

THROUGH THE DRAKE PASSAGE TO ANTARCTICA

By ship to the seventh continent

Now the time has come. The day for departure through the Drake Passage with the M/V Sea Spirit to Antarctica has finally begun. In the morning all passengers gather at Hotel Arakur in Ushuaia.



Hotel Arakur

We get the last briefing for the boarding and have another half day off to do a tour around the city or into the National Park of Tierra del Fuego. We all would like to go on board as soon as possible, but the guests of the last tour have to disembark first. From here high up on the mountain where the hotel is located, the Sea Spirit looks really small.

Can this ship master the infamous Drake Passage unscathed? Why is the passage so infamous? Well, the Pacific and the Atlantic meet here and must pass through the relatively narrow passage between South America and Antarctica. Often enough, there are strong storms, the waves can get up to 10 m high or more ...

Finally the time has come. We are allowed to board. Quickly everyone has found his cabin. We are only about 110 passengers. Some cabins on deck 2 have only portholes, on the upper decks windows or balcony with chairs.



Safety drill

In the Beagle Channel

Shortly after we leave we turn into the Beagle Channel. Here the water is still quite quiet and left and right of this waterway it is framed by snow-capped mountains. Suddenly the signal of seven short and one long sound which is well known on every ship can be heard. It is time for the safety exercise. We grab the life vests and head to the assembly station.

This exercise works smoothly and very soon we hear the announcement that dinner is ready. All passengers can enjoy the delicious food in one seating.



Cape Petrel

Many different nationalities are on board. A large group of Chinese, many Americans, Australians, Malaysians, many Europeans from different countries, South Americans and Russians. The announcements and the program are trilingual, in English, German and Chinese (Mandarin?).

Most of them go to bed early, around 0.30 we leave the beagle channel and the calm waters. Cape Horn, we will not see at all, but will pass far from us, we pass it on our starboard side.

The Drake Passage

And actually, when I wake up at night, I'm pretty shaken back and forth in my bed. The waves have really increased in height, which I can notice very well at the up and down movement of the ship.

In the morning already a few people are missing for breakfast and over the day there will be more. I do not have any sea-sickness, and therefore, eagerly follow the lessons of the lecturers. I love the "swinging" in the Drake Passage!



Could that be an Arctic Tern?

Ma from China has devoted himself to ornithology and tells us all about the birds to be expected. Outside, some of the birds with the widest range, the Albatrosses, already surround us. The width of their wings is up to 3.5 m. For the other lecturers, he is the Chinese translator as well.

Heidi from France tells us all about glaciers and with her unbelievable friendly nature and her enthusiasm for her science and her radiant smile, every listener is "glued to her lips".



Antarctica I am coming!

So the day in the Drake Passage goes by quite fast. And very soon, the second day on sea starts. The wind gets stronger, but it has blown away most of the clouds. The sky is blue, the albatrosses continue to surround us, as are the storm-birds. 6 m high, the waves are partially. I visit the captain on the bridge, because only at special maneuvers the bridge is closed for passengers.

There are still some more lectures and then we the Drake Passage lays behind us! The first iceberg comes into sight and also the first islands of the South Shetland Islands.



The first iceberg!

The South Shetland Islands

Then we have reached our first destination. The Aitcho Islands. Here the ship anchors and we drive on shore with the Zodiacs. The first penguins! Sea elephants, snow and ice wait for us.



The South Shetland Islands lay ahead of us!

Before we can go ashore, every guest has to vacuum his clothes and bags, which will be brought ashore, all boots, which everybody had to borrow here must be disinfected and cleaned before and after each landing.

At least 5 m distance must be kept to the animals, to sea leopards even more.



Aitcho Islands, sea elephant and gentoo penguins

We can watch the gentoo penguins waddle over the rocky beach, stealing stones from each other's nests, because the neighbor's stone is the right one for one's own nest, not the millions of other ones that form the beach.



Chinstrap penguin collecting a stone for its nest

We are instructed not to enter the "penguin highways" and of course the animals always have the right of way and we should under no circumstances stand between them and the access to the sea. But some of the penguins do not stick to the 5 m rule...



