

# Ultimate Antarctica Logbook

Antarctic Peninsula, South Georgia & Falkland Islands

November 7 – December 1, 2011



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## **Monday 7 November, 2011 Depart Ushuaia—down Beagle Channel to Open Sea**

Most of the Photo Safaris group spent the morning at Tierra del Fuego National Park. Following lunch, they returned to the Hotel Albatros to collect their hand luggage that had been left in the lobby and guarded by our staff while they were touring the park.

Our group of 82 (passengers and staff from 11 countries) boarded the *Ushuaia* by 1600 this afternoon. By 1830 we untied from the dock and were on our way. Southern beech trees, snowcapped mountains, incoming airplanes and the thriving southern city of Ushuaia receded from view as we sailed east through the verdant Beagle Channel towards the southern Atlantic. Black-browed albatrosses, southern giant petrels, king cormorants, South American terns and many other birds accompanied our passage. After the emergency evacuation drill was accomplished we settled into what was to become our new regime for the next three weeks—a daily program of lectures or landings punctuated by excellent meals, great camaraderie and on-demand Photoshop/Lightroom assistance from the professional photographic team.

At nearly midnight, the harbor pilot left our ship at the mouth of the channel and we soon began to feel the rock and roll of open sea.

## **Tuesday 8 November At Sea towards the Falkland Islands**

We experienced a calm day on the water (by Southern Ocean standards) with numerous seabirds swirling around the ship. We gained our “sea legs,” gradually getting used to the ship’s motion. Many passengers photographed flying birds from the rear decks. We had our first introduction to the lecture theater and its swashing water sounds from the ship’s “stabilizer,” deep within the bowels of the ship.

Joe Van Os and Monika Schillat presented an exciting talk on *Hitting the Beach in the Falkland Islands*, outlining the photographic possibilities as well as our care and obligations while visiting the region’s wildlife. An additional timetable of lectures on *Photographic Composition* from Mary Ann McDonald and *The History and Geology of the Falkland Islands* with Chris Edwards was presented.

## **Wednesday 9 November New Island, North—Ship Harbor**

We arrived at the Falkland Islands at 2245 on the evening before our next-day landing, so a comfortable, flat-calm night was spent in a sheltered harbor of New Island. Breakfast commenced at 0700 and landings started at 0830.

The weather was great, so after a quick New Island introduction on what to see and a reminder

on how to behave among the wildlife we started landing on the small sandy beach. It was just a 20-minute walk to the cliff views and our first amazing seabird colony experience. Here, we had close-up views of many hundreds of black-browed albatrosses along a mile of cliff. Intermingled



with the albatrosses, rockhopper penguins argued over nest sites and king cormorants impressed mates with great beakfuls of seaweed for the nest. Halfway through the morning the calm changed, the wind increased and the birds started to fly, giving everyone fine views of the 9-foot wingspan of the black-browed albatrosses quartering the cliffs and flying in squadrons overhead.

Below the 1,200-foot-tall fluvial sandstone cliffs, big swells swirled the long strands of kelp and a pod of about 15 Peale's dolphins worked the reefs and fished immediately below the bird colony. It was a great introduction to the Falklands.

On top of the ridge were large rookeries of gentoo penguins on eggs, while the ever-present striated caracaras patrolled the colonies in surprisingly large numbers waiting for their "breakfast omelet." Down in the valley a large pond attracted upland geese as well as Chiloe widgeon, speckled teal and crested ducks, while nearby both ruddy-headed and grey-headed geese were found. On the strandline were nesting Magellanic and blackish oystercatchers with tiny pebble-colored chicks in among the silver leathery leaves of the sea cabbage—a scene typical of early summer in the Falkland Islands.



Almost everywhere there were striated caracaras and an occasional crested caracara—a very large concentration of predators, indeed. They were there for the rich food pickings—at least 100 pairs of upland geese were counted, some with goslings while others had already lost their chicks to predation. As soon as squabbling rival geese started to scatter a neighbor's goslings, the excited mother became distracted and the caracaras were quick to fly in for the kill. They were obviously full as they were caching their food beneath the posts of the old sheep fencing for later consumption.

We experienced a full day's shooting, plenty of sunshine and images by the gigabyte—what a great start to the trip!

#### **Thursday 10 November West Point & Grave Cove, West Falkland**

For our second day in the Falkland Islands, *Ushuaia* had repositioned during the previous evening to lie off the narrow entrance to West Point Cove, at the head of which lies the tiny settlement owned by the Napier family. The anchor had gone down before midnight ensuring a peaceful night for all aboard.

Monika's dulcet tones woke everyone at 0630 with the news that the weather was again wonderful with blue skies and light winds. Around the ship a large number of Commerson's dolphins (commonly known as "puffing pigs" in the Falklands) were circling and using the Zodiacs as bow-riding toys, much to the delight of those waiting to board the Zodiacs. At 0800 we started our disembarkation to land



everyone just below the house. Soon everyone was ashore and shedding their unnecessary wet-weather gear, sorting equipment and preparing for a morning in the field.

Those less able to walk the mile or so to the "Devil's Nose" area where the black-browed albatrosses and rockhopper penguins were located, were transported in the long-wheelbase Land Rovers. Most of those intent on seeing more albatrosses and penguins walked up the fairly steep incline past the flowering gorse with its characteristic coconut scent and then over the rolling grassland to the colony which is situated on a steep tussock-covered valley. However, several photographers decided that there was more than enough to photograph around the house and environs, so everyone was well spread out. A good selection of small songbirds occupied the cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) trees, which act as a windbreak around the house, and several striated caracaras were also in evidence.



