

On First Seeing Antarctica

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It is late February and I am standing at the end of the world.

The serrated mountains with their clawed glaciers and turquoise cirques rise behind me. The frontier town of Ushuaia is at my back with its art-palette-painted timber houses lining the shores of the Beagle Channel made famous by the 19th-century naturalist, Charles Darwin, and his book, *The Voyage of the Beagle*.

Ushuaia, Argentina's last outpost, is known as the world's most southern city. *El Fin del Mundo* - The End of the World. It is a town of beaver dams, old dusty cars and an historic wheel-shaped prison, once housing the most damned of inmates, now repurposed as a maritime and natural history museum.

It is also a town of delectables: meaty empanadas, king crab, dulce de leche, steaming hot chocolate and Argentina's national drink, *maté*, the bitter, caffeine-rich herbal tea sipped through a metal straw.

Sir Francis Drake, when sailing here on his 1577 circumnavigation of the world, heard the Indians making an *oosh oosh* sound as they warned fellow tribes of the approaching ships. Add to this the *uaia* (deep cove) of the indigenous Yamana people, and *Oosh-way-ya* was given its pronunciation.

Ushuaia sits at the end of the spiked, volcanic dragon's tail of the Andes that plunges into the Drake Passage, emerging again, triumphant and horned with snow and ice, as Antarctica. A dragon's tail that is called Tierra del Fuego, the archipelago of Patagonia, the land of fire and ice.

It is also the Gateway to Antarctica; the enigmatic seventh continent. That's where I'm heading. 1,238 kilometers away.

And that's why I'm standing on the dock of the bay. Well, not actually standing, more leaning, at 45 degrees as the cutting katabatic winds funnel down the vertical drops of mountains and almost blow me off my feet. But on the dock, this is perilous, as the water temperature is frigid and I'm not keen on a pre-Antarctic dip.

The dock is flanked with ships of various purposes. There are cargo ships, their cranes loading containers onboard. There are research ships, like the Grigoriy Mikheev, and others with Cyrillic lettering that I can't interpret. And at the end of the dock is my handsome ice-reinforced water chariot, with its cobalt-painted hull and adventurous name.

Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success.

So reads the recruitment notice for Sir Ernest Shackleton's 1914 expedition to Antarctica.

My journey is part fascination with the coldest, driest, windiest continent on Earth. A place barely touched by humans; a place lingering like the spectre of the beginning of time. This journey is also a homage to Sir Ernest Shackleton, my Irish-born Heroic Era champion who, just over 100 years ago, in his polar vessel, *The Endurance*, set off to become the first to cross the southern continent on foot. But, beset by solidifying sea ice and the crushing of his ship after 10 months of drifting, Shackleton had to turn his mind to saving his crew of 28. This was to become one of the greatest survival stories in history.

Although I am not voyaging in the shadow of Shackleton's journey to Elephant Island and South Georgia, I'm still thrilled to be sailing to the Antarctic peninsula. Even if it is only for nine days.

The first challenge is crossing the Drake Passage, which is a misnomer, as Drake didn't actually pass through this stretch of water. He sailed the less dangerous route through the Strait of Magellan. The passage took his name when one of his ships drifted south, therefore establishing the connection between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

After boarding my icebreaker, I go on a reconnaissance mission. With eight passenger levels, she's a classy lady with wooden decks and teak and brass fittings. On the aft deck, as a reminder of her Russian origin as the Aleksandr Pushkin, there's a joyful bronze statue of Rudolf Nureyev reaching to the heavens as he dances. I make the same joyful pose beside him, dancing to the possibilities to come.

The gangway is now gone. The ropes untethered from their bollards, as is our last tenuous link with civilisation. We surge forward and the whistle roars in a triple salute to the shore, leaving behind the forest-tapestry of grey peaks and the blue and white flag of Argentina.

Seals porpoise alongside, and in this last vestige of summer, the sun appears like the prick of a pinhole camera.

My spiritual reverie is broken when some of the passengers start chatting to me. They are puzzled by my accent. Was I English?

'No,' I reply, 'I'm Australian.' I may as well have said, *I am a kangaroo*.

'Oh,' they fussed, trying to conjure up something familiar with Australia. 'Oh, we love your country. Australia has given the world so many greats, like ... Penelope Cruz and ABBA!'

I contain my surprise, but I can't when asked how many cruises I have been on. Ten? Twenty? 'What is your favourite one?'

Not wanting to let them know that it is my very first cruise, I pause as if pondering. 'Well, the cruise from Circular Quay to Manly is my favourite so far.'

'Oh, we've never heard of it,' my new friends chorus.

'It's rather exotic and specialised,' I continue, too far in now to own up to my joke. And suddenly, this Aussie bird is another rare breed in this part of the world.

I ask one of the mingling officers when we will hit the Drake Passage. 'You'll know when it happens,' he wryly replies as a slight smile creases his face.

I'm armed with sea-sickness tablets, acupuncture wristbands and bags of crystallised ginger. I'm terrified of suffering from *mal de mer*.

