A Photographer's Antarctica Voyage Log

Our A Photographer’s Antarctica voyage of December 2015 was an exceptionally good one. It was characterized by flat seas, including an extraordinary calm crossing of the Drake Passage on our return sailing from the Antarctic Peninsula to Ushuaia, Argentina.

A huge volume of ice, partly due to the breakup of a massive ice sheet, allowed us to get into some incredible photogenic tabular icebergs. Yet, ice also prohibited us from getting into some landing spots either because the ship was blocked by dense pack ice or land fast ice, or because some beaches were engulfed by windblown ice that our rubber Zodiacs could not penetrate. But, undaunted, we always had alternative plans and we never seemed to be at a loss for good photography subjects.

On this trip we also recorded almost 200 humpback whales—a highly unusual occurrence this early in the Antarctic summer season. We speculated that these whales had arrived to Antarctica earlier than normal due to warm El Niño water—a massive “Godzilla El Niño”—further north. Perhaps coincidentally, or maybe as a similar phenomenon, a dearth of humpback whales on their calving grounds in Hawaii in December may also be due to warm El Niño water keeping the whales farther north than normal in the northern hemisphere.

Several colorful sunsets and sunrises also provided good photography opportunities for those who were willing to stay up into the wee hours to capture the vibrant skies over the Antarctic Peninsula’s serrate maritime mountains.

Overall, we had an extraordinary trip with great photography opportunities, creating fantastic landscape images as well as lots of photographs of Antarctica’s charismatic wildlife.

4 December 2015

Just like Santa had checked his list twice before his travels in December, a double check of the registration list at our hotel in Ushuaia showed that all of our passengers had successfully made it down to the bottom of the world despite some people experiencing a few delays with their airlines. It just goes to show the importance of arriving to a trip a day or two early to account for flight delays or lost baggage! With combined passengers and staff accounted for, 85 of us had arrived from 10 different countries and from 17 of the United States, making for a dynamic mix of international travelers.

On the morning of our ship’s departure, the vast majority of our fellow travelers participated in an outing to Tierra del Fuego National Park. By all measure, participants had a great time shooting in this landscape of mountains, lagoons and beech forest.
By 4 PM we had gathered on two buses for the strangely short bus ride down the dock, through security, to the gangway of the Ushuaia, our stalwart ship and home for the next two weeks. Our ship is named for our departure city—“The southernmost city in the world.”

It was a beautiful and balmy day as we left the port to sail down the famous Beagle Channel—heading east toward the open Atlantic Ocean. Many people were out on the deck snapping shots of the city as it slowly disappeared in the distance and of the jagged peak of Mount Olivia that towers over the city. It was almost windless and some albatrosses and other large seabirds were rafting on the water, as there was not enough lift to keep them in sustained gliding flight.

We met in the lounge for introductions to the captain, some senior crew members and the Photo Safaris staff as we enjoyed a toast and some hors d’oeuvres before the perfunctory lifeboat drill that took place just before dinner. It was a beautiful calm cruise down this scenic channel.

5 December 2015

The "wake-up" duo of Mary Ann McDonald and Anna Sutcliffe called us 30 minutes before breakfast with a cheery briefing on our ship’s position, weather and sea conditions, and our plan of action for the day.

Throngs of birds, from huge wandering albatrosses and vulture-like giant petrels to swirling groups of scores of pintado petrels (Cape petrels) mixed with a few Antarctic fulmars and Wilson's storm petrels, followed the ship. Early in the morning we were able to photograph the seabirds from the outer decks, but within a few hours the swell increased to four meters and any activity outside became risky. The outer decks were closed. The identification of our squadron of birds continued as they flew along the side our broad expanse of lounge windows.

The first day at sea was a busy one for lectures and our acclimation to shipboard life. We started A Photographer's Antarctica with a lecture on The Tools of Exposure presented by Jeff Vanuga.

Later Anna gave a talk, including her improbable vocal sound effects, about the seabirds that were likely to be seen at sea during our Drake Passage crossing to Antarctica and the birds we expected to see on land once we arrive to the frozen continent.

After lunch, shipboard life continued with socializing in the lounge, informal tutorials featuring Photoshop and Lightroom, and with an interesting lecture on the Geology of the Antarctic Peninsula presented by Chris Edwards, our resident Antarctic geology expert.
6 December 2015

Before breakfast the visibility was good and a number of people saw bright white images on the distant horizon—which turned out to be our first big icebergs. The wake-up call by Mary Ann and Anna heralded the start of another clear day at sea, but this time with lots of humpback whale blows around the ship and not as many seabirds.

At 0930 Monika Schillat and Joe Van Os gave us a mandatory briefing on the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators' Guidelines for Visitors to the Antarctic with a briefing about the Zodiac boats that are used to transport passengers from ship to shore and back again. Lastly, a numbered life jacket was given to each passenger for the duration of the trip. Now all was ready for our first landing. The briefing concluded as sea mist obscured the horizon reducing the visibility to less than 40 meters.

The engine room confirmed that the water temperature had dropped from 7°C to 2°C, marking the start of the Antarctic Convergence (a.k.a. Polar Front) where warm water from the north meets and mixes with the cold water from Antarctica. It was unusual to see fog here as normally the wind is too strong and the mist is blown away. Our position of the start of the convergence at 1545 was 58°11′08″S, 63°32′09″W.

The second morning was much calmer and the ban on walking the outer decks was lifted. Very few seabirds were seen during this part of the crossing, with no albatrosses following the ship at all. By 1015 however, large numbers of pintado petrels and Antarctic fulmars started to follow the ship and this continued throughout the convergence all the way to the South Shetland Islands where Antarctic skuas and southern giant petrels flew by to inspect the ship.

