



BEYOND BELIEF A JOURNEY TO ANTARCTICA

BY CHRIS JONES

BY CHRIS JONES

Jun 28, 2014

BEYOND BELIEF: A JOURNEY TO ANTARCTICA

I BEGAN BELIEVING IN GHOSTS early one morning—at what would have been dawn if Antarctica bothered with dawns—on the bridge of the [National Geographic Explorer](#).

I was mentored there in the ways of unseen things by the ship's first mate, Piers Alvarez-Munoz, his name rivaled in its magnificence only by his beard. His radar screen was a mostly useless wash of scattered green specks—ice floes and monstrous birds with 11-foot wingspans and maybe a giant kraken—and through the windows we couldn't see much beyond the bow of the ship. A snow squall had blown across the Drake Passage and was now upon our decks, another one of the vest-pocket storms that kept rising out of nowhere and returning there just as quickly. Alvarez-Munoz checked his paper charts and compasses and plotted our course with a thick pencil line, finding his way by hand because these waters defy even the most advanced of our machines. Then he nodded: Antarctica was in our immediate range. He was doubtless, even though the only instrument able to find any sign of it was his heart.

After such a long journey, and in the absence of more tangible evidence, it was hard to accept his assurances that we were almost there. My 140 fellow passengers had funneled to this featureless patch of ocean from across the better-known world, every last one of us having originated somewhere due north: flights first to Buenos Aires, and then a [Lindblad Expeditions](#) charter to Ushuaia, a small, colorful town at the bottom of Argentina that lays claim to the southernmost civilized everything. Then we had boarded the Explorer and nosed through the shimmering Beagle Channel, to our left the mountains of Argentina, to our right the slightly more dramatic mountains of Chile. We passed a lifeboat drill quietly deciding who among us looked the most delicious before we escaped the last grip of land and slipped into the Drake Passage sometime around midnight. The seas grew rougher where the Atlantic and Pacific met, joined in their union the next day by several of our half-digested breakfasts and lunches. Nearly 40 hours after we had pushed away from safe harbor, and four days since most of us had left home, there stood Alvarez-Munoz with his pencil, insisting that, any moment now, Antarctica would appear before us.

When it did not, he unrolled another one of his charts to justify his belief in paranormal landmasses. The ocean, now the Southern one—its fluid boundaries another of our perhaps mythic inventions, a function solely of a steep drop in water temperature—was as much as 5,500 meters deep here. But nearby, underwater peaks rose within 200 meters of the surface. Beneath us were entire ranges that dwarfed the Andes. No one had ever climbed or even seen these mile-high monuments, but that didn't mean they were not there. It might seem impossible that there are destinations on this planet that we haven't visited, even remotely, but in many ways Antarctica is an article of faith more than a hard physical fact; its ranking among the continents will last only so long as we believe that it does.

"All the best mountains are hidden," Alvarez-Munoz said—and he said it with finality—before he turned his binoculars back to the uniform gray in front of us.





[Beyond Belief: Chris Jones' Journey to Antarctica](#) from [AFAR Media](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Not long after, the wall of mist and snow opened up, and on the horizon to our right was our first glimpse of a semisolid object, if not land: a single, lonely iceberg, shaped like a triangle. It was what a child would draw if you asked her to draw an iceberg, some implausible idea of an iceberg, calved into miraculous existence. Then came another, larger and to the left. Then another, the way seagulls foretell arrival at more conventional shores. And then, at last, there was a small knob of gray rock in the distance, the first of the South Shetland Islands, the ambassadors of genuine Antarctica, the Antarctica that isn't defined by hunches or Fahrenheit, the Antarctica that can be seen and touched and visited, the Antarctica that is everything we've come to associate with what it means to be a place. It felt, at that delirious moment on the bridge, as though we had finally arrived. Alvarez-Munoz looked down and ran his fingers across his chart and extended his pencil line, and by the time he looked back up, the rock and everything that it represented had disappeared.