The morning soon passed and everyone gathered to return to the ship. Some noticed the abundant planktonic "soup" in the water adjacent to the jetty, a testament to the arrival of Spring and warmer conditions here. The dolphins continued to entertain us on our return for lunch.

During lunch, *Ushuaia* moved out into the bay and into Grave Cove—an inlet of West Falkland Island lying east of West Point and the "Woolly Gut." Meanwhile another cruise vessel approached and anchored for their visit to West Point.

Owing to a limited water depth and uncertain charting, *Ushuaia* was unable to penetrate deep into Grave Cove, necessitating a 1.3 mile run into the sandy beach landing for our afternoon

activity. Unfortunately the fickle Falkland weather had deteriorated quickly from blue skies to a dense overcast, modest wind and light rain.

We were met on a beautiful white sandy beach by the French owners of the Dunbar settlement, who had travelled some 9 miles over rough tracks to greet us and show us the way to the estimated 3,000 pairs of gentoo penguins that comprise the biggest gentoo colony in the Falklands. At the head of the landing beach a number of sealer's graves are situated, dating from about 1830 when the beaches must have been more densely populated by seals than they are today. The gravesites are marked by two flat stones set on their ends, a larger stone at the other end, and a line of stones marking the edge. Chris found what was possibly another gravesite about 1,000 feet from the southern beach. The rain was persistent, but not unduly heavy and did not deter the keen enthusiasts from obtaining some good images of the gentoos.

Some explorers even penetrated to the southern beach to brave the strong breeze and crashing waves to try and photograph penguins emerging from the water. The deteriorating conditions meant that there was a steady trickle of passengers back to the landing and then to the ship as the time for the last Zodiac approached. Everyone was aboard by 1900 and the ship moved out during dinner to maintain station south of Saunders Island during the night in anticipation of the landing the following day.

After a fairly exhausting day everyone was keen to dry off, download and prepare equipment for another Falkland landing. Following dinner, most had an early night!

### **Friday 11 November Saunders Island**

Today could not have been more perfect for a day in the Falkland Islands. We had sun, mild weather and gentle winds for most of the day. Those who stayed ashore photographing for the entire day probably never had a minute's rest.

We landed at the Neck area where there are colonies of gentoo, Magellanic, rockhopper and a few king penguins, as well as king cormorants and black-browed albatrosses. Additional photo subjects included Magellanic oystercatchers with chicks, blackish oystercatchers, upland geese with chicks, snowy sheathbills, dolphin gulls, and dotterels with chicks. The Pole-Evans family joined us for the day and enjoyed lunch on board with some of the passengers who had returned to the ship.



In the morning most people concentrated on gentoo penguins landing on the beach, a wayward fur seal pup, skuas and giant petrels feeding on a penguin carcass, geese and oystercatchers. Others went to the top of the cliffs and photographed the rockhopper penguins, cormorants and albatrosses. There was a freshwater stream where the penguins were drinking, the cormorants were flying in carrying gobs of nesting material, and the albatrosses were constantly flying by.

By afternoon the tide was out and the light was perfect for photographing the rockhopper penguins both hopping down from the colony above and returning from the sea. Rockhoppers coming from the colony stopped at the “Bath Tub,” a depression in the rock that collects the receding tidal water, to bathe and frolic before continuing out to feed. Even though the main exit point from the ocean wasn’t close to our group, everyone got great photos of penguins running and hopping up the beach away from the surf.

The final boat left the shore at 1900 and we departed for South Georgia shortly after. We had the best and most productive three days in the Falklands in (at least) the last four Photo Safaris trips. Everyone was very happy!

### **Saturday 12 November At Sea towards South Georgia**

We had a good tail wind of roughly 25 knots helping the ship achieve a cruising speed close to 15 knots. The weather was partly sunny and the birds were flying around the boat.

The lectures today were: Monika—*A History of Whaling on South Georgia*, Anna Sutcliffe—*Penguins* and John Shaw—*RAW vs. JPEG and RAW Conversion*.

### **Sunday 13 November At Sea towards South Georgia**

Another good day for photographing flying birds around the ship. We still had a good tail wind so the ship was making good progress. The waves and wind were high, however, and before breakfast someone got soaked while shooting birds, so the staff decided to close off the lower deck for bird photography until waves stopped washing over it. We crossed over the Antarctic Convergence (the interface between the cold Antarctic water and that of the warmer southern Atlantic) during the late morning hours.

Considerably fewer albatrosses were following us and the first Antarctic petrel was spotted.

The lectures today were: Chris—*The Geology and History of South Georgia*, Anna—*Sea Lions and Fur Seals* and Joe McDonald—*Understanding and Mastering Exposure*.

### **Monday 14 November 2011 At Sea & arrival at South Georgia**

The windstorm passed us by and the ship made around 11 knots of speed in extreme fog. The birds were not flying around the ship and you couldn’t see more than a quarter of a mile. As we approached the archipelago we never saw the first small islands of South Georgia. However, we had arrived more than a half day early and so made an extra landing this afternoon.

Chris gave a talk on Ernest Shackleton highlighting the part of his adventure in the Weddell Sea—*By Endurance We Conquer*—and then Joe and Monika gave the *Introduction to South Georgia* talk outlining visitation rules. After lunch we observed the obligatory “invasive plant seed inspection” and the thorough vacuuming of our gear and clothing.

At 1700 we made our first landing on South Georgia at Right Whale Bay. It was foggy and raining—rather miserable but we still obtained some good images. The male fur seals were already on the beach. Their musky smell was overpowering as we approached the beach. There were some elephant seals on the beach, we had numerous king penguins and a few wayward gentoos also showed up. Passengers enjoyed the freedom from the ship—their trigger fingers quickly got used to the multiple delights of the South Georgia beaches.