Our next landmark is the island of Cape Horn, the final upward burst of the Andes where rushing currents, unimpeded by land, whirlpool around the white continent. It's where waves revved up by the Roaring Forties, the Furious Fifties and the Screaming Sixties have shattered ships.

That night, as I toss and turn while thinking of icebergs, whales and calderas, I'm jolted from my bed. It feels as if the ship has hit a brick wall. My suitcase is shunted off the rack. My flotsam and jetsam of travel goodies shoot off the desk. I check my phone. It's 2am and I guess that we've *hit the Drake Passage*.

As the ship rocks and rolls, dips and seesaws, I get a bit of sleep. But the next morning, as I shower in my tiny cubicle, I feel as if I'm showering on a surfboard, one foot in front of the other to keep my balance.

Heading to breakfast, I notice that sick bags have been placed every few steps; up stairwells, along corridors, all within handy reach if needed.

Stumbling along with other passengers, gravity pulls us in one direction, and then the other. The corridors run uphill, and then downhill.

One of Shackleton's companions, Felix Rooney, described crossing The Drake as, 'so rough, the ship would roll the milk out of your tea.'

The swell reaches 12 metres, and the wind, 120 km per hour. There are two days of high seas crashing over the seven storeys of decks, where whitecaps bucket the windows as we watch in wonder and slight apprehension.

Unable to access the outside, we stay snug in the library, the salon and the ship's theatre listening to lectures of polar exploration, seabirds and penguin eccentricities, such as how they change their eyeball shape when diving so they can see clearly, and how skuas have claws on the ends of their feet to snatch penguin chicks.

I learn that Antarctica is larger than Europe and Australia, that meteors have landed here and that bodies mummify. That its surface is made up of 98% ice. That it has rivers, lakes and active volcanoes. That Lake Vostok is *under* the ice, and that fossils have been found of the Jurassic forest where 2 million years ago, dinosaurs roamed.

We also discuss the problems facing Antarctica in the 21st century.

There's the question of tourism, but we learn that the greater risk is that of pirate fishing vessels that kill a third of the world's albatrosses and push fish stocks to the brink of extinction. Travellers, on the other hand, who experience the beauty of this last frontier are its best safeguard, as they take home the message of conservation.

The number of people allowed on shore at any one given time, is 100. Everything here is controlled for the continent's biosecurity. One major threat is the rising sea temperature and its impact on the ecosystem. Shorter winters and longer summers mean that birds and mammals are losing their breeding grounds. Feeding patterns are altered, affecting the penguin population.

Another major problem is that of microplastic. Small amounts have already been found in the Weddell Sea, northeast of the Antarctic Peninsula.

After two days of being tumble-turned by The Drake, we finally sail into the protection of the Antarctic Peninsula.

I'm surprised to see a yacht moored here. It's from Wales and has a frozen sheep's carcass roped to its mast.

Roald Amundsen, the first man to reach the South Pole said, '... in the sun, the land looks like a fairy tale.' The spell of wonderment has been cast and I'm smitten.

On seeing my first iceberg through the picture window of my cabin, I race up to the outside deck. The cold slaps my cheeks as snow flutters onto my face like confetti. And I breathe in the purest air I'll ever know.

Before leaving for Antarctica, friends had scoffed at the nothingness that I was paying to see. The *all whiteness*, the *all silence*.

Close to our ship, dark, sawtooth mountains soar into the leaden sky and I feel as if I'm witnessing the beginning of time.

I gaze on opalescent bergs with vivid blue streaks that glint like neon signs. They position themselves like chess pieces waiting for the game to begin.

Looking over the railing I watch penguins, their orange beaks like arrows, swimming furiously under water. They stretch their blubbery bodies and propel out of the brashy ice onto the edge of a nearby berg. They waddle in line up its slope, then slide back into the water, like a group of kids on a playground slippery dip.

Seals laze on their backs on top of other bergs, their fins wrapped around their fronts like belligerent teenagers sleeping in.

There's a loud pistol-whip crack and an exhaling hiss that sounds like the primeval cry of a mother giving birth. It's a glacier carving. As the iceberg is born, I breathe in its now released oxygen that's been held captive for the past few thousand years.

My adventure is now all ahead of me. The discovery of Neptune's Bellows and Hell's Gates. Of sailing through narrow chutes into calderas. Of visiting abandoned whaling stations and research stations. Of zodiac trips, where icy winds will chisel my cheeks and set me upon the continent to take my first historic steps.

Ahead of me is the noise and stench of Gentoo and Chinstrap rookeries, and the antics of Elephant and Weddell seals. Of wheeling petrels and hovering skuas. Of Humpback and Minke whales head-hopping to see who's here, and teams of scythe-finned orca doing figure eights as they hunt for penguins to flip into the air and strip their bodies of skin.

Shackleton's words inspired my pilgrimage to this icy realm. It is his words that settle on me again ... *In memories we were rich. We had pierced the veneer of outside things... We had seen God in His splendours, heard the text that nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man.*

And it is his words that will continue to shape who I am and where I am going.

