

HUFFPOST TRAVEL

Edition: US ▼

f Like 7.2M

t Follow

FRONT PAGE

POLITICS

BUSINESS

ENTERTAINMENT

MEDIA

TASTE

STYLE

GREEN

HUFFPOST LIVE

ALL SECTIONS



AdChoices

THE BLOG

Antarctica: Men, Women and Children Wanted for Hazardous Journey

🕒 05/24/2016 01:58 pm ET



f Like 2



Richard Powell



Freelance Journalist

Few travelers have visited the world's seventh continent, but now anyone can experience the most inhospitable place on Earth on a specialist tour. Richard Powell wraps up for an expedition.



Expedition leaders watch over hikers, high above Neko Harbour

“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.” So went explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton’s legendary advert in a London newspaper in his bid to gather a team to beat the Norwegians to the South Pole.

Graciously, the same trip can be made today in relative safety, even luxury, a hundred years on ... to the extent you can even take your family.

Yet despite today’s comparative open access, the Antarctic region remains a mystery to most, drawing comical comments from even the most seasoned sightseers.

‘Watch out for polar bears’, they warned me. But they live in the Arctic.

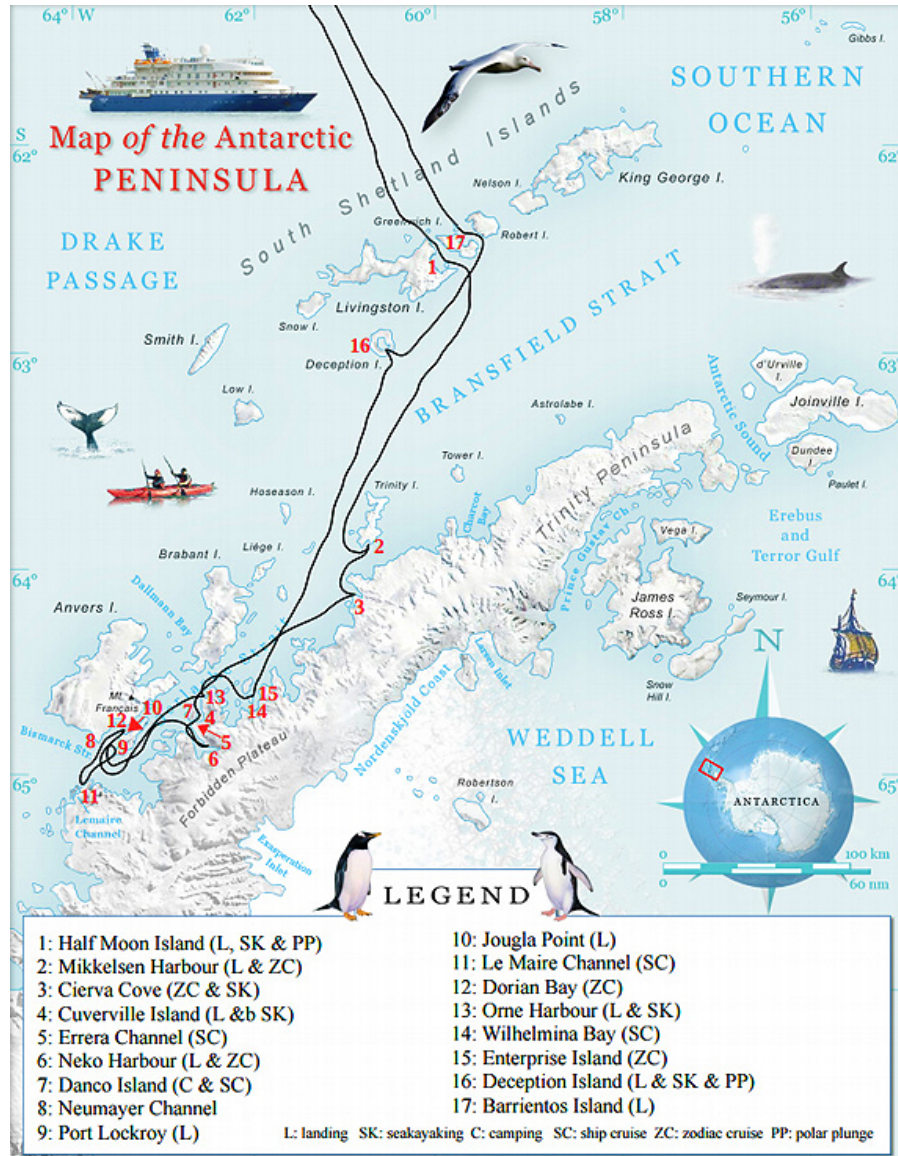
‘You’ll be landing on ice!’ they said. But Antarctica’s landmass - Earth’s largest wilderness - dwarfs that of the US and Mexico combined, while its northern counterpart is the floating ice sheet.

