

ICE, SEALS AND PENGUINS

Tony Baskeyfield braved ice-cold water, faced off with ferocious leopard seals and marvelled at acrobatic penguins in Antarctica

Photographs by TONY BASKEYFIELD





You know it's all been worthwhile after enduring a hurricane for four days in Drakes Passage from Ushuaia to the Antarctic Peninsula. Antarctica is truly awesome. As the saying goes:

'You don't take a trip to Antarctica, Antarctica takes you', and I saw everything I came to see and more. Icebergs, penguins, humpback whales and leopard seals. Even a leopard seal eating a penguin under an iceberg (see the January 2012 issue) - all with the hugeness of unspoiled Antarctica in the background!

Nothing prepares you for experiences like these. I didn't want it to be an easy journey either. I really wanted to suffer the hardships just to see what it would be like to be a real explorer. Having said that, we did take a lovely ice-strengthened ship 500 miles from Tierra del Fuego to the Antarctic Peninsula in luxury, dining royally while huge waves sprayed over the ship for four days.

When we arrived in the Antarctic Peninsula, the weather calmed and the sea was flat in and around the islands that we were to dive over the next five days. You know that you've arrived in Antarctica when you look out of your porthole in your cabin and see icebergs floating by.

Not many people go to Antarctica to dive. I estimate that there are about 100 who visit the continent to dive per year. Yes, it is a long way, taking five days to get there, but once there you will see the magnificence of the whole place. Majestic seascapes with snow-filled mountains, and icebergs the size of countries.

We were going to dive south of the South Shetlands near the Weddell Sea, west of the Antarctic Peninsula. So, although the sea temperatures was between 0 and -2 degrees C, the air temperature was not quite so cold at around 0 to +2 degrees C, occasionally dropping to -5 degrees C overnight.



The divers head off in the Zodiac

"At first I couldn't work out what was the stuff falling all around us until I noticed bits of undigested feathers separating out of the big bits!"



The stunning scenery in Antarctica



Drake Passage can be a little lumpy!

Antarctica is the highest continent in the world and, in places, the ice is two miles deep. The land mass is 17 million sq miles, which doubles in area during the winter when the ice forms. Antarctic weather is very changeable and unpredictable. The weather dominates everything, with icy-cold katabatic winds bringing the clouds down and reducing visibility in an instant.

All of the divers I met in our group had prepared their equipment in their own personal way. Some dived with membrane suits with wet hoods and

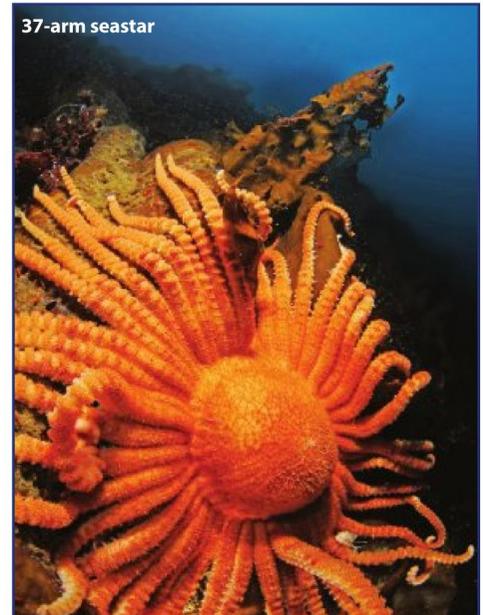
gloves and normal masks. We all brought freeze-protected regulators to prevent them from freezing up and freeflowing.

I spent three months preparing my diving equipment for this adventure. Firstly, I had to get all of my equipment there within my 30kg baggage allowance. So carrying a drysuit and my cameras did not leave me much left over for heated undersuits and batteries, so I opted for the following: Hydrotech drygloves with a WD40 straw between the cuff seal and the glove seal to enable the





Leopard seal munching on a penguin



37-arm seastar



Diver next to an iceberg



Tony photographing penguins

“We took a chunk of clear glacial ice and put it in the bar. In the evening we used the 1,000-year-old ice in our drinks!”

pressure to equalise, preventing glove squeeze on my fingers. Re-usable hot packs to drop into my gloves to further keep my hands warm. Pee valve. Northern Diver gave me a lot of advice and attached a dry hood to my existing suit. Northern Diver metalux undersuit. Finally, a Northern Diver fullface mask so I did not have cold water directly on any exposed skin.

