

Andrew Harper's Hideaway Report[®]

MAY 2016 | Our 37th Year

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TRAVELING THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF TRULY ENCHANTING PLACES



PENGUINS, SEABIRDS, SEALS, WHALES AND SUBLIME SCENERY

Antarctic Cruise Adventure

Antarctica is the place of the moment. Cruises sell out a year in advance, and the Andrew Harper Travel Office is deluged with inquiries. Perhaps this is because the continent is far removed from the world's troubles. On an overcrowded planet, Antarctica's emptiness and purity could be part of the appeal. For many, the teeming wildlife is probably the primary draw. And in an era with too few leaders of stature, maybe the nobility of explorers like Ernest Shackleton is especially magnetic. But for whatever combination of reasons, the Great White Continent is a staple of cocktail party conversations and the 2016 destination of choice.

Antarctica has exercised a special hold on my imagination since, as a boy, I read the story of the ill-fated Shackleton

expedition. His ship, the *Endurance*, was trapped and wrecked by the ice. After a heroic journey to seek help, Shackleton returned to rescue all of his men, 100 years ago, in August 1916.

This year also happens to be the 50th anniversary of the first commercial trip to Antarctica, in 1966, organized by Lindblad Travel, as the company was then called. Lars-Eric Lindblad pioneered expeditions to places previously inaccessible to the general public, and in 1981 I sailed to Antarctica aboard his first ship, the *MS Lindblad Explorer*. The original company ceased operations in 1989; its heir is Lindblad Expeditions, now under the direction of Lars-Eric's son, Sven-Olof. Since 2004, it has been allied with the National Geographic Society, and its flagship today is the *National Geographic Explorer*. While

COVER PHOTOGRAPH

National Geographic Explorer Zodiac in Cierva Cove, Antarctic Peninsula / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

THIS MONTH

Sailing South to the Ice

A 14-day voyage to the Antarctic Peninsula aboard the *National Geographic Explorer* bequeathed memories for a lifetime. 1-6

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Belize Revisited

This tiny country offers pristine coral reefs, Mayan ruins and jungle wildlife. 8-11

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Zodiac excursion from the *National Geographic Explorer* / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

there are other attractive high-end cruise options to Antarctica (see Page 7), in light of the anniversary I decided to journey aboard the successor ship to the one that first took me to Antarctica 35 years ago.

At 5.4 million square miles, Antarctica is larger than the contiguous United States and nearly twice the size of Australia. It is the coldest, driest and windiest of the seven continents. Most of it is covered by a vast sheet of ice — on average over a mile thick — that contains about 70 percent of the world's fresh water, although the continent receives less than 6 inches of precipitation a year. In winter, temperatures in the interior range from minus 40 to minus 94 degrees. Fortunately, there are outlying coastal areas that are gentler, most notably the Antarctic Peninsula, where daytime summer temperatures are usually in the high 20s.

On a map, Antarctica looks like a stingray. The Antarctic Peninsula is the tail, pointing to the tip of South America, from which it is separated by 630 miles of

the Southern Ocean. In summer — December, January and February — Antarctica's waters are alive with penguins, seals, whales and seabirds. All come to feed on the vast swarms of krill, a small shrimp-like crustacean that is the cornerstone of the Antarctic ecosystem.

Our chosen cruise followed a route from Ushuaia, Argentina, across the Drake Passage to the South Shetland Islands, and then along the coast of the Antarctic Peninsula. In total, we spent 11 days on board. Many Lindblad cruises also incorporate visits to the Falkland Islands and South Georgia Island, adding another week. We opted for the shorter trip solely due to other travel commitments. Glancing over the proposed itinerary, it seemed vague bordering on evasive — but the reason is that everything the ship does is dependent on the prevailing sea and ice conditions.

Our journey began in Buenos Aires, where we joined our fellow travelers for an afternoon of sightseeing, followed by a cocktail/briefing session and an early-

morning flight to Ushuaia. Passengers ranged in age from 9 to the late 70s, and included singles, couples, families and people from more than half a dozen countries (though a majority were from the U.S.).

The six-deck, 367-foot *National Geographic Explorer* joined the Lindblad fleet in 2008 after a complete retrofit and redesign as an expedition ship. For travel in polar seas, the hull was strengthened to a rating of Ice-1A Super, the highest attainable, meaning it can easily cut through ice almost three feet thick. Other safety features include forward-scanning radar, high-definition ice radar and a xenon-bulb light mounted on the mast to illuminate and reflect ice at night. At times we could feel bumps and shakes as we went through the ice, but I never felt any concern — although at breakfast one morning, after some pronounced shudders, a fellow passenger wondered whether “the captain's opted for an overland route.” All 81 cabins are outside facing, and include 13 with balconies, plus six large suites and

Onboard the *Explorer*: captain on the bridge; library; fitness center; snow crab cocktail in the dining room; suite interior / PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER



14 cabins for single travelers, making for a regular complement of 148 passengers.

The reception area gave us our first look at the ship's interior. I was impressed by its polished floor with an inlaid reproduction of the National Geographic Society seal, and a curved front desk that made the staff more accessible. I couldn't call the appointments luxurious, but they were casually elegant and functional. The corridors provided judiciously placed handrails and were decorated with striking prints of marine life taken by National Geographic photographers.

