

ANTARCTICA, SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND and the FALKLANDS

OCC Program 5/25/ 2009 by Jim Urbach

See images of these trips by clicking the link below:

http://jimurbach.smugmug.com/gallery/8376234_4MDwS/1/549580693_ZRSJP

Three fabulous places to go and get real close to penguins and be able to capture meaningful images are Antarctica, South Georgia Island and the Falklands. All three locations have other wildlife that is not fearful of humans and allow close approaches. But South Georgia Island and Antarctica have fantastic scenery as well. I've gone twice, November 2002 and January 2008.

If you want to travel to these locations, you definitely should have a sense of adventure, enjoy being outdoors and be prepared for some inclement weather both snow and rain and expect to hike on uneven terrain covered with both ice and snow.

SEASICKNESS: Most importantly you need to prevent getting sea sick because you will be traveling through the South Scotia Sea or Drake Passage which are among the potentially stormiest seas ships encounter. I grew up being extremely prone to motion sickness. I have since learned to avoid this problem by constantly trying to visualize the horizon when at sea, avoiding small confines without windows, preferably feeling a breeze in my face and taking MECLYZINE _ tablet twice a day which I start taking as soon as the ship leaves port. I saw many people who relied on patches that were stricken.

WHEN TO TRAVEL: When you travel in November, you can expect to see penguins on nests protecting eggs. There will be snow on the ground, the scenery will be pristine, the icebergs huge and the 4 ton male elephant seals will be on the beaches. In January the chicks will have hatched, there is apt to be mud on the ground, the icebergs will be smaller and the scenery is apt to be less pristine.

ZODIACS: All travel off the ship to the penguin colonies is on zodiacs. You need to carefully go down the gangplank with both hands free, have your large camera bag in a large Ziploc bag which you carefully hand to a crew member via the handle. When you are told to step on to the air inflated sidewalls of the zodiac do so promptly and 2 crew members on the zodiac will assist you firmly holding each of your arms. You will be assisted to a seat. Your Ziploc protected camera bag will be handed to you via the handle. (Small camera backpacks may be worn down the gangplank but you definitely do not want to be top heavy.) Once seated those with small backpacks should take them off and put them in a waterproof Ziploc bag. All zodiac landings are potentially wet. You definitely do not want saltwater getting on your bag or camera equipment. When cruising among icebergs in calm waters, you will want to access your camera for taking images not only of the scenery but also seals and penguins. Stow your camera inside the Ziploc bag prior to landing on shore.

FOOTWEAR: I advise using mid calf height sturdy hiking boots with over boots by NEOS (www.neos.com) for all zodiac rides but make sure they really do not have any tendency to leak. (Another alternative is knee high rubber boots.) Once on land, take the NEOS boots off, put on MICROSPIKES (www.kahtoola.com) over your hiking boots. These microspikes really do provide great traction on ice and snow and do lessen your chances of slipping and falling.

ZEAGRAHM EXPEDITIONS: I have travelled to these locations twice (November 2002 and January 2008) with Zegrasm Expeditions (www.zeco.com) and highly recommend them. On each trip they run, at least one owner is aboard. They emphasize safety and lease the best ships with the most up to date equipment so they continuously are aware of the weather conditions, ice bergs etc that are ahead. Before a single passenger boards a zodiac for a landing, multiple crew zodiacs have gone to those sites and deemed the landings to be safe . If sea or weather conditions do not permit a safe landing then an

alternative site will be found. Only one landing was deemed unsafe on each of my trips and their replacements were fabulous.

2002 TRIP: The 20 day 2002 trip involved flying to Santiago, Chile arriving early in the morning. I was met at the airport by Zegrahm and taken to our hotel. The rest of the day was free to explore Santiago. Our hotel was the Plaza San Francisco which was downtown. The Presidential Palace was but blocks away and it was easy to explore the city. That night Zegrahm hosted a cocktail hour meet and greet party. All owners and group leaders and personnel were introduced. The next morning we flew to Port Stanley, the Falklands where we were able to see the town, have lunch and get to our ship. We embarked and headed to South Georgia Island at 4PM. South Georgia Island is teeming in wildlife. It's about 100 miles long, very mountainous and less than 200 people inhabit this island. In the early 1900s over 1000 people were working to recover oil from slaughtered whales at Grytviken whaling station, one of a number on the island. Today only the museum and some research buildings are used. We did a morning and afternoon landing each of our three days there at different penguin rookery sites. There was also an optional 4 mile hike from Fortuna Bay to Stromness Bay recreating the path Sir Ernest Shackleton took on his trek to return to civilization. We then travelled to Elephant Island where we rode zodiacs in the calm waters among icebergs. Chinstrap penguins and weddell seals were on ice flows. The next day we finally arrived in Antarctica and the weather was perfect in the narrow straits that we cruised. We made 6 landing in Antarctica and Deception Island each time visiting more penguin colonies and seeing 5 different seals and extensive bird life as well as whales. On Deception Island we hiked 3 _ miles from the beach landing at Bailey's Head through the chinstrap colony gaining about 400 + feet in elevation before descending into the caldera to meet up with our ship. We then travelled back to the Falklands landing twice to see more penguins and other wildlife before flying back to Santiago and on to home the following day. We spent a full 6 days at sea listening to lectures, seeing movies, learning about early explorers and multiple different topics. The food was great.