‘Will you see the South pole’, they asked. ‘Which one?’ I’d respond, leaving them stumped. The answer thankfully, was definitely not.

Another World

Antarctica’s poles: ceremonial, geographic, magnetic, are each more challenging to survive in than the last. These culminate with the Pole of Cold: dubbed ‘The Moon’ by the scientists who embed themselves there in temperatures of -124 °C, in an airless atmosphere, during its 130-day-long polar nights.

Such otherworldly features reveal not only why the continent is lifeless in-land, but also why it was undiscovered until 1895, thanks also to another barrier to civilization: its terrifyingly treacherous seas.



Mapping a course to the southern-most continent

Luckily for this land lover, our three-day voyage across Drake Passage from the world's southern-most city, Ushuaia, was mercifully calm.

Couple that with the ship's luxury decor, spacious cabins (complete with sofa, TV and double bed) - not to mention a well-stocked bar - and the voyage seemed positively enjoyable.

Our time at sea also allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators' guidelines, so our time on land would do nothing to unbalance the ecological sensitivity of this pristine environment.

Deadly beauty

The rules ran from the obvious: don't drop litter, never interfere with research

equipment - to the more unusual: vacuum and disinfect your clothes before landing, don't introduce new species to the continent, provide your proof of Evacuation Insurance.

All the while, lectures were provided in the ship's Oceanus lounge by expedition leaders. These were largely Europeans and all experts in their respective scientific fields.

The most experienced among them was Jonathan Zaccaria, a French scientist, who at 44 visits and counting, was unrivaled in his exploration of Antarctica.

These included tenures at research bases outside of the continent's summer months when sea ice and darkness combine to make extraction impossible, leaving stragglers more isolated than astronauts.



Lectures and Events take place in the Presentation Room

‘At least they can fall back to Earth if they get into trouble,’ he told us.

The experience of a German scientist whose appendix burst under this Antarctic lock-down served to prove his point. ‘She took a mirror and scalpel and performed open surgery on herself,’ he said.

As if that wasn't shocking enough, it transpired that many of our expedition leaders had pre-emptively had not only their appendixes removed, but also their wisdom teeth, to avoid a similar fate.

Natural Spectacle

Zodiac dinghies, operated by our guides, would take us from ship to shore - firstly to a couple of islands on the approach, and then to the continent itself.

While conditions inland are too hostile to support life, the edges of Antarctica teem with fish, birds and mammals and it wasn't long before we had ticked off everything on the ship's species-spotting list.



Whales play to the crowds, bubble-feeding around the ship

Assisted by our eagle-eyed crew, we could identify Gentoo, Adélie, Chinstrap and Magellanic penguins, the Brown Squares stealing their eggs, Albatross, Petrels and Prions; and on the mammal side, four types of seal, Humpback, Arctic Minke and Fin whales and even a brief glimpse of an Orca.

Whenever the whales put in an appearance, passengers literally ran in a free-for-all to the upper decks, camera shutters working overtime. Applause, whoops and cheers greeted every smash of their tails against the freezing sea, as they appeared to lap up the attention and play to the crowds.

On our approach to the peninsula, we were spectacularly fortunate to see whales 'bubble-net feeding': expelling air beneath shoals of fish as a team, grouping them together before surging vertically into them, open-mouthed, and springing up and out of the ocean.

Out and About

Landing expeditions took us firstly to Half-moon Island, where we undertook our

first trek in a snowstorm, and onto Mikkelsen Harbour - with its shipwrecked water boat and whale bone remnants... on to Cierva Cove where we cruised past the Argentine base Primavera station before borrowing some ancient glacial ice from the sea, to pour whisky over back in the ship's bar.