Passenger accommodations are primarily on the main deck and the upper deck, where you'll also find the lounge, the bistro and the restaurant. Other public areas are the chart room, with coffee, tea and soft drinks available throughout the day; the fitness center, with sweeping views though three walls of windows; and the

“ Unlike most cruise ships, the bridge is open around the clock and it became my habit to head there shortly after sunrise.

spa, with sauna and treatment rooms. My favorite spots were on the topmost Bridge Deck. Unlike most cruise ships, the bridge is open around the clock, and it became my habit to head there shortly after sunrise to converse with the naturalists, to pick up tips on seabird identification and to learn what to look out for on the day's excursions. Also on the top deck is the library/observation lounge, a wonderful glass-enclosed space and a perfect spot for watching the passing scene, binoculars at the ready.

Like the rest of the ship, our cabin had an unfussy aesthetic. Practical rather

than luxurious, it came with neutral carpet and walls, plus wood laminate furnishings. It provided more than enough storage, including drawers with push-button hardware for securing them in rough seas, and open closet space. A desk was equipped with a full array of plug-ins for electronics — the satellite Wi-Fi is slow and comes at a supplemental charge, but it does work — and a glass top that served as a display for a National Geographic atlas, opened to Antarctica, that slid out for further consultation. The extremely comfortable bed was positioned so that it was easy to see through the big porthole. And the well-designed bath proved larger than expected, with dark-blue tile accents, a walk-in shower and plenty of shelf space for toiletries.

After departing Ushuaia, the ship entered the Drake Passage, notorious for having the roughest seas in the world when the weather is bad. Coming or going, you will get either the “Drake Shake,” which means you'll be tossed about — even though the ship is equipped with stabilizers — or the “Drake Lake,” with smooth sailing. On the voyage out, we had calm seas, which gave us a chance to settle into the routine of the ship.

A good part of the first day was devoted to briefings and presentations in the lounge, where comfortable seating is arrayed around a central speaker's podium. The 14 members of the expedition team introduced themselves at a morning briefing. By my calculations, they had more than 250 years of combined experience in the field. Their specialties included ornithology, marine biology and geology, and some were actively engaged in scientific research supported by the National Geographic Society. Also among them were ever-helpful certified



Antarctic Bookshelf

HERE ARE THE BOOKS that I found most useful in preparing for our trip, and while there.

Endurance by Alfred Lansing is a page-turning classic that tells the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated but ultimately heroic second expedition to Antarctica.

The Endurance by Caroline Alexander also tells the Shackleton story with more information; she wrote her book 29 years later. It has the added benefit of striking photographs taken by the expedition photographer, Frank Hurley (who saved the negatives before the *Endurance* sank beneath the ice).

End of the Earth by Peter Matthiessen recounts the author's two journeys to Antarctica. Matthiessen writes with a keen eye for nature in an almost lyrical style.

The Worst Journey in the World by Apsley Cherry-Garrard describes the author's harrowing experiences as a member of the disastrous 1910-1913 British Antarctic Expedition led by Robert Falcon Scott (who did not survive). One of the great adventure stories.

A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife by Hadoram Shirihihi comprises illustrations, photographs and maps in the most detailed reference work on the subject. At 544 pages, it was too heavy to carry along, but I consulted it often on my return.

Antarctic Wildlife: A Visitor's Guide by James Lowen turned out to be just right for taking on the trip. Usefully organized by area, it contains excellent photographs that are helpful in identifying species.

Terra Incognita by Sara Wheeler is a narrative of her year on the ice as a guest of the National Science Foundation at the McMurdo Station, written in a personal, anecdotal style.

There are also excellent DVDs: **South**, which assembles the original film of the Shackleton expedition; **March of the Penguins**, narrated by Morgan Freeman; **Antarctica**, a combination of two PBS Nature documentaries; and **Frozen Planet**, from the BBC documentary team that made the incredible *Planet Earth* series.





NATURAL WONDERS

The Many Guises of Ice

IF YOU THOUGHT that ice was a fairly straightforward substance, and chiefly of use for cooling a gin and tonic, then Antarctica will be a revelation. You quickly realize that ice comes in an astonishing array of shapes and sizes.

Brash ice refers to accumulations of floating fragments not more than six feet across.

Fast ice gathers at the edges of the continent, remains stationary for several years and can attain thicknesses of several yards.

Frazil ice is created by ice crystals that have been agitated by wave motion. It looks like slush and has a depth of up to 10 feet.

Grease ice forms in open water by accumulating ice crystals. It looks like an oil slick and has a sheen and low reflectivity that provide its name.

Pack ice is made up of thin plates of ice that form around the continent in winter; so named by the explorer Captain James Cook in 1774.

Pancake ice is circular pieces of floating ice formed by accretions of brash and/or frazil ice.

Icebergs are formed when pieces break off from the Antarctic ice sheet, ice shelves or glaciers. Any piece of ice that rises 15 feet or more above the surface of the ocean is classified as an iceberg. Pieces that rise between five and 15 feet are called **berg bits**; those less than five feet and more than one foot are **growlers**. There are two principal types of iceberg: **tabular**, with table-like tops — the largest calved off the Ross Ice Shelf in 2000 and measured 185 by 23 miles — and **non-tabular**. When the latter become top-heavy from their immersed portions melting away, they turn over, exposing fantastic ice sculptures.

photo instructors and a photographer from National Geographic.

Once we had traversed the Drake Passage, our days were filled with shore landings and Zodiac tours. The passengers were divided into six groups to ensure that no site was overwhelmed. I found it useful to spend the first moments of each excursion with one or more of the naturalists. Passionate about Antarctica, approachable and generous, they had scouted the location before our arrival, noting what animals were where and setting out small orange cones to remind us to keep a safe distance from them. While walking through their colonies, the penguins would sometimes approach to peck at our boots, but mostly they just waddled by without a look. With their experienced eyes, expedition members invariably caught things we would have missed: an unusual macaroni penguin, for example,

Crabeater seals, Booth Island / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER



embedded in a crèche of molting Adélie chicks. On another occasion, a naturalist directed my attention to the shore where a penguin scanned the water, wary of a patrolling leopard seal. The penguin did not look carefully enough — immediately

“Penguins would sometimes approach to peck our boots, but mostly they just waddled by without a look.

after it splashed into the sea, the unfortunate creature was seized by the seal and disappeared beneath the waves.