We anchored in Rosita Harbor overnight.

## Tuesday 15 November Salisbury Plain

During the night, the ship anchored off the coast of South Georgia within 0.3 miles of Salisbury Plain, an area famous for the tens of thousands of king penguins and other wildlife that inhabit the northwest coast. The morning weather was foggy with a wet drizzle and misting rain. From the ship, the seas appeared relatively calm and it would be determined later if a landing was possible. We had our breakfast at 0700 and during this time Joe and Monika scouted the shore with a Zodiac to find a suitable landing area. They returned and informed the crew and passengers we would be departing for shore at 0830.

For most people, this was their first visit here. They may have seen images of Salisbury Plain, but nothing could quite prepare them for the wildlife spectacle we were about to encounter. Upon landing, the entire beach was carpeted with king penguins as far as the eye could see. King penguins—by the tens of thousands—were on either side of our landing area, along with hundreds of Antarctic fur seals staking out their breeding territories. Large elephant seals weighing close to four tons also



dotted the landscape. Although we were all in awe, we were just seeing the “tip of the iceberg!” The beach landing went smoothly and after climbing a short rise from the sea we saw king penguins strewn across the plains to the mountains in the distance. In a short time, all the passengers were safely ashore. The weather was still a light drizzle and our group explored into the interior. By mid-morning, the rain subsided and the wind picked up to about 10 knots.

Several leaders hiked with numerous passengers in a southerly direction toward the base of the mountain range which was barely visible in the mist. As we approached the base of the mountains, the distant slopes looked as though they were strewn with confetti—something that one would see on the streets in the aftermath of a ticker-tape parade in New York City. Upon closer inspection, we were viewing the main portion of the king penguin colony of Salisbury Plain. From a distance we listened to the cacophony of sounds as the birds were actively communicating with each other and their young. Most of the juvenile birds were still in their brown downy plumage while the adults had a mixture of current year’s feathers, and others were molting. Many photographers spent the rest of the morning photographing this graphically-challenging giant colony—trying to make photographic order out of the chaos of the massive number of birds.

By late morning, wind speed was rising and it was decided it was necessary to head back to the beach, load the Zodiacs and return to the ship for lunch. Disembarking the beach was somewhat of a challenge as the surf became rougher and many Zodiacs were overtopped by some waves as they departed the beach. It’s all part of adventure travel!

We had a wonderful lunch and expected to leave for shore again in the afternoon. Shortly after

lunch, we were treated to katabatic winds—which can suddenly rush off the mountain glaciers, gaining speed to hurricane force as they move down the mountains to the sea. Although the day started to clear, we awaited news that the 50-mph winds had subsided so we could have another landing and more photographic opportunities on Salisbury Plain.

In viewing the roiling and frothing waves on the water, no one was in a rush to load the Zodiacs and head for the beach. Our Expedition Leaders gave us updates every half hour until it was evident that we were not going to head to shore the rest of the day. At this point, Joe Van Os “opened the bar” with drinks and appetizers from the kitchen. Everyone’s mood quickly changed mode to party time! With high spirits abounding, everybody had a good time playing bar games, dancing or participating in group conversations. Many cameras appeared and photographers shot both stills and video capturing the fun and excitement that everyone was sharing. We ended the evening with another fine dinner and then retired to our cabins. Seas were calm for a good night’s sleep.

### **Wednesday 16 November Prion Island & Jason Harbor**

Following an early breakfast our landings commenced on Prion Island, home to nesting wandering albatrosses. The weather was misty and cold. Here, rocky reefs protect the landing beach, so disembarkation was easy. Unloading the Zodiacs and then gearing up for the walk up the hill on the new boardwalk took place relatively quickly. We walked up the beach with the staff positioned as “seal guards” forming a protective buffering zone between fur seals and passengers. We passed sleepy fur seals using tussock grass mounds as pillows. Elusive South Georgia pipits were seen frequently on this non-rat-infested island. South Georgia pintails here were remarkably tame—waddling in pairs and feeding on seeds and invertebrates in the mud. (These ducks are occasionally carnivorous, scavenging the meat from carcasses of dead seals or birds.)



The weather really closed in and, if you looked up, the amount of snow descending from the sky was impressive—huge snowflakes were landing on albatross chicks, giant petrels, tussock grass and us. The weather seemed to dampen bird activity, although prions were heard cackling in their burrows beneath the boardwalk and occasionally a flying adult albatross strafed the island. One youngster did get multiple feedings from its parent. The first sign that something interesting was about to happen was the swoosh of wings overhead and the sounds of the youngster clacking its beak and calling—standing up on the nest as it did so. Several flight circuits later, the parent landed and then feeding, preening and parent/chick bonding commenced. The squid soup was still being fed as our second group of passengers began leaving the island.

This little island and compact landing beach offers a wonderful microcosm of what South Georgia was like before man introduced rats and reindeer on the big island. Here, so much

biological diversity is packed into a very small space.

The plan was to return to Salisbury Plain in the afternoon. But, when the weather turned for the worse, we moved along the coast to see if we could land somewhere in Stromness Bay—possibly near the relic Husvik whaling station. At the entrance to the bay there is a spectacular and distinctive folded rock which Shackleton is supposed to have seen when he reached the summit above Stromness whaling station—confirming for him that he was finally near to help and rescue. As we entered the bay the geologic folds were illuminated in clear sunshine, but as we cruised further into the bay past Grass Island gusts of wind were blowing flurries of seawater in miniature tornado twists or williwaws. No landing here either. We steamed past Stromness, viewed Leith Harbor from a distance, and finally sailed round to a different bay. Here in Cumberland West Bay we had a delightful shore landing in Jason Harbor.

