USHUAIA, Argentina — The Antarctic travel season stretches through the Antarctic summer, November to April. More than 30,000 visitors this year are expected to visit the world’s most remote continent. To get there, they must brave one of the most turbulent stretches of water on Earth: the Drake Passage between the southern tip of South America and the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula. They’ll be rewarded with spectacles of ice and wildlife few people have seen.

Visitors come to see glaciers, some more than 12.5 miles long, colonies of gentoo and chinstrap penguins numbering in the thousands, pods of minke and killer whales, and the solitude and silence of the vast white continent. To do it, they’ll make major investments of both time (12-35 days) and money ($3,500 to $16,000).

I joined their ranks on the M/V Antarctic Dream. The notorious Drake Passage lived up its reputation with 20-foot waves, but the natural wonders of Antarctica easily made the crossing worthwhile.

Adorable penguins, unafraid of man, approached to within a few inches; my inflatable rubber Zodiac boat was surrounded by a group of seven killer whales during one adrenaline-filled excursion; and crab-eater and Weddell seals also made an appearance.

I even got to see a 4-foot-tall emperor penguin.

I also learned some lessons and picked up some pointers that the tour companies don’t tell you. These tips will ensure that you make the most of your own Antarctic adventure.

Don’t worry about timing

There’s really no wrong time to go during the Antarctic summer. Sailings earlier in the season tend to have the clearest weather (though about half of the excursions on my first-of-the-season sailing were curtailed or canceled because of snow and wind). Early sailings also coincide with mating season when animals gather to court, and the shoreline is more pristine.

Mid- and late-season sailings offer relatively warmer temperatures and less ice and snow. Later departures also feature the arrival of penguin chicks and higher concentrations of whales and fur seals.

Stay flexible

Get used to the phrase “weather dependent.” In an environment like Antarctica’s, the climate is changeable and potentially deadly, and all activities are dictated by it.

Our first scheduled shore trip, to Aitcho Island, was canceled because of 40-knot winds. Instead, we traveled on to Half Moon Island, where winds were calm enough to allow us to ride Zodiacs to the beach. Less than an hour after landing, however, the captain called us back to the ship as winds reached 35 knots.

Ask a lot of questions

With so many weather-induced changes to the itinerary, it’s important to have the latest information, or risk disappointment. Paul Anderson, a fellow passenger, booked his trip to fulfill his dream of setting

By KAREN CATCHPOLE
Horizon Writers’ Group

The 78-passenger M/V Antarctic Dream, here anchored at Jougla Point, sails from Ushuaia, Argentina. Expect to encounter rough sailing in the Drake Passage.

Kike Calvo/The Associated Press

The 78-passenger M/V Antarctic Dream, here anchored at Jougla Point, sails from Ushuaia, Argentina. Expect to encounter rough sailing in the Drake Passage.

Mission Antarctica

Here’s what you need to know before tackling this long, expensive journey

Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers’ Group

Gentoo penguins are a big draw on the Antarctic excursions. A helpful tip: Dab some menthol-scented lip balm under your nose to mask the aroma created when thousands of penguins hang out together.

Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers’ Group

This massive iceberg near Bluff Island was large enough to permit passage of a Zodiac boat. It’s forbidden, though, to enter glaciers, which can collapse or capsize at any time.

Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers’ Group

Boating across the icy water or communing with penguins in the snow, you’ll need waterproof clothing. You may have to sit out activities if you don’t have it.

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what’s open this time of year.”

The honorific of Port Aransas beach in December from the summer months is that you can actually make out your own seashore all to yourself.

“In the center of the universe, you imagine to yourself, the

Don’t forget the holidays. Port Aransas celebrates the

Institute, 630 E. Cotter Ave. 361-749-6729; www.portaransa

Katherine Rodeghier is an

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prices range from $399 per person to $1,399. Most cruises have a single supplement ranging from 50 percent to 200 percent of the price of a double. On the 12-day trip, the single supplement is $899.

At the restaurant, you can enjoy an authentic Peruvian meal with dishes such as lomo saltado, a beef and potato stir-fry, and causa, a dish made from mashed potatoes mixed with lime juice.

To get to the Galapagos Islands, you can fly to Quito, the capital of Ecuador, and then take a short flight to Baltra Island, which is the main port of entry.

What to Expect:

The Galapagos Islands are home to some of the most unique and diverse wildlife in the world, including giant tortoises, penguins, and the famous frigate bird.

For details of 11-day cruises on January 2013 sailing will be 14 days to the

Eric Mohl/Horizon Writers’ Group

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