The numbers of icebergs increased through the day—great white bergs of many shapes and sizes looming out of the mist.

The ship entered the South Shetland Islands via the English Strait and by 1500 the first passengers were landing on Barrientos Island. Barrientos is one of the group of islands called Aitcho—as in ‘H’ and ‘O’—after the British Hydrographic Office surveyed the area between 1925 and 1939. Barrientos Island is situated between Robert and Greenwich Islands.

The sky was overcast and within an hour a light rain started. A good number of people, however, braved the exposed side of the island to photograph chinstrap and gentoo penguins. The accumulated snow became increasingly softer and caused some people trouble walking up the slopes. Antarctic skuas patrolled the beach and flew over the passengers to inspect the strangers. On the ridges
above the landing site giant petrels flew past. Snowy sheathbills were also seen busily gleaning “tasty” morsels from the detritus around the penguin rookeries.

Each patch of penguins was established on a high point of muddy rock with 40 to 120 pairs in each patch. Many very muddy penguins were seen with a few bright white clean birds coming in from the sea and trudging up the snowy slopes on their well-worn penguin highways.

We departed Barrientos Island in the Aitcho group at 1800, sailing through English Strait and crossing the Bransfield Strait overnight.

It was advised that by 0300 the light would be amazing on big bergs as the ship entered the northern end of Antarctic Sound. With that piece of advice many people retired to their cabins so they could be up bright and early the next day.

7 December 2015

A day of disappointments and triumphs.

The dulcet tones of the two discordant “Good-Morning-ers,” Anna and Mary Ann, woke everyone at 0630 in anticipation of a hearty breakfast followed by a landing on the continent of Antarctica at Brown Bluff shortly afterwards. However, the news was not good. A 40-knot westerly wind, which in nautical parlance equates to a strong gale, meant that the landing at this location was not possible. While Zodiac craft are capable of operating in such conditions, people tend to be less enthusiastic when being doused with icy cold salt water first thing in the morning on the way to the beach. Instead, our expedition leader Monika elected to head southward into the Weddell Sea in search of a landing where wind was not a problem.

Transiting through Antarctic Sound, passing Rosamel Island (Andersson Island), Ushuaia entered Erebus and Terror Gulf, a northern embayment of the Weddell Sea. Normally, one might expect the area to be littered with both sea ice remnants and with icebergs of various sizes derived from the southern part of the Weddell Sea and transported by the Weddell Gyre—a clockwise current that carries ice northward. Instead we found ourselves in a completely open ocean, devoid of significant ice pieces. With the possibility of crossing this area without difficulty we set our course southward hoping to make a landing on Snow Hill Island to visit the historical hut built and occupied during the Swedish South Polar Expedition, 1901–1903. During the morning Monika provided us with a gripping account of this expedition under Otto Nordenskjöld on the ship Antarctic (for which Antarctic Sound is named).

Approaching the characteristic "layer-cake" Cockburn Island in the now bright sunshine, we could see a line of ice stretching from the north end of Seymour Island across to James Ross Island barring our way and precluding any further
progress in that direction. The ship skirted the ice hoping to catch even a fleeting glimpse of a rare emperor penguin, known to breed some 15 miles or so farther south at the end of Snow Hill Island—but nothing was spotted. Instead we looked for an alternative possible landing site and turned toward Vega Island to the northwest with hopes of landing on Devil Island. This island is known to have an extensive Adélie penguin rookery on it, and the "two horned" shape of the topography has provided a link to the island's name. Again ice was the problem. The water around the island is shallow off the rookery, ideal for penguin chicks to learn how to swim, but also providing an easy area to ground floating ice—and indeed that is what had happened. Fast ice with interspersed glacial ice proved to be an insurmountable barrier to approach the island, either with the ship or in a Zodiac. So, once again, we were thwarted.

Turning westwards we passed Cape Well-Met with beautifully exposed vertical cliffs of light brown volcanlastic rocks—volcanic ash which had been deposited in deltas, along with enclosed "bombs" of lava which had been ejected some six million years ago onto the flanks of a local volcano. A series of "angel hair" waterfalls derived from snow patches at the top of the cliff and warmed by the sun decorated the cliffs. Toward the west, one of the valleys was filled with a turbulent cloud formation—which we were to experience later in the day.

However, in bright sunshine we proceeded west and reached an impasse in the form of more fast ice. A smooth but rotten expanse of ice, periodically dotted with groups of penguins, stretched toward the Antarctic Peninsula in the distance. The ship nudged gently into the ice, which proved to be very much degraded, around 30–40 cm (15 in) thick, wet on the surface and easily detached from the parent mass, thereby exhibiting the needle-like crystalline structure on its upturned edge. Thwarted again, we turned northward toward the remnants of a massive iceberg (B15) which had broken off the Ross Ice Shelf on the other side of the continent in 2005 and parts of which had drifted around the continent of Antarctica and were now grounded on the shallower waters of the northern Antarctic Sound.

The hope was that the low sun of the evening would provide a photographic opportunity. But the weather had other ideas. The turbulent clouds witnessed earlier continued to advance over the Tabarin Peninsula on our port side, with drifting snow visible on the peaks, indicative of very strong winds.

During the afternoon Chris Edwards presented a talk in the lounge on the formation and dissolution of sea and land ice, which allowed a better understanding of what we would be seeing (and had already seen) during our voyage of discovery. By the time we reached the massive series of tabular icebergs, the weather had overtaken us, the cloud ceiling was low, and the light was poor, but the stupendous volume of ice was overwhelming. This was difficult to comprehend especially since the icebergs were about 80–90 feet above sea level and resting on the sea bottom some 240 meters (nearly 800 feet) below sea
level—an awful lot of ice, all formed from snowflakes falling over 1000 years and melting, now a contributor to sea level rise worldwide.