The ship stayed in this sheltered harbor all night and then repositioned early the next morning to Fortuna Bay.

### **Thursday 17 November Fortuna Bay & Grytviken**

We awoke to no wind, no rain, no snow. Instead, it was a pleasant and mild day as we entered Fortuna Bay, and saw the wide flat plain stretching to a distant glacier. No problems, we thought. Landing was relatively easy, with no big swells and few fur seals on the beach. Gentoo and king penguins were scattered about and a small group of reindeer—six or seven animals—grazed on the hill above our landing site. Just above the spot where we left our dry bags, a light-mantled sooty albatross nested in the cliff side tussock. Once everyone was ashore, and after the usual briefing as to Zodiac times, everyone was free to wander. For the first hour most of the group stayed close to the landing site as there was a pile of elephant seals on the beach—appearing to be artfully arranged just for our benefit. Opposite were several groups of kings, which offered a nice scenic composition of penguins in foreground, mountain peaks behind.

The weather continued to improve. Fresh snow on the mountains across the bay helped create a spectacular panoramic scene which was hard to resist. In fact, several photographers shot a series of overlapping images to be assembled later in Photoshop—their first panoramic image attempts.



Slowly the group scattered, some people climbing to photograph reindeer, some wading across a small stream to the open flats, and some walking the beach. But after several hours ashore we started to notice a change in the weather. The wind had freshened a bit. And then a bit more. And then it really started to blow. A katabatic wind whipped sand in our faces, while sudden and more intense gusts made standing upright quite difficult. The word went out to all

the staff: gather the passengers as quickly as possible and get back to the ship.

Easier said than done. Trying to get camera packs into dry bags was challenging as dry bags ballooned out in the wind. Six or seven staff and sailors were needed to hold a Zodiac on shore. Once the Zodiacs were loaded and launched, the ride back to the ship turned into a wet ordeal as sea spray was whipped off the tops of the waves by the wind. Finally only a few staff members were still on shore—but then their Zodiac's engine suddenly “died.” And that was the start of a cascading series of events. Another Zodiac, with only the driver aboard, made the trip back from the ship towards shore to assist the stranded boat. About 100 yards out it was caught by an extremely powerful wind gust. Those on the shore watched as the Zodiac's bow rose higher and higher into the air—and then the inevitable happened as the wind caught the underside. The Zodiac flipped. A radio call went out immediately: boat over, man in water. While half the group on shore held onto the boat with the crippled engine, the other half ran to help the sailor with the flipped boat. Luckily the wind was pushing the boat toward shore. A third Zodiac with two sailors came from the ship and, at last, there was enough manpower to turn the flipped boat upright. By this time word had gone around the ship of what had happened, and most of the passengers were watching from on board as the shore party returned. The good news: no injuries, no equipment lost, no one “worse for wear.”

Our "adventure" at Fortuna Bay slightly delayed leaving for Grytviken and our mandatory customs inspection. We sailed for several hours before reaching King Edward Point and the entrance into Grytviken. Chris kept up a running dialogue as we entered, pointing out the historic highlights and explaining the uses of various buildings. We anchored just offshore and waited for the customs agent to come aboard. He finally did, but we waited again for our clearance. At last, after what seemed like an hour, we were allowed ashore. Talk about an easy landing: almost dead calm, no wind, no waves, continued sunshine and a gentle beach. Once everyone was ashore, we were free to wander. Some people visited the museum, some sent out mail, some shopped, and some wandered about photographing the old whaling station buildings. At 1800 we all met in the whalers' graveyard, where Ernest Shackleton is buried. Chris recounted the heroic story of Shackleton and then we all raised a toast to the "Boss," saving the last swallow of rum to pour on his gravesite. Then it was back to the ship, dinner, and a sail to a quiet anchorage for the night.

### **Friday 18 November St. Andrews Bay**

The limited accuracy of the weather forecasts for the Southern Ocean makes for similarly inaccurate predictions of landing conditions for the various beaches we planned to visit during our six days of visitation on South Georgia. After assessing several weather broadcasts from satellite and various other weather predictors, we gauged Friday would be our best opportunity to land on the broad alluvial beach at St. Andrews Bay.

The beach at St. Andrews Bay is the most spectacular location on an island known for a wealth of incredible settings for wildlife and landscape photography. While Salisbury Plain—a fantastic place to shoot—is probably better known to nature photographers, the scene at St. Andrews Bay is larger, more diverse, and has a snowcapped mountain background that adds so much to the images created there.

One major difference between Salisbury Plain and St. Andrews Bay is the landing. At St. Andrews the landing is much more difficult to accomplish as it is completely unsheltered from the large ocean swell that is a routine feature of any landing there, as well as a very steep

beach that drops off into deep water very close to shore—making it hard to stand as we wrestle Zodiacs into place for safe beach landing operations. Few ships attempt landing here!

With our best weather conditions predicted for today, when the day dawned we had our most intrepid photographers assembled in the ship's lounge for a light breakfast of coffee, cakes and sandwiches prior to an 0600 landing on St. Andrews. From the ship, we could see thousands of king penguins on the beach doing their morning ablutions and engaging in various social activities before heading out to sea to forage for their large, voracious and demanding chicks.

