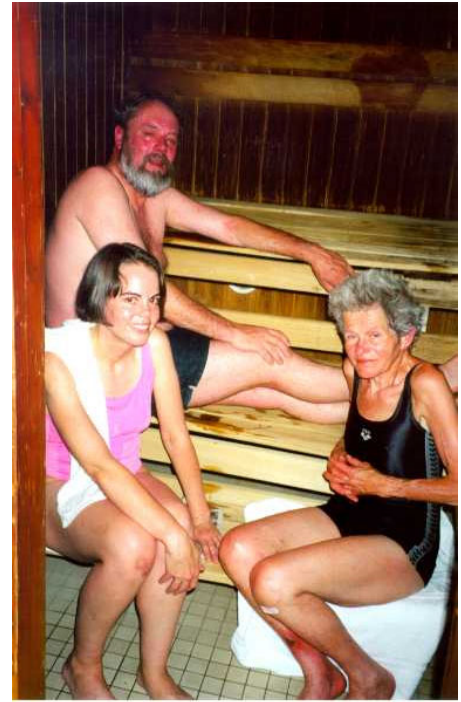
One of the advantages of a Russian ship is that they like their saunas, so while it -10°C outside we were toasty warm inside. Those Russians like their sauna hot and it regularly reached 95°C , this explains why we have congregated on the lower levels which were cooler.

The group comprises (myself in the pink), Freda Fleischer (in the black) and Dr David Given (the bloke) the tour's botanist.

Cape Bird Glacier

We went ashore at Cape Bird on Ross Island which has a wide northward facing beach, it was a very sunny day and on the sheltered beach it was very pleasant. The beach is also another prize piece of Adelie Penguin real estate. This glacier flows down from the slopes of Mount Erebus and forms the western boundary of the beach.

This is me posing in front of the glacier face.



Ross Ice Shelf

Another highlight was getting to the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf or the Great Ice Barrier where the wall of ice of 30 to 50 metres high stretches from horizon to horizon.

Ross discovered the ice shelf (and named it the Victoria Barrier, but it was later renamed after him). His first diary entry reads

(he saw a low white line) "extending from its eastern extreme point as far as the eye could discern to the eastward. It presented an extraordinary appearance, gradually increasing in height, as we got nearer to it, and proving at length to be a perpendicular cliff of ice, between one hundred and fifty feet and two hundred feet above the level of the sea, perfectly flat and level at the top, and without any fissures or promontories on its even seaward face".

"we might with equal chance of success try to sail through the cliffs of Dover, as to penetrate such a mass".

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Again like the rest of Antarctica the sheer size dazzles you; the winds were bitterly cold coming over the ice shelf from the South Pole.

McMurdo Station

While we visited McMurdo Station (United States) it was the coldest for the whole trip getting down to somewhere between -15°C and -10°C plus there was a nasty wind blowing direct from the South Pole. McMurdo Station can accommodate over 1,000 during the summer months however has a winter staff of around 120 and they carry out all sorts of research (exactly what I'm not too sure). The tour of the base emphasised a statue of Richard Byrd (the first Yank to do anything famous in the neighbourhood) the chapel, the canteen and the souvenir shop (obviously they were more culturally significant).



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Actually I am being cruel; Richard Byrd along with three others flew over the South Pole in a Ford monoplane in 1929 becoming the first to fly over either pole in an airplane.

This is looking from part way up Observation Hill (I piked out halfway up) over the station with the Akademik Shokalskiy in some of the clear water in McMurdo Sound.

The brown thing also in the sound is actually part of an old ice jetty, made of compacted ice and soil, which was being broken up and towed out to be replaced by a new one. Although the Americans admitted to not treating their sewerage, it is not a giant "Bondi Floater". (Lest you think I am a raving coprophiliac that is the last poo joke I make)

Scott Base

In an interesting cultural juxtaposition Scott Base (New Zealand) is located next to McMurdo Station and the very different cultural approaches (not to mention funding) could be seen. As Antarctica is so large the landscape dominates everything, you feel very fragile and insignificant, consequently it is very difficult to dominate the landscape. The Americans try however, by spreading their base out like an ugly scar and razing half the landscape in the vicinity (they were going to install a nuclear generator). The result is a very ugly "Tundra Town".



Scott Base is not only much smaller but is also more compact and does not try to dominate the landscape. We visited the New Zealand sites of cultural significance, an historic hut and the bar (with stuffed kiwi) as well as another Ye Olde Souvenir Shoppe.

Emperor Penguins (and one Adelie Penguin)

We were lucky to see a group of *Emperor Penguins* on the ice near McMurdo Sound, these animals were totally fearless coming up to those who went down in the zodiacs for a closer look. Emperor Penguins are the largest of all the penguins and stand around 1 metre tall; furthermore they are also the most colourful with orange yellow around their upper chest and head.

Other animals that we saw at this time were *Killer Whales* (Orcas) hunting in the broken ice at the edge of the sea ice. While most of the pod swam down the edge of the ice a couple of large males kept regularly coming up between the floes to see if there was anything edible (seals or penguins) on them. If they do find anything they then tip the flow and the resulting seal/penguin becomes one Orca McHappy meal.

