



**IN 1903, NINE YEARS BEFORE HIS** doomed Terra Nova expedition, Captain Robert Scott beheld the barren desert of the McMurdo Dry Valleys, Antarctica, later describing the landscape – one of the coldest, driest and windiest places on Earth – as ‘a valley of the dead’. Most of that it may be, but dead it is not, as the ecologist Rebecca Nesbit highlights in her book *Tickets for the Ark*, which was my reading companion on a voyage to the Antarctic Peninsula and South Georgia. One of Earth’s final frontiers, Antarctica is abundant with wildlife; dozens of bird species – including penguins, albatross and petrels – as well as fur seals and humongous elephant seals call its shores home, while whales and orcas frequent its waters.

We boarded our ship, *Le Commandant Charcot*, operated by the luxury French line Ponant, in the city of Punta Arenas, near the southernmost tip of Chile’s Patagonia region, where it splinters into thousands of islands. As we sailed out of the Strait of Magellan into the South Atlantic, the final fragments dissolved in our wake and there was nothing on the horizon but the Drake Passage. Spanning 620 miles

between Cape Horn and Antarctica’s South Shetland Islands, and reaching depths of 16,000 feet, this meeting point of the Atlantic and Pacific has notoriously turbulent waters. ‘It will either be the Drake Shake or the Drake Lake,’ one of the officers quipped over lunch.

We experienced both, with the bow at times disappearing under giant white horses over the course of the two-and-a-half-day crossing. A scopolamine patch from the ship’s doctor snuffed out seasickness, but traversing the corridors was like being inside a pinball machine, and standing on the bridge felt like riding a slow rollercoaster. On these choppier days, the water in the outdoor pool sloshed comically over the edge, showering guests drinking champagne in the deck bar.

Built to expedition standards, the ship is extraordinarily opulent. The sprawling Owner’s Suite – the grandest and most costly at £70,000 for this 19-day cruise – has a 186-square-metre terrace occupying the whole back deck. Every detail has been considered, down to the Balneo bathtub, Swarovski Optik telescope and the minibar’s Riedel crystal glasses. The *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* duo Lorelei Lee and Dorothy Shaw

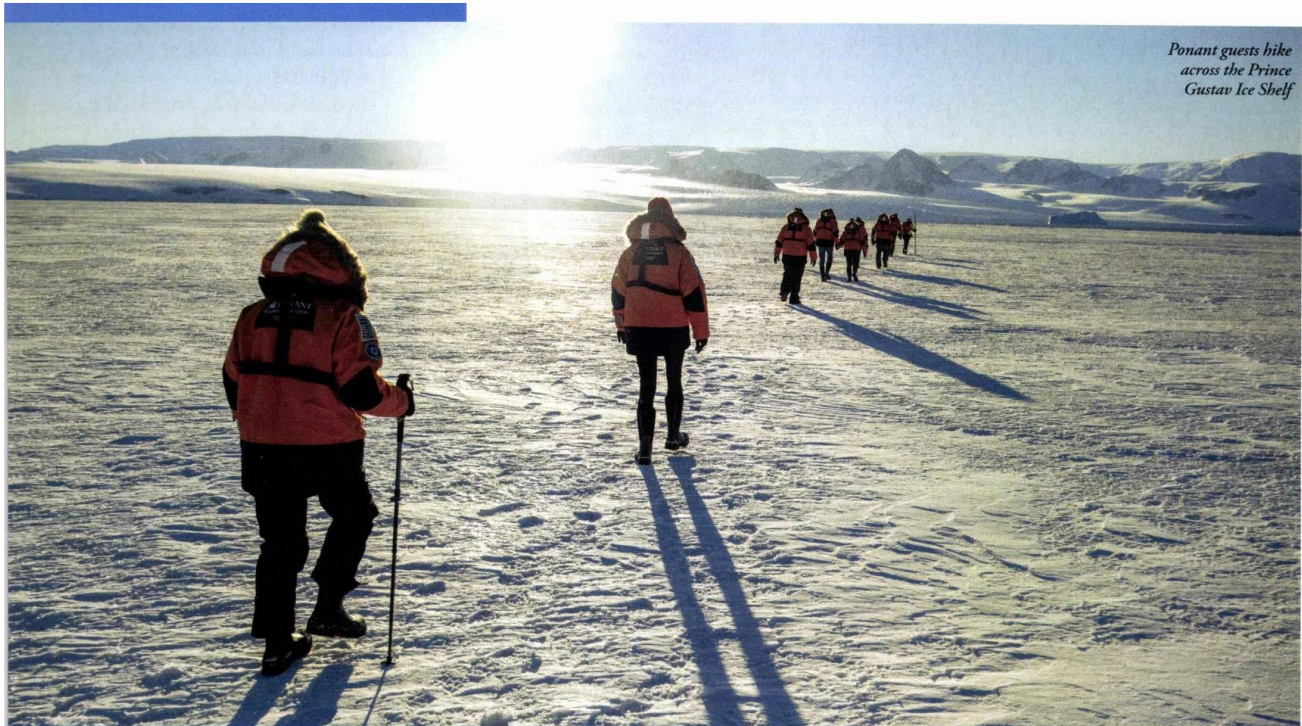
would have had an excellent time making an entrance down the elegant staircase of one of the duplex suites – all four of which also come with 24-hour butler service. Even the smaller state-rooms (at 20 square metres) have balconies and king-size beds, Diptyque products and Nespresso coffee makers, plus a nightly turndown service with a madeleine left on the bedside table.