But as we prepared to dress for shore, a howling cold katabatic wind rushed down from the mountaintop glacier above our landing site. With a velocity of 50 mph with higher gusts—certainly enough to swamp a Zodiac close to shore—we had to postpone our early landing and wait to see if the predicted low wind forecast would come to fruition. By 0800 the wind had dropped, and by 0830 we were landing on the beach for what turned out to be a full day (11 hours for some!) at glorious St. Andrews Bay.

Our landing site was strewn with giant bull Southern elephant seal beach masters with their harems of 10 or more females. Seemingly as big as school busses, the giant males bellowed and belched clouds of steaming breath as interloping smaller males moved in on the harems to partake in this extraordinary beach orgy.



The deep vibrato of these vocalizations resounding up and down the beach allowed potential rivals a way to assess the size and stamina of those big males holding the best female-catching beach real estate. Aggressive males plowed through newborn and "weaner" pups, scattering throngs of king penguins and forcing them to run in all directions to avoid being flattened by these two-ton "raging bulls."

Down the beach we could see the colony of hundreds of thousands of king penguins. But first we had to shoot our way through a menagerie of other species, including gulls, skuas, giant petrels, introduced reindeer and the occasional Antarctic tern.

St. Andrews Bay, with its meandering artistically-bisected streams of glacial meltwater, is among the most photogenic penguin settings on earth. The streams make the king penguin colony photogenic from almost any angle and tens of thousands of images were produced during the day. We shot chick feedings, courtship displays, ecstatic displays, squadron of birds coming and going from the sea, squabbles and slap fights, chick crèches, molting adults—and the list goes on and on. Later, back on the ship, incredible images from the day were converted in Lightroom on people's laptops!

We knew the day was a special one when one of our younger "gung-ho" photographers remarked, as he was leaving the beach, that the day had been so photographically intense he had "run out of creativity" and had to have a bit of recovery quiet time aboard the ship! All I can

say after a day like today is that I was "pooped" and happy. It was time for a hot shower and a glass of wine.

### **Saturday 19 November Royal Bay & Cooper Bay**

After our wonderful experiences at St. Andrews Bay, the *Ushuaia* anchored off Little Moltke Harbor in Royal Bay for the night. Our sheltered anchorage meant a quiet night out of the swell. However, a stiff breeze early in the morning did not augur well. During breakfast the Captain repositioned the ship further inside Royal Bay and, as the wind died away in the shelter of the mountains, things began to



look more promising. For those staff and passengers who had visited this spot before it was somewhat of a shock to discover a major recession of the snout of the Ross Glacier in Royal Bay over the past few years. A Zodiac cruise was organized to the glacier. Antarctic terns and snow petrels fed off morsels brought up by the current and there was also some minor calving to enliven the proceedings. Overhead the lenticular altocumulus clouds added to the scenery and provided interest to many a photograph.

During lunch the ship repositioned back out into a turbulent sea as we headed toward the extreme southeastern end of South Georgia. As we approached Cooper Island and rounded into Cooper Bay it became apparent that another ship was occupying our anchoring position—contrary to the booking system. However, some stern words from our fearless Expedition Leader Monika—forcefully stating our case—caused the vessel and attendant Zodiacs to remove themselves from the area.

Cooper Bay is relatively sheltered, allowing further exploration of the bluffs and bays by Zodiac to watch the resident macaroni ("stuck a feather in his cap and called it macaroni") penguins. Their colony is situated high up on the cliff top amongst the tussock grass and guarded by a phalanx of fur seals. A cruising leopard seal added to the scene. It managed to kill one penguin while we were



there and briefly held another before it ultimately escaped.

At dinner we learned the weather was not going to be on our side and we headed round into the entrance to Drygalski Fjord for shelter during the evening. The Captain conferred with Joe and Monika about a massive storm that could be seen on satellite maps between us and the Antarctic Peninsula. They told the group we would probably hide out at the protected fjord entrance until it passed. It was a calm evening with flat water before the storm.

### **Sunday 20 November Drygalski Fjord (All day sheltering from the storm)**

Sure enough, the wind began to howl during the night. By morning it was actually difficult to stand outside on the deck without being blown over. The wind cut the tops off the waves making foam patterns like fine lace on the surface. Despite the wind there was only a little swell and at breakfast the dining room was full.

We knew that outside of this sheltered harbor the weather was raging in the open ocean. The Captain and our Expedition Leaders had decided to delay our departure to Antarctica for half a day to avoid the battering we would experience in the high winds and huge swells—there seemed to be no disagreement regarding this decision among the passengers. The Drygalski Fjord lies at the southeastern tip of South Georgia. At its end rises a spectacular glacier surrounded by impressive jagged peaks. A distinct fault line separates volcanic rocks from two different geological periods. All in all not a bad place to be stuck as far as the scenery was concerned.

Impromptu Photoshop and Lightroom demonstrations broke out in the lounge. After dinner the winds began to fall below 40 knots. It was just enough to allow us to sail deep into the Drygalski Fjord where, as we reached the impressive Risting Glacier at its end, we were treated to a spectacular view of the glacier at twilight from the Bridge.

### **Monday 21 November Drygalski Fjord & the Southern Ocean**

Our departure was delayed due to the storm as seas with 50-foot-high swells and high winds churned the open ocean from South Georgia to the South Orkneys. Our ship overnighted again in Drygalski Fjord seeking shelter from the weather. Yesterday, we still experienced 50-knot winds most of the day, but it had been relatively calm compared to sailing into the storm.

Just catching the end of the storm, our ship departed from Drygalski Fjord at 0220 this morning and headed to the open sea. We rounded the last portion of land at South Georgia and turned in a southwesterly direction at Cape Disappointment. Here we encountered some rough seas, rocking and rolling for a few hours and waking many aboard. Within a couple of hours we found ourselves back in calmer seas and favorable winds—and it was business as usual! Though the skies weren't the best for photography, there was still some bird activity to shoot around the ship.