MONTHS LATER, MY MEMORIES of that trip aren't like my memories of other trips. They aren't even like my other memories. There are no colors, no tall buildings, no roads or signs or music, no snapshots of indigenous faces, none of the usual time stamps given us by day and night. There was always light, the sun setting spectacularly before changing its mind at the last moment and rising again, true darkness just one more of Antarctica's vast repertoire of apparitions. When I close my eyes, there are only shadows and blurs, a hundred shades of blue and white, snow and ice, sleeplessness and awe. I don't really remember specific locations, and I can't say I fully remember moments, even. I remember the gooseflesh and lumps in my throat.

One afternoon during our voyage, the itinerary was vague: “Expedition Day in the Weddell Sea!” the daily briefing read. “Please listen for announcements regarding our plans, which will depend on weather and ice conditions.” The Weddell Sea is among the more daunting bodies of water on Earth, a whirlpool trapped between the Antarctic Peninsula and Cape Norvegia in Queen Maud Land. Thanks to the peninsula’s grand design, the Weddell Sea gathers ice in all its transient forms: enormous tabular bergs, like elevated football fields; floes, white and sheetlike; bergy bits, icebergs now on their way to becoming ocean; and growlers, blue boulders somehow floating like corks. One survey of the area found 30,000 icebergs in just 1,500 square miles of ocean. It’s hard to explain what that looks like from the bow of a ship, but it looks like a different planet, one where ice is not only a living thing but occupies the top of the food chain. It snaps and howls and groans; it lifts and rolls and crashes. In the middle of all that, back up on the bridge, a brave decision was made: We would push south through that ghoulish course as far as we could, because at the end of it there just might be Emperor penguins.

Virtually all of us stood on the bridge or the bow, looking out across the water and ice, as though the force of our collective will could make everything fall into place. Soon, six killer whales popped up beside us, their dorsal fins cutting through the chop, and then one dived under the ship, from starboard to port, turning upside down to show off the white of its undercarriage through a few inches of sea. Today, when I remember that killer whale, I remember my own stomach flip, the vertigo that came from looking down at the belly of a beast.

Then fog and snow rolled in. On we went, driven by our now steadfast faith in banshee rocks and pencils. Icebergs loomed out from behind the drapes that had been pulled around us; the Explorer passed over a bergy bit that shuddered down the hull of the ship. Everything was silver and spooky until the storm blew out and we found open water again; now we were really steaming toward Snow Hill Island and the fast ice that surrounded it. A clean edge appeared in the distance—an unbroken sheet of ice as wide as a plain, white against the black of the sea in front of it—and through binoculars we could see some small dots on it. A murmur went up. The crew let the currents catch the ship and draw us toward the leading edge of the ice. Our hull dug into it just hard enough to anchor us, and there they were: eight Emperor penguins that had just leapt out of the water, taking the opening steps of their miles-long march back home, somewhere beyond our scope. Ten minutes earlier, ten minutes later, and we would have missed them. Instead, they were right there, waiting. Then Antarctica did what it does, and they were gone.



An Emperor Penguin colony. (Photo by Stefan Christmann)

We turned around and retreated north, lest we disappear with the penguins, lost in the ice. Celebrating in the ship's lounge with high fives and raised glasses, we felt as though we had really arrived now, as though we had finally completed each of our private unspoken quests. The Explorer's passengers were mostly older, some of life's veteran navigators crossing off their seventh continent, and many of them possessed that particular brand of gratitude that comes only with time and travel. I don't think I was the only one who had trouble holding it together. We had come all this way and cashed in so much good fortune for the outside chance that we might see those eight Emperor penguins pick their way across the ice. And we did. In a world that can seem purpose-built and calculated for us, engineered for our safety and convenience, every part of that long-shot day, the entire lunatic trip, felt as fleeting as luck itself. That feeling is what I remember, and that's why Antarctica remains impervious to memories and maps and the mental thumbtacks we might stick in them.

All of its settlements are temporary. Its borders migrate. Its landmarks are seasonal. Its ports are killer whales, and its capital cities are penguins.