2 Chinstrap and one Gentoo penguin on their way to the shore on a penguin highway

What is a penguin highway? Surely one or the other reader would like to now. Many penguins breed far up on the rocky slopes or on plateaus. They now have a longer route to the water, but here the snow melts earlier and they can start the breeding business before others. In between, however, are still many snowy passages. The snow is not always so firm that they for example, simply slip down on the belly downhill, which looks very cute. Instead, they always use the same path and thus wear away paths into the snow. This way they save valuable energy, which they urgently need to provide for their chicks.



on the Aitcho Islands

Of these, the penguins are still far away, they still sit on their eggs, usually only one, rarely two. Again and again we see a big brown skua waiting for a careless penguin to keep his egg or a chick briefly unobserved to grab it and feed their own chicks with it.



Skua

Some chinstrap penguins are also found here, they always seem to grin because of the black strip, which one can see below their beaks. Then we have to go back to the ship by Zodiac. I can hardly part from here, but tomorrow is another day.



back to the Sea Spirit



Sea Elephant with Gentoo penguins

WILHELMINA BAY AND ORNE ISLAND

Hugh icebergs and small islands

It is the sixth day I spend with my husband and about 110 other passengers aboard the Sea Spirit. Wilhelmina Bay and Orne Island will be our today's shore trips.



the Sea Spirit in Wilhelmina Bay

As I have written in one of my last blogs, it does not always work out how the expedition team has made the plan for the next day. Sometimes it doesn't work because the wind is too strong or the current is too heavy or too much pack ice is in the way, which could quickly enclose our ship.

That's how it is today, plan A does not work, but there is a plan B or C...

In Wilhelmina Bay

3 ISLANDS IN ANTARCTICA: CIERVA COVE, MIKKELSEN HARBOUR AND SPERT ISLAND

Three Antarctic Islands at one day!

It is the penultimate day in the Antarctic during my expedition cruise on the Sea Spirit. Today we'll visit Cierva Cove, Mikkelsen Harbour and Spert Island.



huge icebergs

Today again a longer Zodiac ride is on the program. It will take place in Cierva Cove. When I open the curtains in the cabin, we are still on the way. The ship does not go fast because there are lots of icebergs and drift ice.

Cierva Cove



iceberg that transports a rock

is a vast bay located on the western side of the Antarctic Peninsula. In this bay we'll go with the Zodiacs. There is hardly any movement on the water. So these are best conditions to enjoy a calm ride with the Zodiac.

That means, however, some layers of clothes. Ski underwear, ski pants, fleece shirt, water resistant trousers, the thick rubber boots that everyone has borrowed and of course the really warm jacket, which every guest received right after boarding the vessel and can be taken back home. Above that comes the rescue vest. In addition, thin gloves to operate the camera and waterproof, thick mittens, which are useful for holding on the Zodiac, when it goes faster and foam sprays. I also bring along a water-tight little bag, in order to keep my camera in it if necessary. (Packing is sufficient for 10 nights aboard an expedition cruise ship

The Zodiac ride

I am curious what is underneath the ice, so I often put my GoPro into the water. We drive very slowly through the pack ice, which closes quickly behind our Zodiac. There is a strong current in the water, even if we do not notice that here in the boat. In the distance we again see one of the many Argentinian stations. This is called Primavera and is in operation now and then.



Primavera Station at Cierva Cove

The huge bay is surrounded by impressive glaciers. Many huge icebergs are piling up in front of it. They come from the glaciers, which always recur. One of these icebergs looks quite different from the others. Not so bizzar shaped, but rounded and quite evenly shaped.



topped over iceberg

Heidi, the French glaciologist, is entirely in her element. Since not all guests have left the ship, she got a Zodiac all to herself. She drives her Zodiac side by side to ours and holds on to our boat, so she can't drift away; her legs dangling over the water.



alone at Cierva Cove

She tells us that this rounded iceberg has already turned over in the water. In other words, we see its base, which otherwise lies in the water and that is evenly shaped from the flow and the waves. What a wave must that have been, because the iceberg is still huge! She also tells us that only one to three tenths of an iceberg is visible at all, the rest is always below the surface of the water.



view over Cierva Cove

It is nice to experience this silence as Christian, our guide, stops the engine and the Zodiac simply drifts. Unfortunately this tour is over too fast, two hours can pass very quickly within this impressive and unique landscape.