Breakfast was served at 0800 and we were treated to a presentation at 0930 by Monika entitled *Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration*, covering the Swedish Antarctic Expedition of 1901–1903.

The middle of the day was at leisure with passengers and staff helping folks with Lightroom and Photoshop, reviewing images, playing games on iPads, or reading from the ship's library. The temperature was about 46°F (8°C) for most of the day with heavy fog shrouding the sea and

visibility limited to a few hundred yards.

After lunch we were entertained by Chris who lectured on the geology of the Antarctica Peninsula—which included Pangea, Gondwana and everything in between! 300 million years of geology presented in one hour. What talent! Later, Greg presented *An Introduction to Lightroom*.

Our teatime snacks were served in the bar at 1630, the start of the social hour on the ship, bringing everyone together for fun and spirits. Dinner was served at 1900—earlier than when we were landing on South Georgia. It seems no matter what we did, we are always hungry and looking forward to the wonderful meals on the ship. Everyone seemed to enjoy the R&R and the time to prepare for our next adventure and most people retired to bed early this evening after many days of landings on South Georgia. It was a welcome respite after the last several days of intense photography on the island. We were treated to calm seas overnight.

## **Tuesday 22 November At Sea to the South Orkneys**

Despite the fact that we left late from South Georgia, we were en route to get to the South Orkneys later today—actually ahead of schedule! The winds from the storm wrapped around and helped to push us towards the southwest, giving us exceptional speed on our travels.

The lectures for the day were: Anna: *Antarctic Seals* and Joe McDonald: *Digital Workflow Without Using Lightroom and Adobe RAW Converter*.

We got to the South Orkneys by mid-afternoon but couldn't get into the islands from the east due to dense ice. So we went north of the islands and found our first good icebergs—many of them with good concentrations of Adélie penguins sitting on them. We spent the rest of the afternoon photographing the icebergs and the birds flying around the ship. After dinner the light broke through the clouds to give us great golden light. Many of us were outside photographing the Antarctic and pintado petrels in that beautiful light.

## **Wednesday 23 November At Sea towards Antarctic Sound**

We had another full day at sea with more birds flying around the boat, some icebergs and lectures throughout the day. The lectures were:

Anna: *Albatrosses*, Greg: *HDR*, using this technique for creating images from subjects with contrast, and Chris: *Ice is Nice*.

The skies were still cloudy and gray but, once we got past the storm, the crossing had not been bad at all. We entered the Antarctic Sound from the western



end, thanks to the ice blocking our way from the South Orkneys, and by tomorrow morning will begin our journey through the icy waterway. We saw the north side of some of the islands in the last light of the day. Everyone is excited.

#### **Thursday 24 November Antarctic Sound & Erebus and Terror Gulf**

A relatively calm crossing of the Scotia Sea brought us to the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula one day early. But because of the landing booking system with other ships we were unable to occupy the more common sites. However, we had other options and one was to try a landing on Gourdin Island which lies at the extreme northern tip of the peninsula. This small island contains three species of penguins. *Ushuaia* dropped anchor about three cables (a cable is 1/10 of a nautical mile) off the island and, on a bright and breezy morning, a scouting party set off to assess the conditions for landing. The word came back that the beach landing site was very small on account of a significant snow and ice shelf—which would make getting everyone ashore potentially very disruptive to the wildlife which was jammed on a narrow strip of bare rock. With the high tidal conditions dry real estate was at a premium and best left to undisturbed penguins. A brisk northwesterly wind would have made any exit from the ship very wet. So a decision was made to abort any landing here. Indeed this was vindicated later as the wind increased to 30–35 knots.



As the ship steamed into Antarctic Sound we marveled at the snowy landscape with Mount Bransfield standing guard over the entrance to the sound and the Bransfield Strait. Passing the Argentinian station of Esperanza at Hope Bay, Chris gave a short commentary over the PA system regarding the history and basic geology of the location. The wind calmed as we headed south and the afternoon became gloriously sunny and clear. During lunchtime, we headed through Fridtjof Sound and into Erebus and Terror Gulf towards Devil Island during lunchtime. As the voyage progressed the amount of ice increased and at one point we were pushing our way through 9/10 pack ice. However, the way ahead looked even denser and, with significant pieces of glacial (land-derived) ice, Captain Jorge decided that we had gone as far as we dare. He called a halt when we were still several miles from Devil Island which lies on the north side of Vega Island.

A Zodiac cruise amongst the ice provided the remainder of the afternoon entertainment with many photographs of ice and of occasional seals as the small boats took turns to shuttle passengers from location to location. As dinnertime approached the fog, which had been lingering in the east, descended as the ship tried to negotiate the floes and the bergy bits. Around 2200, one eagle-eyed photographer spied two larger penguins in the fog—these were later confirmed to be emperor penguins. Overnight we steamed northeastward to Paulet Island.

## Friday 25 November Paulet Island & Brown Bluff

We woke this morning to sunny skies and quiet waters. As we slowly approached Paulet Island, many of the nearby ice floes had groups of penguins, foretelling a good photo opportunity. When we landed, we were met by hundreds and hundreds of Adélie penguins, coming and going to the sea or sitting in the colony (and squabbling with their neighbors). Easy to tell which direction the penguins were heading: the ones fresh from the ocean were clean, with pristine white breast feathers, while the ones headed to the sea were anything but clean. Exactly how dirty and poop-covered can one penguin become? Apparently really dirty!