My days generally started with a brisk walk around the promenade deck, which wraps around the entire ship, offering uncompromised views of dolphins and breaching humpback whales. Afterwards, the Observation Lounge above the bridge is the perfect place to pause for a coffee with fresh fruit and pastries – or later, a sunset cocktail.

Maintaining a regular fitness routine on such a long voyage is essential, especially when there is temptation at every corner, and the ice hikes peppered throughout the cruise made keeping fit a pleasure, along with the ship’s gym and indoor pool, with its winter garden and detox bar. There are yoga and pilates classes, and for lazier downtime, there’s the spa, which has a relaxation zone with hanging cocoon chairs, a

*The world’s first luxury hybrid-electric polar exploration vessel, the Charcot is a leader in the new wave of more sustainable cruise ships*





*Ponant guests hike across the Prince Gustav Ice Shelf*



*Le Commandant Charcot performs an ice landing*

snow room and a sauna with full-height windows so there's no risk of missing the incredible views.

Lectures and masterclasses are held in the ship's theatre and lounge, in everything from glaciology and ornithology – delivered by one of several naturalists on board – to digital photography and wine tasting. Evenings bring film screenings, opera and excellent live music (not a cabaret feather boa in sight, thankfully).

Sailing to the ends of the Earth requires sustenance – though I can't imagine what Captain Scott would have made of Nuna, the first restaurant at sea from Alain Ducasse, one of the world's most decorated chefs. 'The challenge is all about delivering high-end cuisine for a demanding clientele, under tight constraints,' he told me. 'You can't go to the market every morning – everything must be planned in advance, in a very detailed way. To vary the pleasures on land, the eater can change restaurants every day; on board, the restaurant has to change to avoid fatigue.'

At dinner, Ducasse's haute take on plant-based food was inspiring: crispy soft-boiled egg with wild mushroom fricassee and figs; couscous infused with Asian spices; and pineapple carpaccio with coriander syrup. Organic snails from Saint-Mamet cooked in butter were popular among the omnivores, as were scallop and seafood cannelloni with lobster bisque foam.

All the restaurants on board have Inuit names (Nuna means 'earth'), but each brings something different to the table. At the Sila ('sky') buffet,

the focus is on French cuisine and organic produce, while the outdoor Inneq ('fire') serves international comfort food straight off the grill. This is also the place for decadent morsels – Kristal caviar and smoked salmon blinis.

The quiet luxury of the ship's interiors is the work of Jean-Michel Wilmotte and Jean-Philippe Nuel, the French architects behind the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar and the renovation of Paris's Molitor swimming pool respectively. Leatherwork recalls cabin trunks from the golden age of ocean travel, while natural materials – stone, wood, wool – and steam fireplaces create a homely feel. Since acquiring Ponant in 2015, French billionaire François Pinault has introduced an impressive art collection into the fleet. An LED artwork by Miguel Chevalier scales the atrium and Roger-Viollet prints adorn the walls.

Perhaps the most important areas on board are the two labs where, on my cruise, scientists from the 5 Gyres Institute were researching methods of preventing ocean plastic pollution. Equipped with technology to reduce its environmental impact, the *Charcot* is a leader in the new wave of more sustainable cruise ships. This is the world's first luxury hybrid-electric polar exploration vessel, powered by liquefied natural gas (LNG). In 2021, it set a world record as the first purpose-built passenger ship to reach the North Pole – it was also the first hybrid-electric ship to do so. Its LNG engines reduce carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions by ▷



<math>\leq 20</math> per cent and 85 per cent respectively compared to marine diesel; and no soot or smoke is emitted (so-called 'black carbon' can accelerate ice-melt). Ingeniously, heat produced by the engines is recycled in the outdoor seating (as well as the pools) to provide respite during subzero strolls. Guests are also given reusable flasks in their staterooms, eradicating single-use plastic bottles.

Our first glimpse of Antarctica was at sunrise over Devil's Island. Lilypad formations of pancake ice spread out around us while Adélie and chinstrap penguins porpoised through the water. The pilot of our Zodiac boat sped up as we rode towards the shore – a leopard seal was pursuing us. Measuring up to three metres long, they have a penchant for puncturing the inflatable boats with their razor-sharp teeth. A hike up one of the island's horn-shaped peaks revealed a spectacular view of the Antarctic range soaring from the snow and ice, which averages more than two kilometres thick.