THROUGHOUT SIX DAYS in Antarctica, each one gorgeous and spectacular, that overwhelming feeling of impermanence became almost sinister, like a looming shadow. At first it crept up in odd ways: penguin eggs cracked open by predators; more pods of killer

whales prospecting for seals; piles of bleached whale bones stacked up on a beach. We could fool ourselves that we were invulnerable, given our comforts, our bowls of Argentine ice cream and our hot chocolates spiked with whiskey, and we could sleep soundly in our beds knowing that the right eyes watched over us. But there remained constant reminders that we were in parts that did not welcome us as warmly as our waiters did. It wasn't just the foreboding labels on Piers Alvarez-Munoz's precious charts—Erebus and Terror Gulf didn't sound like the most promising picnic spot—or the sepia portraits of Ernest Shackleton's starving men that lined the Explorer's bistro bar. Ephemerality was a presence we could feel, a literal shiver that ran down us whenever we were alone enough to register it for what it was.

It happened to me twice. The first time, it was inside a beautiful socket called Orne Harbor, a tight crescent of a cove ringed by mountains and glaciers. The water was blue and flat, with lots of ice. We took a Zodiac ride to shore and then climbed a long switchback through the snow to the top of a ridge. It was the most perfect day, skies as blue as the water, the sun shining, warm enough to strip off our jackets and sweaters. The ridge gave us a view across more mountains and more glaciers through air that was so clean and clear I could feel my lungs turning pink again.



A Coast Guard icebreaker traveling in late summer through Antarctica's McMurdo Sound. (Photo by Norbert Wu)

We hiked and reveled and ass-tobogganed down some icy slopes, laughing and taking pictures. Some lesser penguins called chinstraps, an initially ridiculous sight now made routine (we had already stopped at one rookery that boasted 40,000 of another penguin species, tiny Adélies), stopped and stared and shrugged at us. It was a magical few hours, and I joked with one of our guides that I wouldn't be getting back on the ship. He wished me luck, and he smiled, but the way he said it had an edge to it. He knew I wouldn't stand a chance. It was sobering to remember that the topography that had buoyed me could just as easily reduce me to despair, and eventually to more bleached bones on the beach.

So I'm not sure why I soon did maybe the dumbest best thing I've done. We were in the calm of an inlet at Port Lockroy, an old British research station that's now a museum, complete with wall paintings of buxom movie stars limned by men desperate for warmer company. Our crew decided it was time for the polar dip that had been whispered about from the start of our voyage like a midnight raid, when those passengers who dared could strip down to our shorts and drop into some of the coldest, darkest water on Earth. Before we took the plunge, the guides asked whether anyone wanted to do more than the standard leap-in-leap-out. Did anyone think they could stand that water for more than a dip? How about for more than a minute? It would be for science, some sadist said. Four of us said yes. We were younger and stupider, and two of us were more Canadian, than everyone else on board.

Our vital signs would be monitored, even though I was fairly sure they would indicate that I was an idiot. Worse, I decided to wear a snorkeling mask, because I harbored some delusion that I'd have the physical wherewithal to sightsee. We trembled our way out of the ship, our bare feet curved around the edge of a Zodiac turned into a makeshift diving platform, and then we jumped.

It was, to put it gently, a very long minute. Water that cold does something almost primeval to human anatomy. It trips some invisible biological switch. Within seconds, my legs and arms went numb. My breathing became shallow, and my heart began to claw out of my chest like a cat from a bag. Nearly every drop of my blood rushed to my core, my body now its own lifeboat, organs and circulatory system first. Luckily, the salt made me buoyant, because death was now more likely than swimming. Once or twice, I remembered to table my suffering and put my face into the water for a few seconds. I could see the red hull of the ship beside me, but between my translucent, paralyzed feet, all I could see was a bottomless down. After more than a week without darkness, that water reminded me what night looked like, and it both thrilled and scared the shit out of me.

Finally the minute was up. We clambered out and tied ourselves in knots trying to warm up. Our bodies were crimson. We said some very bad things a little too loudly, and I went straight

to the dining room, ravenous, and ate about 7,000 slices of pizza. I couldn't help noticing that I couldn't really feel the crusts. I knew they were there. I could see them and taste them. But my fingers refused to register their heat.