In the distance we could see a special iceberg. Not only was it blue, but in its center was a great arched hole. Even though it was still quite a distance away, we decided to take the Zodiacs out to it. These trips turned into one of the highlights of the morning, as the iceberg was spectacular. By circling the berg, views through the arch revealed either the mountains of Paulet or the clouded skies of the open sea. Most of the groups in the Zodiacs also found small floes with penguins that could be photographically aligned against the arch.

Back on shore, many of us waited as groups of penguins gathered until, finally, as one mob, they rushed into the ocean. Usually this happened immediately after we had given up on them doing anything whatsoever and had turned our attention elsewhere!

The morning slowly clouded over, so that by the time we left the sky was totally overcast. While most of the group either worked the colony itself or tried for penguins on ice, some adventurous photographers walked to the shag colony several hundred yards away. Just as the light started to fizzle, the shags returned—long strings of birds in a line, flight after flight, wave after wave. We watched the returning shags as we packed dry bags, forgetting for a while that we were cold and hungry.

As we loaded the Zodiacs with our gear we all marveled at how far the arched iceberg had moved. Originally we had thought it might have been grounded, but instead the currents had moved it into the far distance, almost out of sight. Between the iceberg and the penguins we used up many, many pixels.



Our sailing time to Brown Bluff was scheduled for three hours, but we had a special "diversion" on the way. Another beautiful blue iceberg, with an arch through its center, was spotted by Joe from the Bridge. Captain Jorge slowed the ship and, as an announcement was made to grab cameras and get on deck, we circled the berg in order to make a slow-speed photographic "drive by shooting." By the time we arrived on shore at Brown Bluff it was late afternoon and definitely overcast. Landing was complicated by the jumble of ice floes along the shore, causing the Zodiac drivers to take ever-changing circuitous routes. However, these same floes offered photo opportunities as penguins rocketed out of the water onto them. The beach was extremely narrow, only about five yards from the sea to the edge of the Adélie penguin colony. The rapidly advancing tide finally forced us to leave so the birds could have some room on the beach. The rules state that we were to be no closer than 15 feet to the nesting penguins and space was getting tight.



### **Saturday 26 November Hydrurga Rocks & Cuverville Island**

Overnight we traveled southward from Bransfield Strait into Croker Passage and the Gerlache Strait, which separates the islands of Brabant and Anvers from the mainland of the Antarctic Peninsula.

This morning we landed at Hydrurga Rocks, a tiny island group with a small chinstrap colony. Our landing was on a small stretch of rocky beach tucked in a petite protective bay, which made it easy to disembark from the Zodiacs. At the landing site we learned about the different types of granitic rocks, formed deep within the roots of a past volcanic mountain, which are estimated to be roughly 140–150 million years old.

Upon arrival the staff cut a snow stairway for passengers to easily make their way to the top of the snowpack where we were treated to chinstrap penguins traversing and tobogganing from their nests to the sea and back again across the snow. There was a small flock of sheathbills hanging out at the landing site, which made for some nice white on white compositions. Kelp gulls could be seen flying



overhead, as well as a few Antarctic skuas.

After lunch we traversed the Gerlache Strait and, on the way toward Cuverville, were treated to views of small artistic icebergs. We made an afternoon landing on Cuverville Island to photograph a large gentoo penguin colony against a dramatic mountain backdrop. Due to the limited nesting real estate some of the penguins chose to nest several thousand feet upslope—after a long day at sea foraging for their chicks they had to make the slow climb up the steep snow-covered hill back to their nest sites with the krill.

At Cuverville two shifts of Zodiac cruises photographed a seemingly endless variety of icebergs featuring beautiful patterns and shapes in various shades of blue and white. At times the lighting was superb with the sun muted by high clouds but still providing enough light to accentuate the deep flutes and subtle textures of the ice.

Upon return to the ship we celebrated another successful day with an outdoor barbeque of Chilean sausages on the grill, a selection of appetizers and another “open bar” of mixed drinks before dinner provided by Joe. The conversation was loud and lively.

### **Sunday 27 November Lemaire Channel & Paradise Harbor**

Amazingly, by 0200 this morning, more than 30 passengers were awake and in the lounge to shoot the sunrise. Joe had asked the Captain to position the ship overnight near Anvers and Wiencke Islands located close to the northern end of the scenic Lemaire Channel. Joe said from experience that if the eastern horizon was clear, the snowy peaks of Anvers and Wiencke could light up in a spectacular sunrise display. We waited and waited—eating cookies and fruitcake—but all we saw was gray, gray, gray. By 0330 most of us had gone back to bed.

Following breakfast we headed down the Lemaire Channel. Though the sky was still gray and overcast, visibility was very good, allowing us to make monochrome images of the towering cliffs at Cape Renard and the twin basalt peaks affectionately known as Una’s Tits—named after a buxom secretary at the British Antarctic Survey at Stanley in the Falkland Islands.

Unfortunately, pack ice blocked the south end of the Lemaire channel. We tried to push through to no avail. So 65° 5' South was the southernmost extent of our travels. We turned around and headed north.

By lunchtime we were arriving at spectacular Paradise Harbor (occasionally called Paradise Bay) when someone shouted “orcas!”—many of us ran out on deck to see a half dozen of these incredible animals patrolling for seals amidst the ice floes.

Spectacular Zodiac cruising, great landscape photography, a minke whale, an aggressive leopard seal, and a scenic climb at the Almirante Brown research station were all part of this incredible afternoon’s activities. In the evening we headed towards Half Moon Island.



