

## **The Spirit of Shackleton: An Antarctic experience**

By: Carrie McClelland

When I told people I would be spending my holidays on the bottom of the world the question I was asked most often was simply, "Why?" For Diana Bent, Michelle Clarke, Scott Duncan, Roisin Kyne, Mark MacDonald, Iain McGale, Marybeth McLaughlin, Nicky Nadeau, Yukon College student Amanda Graham, and myself, all students of OUTD 4510 Polar Tourism, the answer was simple: "Because it's AWESOME!" However, we did have some academic and professional interest as well. Our goals were to investigate the history, development, and regulation of tourism in the Antarctic region. We looked at tourism systems and how they function for such a remote region as well as group/expedition management, ecological impacts, and the significance of the experience. Even though we as a class agreed that Antarctica was the trip of a lifetime, others may not be so convinced. Tourism management research aside, the "why" behind Antarctic tourism is just what we wanted to find out.

On December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005 we boarded the M/S Explorer to start our journey around the South Atlantic. Nicknamed "The Little Red Ship" the Explorer is one of the smallest vessels doing Antarctic tours measuring only 75 meters in length and carrying up to 150 passengers and crew. The small size of the vessel meant that we got to know our fellow passengers very well and that we had a greater opportunity to go ashore as we visited different sites. If there had been more passengers we would have had to rotate who got to go ashore each day and we wouldn't have been able to visit many restricted areas.

The days at sea when we were traveling the vast distances between islands and regions were spent for the most part in lecture. That is, we would attend the lectures if we weren't too busy heaving our insides into the toilet or a sea-sickness bag. Even then there were a determined few who would show up to class, barf-bag in hand, ready to learn all about the areas we were to visit. Lectures covered every area imaginable regarding the Antarctic and sub-Antarctic regions from marine mammalogy, to ornithology, geology, history, conservation of Polar Regions, and plant ecology. The lecturers were an extremely knowledgeable collection of scientists and researchers, many of them university professors and experts in their field. Their lessons about the Antarctic regions went into incredible detail and provided us with an excellent background so that we may better understand the habitats which we were visiting.

Expedition days were by far the highlight of every week and the Lakehead students became known for trying to draw out every minute of our visits ashore. Our enthusiasm was contagious among the passengers and expedition staff and we were often the last ones to return to the ship. We could spend hours at a time just sitting on the edge of a penguin colony, watching the birds as they go about their business and observing them as they approached us to investigate this strange non-feathered visitor. The following is an extremely brief list and description of some of the places we visited:



- Carcass Island (Falklands): Here we saw the endangered Striated Caracara as well as our first penguins! We were also paid a surprised visit by a dozen Commerson's dolphins who escorted the zodiacs ashore for our first landing.



- Steeple Jason Island (Falklands): The largest albatross colony in the world resides on the windy south side of this tiny island. There are currently 150,000 breeding pairs of Black-Browed Albatross (not including immature birds and chicks) and these huge birds would almost take our hats off as they came in for a landing.
- Falkland Island: The famous “Stone Runs”. Geological anomalies that no scientists can explain. I hypothesized they were caused by aliens, similar to the crop circle mystery, but the geologist didn’t think it was very funny.



Mountain trekking in South Georgia: On this section of the island we were given the chance to retrace part of Shackleton's route as he hiked across the island to summon help from the whaling station of Stromness.



- Grytviken (South Georgia): The day before Christmas Eve we sang carols by candlelight in the church, one of few buildings from the abandoned whaling station that have been restored.



- St. Andrew's Bay (South Georgia): Not only did we get to see the South Georgia reindeer on Christmas Eve we also spent the morning with the largest King penguin colony in the world. The Kings were many people's favourite as they were extremely curious and would walk right up to you to get a good look.



- Gold Harbour (South Georgia): We finished up our Christmas Eve excursions by viewing some Light-mantled Sooty Albatross and meeting a recently weaned Elephant seal pup who was missing his mum so decided to plop himself in the lap of the next best thing: a startled tourist!