Slowly the feeling came back to my digits, except for the middle finger of my right hand. All these months later, it still has a small circle of numbness in it, right at the tip. I suspect that it will be some kind of numb for the rest of my life. I hope it will. It's become my constant reminder of 60 seconds and a trip that I can't really remember but for so many reasons want never to forget. Even after everything I saw in Antarctica has vanished, wiped away by winter and time and carbon dioxide, it will still haunt me. My dead fingertip is the one rock in the water that will never disappear.

THE ICE WAS PARTICULARLY THICK last winter; it had socked in five staffers from Palmer Station, the small U.S. research outpost, for months beyond their scheduled finishes. The Explorer has an ice-strengthened hull, and word had come that those five Palmerites would really like a ride home. So it was decided that we should begin our voyage's second big quest, this time in pursuit of people rather than Emperor penguins.

To get to them, we cruised through some unfathomable country—the Gerlache Strait, the Neumayer Channel—breaking up floes that were thick enough to carry seals. They dived out of our way as the powder steam of avalanches rose off the mountains around us and the ice made its usual creepy noises and crackled like power lines. We turned down the Bismarck Strait, leaving a trail of open water in our wake, a river that would soon disappear. Bergy bits thudded against our hull. And then Palmer Station came into view, a tenuous collection of blue metal-sided buildings, oil barrels, and shipping containers perched on gray rock.

The bridge and the bow were packed with spectators for the excitement, and maybe 40 station residents were standing along the shore, cheering back at us. One of them had a beard down to his belly, and someone joked that he must have been one of the five overdue. Then we saw another man, tall with long hair, pumping his fists like a concertgoer. He was one of them, and now we could pick out the others just from their joy.

The Explorer was too big to dock. A rope was thrown across, and a kayak was dragged back and forth, first with loads of baggage. The kayak didn't seem especially sturdy, and the rope kept getting snagged on the ice. Eventually the water cleared out enough for the crew to drop a Zodiac, and the retrieval operation went more quickly. The Palmerites—scientists and support staff—broke from embraces, were ferried across, and clambered through the hatch in the hull that had let us out for our plunge. It proved the opening for more than one kind of escape.



An iceberg splitting into the Antarctic sky. (Photo by Reeve Jolliffe)

Watching them duck on board, I thought they must have been feeling as though they were leaving the moon. In truth they felt as though they had landed on it. The most desperate of them, the tall man pumping his fists, had spent seven months at Palmer Station, through the relentless winter and into the non-thaw of spring. He went straight to the ship's bar, and the look on his face when he took his first sip of draught beer made us want to know what he knew. A crush of curious passengers surrounded him and the others. They soon looked almost alarmed by their peculiar celebrity. In their months away, they had lost all their calluses. They had become shadows of their former selves. They had forgotten the sensation of endless hot showers and the smell of oranges, but they had also forgot how to survive life among the living.

When we finally returned to the shelter of the Beagle Channel, Chile now to our left and Argentina to our right, the Palmer Station Five stood in a group at the top of the ship. They stared across those last few hundred meters of water to Ushuaia, and they looked at it the way we had looked at the South Shetland Islands all those days earlier, before we had learned to believe. Spend enough time in Antarctica, and it's no longer a specter. It becomes real, and the rest of world, the rest of us, become the ghosts. For the first time in months, those five men and women saw grass. They saw trees with leaves in them. They saw cars, and they saw colors.

They saw neon, and dogs, and smooth asphalt with yellow lines on it, and stores with full shelves. A plane took off from the airport, and the tall man shook his head. "I kind of forgot we could do that," he said, laughing at himself a little, and he watched the shining plane lift into the sky until it disappeared into the sun.

All the best mountains are hidden. All the best mountains are right in front of our eyes.

This appeared in the August/September 2014 issue. Whether you want to watch penguins with naturalists or scuba dive in icy waters, there's an [Antarctic cruise that's right for you](#).