There is a saying about Antarctica: “The first time you come for the penguins, the second time for the ice.” Icebergs melt faster beneath the water — the sea being much warmer than the air — and after a while they tend to flip over to reveal astonishing wave-crafted shapes. Powerful winds then further erode their irregular surfaces. We had daily opportunities to get out on the water to explore. On one foray we ventured among extraordinary formations, including one with an enormous tunnel. Most striking was the intense neon blue that seemed to emanate from icebergs of all shapes, the result of air in the ice that has become so compressed that it allows only blue light to escape. On another afternoon, conditions were so calm that we were able to leave the ship in two-person inflatable kayaks (designed to be extremely resistant to capsizing). We were cautioned to keep back 25 feet from the larger icebergs in case they “calved,” but gliding past with

the only sound being the splash of our paddles was like being in a vast outdoor sculpture exhibition.

Every evening after we'd changed for dinner — dress on the ship is casual — we would gather in the lounge for a daily recap. Fortified with hot hors d'oeuvres and cocktails — it's been a while since I saw so many martinis — we listened to a rundown of events and a preview of possibilities for the following day. Next came a lecture from one of the naturalists: the role waves play in the shaping of ice; key markers in identifying seabirds; how to get the most out of your camera. This was followed by reports from the scientists on board: what they discovered on their dives that day; what the remote underwater vehicle had recorded; what the tagging of killer whale populations had revealed.

I loved these occasions, not just for the wealth of information but also for wonderful camaraderie that was a hallmark of our time on the ship. I attribute this atmosphere chiefly to the crew, who were engaging, friendly and contagiously cheerful, without being overly familiar. One evening I lingered after the recap while everyone else went off to dinner. As I sat there, the expedition staff spread throughout the room to clear away the empty glasses, napkins and plates. They were soon joined by the captain himself, an illustration of the “all hands” mentality that informs the entire vessel.

As is true on all cruise ships, meals set the rhythm of life aboard. Their quality proved to be a real surprise. I had wondered if, given the emphasis on nature and off-ship excursions, the food might not be at the level experienced on more obviously luxurious vessels. But we found the dishes to be creative, well-cooked and attractively presented. Breakfast and lunch were served buffet style with an almost daunting variety of options. Dinners were presented at table, with choices such as rack of New Zealand lamb, magret of duck and baked fillet of Arctic char. Seating was open. In addition to the dining room, we could eat in the adjacent casual bistro, opt for a light lunch in the observation lounge or enjoy dinner as an invited guest with members of the crew in the chart room.

Each day produced its own roster of wonders, but one excursion stands out. Having enjoyed fine weather for most of

Clockwise: humpback whale, molting Adélie penguin, elephant seal, gentoo penguins and crabeater seal



Wildlife Encounters

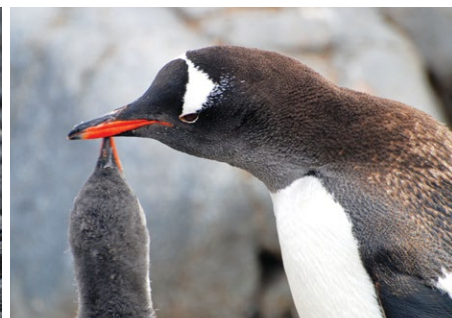
We saw numerous species on our trip including:

Penguins — Adélies, gentoos and chinstraps

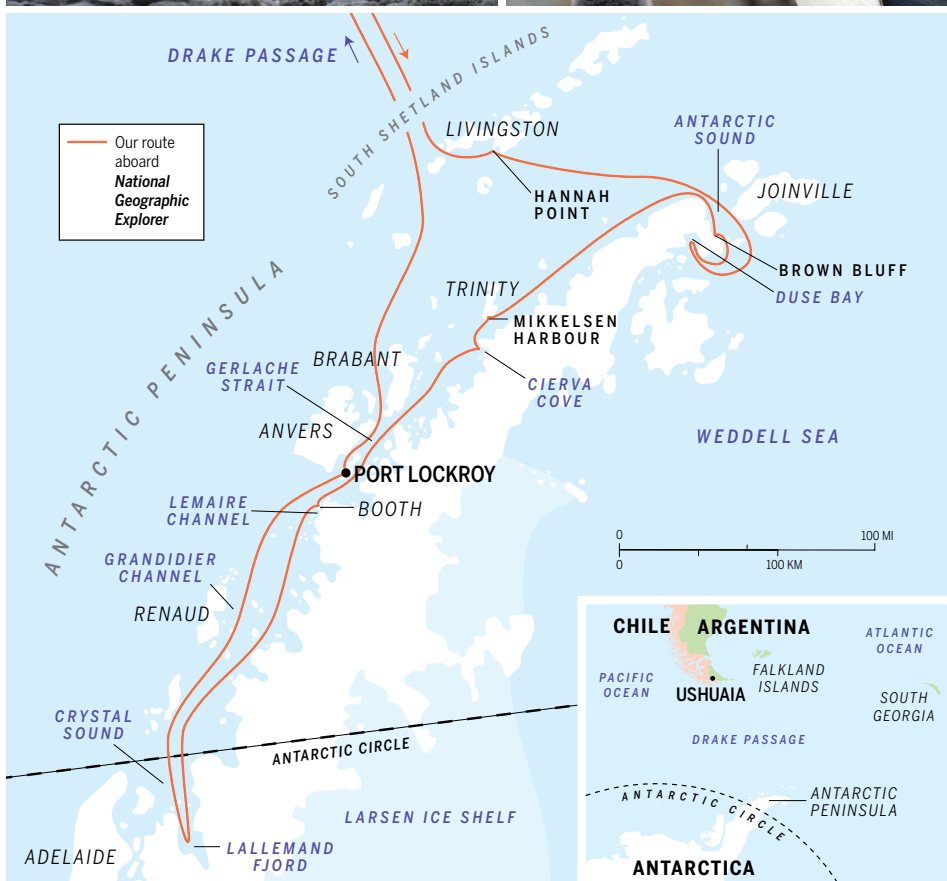
Seals — Weddells, crabeaters, leopard seals, Antarctic fur seals and southern elephant seals