The entire Zegrahm team was most accessible and helpful at all times. It was most adventurous to roam the ship even in the stormiest weather. Meclyzine kept me from getting seasick. I was able to get on the internet or use ship to shore phone cards to call home. They had exercise facilities on board, a rather extensive library and the bridge was a neat place to visit 24/7. Always following in the ship's wake were innumerable shorebirds and albatrosses. I just loved the challenge of trying to capture flight images by bracing myself against the railing on the back deck of the ship.

2008TRIP: Our ship was the Clipper Adventurer. Our crossing of the South Scotia Sea was far calmer. We travelled almost the same route on our way to Antarctica, but on the way back we disembarked at Ushuaia, Argentina via the Drake Passage which was extremely stormy with winds of 75-80 mph.

CAMERA EQUIPMENT: I travel through airports with all my camera gear in a Think Tank roll on bag. If you want to keep it simple, a Canon XTi digital camera and a 28-300 lens is a perfect combination. Make sure you can autofocus with this setup and you can change the active focal point. A G10 is a small hand held great backup camera. I chose to take a Canon 1DMIII and a 40D as a backup camera. I took three lens, a 28-135 f2.8 IS lens for scenic images, a 70-200 IS f4 lens which combined with a 1.4x TC I used for almost all zodiac taken images or close in images of penguins or seals. For flight photography a 400 f5.6 lens or 300 IS f2.8 lens works quite well. Once on board ship, I repack all my camera gear I will be taking on the zodiac in a large LOWEPRO bag. Take some shower caps to protect your cameras from rain or formal THINK TANK rain protection gear.

LAPTOP BACKPACK: My laptop bag contains my 14 " laptop which weighs just over 4 pounds. All electrical cords, battery charges for my cameras, medications, passport and travel documents are contained in this as well. When necessary I have even placed a third camera body and another lens in this bag.

CLOTHING: It's summer in Antarctica. The temperature rarely is in the teens, more likely between 20 to 40 degrees. (Montana or New England in the winter is much colder.) I wear an outer light weight windbreaker jacket with hood and heavier waterproof outer pants with jeans underneath. I take thermal underwear but rarely wear this. I will wear a T-shirt and a long sleeve fleece on top. Make sure you have a winter pull on cap as well as a baseball cap to shade you on sunny days. Winter gloves are needed plus Velcro strapped knee pads for kneeling on snow or rocks.

KEYS TO IMPROVE YOUR IMAGES: Penguins are about 2 feet tall. You will do best if you shoot at their eye level. This means kneeling or at times lying on the ground. Try to keep your backgrounds free of any distracting objects or even other penguins. With a lot of snow on the ground, flash is rarely needed except to provide catch light or to light up indoor ship shots. In low light situations, make sure your ISO is high enough so you are shooting with enough speed so your images are sharp. I fully set my exposure manually. You can spot meter on clean snow at +1 2/3 or +2. If you are overexposed, my LCD image will have blinking highlights indicating I need to let less light in. Learn to meter manually so your subject is exposed properly. On zodiacs your speed should be at least 1/250 at a minimum and far more if your subject is moving.

TRAVEL TO THE FALKLANDS ONLY: If you want to go to just the Falklands, then I would recommend Chas Glatzer.
www.shootthelight.com

TRAVEL TO ANTARCTICA ONLY: Look on www.naturescapes.net to see who might be leading tours there.

Recommended website to learn more about Sir Ernest Shackleton
www.coolantarctica.com

To see other galleries of my images go to
www.jimurbach.smugmug.com.

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