Mikkelsen Harbour



Panorama von Mikkelsen Harbour

In the afternoon, we land in Mikkelsen Harbor, which many years ago served as a landing place for the factory ships of the whalers. Not far from a shelter is our disembarking site. Thus the penguins also seem to like.



penguins

Mikkelsen Harbour with Gentoo

Many have built their nest in the shelter of the hut, there the earth is softened and dirty from the mud and stinking droppings of the animals. This doesn't impress them at all, some even seem to look at their reflection in a puddle.



?!

who is the most beautiful penguin here? I

Again we stroll along the suspended flags through the soft snow. Again and again we have to stop, because some penguin highways cross our way and of course the waddling companions have the priority.



view from Mikkelsen Harbour

We also see a radio pole and some remains of the whalers in form of a broken boat, which is almost completely buried under the snow masses, as well as huge wale bones, which also protrude only very little from the snow.

All this does not seem to disturb the breeding penguins, nor some lazy sea elephants. Our time is over and a zodiac shuttle takes us back to Sea Spirit. Sea air makes me hungry; I'm already looking forward to our dinner, and especially to get rid of all the layers of thick clothing.



Weddell seals at Mikkelsen Harbour

But dinner got to wait. Our expedition crew has planned a third visit for us today. They would like to make a Zodiac cruise with us through the partially sunken Spert Island. Yes, no writing mistake, I mean through!

Spert Island



Entrance to Spert Island

It's an excursion that doesn't happen too often at the Antarctic Peninsula, as the weather conditions must be perfect. Very few to none wind at all and no floating ice, so there are basically no waves that could throw a Zodiac on the razor sharp rocks.



through a natural gate at Spert Island

So all of us dress warmly, as this cruise will last about two hours. The captain of the Sea Spirit stops our vessel quite a bit away from the sunken island. I suppose because the water might be too shallow for the ship. So we climb into the Zodiacs and off we go!



interesting shaped iceberg at Spert



Island huge cave in Spert Island

High peaks of rocks await us and we cruise through channels and caves of Spert Island. It is a volcanic island. The softer rocks are washed out by the wind, the sea water and ice. And all what is left over are these rock needles and huge caves. There are still some ice bergs drifting around, so our expedition team really needs to navigate through them and sometimes turn around, because there is no way through.



at Spert Island in Antarctica

The cruise ends with us viewing a lot of birds flying over a carcass of a seal floating in the water. They dive down very fast and grab their share. Today they and their chicks won't starve.



birds at Spert Island

What an end for this exciting day?! I am really hungry now and it's the first time that I am freezing here in Antarctica. I am looking forward to my hot shower and a hearty dinner...



in a cave at Spert Island



Good Bye Spert Island



icebergs in Wilhelmina Bay

Our captain carefully maneuvers the ship into Wilhelmina Bay. Plenty of ice and many icebergs swim here. The exploration zodiac with some people from the expeditions team sets off before the guests to test whether we can perhaps walk on the frozen sea ice. We would not be the only ones there, some seals are already resting there from the nocturnal hunt for food.

Unfortunately, we are not lucky, it might not carry us, of course security is more important.



peeing crab eater seal

As we drive to the edge with our Zodiac, we find a place that looks like a small harbor in the ice. From here we can observe the sleeping crab eater seals quite well. And a little further away lies a sea leopard. With the binoculars, I can even see the pointed teeth in his mouth when he yawns heartily.



lonely penguin in Wilhelmina Bay

We all get quiet, the surrounding mountains with their massive glaciers make us seem small and insignificant.

