

ESCAPES

THE GO LIST
MONDAY, AUGUST 11, 2014

South Georgia Island: The Last Godforsaken Place

On the 100th anniversary of Ernest Shackleton's legendary expedition, a writer retraces the explorer's steps to one of the cruelest, most gorgeous wildernesses on earth.



Feel close to nature and apart from it as a species minority on South Georgia Island. Photo: Michael S. Nolan

On a 25-degree austral summer day, loose clouds spackled the sky, and the dark skyline of South Georgia Island, a battering ram of 9,000-foot peaks, 160 glaciers, and frayed coastline, loomed off the bow of the ship. I stood on the lower deck, wrapped in industrial-strength rain gear and giant rubber boots rated to minus 40, about to step into a dinghy to venture to shore, when the captain suddenly ordered us to halt.

Almost instantly, the wind picked up and began gusting at 50 knots. Penguins rolled down the beach. The tideline became a thick white band, and squalls scoured the surface of the bay like ghosts.

This is hardly unusual for South Georgia, a chunk of the Andes that wandered into the southern Atlantic some 50 million years ago. The 100-mile spit of land is so isolated that it creates its own weather system, but despite—or perhaps because of—its ruggedness, it's also a holy grail. Located 1,300 miles east of Tierra del Fuego in the South Atlantic Ocean, a combination of underwater topography and converging currents produce rich seas that support some of the most populous seal, penguin, and seabird colonies on the planet.

South Georgia was also a grail for one of the previous century's most famed explorers, Sir Ernest Shackleton, and the men of *Endurance*, his ill-fated ship. But they didn't know that when they set sail from London 100 years ago this August.

The British Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914 aimed to cross the entire Antarctic continent on foot, a first that Shackleton, already an accomplished explorer, considered the last great polar objective. Instead, they failed famously.