

LIFE



Happy
feet

DESTINATION

Antarctica

Cruising to the end of the earth is awe-inspiring in every sense of the word

Words and photography by Rachelle Mackintosh





Clockwise from left: snorkelling among the icebergs; a gentoo penguin in the Lemaire Channel; sightseeing on a Zodiac excursion; an elephant seal relaxing on South Georgia



Backed by jagged peaks garnished with glaciers, the beach looks like a living *Where's Wally* picture – thousands of South Georgia king penguins are waddling as far as I can see. Feeling my Pingu sense tingle, I turn and see my penguin entourage is still following me – their stealth skills aren't much chop, but their curiosity is endearing. It's such a heart-filling sight that I can only exhale. This moment is the very definition of 'awesome'.



The 'Awe' Effect

It's a word we use to describe everything from smashed avo to the smell of new kicks, but when something is truly 'awesome' it can change our lives for the better. According to a growing field of study, we feel awe when we believe we're in the presence of something so powerful, vast and complex, it

transcends our usual frame of reference. And the experts agree it's good for us: a 2021 University of California study found that experiencing awe reduces stress, and is more effective than other emotions like joy and amusement because it takes the focus off ourselves. Plus, according to University of Toronto researchers, people who experience more awe have lower levels of a

blood indicator associated with inflammation.

Where better to max out on wonder than Antarctica, a place so tracks-stoppingly jaw-dropping it's like an awe free-for-all? Over 23 days I cruise with Aurora Expeditions to the white continent, South Georgia and the Falkland Islands on its Antarctica Complete itinerary. And I experience more awe-filled moments than I could've imagined – in fact, I'm still feeling the benefits, months later.

Seas the Days

It takes a few days to cruise to Antarctica from southern Chile, where we first board *Greg Mortimer*. I expect to get seasick along the way, but the infamous Drake Passage proves to be about as volatile as a bubble bath, with the ship's specially designed bow adding stability (and reducing fuel consumption – this is a 100 per cent carbon neutral cruise, after all).

I make the most of the onboard activities, which include everything from inspiring talks to citizen science

projects led by the ship's expedition team. There's also time to hit the gym, get a massage at the wellness centre and kick back with a tippie to watch humpback and fin whales in the distance. Then, after three days at sea, I wake up to see we're surrounded by icebergs - we've finally made it to Antarctica.

White Magic

Exploring this wild playground by Zodiac - the smaller boats used for shore excursions - is super surreal as we weave between formations that could've been sculpted and hand-painted by giants. Creamy coloured bergs the size of Teslas stand alongside bright-blue monuments that seem to glow from within, their

colour created when the ice froze too quickly to trap air bubbles inside.

Other excursions lead us to frosty coves, where we pass hundreds of gentoo penguins as we hike to scenic viewpoints, or sea-kayak and snorkel among the ice. And whether

we're discovering Paradise Bay, Neko Harbour, Prospect Point, Cuverville Island or the Lemaire Channel, one thing remains the same: while this vast polar expanse should feel empty, its incomprehensible enormity leaves me feeling full.



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID HUDSON; MATT HORSPOOL; SCOTT PORTELLI



Behind the Icy Scenes

I Stayed

On Aurora Expeditions' ship, *Greg Mortimer*. My plush cabin had its own balcony, heated bathroom floors and a big-screen TV. Breakfast and lunch were buffet style with plenty of fresh fruit, vegies and proteins. Even as a vegetarian there was always something tasty for me on the dinner menu.

I Hiked

A range of terrains, including snowy slopes, mossy escarpments and sandy beaches; each walk took between one and 2.5 hours return.

I Learnt

More about climate change, seabirds, wildlife and weather systems by taking part in onboard citizen science projects.

Southern Charm

Next, we move on to the subantarctic islands, including the South Shetlands and South Georgia - a 3528km² wildlife wonderland that makes every sense fizz, as layer upon layer of life makes it impossible to know where to look, listen or sniff. The island is home to 54 per cent of the world's southern elephant seals (who belch by way of greeting) and some 450,000 breeding pairs of king penguins, who haven't quite perfected the art of 'playing it cool'. As I hot-foot it across sprawling plains filled with critters, time seems to both speed up and stand still as awe runs through me.

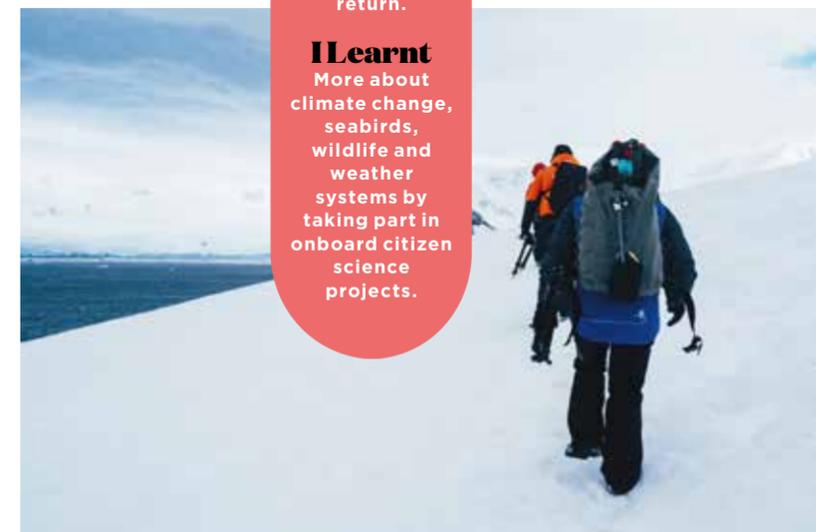
It's a feeling I carry with me on the final days of the cruise as we move on to the Falklands - where we visit a handful of the archipelago's 740-plus islands, enjoy the 10°C sunshine and hike to albatross colonies - and as we cruise back to Chile. When I'm out on the deck and a dolphin leaps up right beside me, sea-spray sparkly in the sunset, I can barely process what I'm seeing.

Spending three weeks cruising 6150km across

the bottom of the planet has filled me with so much awe that I still can't articulate the sheer enormity of it - but I've never felt more optimistic, calm or bullet-proof. Turns out those scientists might be onto something... **WH**



Rachelle was a guest on Aurora Expeditions' 23-day Antarctica Complete cruise. Visit auroraexpeditions.com.au for more.



Clockwise from left: King penguins on South Georgia; exploring via kayak near the *Greg Mortimer*; spotting a dolphin at sunset while cruising back to the mainland; hiking in Antarctica