Then something ripples and a curious crab eater seal puts its head out of the water. Then it dives under the ice right under our boat. Quickly I try to make an underwater photo of it with my GoPro, but unfortunately it does not work. Instead I get a lot of krill on the film. No wonder the seal has submerged here. This must be a feast for it.

Christian, one of the German guides from the expeditions team drives on with us. We have managed to be only German-speaking guests in this Zodiac. So Christian does not need to translate and we have more time to ask questions.

Icebergs and shelf ice

Once again, we get an explanation about the differences between glacier ice and frozen sea ice. The floating icebergs are aborted by calving glaciers and might have huge dimensions. They can contain many thousands of years old air in small entrapped vesicles, which are extremely exciting for scientists.



Wilhelmina Bay

So they can explore how the air was composed long ago. By the way, it is splendid when you have a piece of glacier ice in your drink, it slowly defrosts and these air bubbles escape with a little "plop".

So that we might hear this sound once and learn how ancient ice tastes, Christian looks for a very small iceberg and heaves a little chunk out of the water for us. Since glacier ice is heavier than water, he has to lift off a heavy weight, as you can see in this short video.

When his contract is finished, he goes back to Spitzbergen where he has lived for several years. Since he enjoys working with tourists, he has set up his own company. The best time to observe the polar bears that do not exist here in the Antarctic is in the winter from February to May. Then there is still a lot of snow, but daylight returns. Just the opposite of the seasons here.

It is summer now in Antarctica, most often we got approx. around 0 ° C, when the sun is shining it is even warmer, but when the wind blows it can be much colder. Therefore, we are neatly dressed. This is noticeable at this 2 hour Zodiac tour. To

be cold would be a pity and would take away much pleasure on this tour.
(Packing is sufficient for 10 nights aboard an expedition cruise ship.)



Wilhelmina Bay and Sea Spirit

Today there is a very special atmosphere here in the ice as the sky is gray, while the partial blue glacier ice is very good visible.

Christian turns off the engine of the Zodiac to give us the opportunity of absolute quietness. It takes a moment for the last one in our boat to stop moving, because even the rustling of the clothing appears loud in this calm and solitude.

At this moment I see no other Zodiac, not even the ship. The mountains seem to encircle our boat completely. Quietness, a soft rippling of the water on our boat, the cracking of the ice. A very special moment, I close my eyes and enjoy.

Orne Island



penguin egg, most likely robbed by a
skua

In the afternoon we land at Orne Island. Here the adventurous passengers will camp overnight. No, not in tents, but under the open sky. Stars they will not see, as it never gets dark, but those who really could not sleep, but wanted to hear the sounds of the animals and the ice, they could also watch whales.



Dirk and me on Orne Island

We are now climbing up a mountain on Orne Island. Of course again along the pinned flags to disturb the breeding penguins as little as possible.

We sink deeply into the snow. Some have to be pulled out by helping hands, because to free yourself from the snow, is quite laborious if you are hip deep sunken in it .

From above, we can observe the kayaks as they slowly glide over the calm waters.



Orne Island

All together we later enjoy the always very good dinner. Then the campers leave the ship. I envy them a little bit already, because of this unique experience, but then I cuddle myself into my soft, warm bed and wake up again when the campers are long back on board.



Kayakers at Orne Island



penguin loneliness

YANKEE HARBOUR AND HALFMOON BAY IN ANTARCTICA

My last day in Antarctica

It is our last day in Antarctica on the Sea Spirit, then we head back through the Drake Passage to Ushuaia. We'll spend it in Yankee Harbour and Halfmoon Bay.

Perhaps this is the reason that I got up today on the wrong foot (as we say in Germany). The water in the shower hasn't got the right temperature, I forgot to charge the second battery of my camera and so it goes on. My husband Dirk suspects me to be a small Christmas Gremlin ...



The Sea Spirit in front of Yankee Harbour
Yankee Harbour

The Zodiacs bring us on the land of this island. We are not alone here. In the sheltered bay a sailboat has already anchored, but no one from the crew can be seen.

It is high tide when we land. As usual a penguin committee welcomes us.



