

FINNAIR

# BLUE WINGS

WELLBEING ISSUE TRENDS, DESTINATIONS AND INSIGHTS FOR TRAVELLERS

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Icy adventures in  
**Antarctica**



# ICE ICE BABY

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY ROGER NORUM

Even if you've been everywhere and done everything – the Orient Express, the Skeleton Coast, Branson's space vehicle – Antarctica is still the holy grail for adventure travellers.



*An Orion passenger photographing Observation Hill, where a monument to Captain Scott is inscribed with Tennyson's words: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."*



Renowned photographer Tina Hillier blends in with the penguins on the sub-Antarctic Macquarie Island.



The ship's hull is often the stage for Mother Nature's dances.



The 103-metre long Orion, always in shipshape.



A leopard seal peers out from a Ross Sea ice floe.



A zodiac boat forges through the icy waters of the Ross Sea.



Antarctica. It is a singular evocative word that conjures up notions of adventure, of exploration, of frontiers, and of utter inaccessibility. It is cold: the average annual temperature is -57 degrees Celsius. It is also extremely dry: technically, the entire continent is a desert. And it doesn't exactly beckon with infrastructure or facilities; there are probably more places to comfortably overnight in outer space. But while Antarctica is remote, vast and unforgiving, it is also hands down one of the most stunningly gorgeous destinations you can ever visit.

When I board a ship on the Tasmanian coast to sail across the Southern Ocean to Antarctica's Ross Sea, I am unaware that our embarkation coincides with Australia Day, a holiday that commemorates the first convict ships to arrive, in 1788, from Great Britain to the then-unknown continent. The coincidence is fitting, since it turns out I am to be cooped up with a hundred other passengers on an expedition-ready vessel for the next three weeks. The motley collection of travellers include an Australian gold miner, a San Franciscan pathologist, a Singaporean hydro scientist, a Kenyan bush pilot and many others checking the biggest line item off their bucket lists. Our fearless lead-

ers are **Don** and **Margie MacIntyre**, Australia's "Antarctic Couple," a celebrity duo who have led countless polar expeditions and famously spent one year living together in a 12 m<sup>2</sup> box at Cape Denison (I wasn't surprised to learn they are no longer actually married).

#### HIGH SEAS

As our ice-resistant vessel forges its way towards the glacial shards of the last continent at a respectable 12 knots – one plus of spending three weeks on a ship is you learn what a *knot* actually is – we take in the Southern Ocean's fluttering polar wildlife: terns, petrels and albatrosses. The waters deal us a few days of very high seas and inclement weather, so it is not smooth sailing all the time. The vagaries and vicissitudes of ocean weather patterns make it impossible to know what might happen; it is sailors who kowtow to Mother Nature, not the other way around. For this reason, the ship's dining room chairs are nailed to the floor and wine glasses are bottom weighted. Fortunately, most ships that venture to Antarctica are often chock full of creature comforts. Ours, The Orion, is decked out with roll top baths, gold fittings and private balcony suites, and we are spoiled with personal butlers and Michelin-star dinners.

But all the pampering in the world couldn't hold a

*The Orion is decked out with roll top baths, gold fittings and private balcony suites, and we are spoiled with personal butlers and Michelin-star dinners.*

candle to what happens the moment we reach the ice, one full week after setting sail. I'm deep asleep in my cabin when I'm awoken by the sound of light scraping against the hull of the ship. Dashing to the balcony window at 2am, I see the ship stabilisers slowly retracting. The ship begins to gently rock. I sprint up to the deck, where a dozen early birds in thick red Gore Tex coats are scanning the horizon with their Swarovski binoculars for penguins. We have finally reached the ice. It's our first sighting of "land."

#### WILDLIFE SPOTTING

The landscape over the next week is pure magic. Icebergs coated with thousands of Arctic petrels. Far off glacial shards blessed from above with rays of glori-



British Royal Navy officer **Captain Robert Falcon Scott's hut**, protected from time by the elements, stands today almost exactly as it did when he died in 1912.

ous sunlight. Jaunty little penguins and lethargic seals stranded on tiny skerries of ice. Amidst the ice, we get to experience life at eye-level in small, inflatable rubber Zodiac rafts, which we take out to zoom around icebergs, plow onto snowy moorings and explore the icy shards, searching for wildlife. One afternoon, I catch glimpse of a humpback whale breaching the water's surface, barely 10 metres away.

Along the coast of the Ross Sea, we explore **Robert Falcon Scott's hut**, a large wooden structure that looks more or less like it did when he stayed there during his 1911 expedition. Here, Scott memorably penned in his journal, "I may not have proved a great explorer, but we have done the greatest march ever made and come very near to great success." Scott died in a nearby tent during an unexpected blizzard a few months later, a broken but proud man.

Our itinerary also anticipates visiting **Captain Shackleton's hut**, but the planet has other plans for us. The weather on the day of our planned landing is torrential, with pelting rain and harsh winds throwing us about the Earth's nether regions. We end up being unable to see Shackleton's hut, a fact which angers a few co-expeditionists. To this day, I am convinced that this was Mother Nature reminding us that, ultimately, it is not humans who call the shots.

Towards the end of the journey, as we steam back towards civilisation, I get talking to one passenger,

an exceptionally well-dressed Dutch woman in her 60s named **Bertha**, about why she has come to Antarctica. She was travelling with her husband, **Bert**, with whom she had been to the North Pole just a few years prior. Her hands shoved into the pockets of her orange Zegna down vest, Bertha's answer was simple and matter of fact. "Because it's there."

Those were the same words uttered by British mountaineer George Mallory when asked why he wanted to climb Everest. ●



#### BEHIND THE SCENES **Roger Norum**

Roger Norum is an anthropologist and writer. He specialises in the Polar regions and is currently a research fellow with Arctic Encounters ([arcticencounters.net](http://arcticencounters.net)), an international, HERA-funded research project based at the University of Leeds that explores the role of tourism and travel writing in the European Arctic.

A royal penguin (*Eudyptes schlegeli*) shows off its plumage.



## HOW TO GET THERE?

Safari Experts ([safariexperts.com](http://safariexperts.com)) run a series of Antarctic voyages throughout the year in collaboration with Lindblad Expeditions. The Orion features five-star service and spacious ocean view suites and cabins. Prices (from around €10,000) include all meals, lectures, shore expeditions and port fees.