Whales — Humpbacks and orcas

Birds — Albatrosses, kelp gulls, Antarctic petrels, spotted skuas, Antarctic terns and snow kestrels



PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER



HERITAGE

Port Lockroy Museum

A SURPRISING HIGH POINT of the trip was our visit to Port Lockroy, a former military base that has been restored and now operates as a museum. In World War II, the British constructed three bases on the Antarctic Peninsula. Port Lockroy was designated "Base A." Following its wartime service, Base A became an important center for scientific work and study until 1962. Then, the scientists moved to more up-to-date stations and Port Lockroy was closed.

In 1996, under the auspices of the United Kingdom Antarctic Heritage Trust, Base A was restored as a museum that faithfully shows what life was like in the original outpost. I have to think that the inhabitants must have been as struck by the setting as I was, with its huge glaciers spilling down into the dark gray sea from snowcapped mountains emblazoned by the early morning sun.

The base and its principal structure, Bransfield House, sits on Goudier Island, an easy landing by Zodiac. Inside the snug Bransfield House, the past came alive. There was a bath, with a tub upended to make space when not in use. I especially enjoyed seeing the kitchen, with its big coal-fired stove and full range of supplies in original containers. Apparently the staff ate well, but for variety would resort to penguin eggs. I will rely on reports that they taste good, but better scrambled than fried, as the cooked "white" remains translucent. Not surprisingly, room was found for a well-stocked bar. Nearby, a gramophone provided entertainment for the Saturday "drinks night."

None of us came to Antarctica to shop, but we found opportunity in the gift boutique. The shop also serves as a post office — an official branch of the Royal Mail — that processes more than 70,000 postcards a year dropped off by visitors. First-day issues are in demand by stamp collectors the world over, as is the Port Lockroy postmark, so a postcard home can serve as a good souvenir.

Supplies at Port Lockroy / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER



The Explorer dug into the ice in Lallemand Fjord; passengers head toward resting seals / PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER

“ Looking back at our ship, I was reminded of the Apollo astronauts who, having ventured out on the plains of the moon, turned to see their fragile lunar lander.



our trip, the captain set a course to take us below the Antarctic Circle (this is not always possible). Having crossed the line, we entered a tranquil fjord flanked by impressive snowcapped hills. A vast ice sheet lay ahead. To our amazement, the ship plowed straight into the ice. Crew then disembarked to assess the conditions, and when they had assured the captain that the ice would support us, we exited through a doorway on a lower deck, crossed a small bridge and walked out onto the frozen ocean.

Most of us paused for a moment, striving to come to terms with the extraordinary experience. After a while we walked across to where some seals were resting. Looking back at our ship, our refuge in the

wilderness, I was reminded of the Apollo astronauts who, having ventured out on the plains of the moon, turned to see their fragile lunar lander. For a moment I understood the feeling of being on another world.

Unlike virtually everywhere else I have visited during my wandering life, the Antarctic has remained exactly the same. The Antarctic Peninsula, with its soaring peaks, glorious wildlife and colossal icebergs, is just as strange, remote and hauntingly beautiful as it was 35 years ago. Climate scientists warn of the potential catastrophic collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet, an area larger than Mexico, but for now the Great White Continent appears to the traveler's eye just as it did to Shackleton, precisely a century ago. **[HR]**

Lindblad Expeditions' National Geographic Explorer

"Journey to Antarctica: The White Continent" is a 14-day trip (also offered on the 102-passenger *National Geographic Orion*). Category 3 Accommodation, \$34,380 for two. Rates include all meals and non-alcoholic beverages; hotels ashore as indicated in the itinerary; sightseeing and entrance fees; special access permits; park fees; port taxes; and group flights. Lindblad Expeditions. Tel. 800-397-3348. expeditions.com

Additional Antarctic Cruise Options

When contemplating a cruise to the Antarctic, it is vital to think carefully about your personal priorities. Do you want a luxurious voyage, or are you in search of a wildlife adventure? Is it the quality of the lecturers and naturalists, or that of the food and wine that is of primary importance?