Skua in Yankee Harbour

With the help of some remains we can see that this island was formerly used by whale or seal hunters. A rusted ton serves as a fresh water reservoir for a skua. One of the penguin doesn't seem to like that, as he chases the skua with loud noises.

Not far from there mostly young elephant seals recover from the nightly hunt for krill, which then rises from the depths of the Southern Ocean. So the seals and sea elephants do not need to dive so deeply. And who might say something against a nice morning snooze in the warm sun ?!



Elephant Seals in Yankee Harbour

The penguin breeding grounds stretch over the whole island. They seem to be very successful here and there must be plenty of food for the black and white journeymen, because some breeding pairs already have quite big chicks, some even two. And all have in common that they are always hungry and they lift their little beaks to their parents. They are so cute and cuddly! Small gray-white feather balls!



Gentoo penguins with chicks

On the beach, our fellow travelers spread very quickly and silence returns, if one doesn't count the shouting of the penguins.

I watch a chinstrap penguin, who probably jumped up on a steep rock during high tide and now cannot jump down. In any case, he constantly looks around and seems to ask himself what he really does here.



Chinstrap penguin on the rocks 🐧

We enjoy the sun on this stony beach. We got a lot of time. Nevertheless, I would like to take another look at the elephant seals, because some of them make deep sounds that reverberate on the beach. What is going on?

Since earlier, it looks hardly different. The massive animals seem to have hardly moved from the spot. Sometimes a sleepy one lifts its head or blinks at us. Occasionally a little sand is scooped over the body with the front flippers to alleviate the heat of the sun a little. They sniff and snore in their sleep.

Turning around they snort. Further up one lays that is barely visible, but then it raises its head once and lets out one of these deep buzzing sounds.



elephant seals and gentoo penguins at

I could sit here much longer! I can completely relax while watching these pleasant animals, which are underwater so agile and supple swimmers.

Low tide has set in, and a lot of drifting ice has been driven into the bay. We got to wade through it to get to the Zodiacs. It's so good that we got the thick boots that were lent to us on the first day of our trip.

Halfmoon Bay is not far away. Warmly bundled up in a blanket, I take lunch on the sun deck. During this time, the captain takes course on the last landing place of this expedition.



View over Halfmoon Bay

Halfmoon Bay

This island got its name from the natural shape of the bay, which is reminiscent of a crescent. On one side there is once again a at the moment unoccupied station of the Argentineans. Some mast or position marks I can see on the mountain ridges.



Argentine station at Halfmoon Bay

The tried and tested red flags show us the way to the breeding colonies. Here I cannot see any chicks, or they are better guarded by the parents, because here too many seagulls fly around.



Kelp cull in Halfmoon Bay

The Chinese lecturer Ma, a keen ornithologist walks quickly to the outer tip of the island, because there a lone Macaroni Penguin should hang around for several years. They are recognizable by yellow head feathers. This species nests otherwise not in this region, which is why it was always sighted alone. Ma promises to the first one who spots it a drink, but unfortunately our group has no luck today.



Chinstrap penguin in Halfmoon Bay

My husband Dirk and I marvel again about the penguins, who stamped many penguin highways in the ground. So they get better on the mountain tops where they breed.

We would like to enjoy a little peace and solitude, before we arrive back in Ushuaia in two days.

We therefore sit on large rocks directly at the waterfront and watch the tireless penguins waddle back and forth.

Behind me lays an old, broken boat of the seal hunters. It's only good that this time is over and the stock of most animals has recovered. Only the great whales

are far from back to the level of before the industrial hunting. Soon it is similar to many fish stocks. Do people never learn from their mistakes?



old whaling boat left to rot at Halfmoon

Slowly the water rises. Suddenly there is a big splash right in front of my feet. Three penguins jump out of the water right in front of me. How good that my GoPro is ready for use!

The three lively fellows cannot be disturbed and just walk around. Then they waddled away happily. What a happy ending of this day.

Why had the day started so stupid? I don't know it anymore. But I do know that I am going to miss this space and tranquility.



bizarre rocks at Halfmoon Bay