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Exactly what the Adie Penguin is doing hanging out with a group of Emperor Penguins I am not sure (probably trying to interest them in some real estate).

However an Emperor penguin nesting colony does not contain individual nests, the penguins balance the egg on the feet and shuffle round on the ice in a large group, consequently their appreciation of real estate sites within a colony may be less than the Adie Penguins.

Arty Iceberg Photo

Where would a trip to Antarctica be without at least one arty iceberg photo, this one was photographed in the Ross Sea just before the weather turned bad.



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We saw many tabular icebergs in the Ross Sea, which have broken off from the Ross Ice Shelf, which resemble giant floating Pavlovas. I resolved that for the next Pavlova that I make that instead of the ubiquitous strawberry or kiwi fruit topping I would replace them with small fondant penguins, and for a additional touch of realism add small splotches of green food colouring (whoops there I go again).

This berg is an irregular berg, which means it has either broken off (calved) from a glacier or ice tongue or is the remnants of a tabular berg.

Enderby Island

Our final Southern Ocean stop was Enderby Island, which is a small island at the north of the Auckland Island group. It is one of those magical enchanted places which looks exactly like an illustration from a fairy story. It is the sort of place that you fall in love with and will always remember.



The river nobly foams and flows,
The charm of this enchanted ground,
And all its thousand turns disclose
Some fresher beauty varying round;
The haughtiest breast its wish might bound
Through life to dwell delighted here;
Nor could on earth a spot be found
To nature and to me so dear

Childe Harold's Pilgrimage by George Gordon, Lord Byron

There was a colony of *Hookers Sea Lions* containing some young adults and a number of pups. These pups had been weaned and had been left by their mothers in a few weeks they would make their own way out to sea. Not only were they unbelievably cute but also they were totally fearless they came right up to us and chewed at our boots and sniffed at our bags. They were almost just like real puppies, except that they didn't try hump you leg.

Unlike Antarctica which is so large it totally dominates any human endeavour Enderby Island has a very human dimension; it takes around 6 to 8 hours to walk around it which constitutes a good day's walk. The vegetation also varies from open moorland in the centre, open sward around the north and east and rata forest to the south. There is also a sandy beach, the first real sand we had seen since leaving New Zealand.

The rata canopy is the truly magical part; the trees form a canopy approximately 3 to 4 metres high with very few understorey shrubs and ground cover plants. The rata tree trunks have a gnarled appearance coupled with a very open forest with mosses covering the ground gives it a magical appearance. The animals are so wild they are tame, if you sit quietly under the canopy, *Bellbirds*, jet black *Tomtits* and *Red-crowned Parakeets* will come up very close.

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There are tunnels made by the *Yellow Eyed Penguin* through some the understorey plants which are about 40 cm high and wide, they look like the right size for some small mythical creature (gremlin, gnome or pixie). You could almost expect some small creature to come up and strike up a conversation.



Every place has its own wisdom. Come
Time we talked about the sea,
The long waves
‘trapped around islands’

By Michael Ondaatje

Group Photo



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A line up of the whole cast and NZ crew (I am on the right) in front of the Akademik Shokalskiy on return to Invercargall.

Top Alistair McAra, Brian Ahern (Government Representative), David Given (Botanist), Philip Johnston (Zodiac Driver)

Standing - Peter Fisher, John Dodd, Margaret Munro, Johanna van Leeuwen, Leo van den Houten, Jennifer Overton, Ted Moors, Patrica Varga, William Hudson, Mary St Clair MacLeod, Donald MacLeod, ??, Michael Varga, Victoria Metcalf, Val Gwynn, Mike Small, Dane, Ruth Levin, Tim Smith, John Clarke, Charles Grant, Linda Hall, Maria san Roman, William Dawson, Sheila Dawson, Stephen Miller, John Clarke, Hadoram Shirihai, Neil Meadowcroft, Kathleen Houghton, Pam Miller

Kneeling/Sitting - Merv Halliday, Eve Symes, Valerie Crocker-Edwards, Albrecht Teichman, Deslie Blanch, Freda Fleischer, Sally Millns (Cruise Director), Lois Towart, Gill Hunter and Rodney Russ (Team Leader).

In case this report doesn't turn you on, here is a penguin joke.

A penguin is driving through Arizona on a hot summer's day when he notices his oil light is on. He gets out of the car and, sure enough, it's leaking oil all over the road. The penguin drives around the corner to a service station and asks the mechanic to take a look at it. The mechanic says he has a few others to look at first but if he comes back in an hour he can tell the penguin what is wrong with his car. The penguin agrees and goes for a walk. He finds an ice cream shop and thinks a big bowl of vanilla ice cream will really hit the spot since he's a penguin and its Arizona in the summer, after all. He sits down at the counter and starts in on his ice cream.

Of course he has no hands so it is rather messy. By the time he is done he has ice cream all over his flippers and his mouth-a total mess. He walks back to the service station and says to the mechanic, "Did you find out what is wrong with my car?"

The mechanic replies, "It looks like you've blown a seal."

"No no," says the penguin. "It's just ice cream."