And so the day came to a close. Several attempts were made at finding a spot to land, but with no success due to wind and ice. But “tomorrow is another day” and we were in the Antarctic and nothing EVER goes according to “plan A”—this is the nature of expedition cruising in Antarctica.

8 December 2015

When the morning wake-up call was made at 0630, the ship was off Hope Bay with 10 knot winds, with no swell or fog. Our goal for the morning was Brown Bluff—a continental landing—and what a landing it turned out to be!

We began the landing procedures at 0800 and had no problem with ice blocking our way as we headed to shore. The snow had melted along the beach and up the crumbling slope so there was plenty of easy walking for the group. Gentoo and Adélie penguins were nesting, as well as kelp gulls, pintado petrels, snow petrels, and (probably) skuas, since they were actively patrolling around the nesting colonies. Scattered across the beach and in the shallow water were beautifully-carved ice formations. Some of the group had a great time working the ice for macro shots, and the different shapes offered a wonderful foreground for our landscape images. Some of the penguins used these smaller ice pieces as a playground as they climbed up and down and over the grounded ice.

Gentoo penguins were nesting in small groups around large boulders, as well as in a larger colony up from the beach on the flats and on the slopes to the left of the landing site. As far as we could tell these penguins were only sitting on eggs.
The Adélie penguins were the hit of the morning with most of the group photographing these adorable cartoon-character creatures. Groups of Adélies congregated on the beach in numbers of up to two dozen before venturing to sea. Our hypothesis was that a leopard seal had been patrolling the waters recently, making the penguins nervous so that "safety in numbers" was the norm both in entering and exiting the ocean. We got great shots of them walking on the beach to a launch site, standing in groups, and hopping onto rocks in the surf as they got as close as they could to the open ocean before diving in. The pools of water created by the receding tide made for some nice reflections—and bathing sites for gulls and penguins alike. The most challenging shots were of the penguins riding the waves back to shore—and to capture them as they popped up out of the surf. Those who concentrated on this behavior scored some wonderful shots.

The rest of the group worked along the edge of the colony—photographing penguins carrying rocks to the nest, pairs greeting each other and then trading places on the nests. We watched penguins standing up and stretching and then rolling their eggs before settling back down onto the nest. Finally, near the end of the landing time, one of the participants noticed a chick underneath a parent. As more people gathered along the edge we noticed another chick—and then another one. One penguin had just one chick while another had a chick and an egg. Soon there must have been at least 20 people lined up trying to get shots of an adult feeding a chick. During our observation we found at least three different nests with two chicks. Right before we all had to leave the beach we had an adult penguin stand up facing the crowd. It had two chicks underneath, one a little
larger than the other. As the smaller one (with eyes barely open) tried to wobble its head upright to feel for the parent’s beak to receive a good feed, the larger one nudged it out of the way and to get all of the food. The parent kept trying to feed the smaller one, but during our stay it never received any food. We had seen some good feeding sequences with everybody getting a shot.

Throughout the morning the weather cleared and by the time we left it was sunny and beautiful. We headed toward Paulet Island, our next stop for the day. Along the way we passed some penguins on ice floes and had a spectacularly scenic cruise. But as we neared Paulet Island we realized there was at least 10 miles of ice between the ship and the island. Huge tabular icebergs had drifted up from the Weddell Sea creating mini islands. Fast ice had formed in between the icebergs and had created a huge ice field that was impenetrable for the ship. And what a pity that was because the day was sunny and absolutely beautiful.

The ship turned around and headed back toward Antarctic Sound. It passed close to the ice floe edge and passengers were able to photograph penguins on the ice and porpoising through the water. We saw several different seals on the ice but none were close enough for a good picture. And as we passed by Rosamel Island we saw a few distant orcas. We decided to head back through the sound to the spot where we had seen parts of B15—the huge tabular iceberg that had broken off from the Ross Sea ice shelf. Along the way, the weather held for us and offered beautiful landscape shots of the continent. After snacks, Joe and Mary Ann McDonald gave two photography lectures on exposure and composition. Just before and again after dinner, the ship cruised among the icebergs and we captured the bergs in some very nice afternoon light. Then we left this part of the sound and began our journey down the western side of the continent.

9 December 2015

Once again we were awakened by the "gentle" voices of Mary Ann and Anna as their "melodious" chorus filled the ship at 0630. It was as if two nightingales had been sent from heaven above to gently guide us from our slumber into the bright new morning!

Breakfast began at 0700. But, shortly after sitting down at our tables, we were very fortunate to be interrupted by a number of humpback whales bubble netting and lunge feeding on krill. The captain slowed the ship’s engines until we were left drifting among the leviathans.

Humpback whales spend their winters in warmer waters far nearer to the equator. It is there that they give birth, court and mate. In the summer, they migrate into more polar waters where they dine nearly 24 hours a day on krill or small fish. They can grow to 45 feet in length and weigh 40 tons. Humpbacks belong to the group known as baleen whales. Unlike the toothed whales, such as
sperm whales, baleen whales gulp in huge amounts of food-rich water. Their pleated lower jaw/throat expands to many times its original size in the process, similar to the pouch of a pelican. The humpback then closes its mouth, trapping the prey inside, and forces water out through thousands of strands of baleen with its tongue. Once the water has been expelled, the whale swallows its meal.

Our whales seemed to be appearing in widely scattered groups of two to four animals. Everyone was afforded multiple opportunities to shoot these feeding behaviors, as well as wonderful fluke shots. We also witnessed and photographed some flipper slapping and even a couple of breaches. Unfortunately, the breaches were usually into the sun and a bit far away.