Attentive as ever, the crew greeted us as we boarded each time, providing hot towels and drinks and swiping our ID cards to keep track of guests who had left the boat. Antarctica is not a place to get stranded in.



Flash out-of-date

[< Back to YouTube video](#)
Zodiac cruises get you closer to icebergs and wildlife

On the way to Cuverville Island we again saw whales feeding in the Gerlache Strait, which we arrived at amid bright sunshine and clear blue skies, before continuing on through the gargantuan iceberg-filled Errera Channel.

Next, Neko Harbour provided spectacular views of its bay and surrounding islands from a peak we scaled, before traversing the narrow Neumayer Channel to reach the British base at Port Lockroy. Here, we wrote postcards that would eventually find their way to civilization via the Falklands Islands' post office.

Frozen in Time

Our next hike took us to Jougla Point, before cruising on through the Lemaire

Channel with its looming cliffs on each side, past the mischievously-named 'Una's Tits' - two towers of basalt, each topped by a cap of ice. By the end of the day, we'd had more than enough excitement to make an abandoned landing at Damoy Point only a minor inconvenience after thickening sea ice threatened to envelop us, forcing our escape out and onwards.

The following day, we awoke beneath the towering black spire of Spigot Peak at Orne Harbour and cruised once more in the zodiacs into the epic Wilhelmina Bay, flanked by steep, snow-covered cliffs and gleaming blue glaciers. Speeding past the rusty abandoned Governoren whaling ship, we found ourselves encircled by a group of humpbacks so closely we could almost feel their blow as they surfaced around us.



Jonathan guides us around Whaler's Bay, Deception Island

The next landing took us to the rim of a flooded volcanic crater that makes up Whaler's Bay, and we walked across the black sand beach to look at the abandoned whaling station and old Royal Air Force building, untouched since it was abandoned at the end of the Second World War.

By evening, the ship had docked next to the uniquely ice-less, moss-covered Barrientos Island in the Aitcho group of South Shetland Islands. Its peaks and plains provided a memorable backdrop as we drank Malbec in the top deck hot tub under the midnight sun, before setting off on the long voyage home.

On this final night, on choppy seas, the crew read us the last entries of the British Navy Captain Scott in the atmospherically dark lecture hall. Here, we heard in painstaking detail how he had arrived at the South Pole with his expedition team,

after their Norwegian rivals, and with their hearts broken by the realization, managing to survive only several weeks more as they hiked back to their ship.

Listening to their final letters home as they huddled together - starving and freezing to death - drink in hand, with none of their troubles or obstacles to share in, made for an emotional farewell to this unforgiving but spectacular place.

End of the World

For an extra \$50,000, it's possible to fly to the pole such men gave their lives to claim, but I was content just to have tasted this last continent and return to tell the tale.

Back in civilization, Tierra del Fuego's main street of Avenue San Martin, with its bustling cafés, shops and restaurants seemed like a far cry from the uninhabited icy wastelands we had hiked across in Antarctica.



Hiking in Ushuaia's diverse nature reserve

On the town's adjacent mountain, we spent the night at Hotel Arakur - an upmarket spa resort 800 meters up, on a nature reserve. The location allowed for a final hike to a secluded waterfall the next day, along with panoramic views of the bay, seemingly miles below.

Getting home from here meant a three-hour flight to Buenos Aires, before the long haul to London.



Antarctica: Men, Women and Children Wanted for Hazard...



The Four Seasons in Buenos Aires offers a majestic stop-over

Trying to maintain the luxury vibe of the cruise, I stayed at the Argentinean capital's Four Seasons hotel, where its top class service and impeccable restaurant provided a perfect environment to mull over my privileged trip to Earth's lesser-seen sole.

--

Join an Antarctic voyage from Ushuaia to the Peninsula on the M/V Sea Spirit for the upcoming 2016-17 season (December to February), or book 2017-18 now for an early rate. Prices from US\$7,196 to \$18,526 pp, when sharing a cabin, with [Poseidon Expeditions](#).



Richard Powell is a freelance journalist who also works for the [Media Contacts Database](#) and [Press Release Distribution](#) firm Presswire, but does not work with or for any of the parties mentioned in this article.

Follow Richard Powell on Twitter: www.twitter.com/PresswirePR