- Elephant Island (Antarctica): We had an amazing zodiac tour around Cape Wild where Shackleton's men awaited rescue for 4 winter months. The beach is completely washed away and nothing remains except a statue and plaque as a tribute to the captain of the vessel that saved them.
- Cierva Bay (Antarctica): This evening was interrupted by the most amazing whale watching many of us will ever see. Three huge Humpbacks participated in 45 minutes of 'bubble feeding' not 20 feet from the ship. We captured the most phenomenal footage and were at a loss for words to describe how incredibly lucky we were to see this up close.

The students from Lakehead University acted with the utmost respect for the environment and others, demonstrated a keen interest in every area from lecture to landing, and acted as excellent ambassadors for our school. We often split up at meals in order to meet new people and exchange knowledge resulting in new connections being made and new friendships formed. Everyone on board knew "the Lakehead students" as friendly and polite young people, in attendance at every lecture, every briefing and every landing, who brought a refreshing enthusiasm to the trip. Many passengers commented to us that "we made things 'exciting' again", something that would have been greatly missed without us.

It is difficult to express how an experience such as this has affected me. I know that if I could pass on any advice it would be to start saving your money, this trip is worth it. We accessed places so few people have ever seen, in some of the most remote regions of this planet. One couldn't help but get the feeling that we were some

of the luckiest people on earth to be able to see such things. We only wished that our friends and family could be there to share it with us.

Yet it is important to remember that regions such as Antarctica are becoming increasingly accessible to the general public. As long as you can write a big cheque, you too can ride a luxury cruise ship, get off and trample around some tussock grass, get chased by angry seals and disrupt penguins and albatross desperately trying to protect their nests in this harsh environment. As tourism students we took a good hard look at how tourism is currently carried out in such delicate places and how the management systems must change in order to accommodate the growing number of visitors. Ten years ago, between 3000-5000 people visited the Antarctic Peninsula. This year, Antarctica will be bombarded by upwards of 25,000 tourists, many of whom will do anything to get the perfect picture, no matter the cost to the ecosystem. Knowing this I had to wonder if seeing a bunch of penguins was worth the inevitable damage so many feet can make. While I feel that GAP tours is perhaps one of the most environmentally conscious companies offering Antarctic tours, they too will have to make some adjustments if they want to keep Antarctica what it is: wild.

There are more stories from this trip than I can share in one article so you'll have to find one of the participants and interrogate them for further information. You can also view pictures from the trip by visiting [orss.ca](http://orss.ca) and clicking on the Polar Tourism link. Come out to the Outdoor Film Festival and see a short video from the trip! Here are some stats just to get you thinking:

**Total Distance travelled:** 6, 635.6 km at sea

**Largest swell of the trip:** 7 m waves between the Falkland Islands and South Georgia

**Places visited:** Tierra Del Fuego National Park; the Falkland Islands including the capital of Stanley; South Georgia including Prion Island, Stromness, Grytviken, Drygalski Fjord, the Shackleton hike; Elephant Island; Antarctic sound; the Weddell sea; Devil's Peak; Primavera Research Station; Orne Harbour; the Drake Passage; as well as Ushuaia and Buenos Aires

**Main species observed:**

**Albatross** – Black-browed, Wandering, Light-mantled sooty, Sooty

**Penguins** – Magellanic, Gentoo, Rockhopper, Macaroni, King, Adelie, Chinstrap

**Seals** – Elephant, Fur, Weddell, Crabeater, Leopard

**Whales** – Minke, Fin, Humpback, Orca, Beaked

**Dolphins** – Commerson's, Peale's, Hourglass

**Seabirds** – Giant Petrels, Cape Petrels, Wilson's Storm Petrels, Falklands Flightless Steamer Ducks, Upland Geese, Antarctic terns, Skuas, Gulls, Snowy Sheathbills, Falklands Pintail duck, Antarctic Shag

**Landbirds** – Striated caracara, Magellanic Snipe

**Fun activities:**

- Iceberg smashing
- Tobogganing down mountain sides
- Finding our way through seal mazes
- Trying to catch the petrel flying at Mach 5 on film
- Hanging out on the bridge with the officers
- Trying to stand still on the top deck in 7 m swells
- Playing the Take-a-shower-in-rough-seas game

- Christmas Eve party in the Crew mess Discotheque 😊
- New Year's Eve Cabaret
- Chatting with other passengers at Tea Time
- Swimming amongst the penguins and icebergs