

CRUISING ANTARCTICA

An unforgettable journey to the polar edge of Earth.

BY PAUL RUBIO

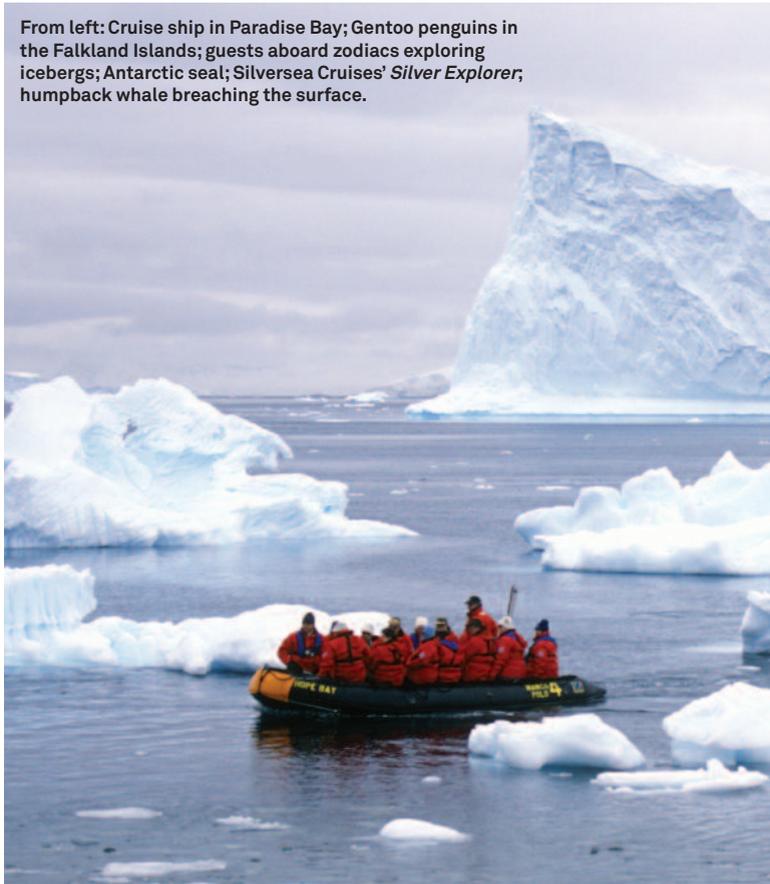




Beautiful snowcapped mountains
against the sunset in Antarctica



From left: Cruise ship in Paradise Bay; Gentoo penguins in the Falkland Islands; guests aboard zodiacs exploring icebergs; Antarctic seal; Silversea Cruises' *Silver Explorer*; humpback whale breaching the surface.



Antarctica—it's a name that conjures up images of breathtaking glaciers, snow-blanketed mountains, bustling penguin colonies, sunbathing sea lions and an overall mystique of the far reaches of the globe. From icebergs hand-sculpted by Mother Nature, to all-encompassing, ethereal panoramas of white and blue, to charismatic wildlife that have adapted to life in this polar extreme, Antarctica is a stunningly beautiful place that never fails to impress.

RITE OF "PASSAGE"

Reaching the world's most remote continent requires time and dedication, but the rewards are handsome for venturing out on this road less traveled. Cruises take place from late November to early March, circumnavigating the islands and coastline of the Antarctic Peninsula, the northernmost tip of the iceberg (pun intended) of this massive landmass of 5.4 million square miles and zero permanent residents (there are nearly 5,000 temporary residents, mainly researchers and scientists). During this time of year, temperatures hover above freezing, sunlight dominates over darkness, and seas remain relatively calm. Tourism is at its peak in December and January, when climes are most optimal and sightings of penguin chicks and whales are most common.

Cruise ships set sail most often from Ushuaia in the southernmost reaches of Argentina. From there, they head south to brave the infamously turbulent Drake Passage, the 500-mile-wide body of water that separates the tip of South America from Antarctica. Cruise programs offer activities such as educational lectures and presentations on ecology and geography in addition to standard cruise-ship-style fun. In calmer patches, guests are encouraged to step outside and marvel at the seabirds and whales feasting on the fish of these nutrient-rich waters and to revel in the midnight sunset of the Antarctic summer.