Silversea Having been a frequent passenger on Silversea ships, I can attest to the high levels of service that they provide. The appointments are more luxurious than those on Lindblad. A culinary partnership with Relais & Châteaux ensures on-board cuisine of a high standard. Journeys to the Antarctic are currently on the *Silver Explorer*, a purpose-built expedition ship that accommodates 130 passengers. Its ice rating of 1A is not quite as high as that of the Lindblad ships. A team of 11 experts accompanies the voyage and joins Zodiac excursions. Antarctica itineraries are scheduled from November 2016 to early March 2017. *Veranda Suite for 10-day trip, \$32,970 for two; Veranda Suite for 18-day trip, \$52,410 for two. Tel. 888-978-4070. silversea.com*

Seabourn This company puts a premium on luxury. Recently, it made a transition from smaller vessels to “Odyssey” class ships, which accommodate up to 458 passengers. The newest, *Seabourn Quest*, launched in 2011 and was reinforced in 2013 to give it an ice rating of 1D, lower than the other ships covered here. And with such a large complement of passengers, the *Quest* will not have the same access



Ponant's *Le Boréal* near South Georgia Island / © MATHIEU GESTA

to Antarctic landing sites — restricted to fewer than 200 people — as the others. However, its Antarctic cruises have a full expedition staff of lecturers, naturalists and photo instructors. Two cruises at the end of 2016 follow a 21-day itinerary from Valparaíso, Chile, to Buenos Aires, with six days in Antarctica and numerous stops in Patagonia. *Veranda Suite on the November 28 cruise, from \$25,998 for two; and Veranda Suite on the 24-day trip departing on December 19, from \$31,998 for two. The same prices apply to the two 2017 trips, scheduled for January 12 and February 2. Tel. 855-545-7619. seabourn.com*

Ponant This French company has made its mark in recent years with sleek vessels that look more like mega-yachts than conventional cruise ships. The three ships that sail Antarctic itineraries — *Le Boréal*, *Le Soléal* and *Le Lyrial* — limit the number of passengers to 199 so that they can visit restricted sites. All cabins have balconies. The décor is “stylish contemporary,” and

great emphasis is placed on comfort. The ships are all equipped with up-to-date safety devices and have ice ratings of 1C, not as high as the Silversea and Lindblad vessels. Ponant has a fully qualified expedition staff. Antarctic cruises are scheduled from mid-November to early March. Generally, itineraries are 11 or 16 days; the final March sailing is 22 days and ends in Cape Town. *Deluxe Stateroom for 11-day voyage, \$24,920 for two; Deluxe Stateroom for 16-day voyage, \$26,840 for two. Tel. 888-400-1082. ponant.com*

Abercrombie & Kent A&K charts *Le Boréal* and *Le Lyrial* for its two Antarctic itineraries of 12 and 17 days, respectively. A&K's own highly respected expedition teams are on board for these cruises. *Deluxe Stateroom for 12-day trip, \$28,990 for two; Deluxe Stateroom for 17-day trip, \$43,990 for two. Tel. 888-611-4711. abercrombiekent.com*

Lindblad Expeditions As well as the voyage we took, Lindblad Expeditions offers a 24-day itinerary that includes Antarctica, the Falkland Islands and South Georgia Island. Cruises are aboard either the 148-passenger *National Geographic Explorer*, or the 102-passenger *National Geographic Orion*. Trips begin in November 2016 and run through February 2017. *Category 3 Accommodation, \$54,260 for two. Tel. 800-397-3348. expeditions.com*

Expert staff in the **Andrew Harper Travel Office** will be delighted to discuss the merits of all the ships above. Tel. (800) 375-4685. reservations@andrewharper.com

“Land of The Ice Bears” trips are offered by Lindblad Expeditions / © RALPH LEE HOPKINS



Arctic Cruises

MANY HARPER SUBSCRIBERS have expressed strong interest in travel to the opposite end of the world. Whereas Antarctica is a continent surrounded by ocean, the Arctic is frozen ocean surrounded by continents. Most of the inquiries I get about the Arctic focus on polar bears. I have detailed options that will address this passion at andrewharper.com/go/arctic-cruises.



PLEASANT SURPRISES AND SEVERE DISAPPOINTMENTS

Belize: From the Jungle to the Beach

Shimmering waters off Ambergris Caye / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

The tiny country of Belize packs an astonishing range of attractions into a space slightly larger than New Jersey. The Mayans left numerous enigmatic ruins, ranging from small ceremonial centers to major cities such as Caracol, thought to have had 150,000 inhabitants at its height in the eighth century. Forests of tropical hardwoods and palm trees house hundreds of colorful bird species, such as keel-billed toucans and scarlet macaws. The world's second-largest barrier reef protects the coastline and shelters a rainbow of marine life. And just above sea level, picturesque cayes and barrier islands

are home to mangrove forests, white-sand beaches and small-scale resorts.

With a population of just 350,000, Belize has done an outstanding job of protecting its environmental and historical riches. More than half of its primary forest remains intact, and at least a quarter of the country's land and sea is set aside as national parks and nature reserves. Local people are more or less fluent in English, the official language. And outside of a few rough neighborhoods in Belize City, a place of little interest, the country is safe.

Many visitors spend all their time by the coast on Ambergris Caye, but my

favorite Belize itineraries include time both by the sea and in the jungle. **Belcampo Belize**, near Punta Gorda in the relatively undiscovered southern province of Toledo, is the rare property that affords easy access to both. Although set high on a hillside, it takes only six minutes by funicular to descend to the Rio Grande, where Belcampo has kayaks and a large pontoon boat for snorkeling and fishing excursions. The resort comprises some 12,000 acres of land, including a forest-shaded cacao plantation — Belize's largest — and fields of sugar cane destined to be distilled into rum in Belcampo's new on-site distillery.

The jungle gives way to ornamental tropical gardens and the resort's 16 accommodations, the most desirable of which are the four Ridge Suites, built on the crest of the hill. A short funicular (or long staircase) connects the Ridge Suite complex,



Dining terrace at Belcampo Belize / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER



complete with its own infinity pool, to the rest of the resort below. Aside from their very spacious interiors, the suites' most attractive features are their wide furnished terraces with hot tubs, overlooking either the sunrise and distant coast (suites 13 and 16), or sunset and jungle-covered hills (14 and 15).