## **Monday 28 November Half Moon Island**

Our morning included a short but beautiful landing at one of the most picturesque locations in the South Shetlands—Half Moon Island. We arrived by 1000 and, because of two impending storms forecast to merge into a huge one in the Drake Passage, we had to be off again by noon to avoid them.

Half Moon Island hosts a large colony of chinstrap penguins nestled amongst the ledges and rocky spires. The exposed rocks are coated with brilliant orange lichens and Chris photographed an endemic large mite that feeds on this primitive plant. Kelp gulls nested in a small colony on one of the outcrops, as did Antarctic terns, and skuas patrolled the skies, watching for unguarded penguin eggs.

The landscape possibilities on Half Moon Island are among the best. The view in one direction overlooks a large bay and sweep of glaciers and, almost directly opposite, another view offers a great vantage for watching a penguin highway. The chinstraps trudge upslope to their nests, framed by a brilliant orange cliff face and a distant row of mountains. The penguins were still on eggs and, typical for a colony, the birds on nests were mostly stained and colored by a krill-pink wash. Penguins coming fresh from the sea, however, sparkled clean and bright. In small groups or alone they waddled past our cameras to their nests.

We departed on time and began our Drake Passage traverse, cutting out a planned afternoon visit to Deception Island, in still pleasant seas with a small swell and, with little wind, a birdless sky.

Not far out into the Drake Passage we came upon a throng of whales feeding just along the continental shelf. What started out as a sighting of two fin whales gave rise to a half dozen or more humpbacks and perhaps twice that number of sei whales. Though we didn't have any extended close encounters with these leviathans, we saw humpbacks bubble-net feeding and sounding with flukes up on numerous occasions. Sei whales with smooth backs and sickle-shaped dorsal fins were seen lunge-feeding through (apparently) shoals of krill, making this time a great send-off for our journey northward.

## **Tuesday 29 November At Sea towards Cape Horn**

The day started calm with the ship making great speed at 13 knots. Chris offered his Antarctic dog sledging program. Lunch was fully attended and two birthdays were celebrated royally. The afternoon was spectacular with waves and wind rising to 30–45 knots with a maximum of 60 knots. Wave height by evening was 30 feet plus! Because we knew we were close to shore, many participants in the lounge treated these wild waves as a roller coaster ride, oohing and aahing with each big wave, while others stationed themselves on the Bridge to photograph big waves crashing over the bow. The storm was at its worst around 2100 and many of us began the night with fitful sleep due to the ship's motion.

## **Wednesday 30 November Rounding Cape Horn & into Beagle Channel**

By 0200 the Captain had taken us to shelter in the lee of Cape Horn—and we all finally slept.

By excellent planning—as well as using the latest satellite technology—we had missed the brunt of the storm because our extended trip allowed for a bit of travel flexibility without feeling like we had missed something. In contrast, two ships on very tight schedules to the Peninsula and back went headlong into this massive storm—and their passengers experienced miserable conditions

during their crossing!

Our day was filled with “Life in the Freezer” movies, packing, a fantastic photo competition, and a gentle anchorage for all to truly appreciate after the rocking of the night before.

Deep into the Beagle Channel the wind abated, the sun shone, and the smell of land and green plants could be sensed from the outer decks. We gathered that evening in the lounge to mingle with our newfound friends one last time before tomorrow’s departure.

#### **Thursday 1 December Ushuaia Arrival/Departure**

We arrived back in Ushuaia in the “wee hours” of the morning and floated offshore until berthing space was made available to us on the municipal dock.

Following breakfast we all said our “good-byes” and most of us headed off to the airport for homeward flights, while others continued their adventures, traveling to Torres del Paine National Park in Chile or Iguazu Falls in Argentina—or Easter Island, far out in the South Pacific!

What a great trip!

**Written by**

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Joe McDonald  
Mary Ann McDonald  
John Shaw  
Joe Van Os  
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**Captain**

Jorge Aldegueri

**MV USHUAIA**

Originally commissioned as the *R/V Researcher* for the US National Oceanographic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) the *Ushuaia* has since been refurbished for Antarctica cruises. While in the service of the US government, the ship was the first NOAA vessel to circumnavigate the globe on a scientific voyage (1995), carrying out baseline studies to gather data critical for later years comparison on the ocean's role in global climate change, the Antarctic ozone hole and the El Niño phenomenon, among other projects.



Now, as the newly renamed *Ushuaia*, the 278-foot-long ship has been recently converted for passenger travel accommodating a maximum of 84 passengers in 41 comfortable twin cabins and suites. Navigation and communication equipment have been upgraded and passenger email access on the ship's bridge has also been installed. Cabins on this ice-strengthened polar vessel are nicely appointed and feature two lower berths in the Suite and Superior cabins and some twin cabins, and upper and lower berths in all others. Depending on the cabin category selected, rooms provide private or semi-private facilities. A desk, wash basin, and ample storage space is standard in all cabins. Public areas feature a large dining room, an observation lounge and bar, a conference room with modern multimedia equipment, a well-stocked "Antarctic" library, a changing room and a small infirmary. Because *Ushuaia* was built in the US, electrical outlets onboard are 110 V/ 60 Hz with American/Japanese style plugs.

The ship has a large bridge with an open bridge policy. *Ushuaia* is staffed by an Argentine captain and crew, highly experienced in the art of Antarctic navigation. There is a large amount of outside deck space available to passengers for photography, wildlife viewing or gazing at Antarctica's spectacular scenery. There is a full complement of Zodiac and other rubber inflatable boats for use for shore landings and for cruising in these small boats to view wildlife and explore Antarctica's amazing icy coastline.