

# THE FROZEN CONTINENT

Ever more adventurous options are emerging for those eager to explore the stellar wildlife and gritty history of Antarctica's most remote corners, says **Mark Stratton**





witch's finger pointing towards Ushuaia in South America, a choppy two-day sailing across the Drake Passage. This is the most affordable way to see Antarctica, with trips lasting roughly 11 days. Time-poor adventurers (or those concerned about the infamous "Drake shake") will be pleased to hear that lines such as Lindblad Expeditions offer smoother crossings, courtesy of a two-hour flight from Puerto Natales, Chile.

After making it ashore, guests typically get to enjoy twice-daily Zodiac excursions to cruise around icebergs or head onshore to visit penguin colonies and historic bases maintained by the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust. The quirkiest offering by far is Port Lockroy's Penguin Post Office, where you can mail a postcard to friends and family (though don't be surprised if you beat it home).

Nowadays, peninsula trips are more multi-faceted, often featuring citizen science projects

## 'By late season, whales leap out of the water, energised after feasting all summer on krill'

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE**  
Heading ashore by Zodiac; the Norwegian Church at Grytviken; a refuge hut at Damoy Point

that help analysts learn more about everything from clouds and birdlife to phytoplankton.

"Citizen science adds value to your voyage because you're collecting data for researchers who do not have the financial resources to come here to study," says Polar Latitudes' science coordinator, Dr Annette Bombosch. Other activity options include kayaking, dry-suit snorkelling, helicopter flights and even spending nights on the ice in durable bivouac bags.

### THE WEDDELL WILDERNESS

Don't be deterred by tales of woe and shipwreck in the magnificently remote Weddell Sea. Historically this region was notorious for trapping ships in a huge clockwise gyre of ice, most notably Shackleton's vessel, *Endurance*, which was crushed here in 1915. Even today, only a small percentage of voyages sail down the Antarctic Peninsula's eastern flank into the Weddell, so any such journey feels like a precious privilege. When we reached the southernmost limit for most ships, an area named Snow Hill Island, our vessel was only the sixth to make it there that season.

"The Weddell has certainly been overlooked, due to the challenges of shifting ice," says Alex Mudd of Swoop Travel. "But venturing into it is expedition cruising par excellence, with the added excitement of tracing Shackleton's footsteps".

Here you can expect to see huge quantities of drifting iceshelf and massive Adelie penguin ►



Antarctica is out of sight and out of mind," says Marty Garwood, expedition leader for Polar Latitudes, during a recent cruise on the small ice-class vessel *Seaventure*. With an icecap up to 4.8km deep, the sheer magnetism of snowy mountains and bays choked by blue-tinged bergs – not to mention the promise of awe-inspiring wildlife – makes a cruise to the frozen continent a truly unforgettable experience. Earlier in a season that runs from November to March, penguin rookeries thrill visitors as the newborn chicks battle for survival. By late season, before 24-hour darkness descends, whales leap out of the water, energised by their full bellies after feasting all summer on krill.

### FIRST STEPS

On my first morning in the Antarctic Peninsula, I awoke aboard AE Expeditions' *Greg Mortimer* in Paradise Harbour. It was snowing and -3C. Gentoo penguins porpoised through the brash ice while the rasping blows of humpback whales merged with the gunshot ricochets of calving glaciers. It was everything I imagined Antarctica to be.

For most travellers, the peninsula is their first exposure to Antarctica. It rises like a crooked

Images: Mark Stratton. Illustration: Shikha Shah







rookeries. And while the harrowing story of Shackleton's travails is revealed in lectures, Snow Hill itself tells the gripping tale of Swedish geologist Otto Nordenskjöld, trapped here between 1901 and 1904 (you can visit the perfectly preserved hut where he overwintered while awaiting rescue). The most ambitious activity is visiting the peninsula's only accessible colony of emperor penguins, which involves a helicopter flight off your vessel from south of Snow Hill.

#### EMPERORS AND EXPLORERS

Comparatively few expedition ships make it to the Ross Sea. Midway along southern Antarctica's shoreline, the Ross Ice Shelf is the world's largest mass of floating sea ice. Located at the head of the Ross Sea, it's roughly the size of France and is inaccessible bar a few Austral summer months (late December to early March), when most cruises sail from New Zealand.

Heritage Expeditions offers a 28-day cruise each January. "Our voyage sails further south into

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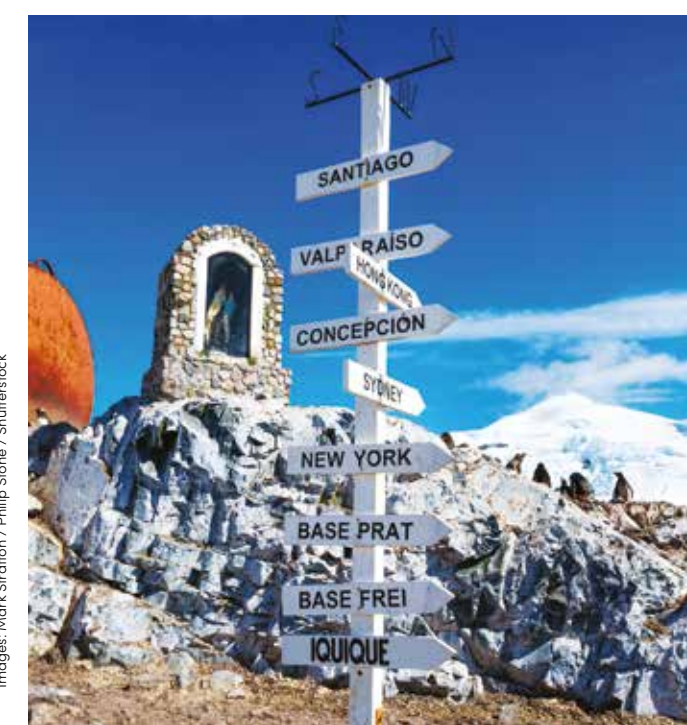
**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** King penguins; *Seaventure*; citizen science in action; Antarctica is a long way from everywhere