Alas, these accommodations were all full, so we opted for a Deluxe King Suite, which proved to be comfortable and attractive (request suite 1, 2 or 4 for the most privacy). Beneath a beamed ceiling, we found an open-plan space with tile floors painted white, two inviting rattan armchairs, a campaign-inspired desk and leather chair, and a firm king bed flanked by basket-shaded hanging lights. To the left of the bed, sliding doors opened to a screened-in porch with two sofas and a

“The bath contained a walk-in shower clad entirely in pebbles; a window overlooked the jungle, allowing one to bathe and bird-watch simultaneously.

table hewn from half a log. At the other end of the suite, the bath contained a contemporary trough sink of polished concrete and an immense walk-in shower, clad entirely in pebbles. A tall window in the shower overlooked the jungle, allowing one to bathe and bird-watch simultaneously.

Unseasonably cool weather left us with little inclination to use the small pool, nor did we work out in the little “Jungle Gym,”

which has attractive views of the forest. But Mrs. Harper did take advantage of the compact spa, where she had a restorative and well-priced scrub of brown sugar, cloves and cacao nibs, a treatment that also included a mini-facial.

Belcampo's other principal amenities are its stylishly decorated bar and restaurant, housed within a two-story building overlooking the treetops. The cocktails proved be memorable, notably the Spicy Mayan, a refreshing and well-balanced drink of muddled allspice leaves shaken with white rum, lime juice, simple syrup and *culantro* elixir (a wild cilantro liqueur). Dishes in the restaurant — aside from one misconceived main course of Gulf mackerel with undercooked grilled bok choy and useless chunks of crispy rice — tended to be simply presented but satisfying. I especially enjoyed the fresh fish tacos with papaya salsa; mackerel crudo with ginger and mint; and snook *tikini*, a dish of crispy fish with a stew of tomatoes, onions and peppers over mashed plantains. Some 70 percent of the ingredients used by the restaurant come from the property's own organic farm.

On occasion, service at Belcampo was clumsy. For example, when Mrs. Harper emerged from her spa treatment and expected to have some tea in the waiting room, she found the chairs covered with cushions from the pool loungers outside. Similarly, one night we returned to our suite after dinner to discover that all the decorative pillows on our bed had been stacked in one of our armchairs. Never-



Entrance to Barton Creek Cave

SACRED CAVES

Subterranean Belize

THE LIMESTONE BEDROCK beneath much of Belize is riddled with caves, which the Mayans regarded as portals to the underworld. They used some of them for important religious rituals, including human sacrifice. The most dramatic example of such a cave is **Actun Tunichil Muknal** (often abbreviated as ATM), the archaeological riches of which are accessible only by fording a river, swimming a stretch in the cave and doing a bit of light rock climbing.

Not feeling quite that adventurous, we opted for a more relaxing visit to **Barton Creek Cave**. Our guide paddled our canoe through the vine-draped cave mouth, and slowly its soaring ceiling, dripping with stalactites, came into view. We quietly glided deeper into the cave, reaching the “Maya Bridge.” Near this arch-shaped rock formation spanning the water, we could see carefully placed clay pots, and even a human skull partially embedded in the rock. In the silence of the cave, the presence of the ancient Mayans felt eerily palpable.

Screened-in porch, shower and bedroom of our suite at Belcampo Belize; fish tacos / PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARPER





Xunantunich / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

ARCHAEOLOGY

Ruined Mayan Cities

BELCAMPO BELIZE stands near some intriguing and little-known Mayan sites, including **Nim Li Punit** and **Lubaantun**. The latter earned its name, which means “Place of the Fallen Stones,” after amateur archaeologist and treasure hunter Thomas Gann dynamited the tops of several buildings in the early 20th century (the original Mayan name is lost to time). In the walls that escaped Gann’s depredations, the stonework shows impressive precision. Some walls even display traces of the original ocher paint that decorated the pyramids’ exteriors.

To see several of the most well-known and spectacular Mayan cities, it’s better to base yourself at a luxury property near San Ignacio. The closest ruin is **Xunantunich**, but despite its proximity to town, we had the place virtually to ourselves. Xunantunich dates from the Classic Period and was first excavated in the 1890s, but recent archaeological work has unearthed several large buildings and a number of striking stucco friezes. The most remarkable structure is a 130-foot stepped pyramid known as El Castillo. A rough path (unsuitable for those with vertigo) leads to the summit, from where there is a panoramic view that encompasses the whole site as well as forested hills extending far into Belize and Guatemala.

The border with Guatemala is just 15 minutes from Ka’ana and The Lodge at Chaa Creek, making its Mayan sites easily accessible from Belize. More than once we’ve toured the majestic **Tikal**, but we’d never made time for enigmatic **Yaxha**, about an hour from the border. This expanse of nine plazas and some 500 buildings proved to be sensationally atmospheric, because again, we walked alone through the semi-excavated site. Numerous pyramids, palaces, observatories and ball courts have been unearthed, but many more buildings surrounding them remain covered in palms and strangler figs. The top of Structure 216 has sweeping views of the jungle and Lake Yaxha. We stood alone there at sunset, accompanied only by our guide, as the hoots of howler monkeys echoed across the treetops.

theless, our stay was enjoyable, and I would happily return in the future to try more of the resort’s myriad activities and excursions.