The whales were an exciting diversion on our way to our first landing of the day at Hydrurga Rocks, a small group of islets in the Palmer Archipelago. We drifted with the whales from 0710 until 0945 in the morning. On several occasions, whales came right up next to the ship, seemingly to check us out as well.

After our two-and-a-half-hour “whale delay,” we arrived at Hydrurga Rocks, so named for the leopard seal (Hydrurga leptonyx), at 64°41′S and 62°37′W. It was a beautiful partly cloudy day. The weather was even a bit on the warm side—meaning it was above freezing. Between the ship and shore there was a magnificent grounded iceberg. It had begun "life" as a tabular iceberg and was now a sculptural work of art. Time, the sea and weather had definitely influenced its current condition. Tilted on its side and split down its width, the most interesting part was a beautiful carved archway near the top. Hints of blue were
visible throughout. The ocean itself could not stifle its beauty as the iridescent blue that emanated from just below the surface was almost electric.

Several Weddell seals and one baby southern elephant seal rested on the nearby snow on our landing beach. The pebbled beach made for easy landings, but quickly yielded to some quite deep snow. The Photo Safaris crew dug and carved a rudimentary staircase into the snow to make the arrival easier for all to negotiate. Once the final passenger had been successfully delivered to Hydrurga Rocks, six passengers at a time were then transported to experience the iceberg up close via Zodiac. Each Zodiac run lasted about 15 minutes and everyone was excited about what they had seen and photographed.

This location was a landscape photographer’s dream. Great compositions appeared in every direction. The accommodating mountain range in the background (often obscured by clouds) was a nice touch. But there was something here for the wildlife photographers as well. A noisy colony of chinstrap penguins was up in the rocks. If photographed from below, one could include the clear blue sky in the background of their photographs. Imperial (blue-eyed) shags, also called Antarctic cormorants, were also found here. Though not as approachable as the chinstrap penguins, they were interesting subjects just the same.

The all-white snowy sheathbill was indeed the scene stealer here. Its downy white plumage gave way to a somewhat ugly face. This pigeon-sized bird (called sore-eyed pigeon by early whalers) casually walked among us on the rocks and snow in search of an unguarded camera bag—which it would then peck mercilessly until the next camera bag got its attention. We also saw and photographed Antarctic skuas and kelp gulls.

At 1330 the last Zodiac back to the ship from Hydrurga Rocks left the beach. Our schedule had been pushed back a bit due to our unexpected encounter with the humpback whales earlier in the day. So the kitchen crew graciously created lunch for us at 1400 instead of 1300. The din at lunch indicated that everyone was having a wonderful day.

After lunch, we had approximately three hours to download all of our images, charge camera batteries, and maybe catch a quick nap before we arrived at our next landing site, Cuverville Island. Cuverville Island lies at 64°41’S and 62°38’W. It lies between the Arctowski Peninsula and Rongé Island at the entrance to the Errera Channel. Our first Zodiac landing here began just before 1800. Our dinner was now postponed until 2000 to accommodate this landing.
On the way to the very narrow landing beach, the Zodiacs passed by the best icebergs of the trip thus far. They were the best in number, diversity and just plain beauty. This was another scenic photographers’ dream site. But Cuverville was a wonderful place to be a wildlife photographer as well, as there was also a photogenic gentoo penguin colony here. The gentoos would come and go from the water in groups of two or three birds. With a polarizer it was possible to see the penguins swimming in the very shallow water against the pebbly bottom. It was beautiful! For all intents and purposes, they basically flew underwater. You could easily photograph them below the surface from the snow-covered shore. One challenging shot to capture was porpoising penguins as they made their way back toward shore. While waiting for the final Zodiac, a skua flew directly over us with a penguin egg in its beak. It landed in the snow and went about cracking open and eating the egg’s contents. It finally flew to the water to bathe after eating such a messy meal.

The last Zodiac left at 2005. We rushed to get out of our cold-weather gear so we could enjoy a hot dinner. The room was loud with laughter and storytelling as everyone had had a wonderful day.

10 December 2015

The echoes of “good morning” over the ship’s PA let us know we were at the mouth of Paradise Bay. Plans were announced over the PA and instead of sailing the Lemaire Channel—which was blocked with ice—we would instead cruise in Paradise Bay (Paradise Harbor) by Zodiac. This was good news as we
had gotten permission to enter Paradise Bay even though they had an oil leak in the recent past. The outside weather was cold with partly cloudy conditions. Some very nice shafts of light were showcasing the surrounding snowcapped peaks. Everyone had breakfast at 0730 and began to get ready for the day ahead.

Out on deck many people took advantage of the floating ice and larger-than-life mountain ranges. The ship anchored at the mouth of Paradise Bay and Skontorp Cove. As we idled in the middle of the bay, people took photographic advantage of gorgeous scenery in all directions. The first group (port side) met at the back of the ship at 1030 with cameras in hand and ready to shoot wildlife and landscape images from the Zodiaks. The Zodiaks were filled with seven people and one photo leader. One by one the Zodiaks made their way around the floating ice and took full advantage of the beautiful icy conditions. During the Zodiac cruise people also learned some of the history about the out-of-use Argentine research station that was situated at Paradise Bay. Some of the groups were able to see penguins porpoising out of the cold water in front of the glacial peaks. While near to the cliff side of the vertical mountain faces there were opportunities to photograph some of the perched imperial shags building nests. The Zodiaks came close to some stunning blue floating ice that made a perfect foreground with the mountain backdrop. Some of the group were fortunate enough to see crabeater seals lounging on the ice. After that, the second group (starboard side) then went out for a Zodiac cruise and photographed the winter landscapes as the sun came out for a late morning appearance.