Having tested my equipment thoroughly, I was pretty sure I'd be okay in Antarctica. However, nothing prepares you for that first immersion. I rolled off the inflatable into -2 degrees C of water. In the first five to ten minutes I thought, 'yes, I'm lovely and warm - this will be easy'. But the cold water of the Antarctic just bites through and slowly gets

you. First of all, your extremities start to get cold, head cooling off, feet starting to chill. Then 15-20 minutes in, it turns into a matter of sheer endurance to last out for 30-40 minutes. After 40 minutes it is definitely time to get out, divers' body cores starting to get very cold. Getting de-kitted in the water was harder than usual - with hands and fingers devoid of feeling, unclipping hoses and buckles was difficult.

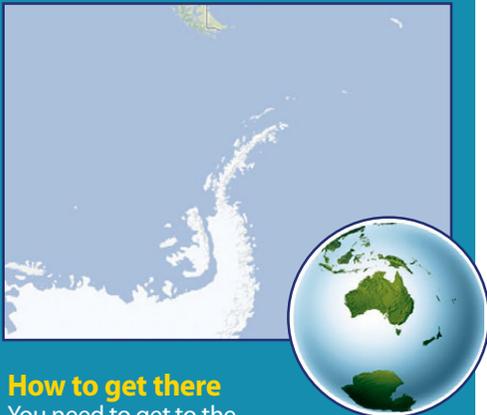
Scuba diving in Antarctica is a significant high-light for many divers. Some people might wonder why anyone would want to dive there, as it is so cold. The three big attractions of Antarctic diving are big ice, seals and penguins - and we had great encounters with all three!

Our first day of diving was a check dive at Port Lockroy, where we saw the bones of great whales left behind from the whaling years. Whales were hunted at sea and their bodies stripped and processed ashore. Then the carcasses were dumped in the bay at Jougla Point. We saw vertebrae, head and jawbones littering the seabed.

On the third day, poor weather meant only one dive was possible at Pleneau, however we managed to swim alongside a magnificent iceberg, which was grounded on the seabed some 80m below! Diving an iceberg seems easy, but you do have to choose an iceberg that is safe. Icebergs split, crack and roll, so working out iceberg dynamics is vital, as if it is too tall it may topple and crush you against

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW...

Antarctica



How to get there

You need to get to the Argentine city of Ushuaia, which is the world's southernmost city. This is where you join the ship and head south across the Drake Passage. As well as Antarctica, there is plenty to do enroute - some people went hiking in Patagonia, others glacier viewing in El Calafate, while some visited possibly the most-spectacular waterfalls on the planet at Iguazu in Argentina's tropical north.

When to go

Diving in Antarctica is best in February or March, when much of the areas' sea ice has cleared and visibility improves after a December/January peak in plankton. This is also often a good time to see whales and dive with leopard seals when they are ambushing young penguins on their inaugural fishing expeditions.

"So one day I dived in completely naked and it made me shudder and ache all over"

Entry requirements

No visas required for UK passport holders.

Currency

Argentine Peso
(£1 = 7.50Pesos).