the frozen continent than any other sea route and into the realm of 24-hour daylight during the 10 to 12 days we spend exploring the Ross Sea," says expedition leader Aaron Russ. "The itinerary is dictated by nature, so guests can enjoy Zodiac safaris under the midnight sun, visit the world's largest Adelie penguin colony at Cape Adare at 2am or watch pods of orca hunting toothfish along the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf at any hour of the day or night."

The world's tallest penguin, the emperor, has an iceshelf breeding ground at Cape Washington in Terra Nova Bay, where 20,000 males brace for winter. Here, the relative proximity of the South Pole also provides an extraordinary legacy of historic sites, left behind by those epic early 20th-century expeditions. You can visit Robert Falcon Scott's hut at Cape Evans, and Shackleton's hut at Cape Royds in McMurdo Sound, built for his failed 1907-09 Nimrod Expedition to the South Pole. Scott's hut, built in 1911 and kitted out with bedding, maps, kitchen utensils and clothing, looks as though his Terra Nova Expedition crew upped and left just yesterday. Scott reached the pole in 1912, only to perish on the return journey.

#### WILDLIFE WONDERLAND

If spotting Antarctic wildlife is your primary reason for booking a cruise to this enchanting region, think about a longer three-week voyage incorporating the Falklands and South Georgia. The latter is Antarctica turned up to 11. After recovering from wholesale slaughter by sealers and whalers that ended by the mid-1960s, South



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## ‘King penguins number in the hundreds of thousands and beaches wriggle with seal pups’

Georgia’s wildlife presents one of the most thrilling spectacles on Earth today.

“It’s like being in a David Attenborough documentary, where you’re completely surrounded by wildlife that doesn’t care about your presence,” says Dan Brown, Polar Latitudes’ naturalist aboard *Seaventure*. Major sights include St Andrews and Gold Harbour, where the king penguins number in the hundreds of thousands and the beaches wriggle with fur seal pups.

South Georgia also witnessed the finale of Shackleton’s epic escape from Antarctica. In 1916 he arrived in a flimsy lifeboat after a death-defying sea crossing. He then traversed the island’s glaciated spine on foot to find safety at Stromness whaling station. Trips sometimes offer hikes following his cross-island journey, the best of which is a four-hour yomp from Fortuna Bay.

The great explorer was still to die here, but not until 1922 when he suffered a heart attack while bound for yet another expedition. Visitors can see his grave at Grytviken.

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Drygalski Fjord, South Georgia; Gypsy Cove on the Falkland Islands; pintado petrels; a fur seal

The Falkland Islands are equally magnificent. “There are great wildlife viewing opportunities throughout the Falklands, such as seeing the fabulous rockhopper penguins. You can also learn about the islands’ military history,” says Carolyn Foreman, head of the polar programme at expedition specialist Audley Travel.

### TRANSANTARCTIC AMBITION

In 1914 Shackleton launched an ambitious plan to cross Antarctica. It ended very badly. In recent years such ambition has been mirrored by ever more adventurous and extensive expedition voyages into rarely visited corners of Antarctica. These voyages may involve 30 or 40 days at sea, crossing between the eastern and western reaches of the seventh continent – the fringes of Australasia and South America.

Departing from Hobart, Australia or Dunedin, New Zealand, westward voyages explore the huge biodiversity of the pristine subantarctic islands, where native species include the yellow-eyed penguin, and Macquarie Island, home to 3.5 million breeding seabirds. They sail by immense iceshelves and navigate icefloes around Marie Byrd Land, and then beyond the Ross Sea into the Amundsen Sea’s sparse icescapes, before reaching the Antarctic Peninsula well below the 66.5° south latitude line.

From 2026, AE Expeditions’ new *Douglas Mawson* vessel will make a 34-day transantarctic crossing between Dunedin and Ushuaia, while Ponant’s luxurious *Le Commandant Charcot* is at sea for 29 days following a similar route.

Such voyages are infrequent and hugely expensive, with fares of £30,000 or more per person. Shorter trips can cost considerably less, though it must be said that cruising in Antarctica is never a budget choice. But can you really put a price on the experience of a lifetime? ■

### Get on board

**Polar Latitudes’** 13-night ‘Crossing the Circle’ cruise aboard *Ocean Albatros*, return from Ushuaia to the Antarctic Circle, departs on 22 December 2026, from £11,383. [polar-latitudes.com](http://polar-latitudes.com)

Have you cruised to Antarctica before? Share your story with us on social media or by emailing [hello@worldofcruising.co.uk](mailto:hello@worldofcruising.co.uk)