After lunch people prepared to go out again into Paradise Bay, but this time look for different subjects. Both groups switched and this time the starboard side group went first at 1400. It was not long before the Zodiaks came across a sleeping Weddell seal. Darting in and out of the icebergs, the Zodiaks made their way deep into the bay to cruise through unexplored (for them) territory. The bay did not disappoint as the water was glass calm and made for excellent reflections. While shooting Paradise Bay from the far reaches of the bay we found some fantastic sculptural icebergs tucked away. This was a great way to finish off the afternoon of shooting in spectacular Paradise Bay.
Once everyone got back from their outing in Paradise Bay people were eager for a party in the lounge. With abundant snacks and favorite drinks we had a great social hour and everyone was in a festive mood as we headed to the dining hall for dinner.

After dinner many of the group headed out on deck for some sunset shooting as the ship left Paradise Bay. The side light was brilliant and the group got their first chance to really get some sunset brilliance on the surrounding glaciated peaks. The energetic group stayed on deck for several hours and some even got the chance to try time-lapse video for the first time. The day ended with a gorgeous sunset at 2314 as the ship sailed off into the twilight.

11 December 2015

Today was a day of extremes. After spending the night at Dorian Bay, early in the morning we sailed to the entrance of the Lemaire Channel, only to discover it was still choked with ice and totally impassible. The wind was up—a sustained 40 mph with gusts up to 64 mph—and there was virtually no chance that the channel would open this day. After breakfast we turned to leave, and snow flurries picked up. We decided to sail toward Dallmann Bay, hoping to get out of the strong winds.

Joe Van Os showed an Oceanites documentary film, The Penguin Counters, featuring the research group we hope our proposed E-book will help with fund raising. Almost immediately afterward word came down from the bridge that several humpback whales were in sight. However, none ever came within good photographic range.
Slightly frustrated, we decided to head to Wilhelmina Bay, with the hope that it would offer some shelter from the wind—but no such luck. Backtracking through the Gerlache Strait on the Danco Coast side we sailed into Dallmann Bay and found an unusual iceberg with multiple tall Stonehenge-like spires. Almost everyone went out to photograph, only to learn that the wind had not abated at all. Wind? That's far too basic a word; it seemed more like a blast from a hurricane. We searched for places on the ship to tuck into—any place for shelter. As the ship turned to make another pass at the berg, the wind first hit one side of the ship and then the other—causing a mass migration of cameras and people into the sheltering lee of the ship. After about 20 minutes we left the iceberg—all of us rapidly approaching Popsicle status.

In midafternoon John Shaw gave an Introduction to Lightroom lecture. Almost immediately after he finished, four orca whales were spotted. Once again, all of us pulled on multiple layers of coats, hats and gloves, and headed on deck, only to discover that the wind demanded even more layers. The orcas were largely elusive—offering us but a few good shots. We decided to return to Dorian Bay via the Neumayer Channel, but it was blocked with ice. So backtracking again through the Gerlache Strait we finally ended up where we had started the day—in Dorian Bay.

Shortly after dinner Monika showed a movie about Port Lockroy and its historic British base—the next morning's scheduled landing. Just as the movie ended, the miracle began: great light appeared. The mountains and glaciers lit up, lenticular clouds formed, streamers of snow flew from the mountain tops, and the wind dropped to about half its previous strength. Almost everyone went out on deck to photograph, and to enjoy the incredible scene. The view improved and improved as the light level slowly dropped, and we ended our day on a very happy note.

12 December 2015

For some photographers today was a very long working day. Last night the skies were promising, and quite a few photographers stayed up for the 2320 sunset.

They were rewarded with nice light and great colors, a wash of gold and orange tinting the ring of mountain peaks. Sunrise was barely four hours later, and the few photographers who met that light were treated to a spectacular sunrise, with the clouds floating above the ridges catching the sun’s low rays, a spectacle of orange and gold. This good shooting did come at a price, however, as the winds were near hurricane force, challenging everyone’s ability to stand or hold a camera steady.

After breakfast the group had a short Zodiac commute to the British Antarctic Station at Port Lockroy—named in honor of Edouard Lockroy, a French politician.
who helped Jean-Baptiste Charcot finance his French Antarctic Expedition. This station has three volunteers in residence for the summer season, all Brits, who perform several duties, including gentoo penguin research, curating the museum located here, and operating the gift shop (whose revenue supports the station) and post office.

Although we had visited this harbor on many previous trips, and earlier in the season, we had more snow at the port this year than ever before. Nesting gentoo penguins were restricted to the rock promontory by the landing and to a few more distant colony clusters that were off limits to tourists. Snowy sheathbills, those carrion-eating, garbage-picking and overall disgusting-eating-habit birds were everywhere, perched on the station’s roof tops, hunting for scraps among the nesting penguins, and walking with surprising speed across the hard-packed snow.

Imperial shags passed overhead frequently, their silhouette sometimes confusing as their beaks were filled with algae they’d plucked from the sea for building their nests. A few Antarctic skuas circled the colony, infrequently diving down to harass a penguin in hopes of stealing an egg.

The weather for the visit was surprisingly nice, and most of the participants—and leaders—were overdressed. A few scattered snow flurries marked a subtle change in weather toward the end of our visit, and we returned to the ship with
the three Port Lockroy staff along, offering them the chance for a good cooked meal and a hot shower.

After lunch we headed up the Gerlache Strait toward Andvord Bay where we hoped to find some photogenic icebergs and, weather permitting, do some Zodiac cruising. Along the way we sailed by several whales—at least one humpback almost touching the starboard side of the ship as we motored past. Two orcas, or killer whales, were spotted, but the sightings were brief, and a couple of speedy minke whales.

