

CHILLING



THE **JOURNEY** HAD BEEN A LONG ONE – A LIFETIME OF ANTICIPATION, 24 HOURS OF AIR TRAVEL TO THE **SOUTHERN** TIP OF SOUTH AMERICA AND TWO DAYS CRUISING THE NOTORIOUS DRAKE **PASSAGE**. THIS WAS THE LAND OF **GLACIERS** AND ICE THAT WE'D DREAMT OF AND READ ABOUT FOR SO LONG. OUR **EXPLORATION** OF THE ICY WILDERNESS OF THE ANTARCTIC **PENINSULA AND** DIVING BENEATH THESE FROZEN SEAS WAS ABOUT TO **BEGIN**.

We'd boarded our expedition vessel the *Polar Pioneer* in the Argentine port city of Ushuaia two days earlier. Ushuaia is sometimes referred to as 'The City at the End of the World' and this is an accurate, if not colourful, description. Antarctica, lying to the south across treacherous seas, is truly like another world. The *Polar Pioneer* is a Russian ice-strengthened research ship built in 1983 and refurbished in 2000 to comfortably accommodate passengers for travel to the polar regions. She served us well during our 12 day voyage. Crossing the South Atlantic and Southern Oceans, our companions were the ever-present sea birds – wandering albatross, Wilson's storm petrel, Cape petrels and brown-browed albatross entertained us for hours on end with their aerodynamics across the waves. These are the true masters of the polar oceans and they accompanied us all the way from Cape Horn to the first icebergs and on to the South Shetland Islands of the Antarctic Peninsula.

Now, however, it was time to dive. Positioned in a small sturdy Zodiac, we looked at the sea surface covered in brash ice and a shiver ran up our spines. Sure we had on our drysuits. Certainly, we were warm in our thermal undergarments. Of course we were using environmentally protected regulators to guard against freezing. But the water looked so ...cold!

We entered the water slowly, making sure the equipment was functioning properly and that our bodies were protected against the zero degree water. Resting on the surface, we were aware of the silence. The only sound we could hear was the crinkling and creaking of the blocks of ice in the water all around us. Then we slipped beneath the



MICHAEL SALVAREZZA, CHRISTOPHER P. WEAVER



Inset: Predatory leopard seals often approach divers for a closer look. Above: Crossing the notorious Drake Passage. From far left: A crocodile dragon fish; bottom-dwelling spiny plunder fish; starfish, some with up to 48 legs, can often reach a metre in size.



frozen slush on the surface and entered the underwater world of Antarctica.

We were diving the Hydruga Rocks, a small cove alongside one of the islands in the Gerlache Strait. Below us was the rocky bottom, strewn with small boulders and overgrown with beds of brown kelp. As our eyes adjusted to the reduced ambient light, we noticed colorful starfish in dazzling shades of yellow, red and purple. As we swam deeper along the gently sloping bottom, we encountered some of the unique fish life of this region: a small spiny plunder fish and a beautifully colored crocodile dragon fish. These are bottom dwellers that have adapted to the extreme cold

era whaling factory ship *The Governer* in the fading twilight. This was a fascinating glimpse of the history of whaling and the bleached bones of some of the unfortunate whales captured by this vessel were still strewn over the bottom alongside the wreck.

At Cuverville Island at the mouth of the Errera Channel we dove alongside and underneath massive icebergs. Above the water, icebergs are beautiful in their various colours of white, blue and purple and endless strange shapes and sizes. Below water, however, icebergs take on a completely different but equally awe-inspiring appearance. The ice below the surface is as smooth as glass and often scalloped from the interaction with the surrounding

iceberg creating the underwater disturbance. At Cuverville Island, a massive piece of ice fell into the water directly in front of us, again highlighting the risk of exploring these structures. Despite this, the dives around and under these massive formations of ice were the highlight of our journey. Our diving included encounters with fur and leopard seals and many times we also found ourselves diving alongside penguin rookeries. The visibility often exceeded 10 metres and our equipment kept us warm throughout these dives.

Antarctica is as wild and beautiful above the water as it is below. Throughout our journey, we encountered majestic

THIS FROZEN CONTINENT IS HUMBLING, EXHILARATING, INTOXICATING – AND LIKE NO OTHER PLACE ON EARTH

of the waters. At 20 metres we came across a flat sandy plain inhabited by more starfish and an occasional sea anemone. We were as amazed by the marine life we were encountering as we were with the realization of our diving dreams.

Antarctica is truly frontier diving. Many of the dive sites we explored during our stay have never been dived before. Most people only dream of journeying to such a remote location and we considered ourselves really fortunate to be there! Hydruga Rocks was a prelude to diving excitement elsewhere along the Antarctic Peninsula. One evening we dove on a 1900s-

water. Many times, the ice is a light blue colour and occasionally bits of rock can be seen embedded in the frozen mass itself. As we dove alongside these majestic creations, we found ourselves dwarfed by their size and captivated by their beauty.

Icebergs can be dangerous, however, and deserve plenty of respect. As we cruised alongside one fairly large iceberg near Pleneau Island, we heard a massive underwater explosion followed almost immediately by a pressure wave that knocked into us. Our hearts raced as we struggled to swim as far away from the ice as possible – nearby, a large section of ice had broken away from a different

mountain peaks, dramatic glaciers and icebergs, and multitudes of wildlife. Blessed with long summer hours of daylight, the amount of time spent diving and walking the shores can be maximized. Anyone visiting this remote land should spend as much time as possible communing with the wildlife and with the continent itself. Richly rewarding experiences are possible everywhere in here. Whether it was watching a calving glacier while accompanied by a lone penguin, or having an inquisitive penguin chick nibble at the drawstrings of our jackets, or seeing a humpback whale breach alongside the cool blue icebergs of the Antarctic

Top from left: Red starfish can be found in large numbers on the bottom; strange looking limpets inhabit the rocky seabed; sea anemones and other invertebrates dominate the marine landscape; female gentoo penguin feeding her chick.

Above right: A Weddell seal taking a nap.

Below from left: Topside, many icebergs are sculpted into fantastic shapes by the wind and waves; approaching an iceberg underwater; geared up and ready to go!





waters, we found that special moments in Antarctic are a daily occurrence.

Antarctica is a continent isolated by strong and violent oceans, great distance and harsh climate. Still, Man has had his impact here. Whaling operations decimated once thriving populations of the great whales and countries still dispute claims of ownership of certain parcels of land. The threat of future exploitation of natural resources here is an

Spectacular is the only word to describe this icy experience. Below right: The Russian icebreaker *Polar Pioneer*, our comfortable and safe expedition vessel.

ever-present one. And the impact of an increasing number of tourists has yet to be fully understood. Still, for explorers and adventurers, including divers, this is a unique wilderness frontier. One cannot help but come away from this place filled with awe and wonder ...and concern. Hopefully by encouraging more to visit, the increased knowledge can be enlisted to help protect this Frozen Continent.

For more info contact
 Aurora Expeditions, 182A Cumberland St, The Rocks, Sydney
 NSW 2000 Australia
 Tel + 61-2-9252-1033
 Fax + 61-2-9252-1373 auroraex@auroraexpeditions.com.au