After a two-day journey, Antarctica's exquisite islands begin to come into view. Nature rules on these islands, where elephant seals, Adélie penguins, humpback whales and wandering albatross play among the ice formations.

INTIMATE EXPEDITIONS

Vessels carrying less than 200 passengers have greater reign over the Antarctic terrain, since they have permission to land on the islands via inflatable zodiac boats. With more opportunity for in-depth exploration, these smaller expedition cruises spend upwards of a week traversing the icy water world of Earth's southernmost continent and stop at several points. For example, Silversea's *Silver Explorer* offers both 10- and 18-day voyages round trip from Ushuaia, with daily zodiac tours once in Antarctic territory. The longer journey also includes two days in the Falkland Islands, two days in South Georgia and a day at Elephant Island, named for its prolific population of elephant seals.

These expedition cruises are certainly geared toward those who want a complete Antarctica immersion, and in many instances, you'll be able to set foot on the islands and walk through these dreamscapes. Onboard experts specialize in the region, and activities center on all things Antarctica—from photographing the landscapes, to learning about climate change and intricate details on the behavior ecology of the region's most famous exotic residents.

LARGER, LUXURY SHIPS

Many prefer to visit Antarctica with all of the frills of a larger, luxury ship. However, it should be noted that ships carrying more than 500 passengers are not permitted to land guests ashore and instead focus on scenic cruising. Hence, itineraries on ships such as Holland America Line's *ms Zaandam* include three days of Antarctica sightseeing as part of a larger 21-day South America package, which typically begins in Santiago, Chile, and ends in Buenos Aires, Argentina, or vice versa. During these three days, you'll cruise through the myriad petite islands of the Palmer Archipelago, skim the coastline of Danco Island and gawk over the natural artwork of ice and ocean through the 30-mile Antarctic Sound.

The *ms Zaandam* itinerary also offers the rare opportunity to visit the Falkland Islands. Be sure to reserve your spot early for the penguin tour in East Falkland; this trip across the island in a 4x4 to see the massive



Gentoo penguin colony is a best-seller. In Chile, the ship also docks in Puerto Montt, where an excursion highlight includes photographing the most iconic sight in all of Patagonia—the peaks or “towers” of Torres del Paine National Park. Other ports of call for these itineraries include Isla Chiloe and Punta Arenas, Chile; Ushuaia and Cape Horn, Argentina; and the capital of Uruguay, Montevideo.

IT'S THE JOURNEY AND THE DESTINATION

Whether traveling via ship large or small, Antarctica's power is palpable and prodigious. Your heart will race as you push deeper into this fragile, desolate land surrounded by 360 degrees of water and ice. You'll inhale the pure air, fall deep into thought, and feel at one with Mother Nature. You'll lose yourself in the panoramas and the wildlife as humankind begins to feel galaxies away. It is then, when you feel that you have reached Earth's final frontier—a place you never knew truly existed—that you have experienced the magic of Antarctica. ■



GETTING THERE:

Whether you begin or end your cruise in Buenos Aires or complete your round trip from Ushuaia, U.S. citizens are required to pay a \$160 reciprocity fee in advance of entering Argentina. A printed receipt of payment, which can be made online at a dedicated website of Argentina's Minister of Interior, is required for entry, and is valid for 10 years and multiple entries.



PACKING ESSENTIALS:

You will receive a long list of what to pack for your Antarctic sojourn. Despite it being “summer,” temperatures hover around freezing, so layers are essential. Also, be sure to pack plenty of sunblock since the sun can be extremely fierce despite the cold temperatures.

CALL US

To book your cruise to Antarctica, call our Travel Leaders agency today—our number is on the back cover.

LET'S
GO

Experience Antarctica with an expedition cruise on the **10-day Ushuaia to Ushuaia cruise** along the Drake Passage and Antarctic Peninsula with **Silversea Cruises**. Traveling aboard the luxury ship *Silver Explorer*, you will discover a place unlike any other with frosted wilderness of glistening white, calving glaciers, up-close wildlife encounters and whales surfacing from beneath the icy waters. Departs December 2, 2016, from \$12,450 per person (airfare additional).