When we left the Port Lockroy harbor we were almost immediately in great ice, with fair-sized icebergs and long avenues of pack ice flanking our route. Snow petrels were common, and several flew around our ship until we reached more open water. There, at times, the snow petrels were replaced by swallow-like Wilson’s storm petrels—tiny black birds with a white rump that often seem to dance upon the water. A few giant petrels soared by on fixed wings, and an occasional group of gentoo penguins porpoised along—but the show was the ice, and the variety of shapes and colors of the bergs that kept most of the photographers on deck through much of the afternoon.

After dinner, anchored near some stunning icebergs in Andvord Bay, we planned to do some Zodiac cruising. Our first departure was to be at 2030, set for a 45-minute cruise, but soon after the first Zodiacs were launched the wind really kicked up. The Zodiacs, barely motoring along with only the driver on board, bucked like wild horses. Chris advised everyone to get their minimal camera equipment in protective bags as he was sure we’d be soaked by sea spray. But we didn’t have the chance, as the Zodiac cruise was cancelled because of the building rough seas. Some participants, already dressed for an outing, shot images of the Wilson’s storm petrels or the surrounding mountain ridges. With patchy light and dynamic clouds, the shooting was good.

13 December 2015

We woke up to partly cloudy skies and the temperature a mild 2°C. We had spent the night in the sheltered Andvord Bay and were treated to tabular icebergs illuminated in golden light by the setting/rising sun. With 15–25 knot winds we changed our original early morning landing plans and headed for a landing on Orne Island at 64°40'S and 62°40'W. The islands are snow-covered domes reaching to heights of 245 feet. Upon landing we were treated to colonies of chinstrap and gentoo penguins on high bare ridges overlooking magnificent scenery under breathtaking lenticular clouds. As our Zodiacs returned to the ship, we were treated to humpback whales surfacing in close proximity to our ship and the Zodiacs.
During lunch we made one last attempt to enter the Lemaire Channel, but a previous ship had failed in its attempt a few hours earlier so we altered our original plans and headed to Cuverville Island.

After lunch we cruised around Cuverville Island and into the spectacular Errera Channel capturing the beauty of Antarctica from the comfort of the ship. Canyons and mountains rising up from the narrow channel and icebergs were in close proximity. The majestic scenes filled our viewfinders with the photogenic magic of Antarctica.

In the afternoon the winds subsided and we took advantage of clear weather for Zodiac cruises around Andvord Bay. As the evening progressed, the weather improved with clearing skies and sunshine creating dramatic skies and glowing towering icebergs. Zodiacs cruised around tabular icebergs and smaller chunks of ice with arches and stunning blue reflections. After dinner we had one of the best sunsets of the trip and many people stayed up until after midnight to catch the golden glow of sunset.

14 December 2015

Weather sunny, warm, dry, calm—in fact, perfect.

Your scribe is uncertain how many enthusiastic photographers either remained awake after last night’s sunset to witness the sunrise, but the general consensus was that the sunrise was even better than sunset.

_Ushuaia_ had remained on station at the mouth of the Errera Channel at the northwestern limit of Andvord Bay during the night and when the wake-up call came from Anna and Mary Ann at 0700 it was full of good news. The weather was “baby blue” skies and barely a ripple on the water, and the massive tabular icebergs which had provided us with a location for our Zodiac cruises yesterday afternoon were still visible off the starboard side of the ship. The day was perfect! The American NSF research vessel _Laurence M. Gould_ was lying some distance off our starboard side. Breakfast was perhaps livelier than normal, the bright sunshine and calm seas really lifting all spirits.

A landing onto Danco Island at the Errera Channel had been scheduled and the ship maneuvered into position by retracing our voyage through the waterway. Unusually there was a convenient relatively shallow-water anchorage nearby and the ship dropped anchor with a rattle. As was normal, the staff departed on a Zodiac reconnaissance to prepare the landing site prior to general disembarkation. However, despite examining several potential places on Danco Island, it was considered to be too difficult because of the extremely steep ice foot which persisted along the shoreline. Even penguins were finding it difficult to access the snow, and ultimately their nest sites, because of the abundance of deep windblown snow on the island. A return was made to the ship but not
before a quick examination of a young leopard seal which, in turn, was viewed by all subsequent Zodiac passengers. Monika quickly rearranged the program from a landing to one of purely cruising among the ice around the island. Joe Van Os, Anna, Monika and Chris with two ships’ crew drivers escorted participants among intensely blue icebergs, fantastically sculpted by melting under the water. The young leopard seal had visits from virtually everyone and it cooperated wonderfully.

One of the highlights for many photographers was shooting the gentoo penguins who were attempting to negotiate that difficult ice overhang around the island by either jumping into the shallow water fringing the beach or, alternatively, trying to leap out of the water to the same steep overhang.

