



Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune  
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Penguins — aquatic seabirds whose wings have morphed into flippers — are among the few animals that live on the world's coldest continent. See more photos at [startribune.com/galleries](http://startribune.com/galleries).

## Icebreakers in Antarctica

Folks who brave the rough seas on a voyage to Antarctica are kind of nutty. Getting to know them is almost as fun as spying penguins and whales.

By KAREN CATCHPOLE • Special to the Star Tribune

**Y**ou won't find this information front and center in your Antarctic tour company's brochure: Even if perfect weather enables all of the scheduled shore excursions, you will still spend 90 percent of your trip on board the ship in a confined space with a bunch of complete strangers.

It's got the makings of a season of "The Real World." Fortunately, your fellow humans can be a highlight of your Antarctic adventure. I traveled on the first sailing of the 2010-11 Antarctic travel season (which runs from early November through May) aboard the M/V Antarctic Dream and was surprised to discover that my shipmates were not the well-heeled-but-dull older travelers I'd expected based on the fact that these trips are pricey and sometimes involve the word "cruise."



◀ Stacey Richman of New York City brought a Snoopy snow cone machine in hopes of making an icy treat with ancient ice.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Antarctic tour companies are reporting a trend toward younger passengers. Nadia Antetomaso, a guide with GAP Adventures, says the company has noticed the shift over the past few years. Some of that is driven by price — GAP Adventures and Antarctic Dream trips tend toward the more economical end of the Antarctic travel spectrum, which typically ranges from \$3,500 to \$16,000 per person for 11- to 35-day trips.

Whatever the reason, many of the passengers on my sailing were in their mid-40s or younger and most of them were hilarious companions. First, we survived the Drake Passage together. Then the real fun began.

Antarctica continues on G6 ▶



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Views like this one compel people to brave rough seas to get to Antarctica. At more than 5 million square miles, the continent is larger than Australia and Europe; 98 percent of its land is covered in ice.

# Breaking the ice in Antarctica

## ◀ ANTARCTICA FROM GI

### Drake Passage drama

"We could lose the ship in seconds."

That was our distractingly dapper captain's totally honest answer when asked what the worst-case scenario is when sailing among icebergs and crossing the Drake Passage.

Things do go wrong in the Drake Passage — which must be crossed in the first and last few days of all Antarctica tours to and from Ushuaia, Argentina (the main port). That's because the Drake Passage is the spot where the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans literally crash into each other, resulting in some of the roughest seas on the planet.

In early December 2010 the *Clelia II* lost an engine in the Drake with 165 people aboard and spent days being tossed around by 30-foot waves before the ship was repaired and able to continue on to Ushuaia.

Thankfully, the most dangerous things passengers on the *M/V Antarctic Dream* encountered during my journey through the Drake were the increasingly askew hairdos of passengers who had been confined to bed either by seasickness or by the drowsy side effects of seasickness medication. Trying to determine how many hours fellow passengers had spent in bed based on the state of their hair served as a great icebreaker, so to speak.

### The penguin chicks

Two 30-something women, Hannele Luukkainen from Finland and Helen Joannidi from the United Kingdom, were riding along only as far as Port Lockroy. The British-run former research station has a small museum, gift shop and one of the most remote post offices in the world, and it serves as a shore excursion that most Antarctic tour operators make.

We would leave Hannele and Helen at Port Lockroy to begin their five-month volunteer stint during which, they explained with equal measures of excitement and trepidation, they would live in a dorm with two other volunteers, use an outhouse (no shower), help run the gift shop and count penguins as part of ongoing re-

search into the effect of tourism on the animals' behavior.

My emerging clique of passengers immediately dubbed them "the penguin chicks."

Handing out nicknames became something of a ritual on board but one passenger came pre-nicknamed. "The Glen," a 28-year-old long-term traveler from Australia, may have had a short name but he was full of big surprises during our shore excursion to Deception Island.

The island was formed when a caldera flooded and heat from the still-active volcano, we were told, now warms the waters around the island, making a quick dip possible.

We all optimistically packed our swimsuits before we scrambled into Zodiac boats and headed for Deception Island to explore its abandoned whaling station and small cemetery. In the end, though, the Glen was one of only four brave souls who took the plunge — and the only one who did it without a swimsuit.

Before we knew it, the Glen was naked and bounding into the not even vaguely warm water. A huge tattoo of the Antarctic continent was plainly visible in the middle of his bare back as he sprinted gingerly into the water.