We headed next to San Ignacio, an ideal base for exploring Mayan cities such as Xunantunich, Caracol, Yaxha and Tikal, which rank among the most compelling ruins in the world. I opted to stay at **Ka’ana**, a 17-room contemporary resort set amid colorful gardens not far from my longtime San Ignacio favorite, The Lodge at Chaa Creek. We chose a Master Suite, one step down from the villas with private plunge pools. Although we had plenty of outdoor space, including a daybed and outdoor shower in the back and a small furnished terrace in front, the interior felt like a large deluxe room, not a suite. It had a comfortable king bed, a dinette and a built-in desk, but no sofa or armchairs. I liked the airy vaulted ceiling, the ample storage space and decorative touches such as Mayan-inspired paintings. But the bath did not feel luxurious, with faucets that didn’t fit the twin vessel sinks properly and a glass-block window illuminating the shower.

The restaurant, with a shady terrace and fire pit, served unfussy but delicious food, such as fresh shrimp ceviche; Mayan *dukunu* (sweet corn porridge) topped with spicy sausages; gnocchi with tomato and basil; and perfectly cooked double-cut molasses-glazed pork chops. Drink orders could be problematic, because the lone barman was clearly overwhelmed at peak times. And when I remarked to our waitress that my cocktail tasted tart and unbalanced, she replied, “Yes. It’s very rare for people to like that drink.” (She did not offer to replace it.)

A spa with two treatment rooms stood behind the small infinity pool. Farther into the gardens, a broad wooden deck hosts complimentary yoga classes twice a week and the occasional private dinner. All

these features I liked, but it was difficult to forgive the resort’s location just off the main road. The whoosh of cars constantly reminded me of civilization, which is precisely what I’d wanted to escape. Ka’ana has cheerful staff, well-run excursions and very comfortable accommodations, but I always wished I were back at The Lodge at Chaa Creek instead.

We decided to finish our stay with some relaxation on the coast. The secluded resort **El Secreto** is about 30 minutes by speedboat north of San Pedro, a colorful and touristy city on Ambergris Caye. This 13-villa property is located along a palm-lined stretch of well-groomed beach, raked daily by the staff. The indoor-outdoor restaurant has a soaring thatched roof, as does the sand-floored open-air bar; a lounge-lined infinity pool overlooks the sea. Our spacious and pretty Sea Villa also had a vaulted thatched roof, a soft king bed, a comfortable sofa and a beach-view terrace with a hot tub surrounded by gauzy curtains.

True to its name, the resort had secrets. There were the small surprises, such as the \$4 fee for each small cup of black coffee at breakfast and the fact that a staffer had to turn our hot tub’s heater on two hours in advance of when we wanted to use it. Several guests we spoke with were also surprised that seagrass and shallow water prevented swimming from the beach (complimentary kayaking and paddleboarding were available, however). Most irritating was the secret that the hotel allows non-guests full run of its facilities. A group staying in San Pedro monopolized the main pool’s hot tub, calling for loud reggae music to “get the party started.” After too many frozen margaritas, they decamped to the sofas in front of the check-in desk, where three of them proceeded to pass out. In short, El Secreto is unlikely to be a Harper recommendation anytime soon. **HR**

Belcampo Belize 91

LIKE The spacious and well-designed accommodations; the secluded hillside location; the professional and well-priced spa treatment; the views from the Ridge Suites; the cheerful service. **DISLIKE** Easily avoidable service missteps, such as using the spa waiting room as a storage shed. **GOOD TO KNOW** The hotel offers a food package including lunch and dinner, but it’s a better value to order à la carte. *Deluxe King Suite, \$650; Ridge Suite, \$720. Wilson Road, Punta Gorda, Toledo, Belize. Tel. (501) 722-0050. belcampobz.com*



preceding a rating, denotes an officially recommended hotel. **Ka’ana (89)** and **El Secreto (87)** were not up to my standards; more information is available online.

Classic Belize Resorts and Lodges

I have traveled to Belize regularly over the past three decades. During that period, a number of hotels and resorts have become established favorites. On my recent trip, I went in search of new discoveries, but my thoughts often turned to properties where, on previous visits, I have been fortunate to spend so many happy times.

The Beach

Although Belize faces the Caribbean, the country has few beaches of note. This is because a long barrier reef creates a vast saltwater lagoon between the coral and the shore. The snorkeling and diving may be superb, but beds of turtle grass often impede direct access to the water. This need not be a great inconvenience. At **Victoria House** on Ambergris Caye, a long wooden pier extends from the beach to a clear swimming area beyond the weed. A plantation-style hotel, Victoria House is an oasis of tranquility, despite being just 15 minutes by golf cart from the bustling town

Below, top to bottom: Beach Villa at Cayo Espanto and Beachfront Villa at Victoria House

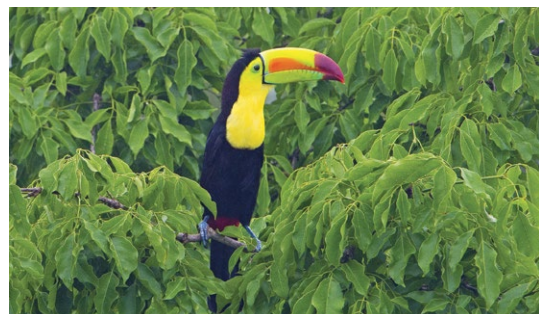


of San Pedro and its tiny airport. The property has a well-equipped dive shop staffed by experienced instructors, and guides are available for saltwater fly-fishing. For me, however, much of the property's appeal derives from its lovely tropical gardens and consistently friendly and obliging staff. Victoria House is a place to settle into a lounge beneath the palms and to read for hours undisturbed. The quality of the 42 accommodations is inconsistent, and the regular casitas are too simple to appeal to a majority of *Hideaway Report* readers. I recommend only the Infinity Suites, the Rainforest Suite and the deluxe units in the three beachfront villas.