During lunchtime our ship returned to the Andvord Bay area and penetrated some six miles into Neko Harbor—a small bay on its northern flank. Neko Harbor had been so named on account of it providing a convenient sheltering anchorage for the whale factory ship Neko, which was owned by Christian Salvesen Ltd. in the 1920s. The gravel and sand beach provided a very pleasant landing. Gentoo penguins had established colonies across the hillside and were constantly going to and fro from the water. Zodiac tours round the local ice were also offered. The clean granite rocks on the beach (which have been radiometrically dated at 140 million years) are witness to occasional mini-tsunami waves which sweep along the beach if there is a large calving from the adjacent glacier snout.
Fortunately none occurred during our landing, although a massive avalanche had crashed onto the lower slopes from an ice wall overlooking the bay while we were getting everyone ashore. By 1800 the light had become overcast, floating ice was beginning to impede access to the beach, and the smoke rising from the barbeque on the aft deck of *Ushuaia* was beckoning. This encouraged the last few penguin photographs to be taken as everyone cleared the beach. Chorizo sausages were served on the aft deck and then the main part of the meal was distributed in the dining room—beef, chicken and sausages with a side dish of potato salad. The evening progressed from there as *Ushuaia* headed out of Andvord Bay, through patches of brash ice towards our next Antarctic experience. The sunset was different this evening, with a layer of thin stratus clouds at around 300 feet providing another dimension to a yellow and orange cloudscape. The ship negotiated an ice-strewn Gerlache Strait during the evening, heading for Schollaert Channel and Melchior Islands. Only a stalwart few on the outside decks witnessed the groups of penguins on ice and the occasional spouting humpback whales as we journeyed slowly onwards.

**15 December 2015**

We awoke this morning to a beautiful day with clear blue skies and mild winds. The area we were headed, the Melchior Islands, is where the ship took shelter several days back during the "hurricane" with winds up to 75 knots. But this morning, after an incredible sunrise at 0236, the weather was just the opposite.
The Melchior Islands’ basalt cliffs visible beneath snow and ice sheets are a completely different geology than we had seen during our travels. We had an early breakfast at 0700 and then began Zodiac cruises at 0830. Each cruise was planned for one and a half hours, but we easily could have spent twice that amount of time out on the water, photographing. Everyone started out from the ship and went west around the first or second island. We photographed icebergs that had been sculptured by water, wind and waves. Some of the icebergs had rolled, revealing a photogenic multi-dimpled surface.

Throughout the morning we encountered different wildlife, including porpoising chinstrap penguins, bathing, feeding and resting gentoo penguins, Antarctic terns and kelp gulls. Several of the Zodiacs found three crabeater seals resting on a small ice floe.

The morning started out clear and rather balmy, but by the end of the second Zodiac cruise the clouds began to roll in. It was the perfect time for us to board the ship for lunch and begin our long cruise up to Deception Island. The Melchior Islands lie on the western side of the Antarctic Peninsula. Due to a calm 15-knot wind the sea was relatively smooth, so the captain decided to steer the ship directly toward Deception by staying farther out from shore. Even though we passed a few whales during our journey, the chosen path kept us farther off shore so there were limited photo opportunities for scenery of the peninsula as we headed north. But this more direct route cut our travel time by more than an hour and gave us a smooth journey.

Shortly after dinner we approached volcanic Deception Island. As we neared the caldera’s famous entrance—Neptune’s Bellows—we passed several icebergs with dozens of chinstrap penguins. With Baily Head, one of the largest chinstrap colonies in the South Shetlands just around the corner, the icebergs gave the penguins a resting spot during their feeding time at sea.

The evening couldn’t have been more perfect for our passage through the Bellows. This passage always requires a tricky maneuver of navigational skill as the entrance is rather narrow, with rocks and a sunken ship. With all hands on deck, calm seas and winds, and clear skies overhead, the captain steered the ship flawlessly through the Bellows. Everyone was smiling as we cleared the last of the cliffs and were met by the incredible view of the entire caldera and Whalers Bay.

Our anchorage for the night was around the corner from the old whaling/research station. Fast ice was still present in that part of the bay. The ship was gently placed into the fast ice edge and that is what we used for our anchorage site for the night. It was a perfect place for a restful night, surrounded by the towering walls of the caldera, with a beautiful ice moorage in front of us.
16 December 2015

Only nine more shopping days until Christmas!

Our last day of land-based photography was a spectacular one. Our first departure was a short Zodiac ride to Whalers Bay on Deception Island, a volcanic island highlighted by its breached caldera where we anchored for the morning. The caldera floor, now a flooded seabed and presently still half-covered in fast ice, stretches six miles in diameter and reaches 585 feet from the sea floor. This sheltered bay was both a whaling station and a small British Antarctic base, called Biscoe House, whose remains slowly deteriorate on the black sand beach.

Several large red-rusted silos, resembling an oil refinery, are the most prominent feature of the beach. Indeed, these silos, sitting adjacent to the decrepit, decaying buildings that functioned as meat and blubber processing facilities, acted as fuel storage facilities. All of the structures are in progressive states of ruin, and going inside is forbidden as the crumbling interiors are quite unsafe. However, outside of the buildings and the silos there were numerous photo opportunities of industrial geometric shapes, weathered wood buildings, and
more. On the roof tops of some of the shacks kelp gulls nested and, on the gravel bars beyond, Antarctic terns nested and dive-bombed anyone who walked too close to their nest sites.

Although there are no penguin colonies inside the caldera, one lone chinstrap penguin strolled along the beach, quite oblivious to the photographers lining up to take its picture. Pintado petrels rode the gently lapping waves along the shoreline whenever a Zodiac arrived churning up dead krill, but most flew off as the Zodiacs returned to the ship. Three different Weddell seals humped themselves ashore and periodically slept or scratched on the remaining snow fields. As true seals, the Weddells do literally hump along, resembling a caterpillar as they lurch forward. Eared seals, like the fur seals and sea lions, have limbs that rotate and elevate, allowing those seals to actually run or gallop if necessary—sometimes chasing photographers as they do so. On this trip we did not encounter any.

One of the highlights of Whalers Bay is Neptune’s Window, a notch in the steep cliffs looking east into the sea. Several photographers hiked to the rim of the Window and were treated not only to a great view but also, for some, a bit of vertigo, as the cliffs plunge steeply to the sea. Everyone was warned to stay several feet from the edge, as the substrate here was composed of loose conglomerate rock that might, if stepped upon, crumble and collapse.