### Snow-cone treats

At first glance Stacey Richman, a defense attorney from



Gentoo penguins live and breed on Antarctica. They seemed like a friendly lot: A group of them hovered on the shoreline as if to greet passengers when they arrived via Zodiac.

New York City, might seem like the kind of traveler I was expecting to find on an Antarctic cruise. Then she opened her luggage and revealed an unexpected traveling companion. On a whim she'd brought a hand-cranked Snoopy snow cone machine featuring America's favorite cartoon dog snowboarding across a plastic mini-Matterhorn. She planned to use it to turn some of that 1,000-year-old glacial ice into delicious frozen treats.

Snoopy and Stacey made

their debut on the first shore excursion of the trip which took us to Half Moon Island, where hundreds of Gentoo and chinstrap penguin had gathered. It's unclear what the penguins thought of this Peanuts character since most of them were preoccupied with their odd beak-slapping and wing-flapping mating rituals.

It was clear, however, that the adage about yellow snow applies in Antarctica, too. Snoopy returned to the ship unused.

When a three-day stretch of

snowy and windy weather descended, it caused the cancellation of a number of scheduled shore excursions but also provided just the right amount of "ship cabin fever" to inspire the birth of Ernie Shack, Adventure Addict (a.k.a. Ian Kimbell, a 45-year-old software salesman from Heidelberg, Germany).

### Just add Maxi!

It should have come as no surprise when Pablo, the shipboard crew leader, tapped my crew of fellow lunatics to help him produce an end-of-cruise slide show of pictures to be shown to everyone on board on the final night of our Antarctic Adventure.

Not content with any old slide show, we quickly hit upon a gimmick and ran with it. The result? A collaboratively produced 10-minute slide show of pictures embedded with the grinning, thumbs-up visage of Maxi, the goofiest guide on the ship.

There's Maxi's head in the icy water along with the small pod of killer whales that surrounded our Zodiacs on day five. There he is encouraging a particularly amorous pair of penguins. There he is in a block of 1,000-year-old ice that we brought aboard one day and demolished for cocktails. That's him again, emerging from a bright blue building-sized iceberg.

Every image — already a cherished memory of our Antarctic adventure — was somehow enlivened with the addition of Maxi's full-throttle enthusiasm. If anyone on board had failed to appreciate the role humans can play in Antarctic travel, they certainly appreciated it now.

Karen Catchpole and Eric Mohl are in the midst of a multi-year trip through North, Central and South America. Follow along at [www.trans-americas.com](http://www.trans-americas.com).

## SAILING TO ANTARCTICA

**When to go:** The Antarctic travel season runs from early November through May. The weather is clearest early in the season. Still, about half of the excursions on my first-of-the-season sailing were curtailed or canceled due to snow and wind. Early sailings also coincide with mating season, when animals gather and court. The shoreline is also more pristine since landing sites haven't been trampled yet by human and penguin feet. Mid- and late-season sailings offer (relatively) warmer weather and less ice and snow. Later departures also feature the arrival of penguin chicks and higher concentrations of whales and fur seals.

**Getting to port:** Most ships to Antarctica depart from Ushuaia, Argentina — the southernmost city in the world. We flew there on LAN Airlines ([www.lan.com/en\\_us/sitio\\_personas/index.html](http://www.lan.com/en_us/sitio_personas/index.html)).

**Dealing with the Drake:** While there is anecdotal evidence of something dreamily referred to as "Drake Lake," most two- to three-day crossings of the Drake Passage (done both leaving and returning to Ushuaia) are more often like surfing in a washing machine. The doctor aboard the *M/V Antarctic Dream* was on hand to dispense seasickness pills. Holistic remedies include ginger gum (ginger is a noted natural nausea depressant) and Sea-Bands, which put pressure on the P6 (Nei-Kuan) acupuncture point in your wrist and are said to relieve nausea (pregnant women swear by them).

### More information:

• *M/V Antarctic Dream*, [www.antarctic.cl/web\\_eng](http://www.antarctic.cl/web_eng)  
• GAP Adventures, [www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com)  
KAREN CATCHPOLE



Zodiacs filled with well-bundled passengers from the *M/V Antarctic Dream* approach land, where penguins await.

« MANY OF THE PASSENGERS ON MY SAILING WERE IN THEIR MID-40S AND MOST OF THEM WERE HILARIOUS. »