The *Charcot* is a Polar Class 2-rated vessel, able to operate year-round in ice that has built up over years. In the Prince Gustav Channel, the captain, Patrick Marchesseau, put it to the test, wedging the ship into the ice shelf. Gingerly disembarking, we followed members of the expedition team, who gauged the thickness underfoot with unghags – Alaskan safety tools. By the water's edge, plumes of mist rose from the blowholes of whales hunting for krill. At night, a giant waxing moon of burnished gold lit up rock strata as we neared the basalt tuya of Brown Bluff. As darkness fell, in the total absence of light pollution, the sky was embroidered with a Milky Way brighter than I've ever seen.

A defining characteristic of a Ponant expedition itinerary is that it is malleable. Marchesseau steered us towards high-pressure weather systems where possible; one afternoon we diverted to behold a rare sight – orcas, humpbacks and fin whales swimming in formation. We swapped out the South Shetland Islands altogether and, in the South Orkneys, we sailed avenues of icebergs more tremendous than any construction humans could build. From monolithic blocks to cloister-like structures carved by water and wind, some emanated a copper sulphate blue, others were blindingly white and an occasional few were the colour of green marble – a result of frozen snow fusing with frozen water.

Any sense of melancholy at leaving Antarctica yielded to excitement about South Georgia, some 1,250 miles from the tip of South America. As David Attenborough promised in the briefing video screened in the theatre en route, we were about to have the 'experience of a lifetime'. Many species migrate here for winter as the Antarctica

TATLER



The outdoor pool and bar

sea ice freezes, doubling the size of the continent over the season. South Georgia's shores, by contrast, are never ice-bound, and it has the greatest concentration of seabirds and marine mammals anywhere on Earth, earning it the sobriquet 'the Serengeti of the Southern Ocean'.

As we approached Moltke Harbour, the ghostly figures of penguins – king, gentoo, Adélie – emerged through the fog. These regal birds were humbly ambivalent to our presence as they went about their business, pattering through glacial streams, embracing and preening, slapping wings and jabbing beaks in a courtship dance.

The island's situation in the South Atlantic means that it is full of contrasts and conditions can change within an instant, as we experienced during a landing in Fortuna Bay. The jagged peaks of the fittingly named Breakwind Ridge wall the southwest side of this fjord, which culminates in a large meltwater lake and the König Glacier. Out of nowhere, katabatic winds tore down the valley, whipping up the black sand into undulating clouds. The resident sooty albatrosses and brown skuas, burrowing into their feathers, were infinitely more resilient to the elements than we were. The Zodiac ride back to the ship doubled as a white-water rafting adventure, almost making up for the scuppering of a hike

tracing the final steps of Sir Ernest Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition.

We would catch up with Shackleton at his resting place in the Grytviken cemetery. In 1914, on his third Antarctic expedition, the Anglo-Irish explorer attempted to be the first to cross the continent. After the *Endurance* became trapped in pack ice almost 100 miles from its destination, Shackleton and his crew were stranded for 10 months before he managed to lead them to safety. It is customary to share a dram of whisky with the man the crew referred to affectionately as 'the boss', pouring a last sip over his tombstone. The ritual felt even more pertinent with the discovery of his schooner just a few weeks earlier, at the bottom of the Weddell Sea.

A former whaling station, Grytviken has a grim history: between 1904 and 1976, many species were hunted to near-extinction in the Southern Ocean, their baleen used for corsets and blubber oil for lamps. Today, there are new threats to this diverse ecosystem. Antarctica is one of the fastest-warming regions on the planet, and the glaciers that carved Saint Andrews Bay, our final port of call, have receded significantly in 50 years. Over breakfast, I returned to *Tickets for the Ark*, which offered encouragement. 'Pessimism can blind us to the many positive signs,' Nesbit writes on

creating a planet where humans and nature thrive. 'If we instead focus on the reasons for optimism, we can see sprigs of hope all around us.'

The strides South Georgia has made towards becoming a conservation success story are that sprig of hope. The rusting remains of oil-processing plants and ships are now home to nesting birds and fur seals. One of the world's largest marine protected areas, spanning some 1.24 million square kilometres (five times larger than the UK), has been established around South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, encouraging the return of the critically endangered blue whale. And one of the biggest king penguin colonies in the world – around 150,000 pairs – has moved into Saint Andrews Bay.

As we clambered up a rocky outcrop, their braying drew to a crescendo and the spaceship-like clouds hovering overhead glowed amber. The sun was setting on this once-in-a-lifetime experience, but my work as an 'Ambassador for Antarctica' (as those fortunate enough to visit are invited to become by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators) – to champion this unique environment in a global context – was only just beginning. □  
From £20,870, including a night in Santiago and transfers; en.ponant.com