But one hardy soul did venture into the sea. Eamonn Cullen went swimming in Whalers Bay, but unfortunately missed any of the volcanic hot spots that warm the water from the volcanism below. Since he missed the upwelling of warm
water, his swim was cold! But it was captured by our cameras for posterity, nonetheless.

After lunch we embarked on our final landing, and if the trip needed a crescendo—a whopping climatic conclusion—this was surely it. We landed at one of the most beautiful islands we visited—Half Moon Island in the South Shetland Island complex. We were worried that the landing might be difficult, as the cobble beach is short and narrow and its steep snowbanks could make reaching the island a problem. But our worries were for naught, as the seas were so calm that we practically had a dry landing, with participants stepping into ankle-deep water as we went ashore. The snowbank was gently tapered, making the climb up to the chinstrap colony quite easy.

Several distinctive locations mark this island as exceptional for photography. Along the beach Antarctic shags nest nearby. One greeted our landing, perching accommodatingly on a large rock close to our Zodiacs. Later, that bird and another were joined by chinstraps. Although the shag appeared to just want to get along, the penguins took offense and jabbed at the odd bird whenever the opportunity arose.

At the top of the slight rise, two small colonies of chinstraps formed the foreground for a great vista of the bays surrounding this island. Periodically, skuas flew overhead, looking for an unguarded egg and prompting defensive calls from the penguins below. Further along the trail Antarctic terns nested on the sea stacks, as did kelp gulls. The patient photographers in the group were rewarded by numerous opportunities to capture terns carrying fish or doing courtship fish exchanges with their mates on the nearby rocks.

Three well-traveled penguin highways led to the rookeries. Some were located at the very top of the surrounding cliffs, and from that position a few chinstraps could be seen, head pointed skyward, as they rattled out their "ecstatic display." One had to wonder why a bird would walk that far and that high, but these areas would be the first to become snow free, and offer the first and best nest sites. The human trail led to more sea stacks where Wilson’s storm petrels flitted about like swallows, circling repeatedly above the rocks until finally settling down—seeking out the crevice they would use for a nest. The trail led down to the rocky beach, paralleling the route chinstraps used to hop and scramble up the steep incline to the nesting colonies.

On the beach several Weddell seals had hauled out on the snowbanks. The few participants making that far of a hike were rewarded by near absolute silence. Yet, a seal broke that silence by singing its not-often-heard song—a whistling trill and bubbly burp, seemingly sleeping as it was doing so. I had to wonder if it was "talking" in its sleep.
The departure time to leave the island came all too quickly, but fortune smiled on us again as clouds covered the sun and dropped the light levels and the contrast. We had squeezed out all the good light and were departing just as photography opportunities diminished. Soon after dinner we headed out to sea—toward the dreaded Drake Passage—wondering how smooth or rough those seas would be as we traveled northward and back to port and home.

17 December 2015

Still in bed at 5 AM and I can't feel the ship moving!

Am I awake?
No rolling or quake!
For goodness sake!
The Drake is a lake?
Oh, what a break!
So here is my take—
This prediction I'll make:
The crossing will be a piece of cake!

The sea really was like a lake, with very smooth conditions and almost no rock-and-roll. The captain, crew and most of the Photo Safaris leaders could not remember how long ago they had experienced a Drake Passage crossing as smooth as this one! And most of them had made this crossing many times.

Lots of birds followed the ship, so many of us were outside trying to photograph birds on the wing.

At mid-morning Chris gave a lecture on the history of Deception Island, which we had visited yesterday. Kevin McNeal followed with a lecture on using Adobe Camera Raw Converter software. After lunch there was a leisurely break, until the "Joes" (Van Os and McDonald) gave a joint slide show/lecture on the Jaguars of Brazil's Pantanal, which was attended by nearly everyone. Their message was now was the time to see the jaguars!

18 December 2015

The Drake Passage was unbelievably flat. In fact, it was so flat there was little difference from the ocean to the water conditions inside the Beagle Channel when we entered it in the late afternoon. Birds sporadically followed the ship, but due to a lack of lift because of a flat sea and low wind, we passed many birds just floating on the surface.

Today was a packing day. And all of us who had our things scattered all over our cabins were now cramming them into suitcases, packs and duffel bags.
In the afternoon, Mary Ann presented a humorous slide show of people and events that had taken place during our voyage. There were lots of laughs and the occasional groan, but certainly everyone appreciated the amount of effort it took to gather all of the photos and to write such a funny script to go with it. Joe McDonald had accumulated a number of images from our shipmates that had been created during the voyage. It is always amazing to see the different ways people envision photographing in the same locations. There’s an incredible variety.

We arrived in the Beagle Channel, sailed in for several miles, and then waited until the wee hours of December 19 for the local pilot to take over navigation until we reached the port of Ushuaia.

19 December 2015

Amazingly, we were one of seven Antarctica cruise ships vying for dock space this morning. Several of the ships had as many as 250 passengers disembarking. But we had planned ahead and had contacted the local customs agent early and we were cleared to go ashore before most of the other ships were able to unload. This gave most of us a little bit of time in town to wander around before we boarded our buses and were taken to the airport. The goodbyes were never ending! Sixty-five of us departed Ushuaia on the same flight to Buenos Aires where many of us said one final goodbye before the mad scramble to catch international flights homeward.

This log book was written by Anna Sutcliffe, Jeff Vanuga, John Shaw, Mary Ann McDonald, Chris Edwards, Kevin McNeal, Joe Van Os, Mark Thomas and Joe McDonald. It was edited by Joe Van Os and Hedy Slack.

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