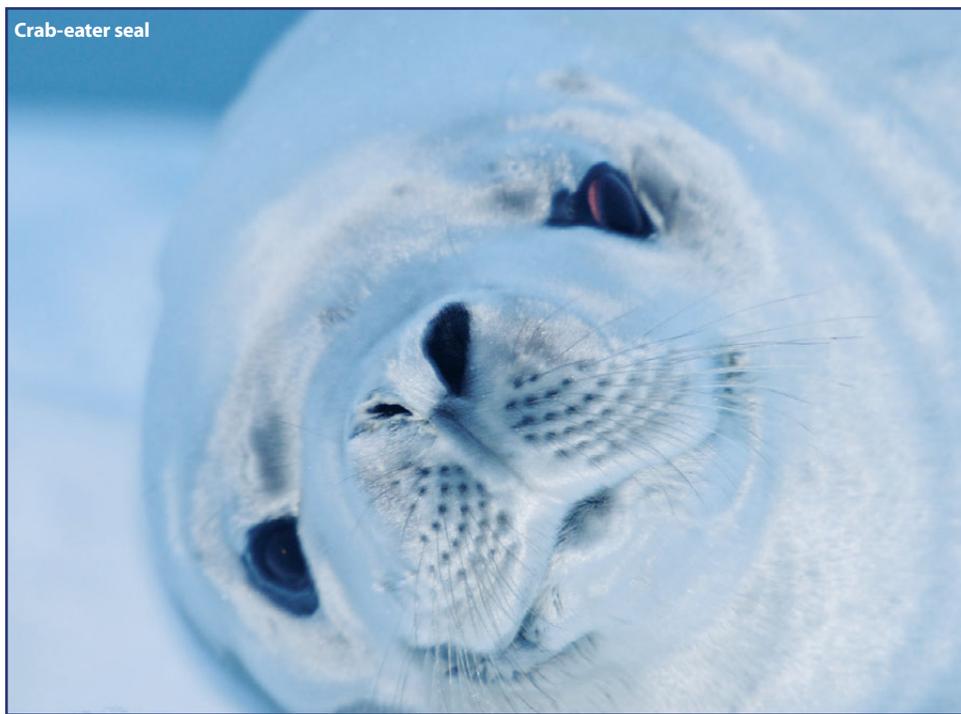
Where to eat

Very little choice beyond the boat you travel on! There is a lot of choice throughout Argentina, home of possibly the best steaks in the world.



Ten out of ten. A real out-of-this-world experience. You just can't go any further, or have a more-extreme adventure.

Crab-eater seal



the seabed. Swimming alongside the iceberg was just beautiful, with a stream of blue light refracting from the ice highlighted in the texture of the surface dimples and cracks

On the top of my wish list was to dive with leopard seals and we were lucky enough to have some fantastic encounters. On one dive a big male seemed to make a threatening display to us all. But then, when he caught a penguin, he allowed us all to watch him eat it. Then at Petermann Island we dived with a really curious female leopard seal. She gave us an acrobatic swimming display for 20 minutes followed by large dollops of poo! At first I couldn't work out what the stuff falling all around us was until I noticed bits of undigested feathers separating out of the big bits.

At Vernadsky Station, a large group of Gentoo penguins swam circles around our bubbles. Penguins move in water like torpedoes. The air in their feathers is squeezed out when they enter the water, leaving a trail behind.

We had our coldest dive of the trip at Paradise Bay, where we dived a wall covered in colourful anemones, 37-arm starfish and sponges that are said to be up to 10,000 years old and are one of the oldest marine life forms.

The trip just got better and better; one morning we awoke to find two inquisitive humpback whales. They stayed around for about an hour and came close enough to touch the ship.

On our final dive I managed to get really close to a group of Antarctic fur seals out on the rocks. These fur seals have ears like a sea lion and they use their fore flippers to steer themselves.

When the sea freezes over, the sea forms grease ice first. Then the grease ice joins up to form pan-

cake ice. In places we saw pancake ice with chunks of glacial ice frozen in. Glacial ice is formed from freshwater and is blue and clear. The clearer the ice, the older it is, as the gas has been compressed out. We took a chunk of clear glacial ice and put it in the bar. In the evening we used the 1,000-year-old ice in our drinks!

I've often wondered how cold the water really is in the Antarctic, and have seen some people swim in it briefly on TV. How cold can it really be? This was something I had to do for the experience, just to say that I did it! So one day I dived in completely naked and it made me shudder and ache all over. I could feel my body heat draining; I was getting weaker by the second and lost all sense of feeling. I swam two, maybe three strokes, and swam straight into a small ice chunk completely brain-dead. The bang on my head hurt. Then I stood up before I got too cold and passed out. Getting out was the best bit and I did not feel cold at all. The air temperature was +2 degrees C. As I dried myself with a towel, I could feel the warm blood rushing around my body. Box ticked - and I'll never do that again!

We had an incredible week of diving in all kinds of Antarctic weather, with a lot of truly amazing memories. On the way back we had a very smooth sea crossing and sighted Cape Horn on the horizon before entering the Drake Passage, then it was back to Ushuaia before catching our plane for the long journey home. ■

Tony was assisted on his expedition by Aqua-Firma (www.aqua-firma.co.uk)

For a comprehensive list of tour operators, check out: www.sportdiver.co.uk/operators