Set on a private islet, 10 minutes by speedboat from San Pedro, **Cayo Espanto** is a resort also suited to lazy afternoons with a long novel. Its seven lavish cottages offer stylish living areas, separate dining spaces and private beachfront sun decks with heated infinity plunge pools. All rooms have personal butlers, and meals are served on private verandas. Cayo Espanto's principal drawback is that the shallow surrounding waters are ideal for bonefishing but not for swimming. Essentially this is a hideaway best suited to couples in search of privacy and seclusion.

The Jungle

Much of Belize is mountainous and covered with dry tropical forest. Surrounded by a 365-acre nature reserve, the eco-resort **The Lodge at Chaa Creek** is set on a grassy ridge above the Macal River, not far from the small town of San Ignacio and close to the border of Guatemala. The property's 23 palm-thatched cottages come with screened sitting areas and spacious verandas; some offer outdoor showers and Jacuzzis. I particularly recommend the Garden and Treetop suites. Activities at the property include horseback riding, canoeing, hiking, bird watching and escorted trips to spectacular ruined Mayan cities such as Tikal, Caracol and nearby Xunantunich. Chaa Creek is ideal for a family vacation and children between ages 7 and 15 will find themselves



From top: cabana at Chan Chich Lodge, keel-billed toucan, and Treetop Suite at The Lodge at Chaa Creek

in paradise. Adults in search of tranquility may be happier elsewhere.

Chan Chich Lodge is located on a 130,000-acre private nature reserve. The 12 one-bedroom and two three-bedroom thatched-roof cabanas are set in the plaza of an ancient Mayan city, and all around there are enigmatic green hummocks concealing structures long since buried beneath several feet of soil. Chan Chich feels remote; nocturnal jaguar sightings are not uncommon. Naturalists lead guests on hikes through the dense forest, where the birding is exceptional. Although Chan Chich could scarcely be described as luxurious, it is comfortable and atmospheric. The property will chiefly appeal to those with a deep interest in the natural world. I have recently received several enthusiastic reports from subscribers, which have led me to raise the property's rating in the 2016 update to the Central & South America section of the *Harper Collection*. **HR**



Final moments of a lingering sunset in Grandidier Channel, Antarctic Peninsula / PHOTO BY ANDREW HARPER

New and Noteworthy

Chinese Hideaway Hotels

The indefatigable Adrian Zecha, the founder of Aman resorts and now an octogenarian, has launched a typically imaginative new venture. Zecha is the co-founder of Ahn Luh, a luxury hotel brand in China. Its first property, **Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao**, recently opened in the historic Qingpu district of Shanghai (30 miles to the west of downtown). The concept of the new group is to offer all the comforts of a modern hotel in an ancient Chinese cultural context. Ahn Luh Zhujiajiao is based on a restored 600-year-old Ming Dynasty mansion. Each of the 35 surrounding villas comes with its own courtyard and garden. Amenities include a restaurant serving local cuisine, a Tai Chi center and spa with treatments inspired by traditional Chinese medicine.

Singita Lebombo Expanded

Following the redesign of Singita Ebony Lodge, in South Africa's Sabi Sand Game Reserve, **Singita Lebombo Lodge** is the latest of the group's properties to undergo reinvention. Located on a private concession in a remote area of Kruger National Park, Lebombo is famed for the bold contemporary design of its 15 loft-style suites. Now, the public areas have been enlarged and augmented by a new rooftop dining area, an interactive kitchen, a library and an additional 80-foot lap pool. Two new family suites have also been created, which can be combined to form a self-contained four-bedroom villa.

Seabourn Spa Innovation

The new 600-passenger **Seabourn Encore**, with an interior designed by Adam D. Tihany, and a restaurant under the aegis of Thomas Keller, is scheduled to enter service on December 4. Aside from a spa with a full range of massage, detox, cleansing and wrap therapies, the ship offers The Retreat, billed as "the ultimate serene space." At its center is a large whirlpool, ringed with 15 private cabanas designed as luxurious living rooms. There, the fortunate occupants can relax while perusing the menu of spa cuisine, or indulging in a glass of Champagne. Sounds like fun.

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LAST WORD

Making Connections

HAVING RECENTLY COMPLETED trips to Myanmar and New Zealand, my enthusiasm for intercontinental flights is temporarily at a low ebb. Actually, it's not really the long flights that are the killer. It's waiting around for a connection, and then the second airplane, which does the damage. Before the Great Recession, the trend was for flights to get longer and longer. Singapore Airlines used to fly the 19-hour, 9,522-mile route to New York nonstop. Soon, I was told, you will be able to travel from any major city to any other major city on a single flight. Then the world economy went into free-fall, the number of First and Business Class passengers declined and the price of aviation fuel went through the roof. Ultra-long-haul became uneconomic, and we went back to changing planes. Now, however, the sands have shifted once again. Aviation fuel is cheap and new types of aircraft have more efficient engines and lighter composite structures. The Boeing 777-200LR and the Airbus A350-900ULR will shortly return us to the status quo ante. Singapore Airlines has already announced that the nonstop New York flight will be reinstated. Ultra-long-haul is back. And if that means I spend less time waiting around for connecting flights while succumbing to a stupor of jet lag, then, frankly, I'm thrilled.

Andrew Harper



Reader's Choice

Our annual Reader Survey is now open. Vote for your favorite hideaways and resorts online at andrewharper.com/reader-survey, and you could win a three-night stay at Sonoma's Farmhouse Inn, including airfare.