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TRAVEL

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SECTION G

GALAXY'S EDGE TAKES OFF

Inside Disney's new Star Wars land **G4**



TAKING THE PLUNGE

Spa experience in Wiesbaden **G7**



One of the aims of Antarctic operators is to keep the environment as pristine as possible. *STANLEY LEROUX*

ICEBERGS, PENGUINS & UNSPOILED BEAUTY

Nature is everywhere on the southern continent, fierce and magnificent

JANE MUNDY

If you think there is nothing left untrammelled on this planet, Antarctica awaits. It is serene and surreal, magnificent and empty.

Empty of humans, that is. Penguins are a different story — there are millions of them here. As soon as we hopped out of the zodiacs launched from our home base, One Ocean Expeditions' ship RCGS Resolute, curious Adelie penguins greeted us. I could have just sat on a rock and watched them, mesmerized, all day.

Getting to the Antarctic Peninsula was no cakewalk. We boarded the ship in Ushuaia, Argentina — the southernmost city in the world — and plowed down the Beagle Channel to the infamous Drake Passage.

The "Drake Shake," which cross-



A curious Adelie penguin checks out a visitor on its turf. *JANE MUNDY*

es close to 1,000 kilometres of often stomach-churning waters from the tip of South America to the Antarctic Peninsula, was an important trade route that hasn't seen much traffic since the Panama Canal opened in 1914. Today, scientific research vessels and a few small cruise ships ply these waters.

"Below 40 degrees south there is no law, below 50 degrees south there is no God," old seafarers said about the Drake and the Southern Ocean in general, known as the wildest waters on the planet.

On our fourth day at sea, we crossed the Antarctic Circle, with waves resembling manes of white horses galloping toward us at 35 knots. An excursion was planned for the morning, but the wind reached 50 knots and the ship was leaning at an intimidating angle.

Not everyone showed up for breakfast. Or lunch. Or dinner. But the icebergs showed up, announcing that we were in the Antarctic. Colossal tabular icebergs, straight-sided and flat-topped, stretched across the horizon.

Within minutes, drama unfolded: roving clouds and icy rain sheets quickly changed to blazing sunshine and gale-force winds.

Some icebergs were like frozen waves, dazzling white in the sunshine, ghostly white under clouds. Some were luminous blue, as if they were lit up from inside. It was like a huge modern sculpture museum made of ice instead of marble.

SEE ANTARCTIC ON **G2**

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'AT THE MERCY OF NATURE'

ANTARCTIC FROM G1

Snow petrels darted overhead, totally white except for their dark feet and black eyes. An albatross glided by. In the distance, there was an occasional thunderous roar as ice chunks broke away from a glacier.

Although we hadn't yet made it to shore, no one complained. Our resourceful and upbeat guides found lots of ways to keep us entertained. On any given day, there were several talks. The crew included professional photographers, an ornithologist, glaciologist, historian, biologist and California Ocean Alliance scientists, led by Ari Friedlaender, conducting research on marine mammals.

There were seminars on identifying different types of icebergs — growlers and smaller "berg bits" are chunks that bump against the hull as we weave through broken ice — as well as on Antarctic history and penguin biology.

I found the photography talks, which included one on how to shoot birds in flight, particularly inspiring.

"Let your curiosity and creativity guide you," resident photographer Dave Broska said. "Slow down. Best to end up with a few compelling images than to spray and pray and risk ending up with hundreds of snapshots."

An announcement from the bridge informed us that the afternoon zodiac excursion was canceled — there was a 500-metre iceberg dead ahead, three times the size of the Resolute. Up on the bridge, the captain calmly ordered "10 degrees starboard." Watching the eerie panorama, we didn't even whisper.

On the fifth day, we finally got ready to go ashore. After a safety drill and a lesson on how to get in and out of the zodiac, we donned our outdoor gear (on top of two layers of thermals), life jackets and boots. We stepped in and out of biocide to kill any organisms that could be harmful to the delicate ecology of Antarctica.

Everyone's equipment was vacuumed, from boots to backpacks to tripods. (Pathogens such as grass seed have been found on Velcro.) We were told to stay off penguin highways, and keep at least five metres away from wildlife.

We were elated to be on solid ground, finally.

We passed a few dozen fur seals lolling on the shore and made our way up the trail blazed in advance with red flags by the expedition crew. Climbing to the top was exhilarating — the wind was howling, but the sun was shining.

We zipped over to Petermann Island, home to an Adelie penguin rookery and once home to three men called the "Hut Boys" who lived here for nine months. This tiny refuge was built by the Argentines in 1957 to help the British explore the Antarctic Peninsula. Its beds are wood planks and its shelves are still stocked with provisions from the '50s.

You can smell and hear the penguin colony's berserk babbling and shouting before you see a single bird. They pompously amble along their "highway" and we move out of their way.

Most of them seem too busy to



The RCGS Resolute cruises amid mountains, icebergs and brash ice in Charlotte Bay. STANLEY LEROUX

... It's a bucket-list thing. It's like going to the moon — you spend more time getting there and coming back — but it will change your perspective forever.

even notice us, while others are curious and one wanted to see the insides of someone's backpack. They all seem to be in a hurry.

Surrounding our zodiacs were small crystals of ice seeming to float on an oily surface, and then the sea became soupy with ice. We passed a leopard seal snoozing on a growler. The temperature hovered around freezing, but the skies were blindingly blue and the icebergs brilliant white, tinged with turquoise. The only sounds emanated from the blowholes of sleeping minke and grey whales.

Deception Island is part of the South Shetland Islands and one of three volcanic centres in the region. It could be called Desolation Island.

It's a deserted whaling station and the massive metal drums make it look post-apocalyptic. Here is where intrepid travellers take the polar plunge from the black sandy beach. That was one adventure I decided I did not have to experience.

At Half Moon Island we followed our guides up to a rocky knoll to discover thousands of chinstrap penguins. And Kevin.

"This is the 10th year in a row that I've seen Kevin," said ornithologist Tony Beck, who explained that Kevin is a rare Macaroni penguin adopted by the colony. Tony was about as excited as we were.

The chinstraps prefer high ground, which means they take ages to waddle down the rocky slope to the sea. Sometimes they waddle too quickly and topple over and squabble like it's the rock's fault. They weave uphill and join their mates for a cacophony of squawking. They stretch their necks and throw their heads back, open their gullets and flap their flippers. They are badass with attitude, cocky and sure of themselves.

As we headed back to the Resolute on the last of our shore days, penguins darted by the zodiac like they were saying farewell. Some of us were teary-eyed.

"A lot of people say it's a buck-

et-list thing," said Tom Feuchtwanger, a Canadian travel blogger. "It's like going to the moon — you spend more time getting there and coming back — but it will change your perspective forever.

"I thought it would be like Calgary in the winter, like the Arctic," he said. "But the scale of Antarctica leaves an emotional impact. And One Ocean does a hell of a job."

"Here you are at the mercy of nature and its fragility," said Janet Wilson, Tom's wife. "I really got a sense of climate change. If we make the wrong decision, we are screwed."

If you go: One Ocean Expeditions, based in Squamish, offers a variety of expeditions, including the 10-day Antarctic Peninsula Adventure. I flew with Air Canada from Vancouver via Toronto to Buenos Aires; a few Argentine airlines fly to Ushuaia.
This writer was a guest with One Ocean Expeditions, which neither read nor approved this article before publication.



A chinstrap penguin takes a sun bath at Half Moon Island. STANLEY LEROUX



A group sets out to watch for whales. JANE MUNDY

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