



South Georgia



From top: Elephant seals crowd the shore of Gold Harbour, South Georgia; a Zodiac is dwarfed by sea ice floating off the Antarctic Peninsula; spring is breeding season for gentoo penguins.



Alone on the ice

Rachelle Mackintosh leaves the first footprints on Antarctica on an early-season expedition

Sidestepping Saint Andrews Bay's critters is like dancing the cha-cha in a living *Where's Wally?* puzzle as 300,000 king penguins and countless elephant seals trumpet and belch their early-spring soundtrack.

"It's pretty overwhelming, isn't it?" expedition leader Peter Wilson smiles as I catch my breath. "More than anywhere else, South Georgia Island is where I've seen the most people start crying—it's just that incredible and immersive."

Wilson's not wrong; my awe feels as gigantic as the British Overseas Territory's landscapes.

It's the second region we visit on National Geographic Lindblad Expeditions' 22-day Antarctic, South Georgia, and the Falklands itinerary—a small-ship cruise we embark on in early spring. The 6075km route unfolds through three key wilderness areas in a sequence that becomes wilder as we head south, the transition beginning within hours of departing Ushuaia. As my 129 fellow passengers and I settle into life aboard the *National Geographic Explorer*, our days are soon measured in wildlife sightings and learning experiences as we cross the South Atlantic towards the Falklands.

This is the first of four ocean crossings on our voyage, each packed with activities. Between watching whales and seabirds from the deck, the 14-strong guiding team hosts lectures on everything from photography hacks to Ernest Shackleton's quests. Meanwhile, stellar à la carte menus, themed banquets—including Swedish, Chilean and Filipino feasts—and daily happy hours keep us energised.

When I'm not working it off in the gym, Captain Peik Aalto's open-bridge policy means everyone's welcome

at the helm to watch the ocean in motion. And even though the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators reports an increase in visitors from roughly 105,000 visitors in 2022-23 to almost 125,000 in the 2024-25 season, it looks like we have the region to ourselves—because, for the most part, we do.

"In the early spring a lot of the other ships are still on their way down here, so we don't usually see anyone else," says naturalist Dr. Jacqueline Windh.

Arriving in the Falklands, we enjoy the first of our off-ship activities. It's 14C as our Zodiacs pull into New Island's wildflower-garlanded bay, and we hike to a clifftop heaving with rockhopper penguins, black-browed albatrosses and imperial cormorants, all loved up for breeding season. Carcass Island's geese enact their own take on *Rachelor in Paradise* among the golden gorse shrubs, while Saunders' sandy beach would look tropical if it wasn't dotted with penguins.

Then, it's time for one last look at civilisation in the archipelago's only town, Stanley, where cottage gardens are in full bloom, but the relentless wind tells us we're at the gates of Earth's rawest wilderness.

We know we've passed through them when we arrive at Grytviken, South Georgia, where winter makes a cameo via a snow squall and a dip to 6C. When we step ashore later that morning, spring strikes back—the sun beats down on the old whaling station and the colossal elephant seals among its ruins.

"A highlight of being here in early spring is seeing all these adult elephant seals and their nursing pups," says naturalist Matthew Drennan. "Nobody really gets to experience that because they only nurse for three weeks. After that, the pups are weaned and left completely on their own—that's how most visitors see them. The adults leave the breeding sites and



> DISCOVER

National Geographic Lindblad Expeditions offers a range of polar expedition cruises aboard *National Geographic Explorer*, *Resolution* and *Endurance*, with a maximum of 148 passengers per voyage. The highlight of each is the included Zodiac cruises, landings and guided wilderness hikes. Accommodating various fitness levels, you can choose your own adventure, from easy beach meanders to more strenuous overland routes, and each is less than two hours' long. [expeditions.com](#)

> PLAN

For 2026, the 22-day Antarctic, South Georgia, and the Falklands itinerary will be aboard *Endurance* and *Resolution*. Depending on which departure you choose, your trip will begin and end in either Buenos Aires, Argentina, or Santiago, Chile, where you'll join a charter flight to the embarkation point, in Ushuaia (all flights are additional). From Sydney, LATAM flies daily to Santiago and Buenos Aires. Once you're on board all meals are included (alcohol's additional) and you'll receive a complimentary waterproof expedition parka (you can either BYO your own muck boots and waterproof trousers, or hire these on-board). [latamairlines.com](#)

> BOOK

The November 6, 2026, departure for this expedition is priced from \$50,118 per person (plus flights).



> PACK

Anaconda binoculars
Get up-close and personal with flora and fauna of Antarctica with Anaconda's multi-coated binoculars (\$70). The nitry device offers clear colours, crisp details and 10x magnification—perfect for wildlife watching.



Clockwise from above: Sunset over the Lemaire Channel; *National Geographic Explorer* off Grytviken, South Georgia Island; huts at Whalers Bay on Deception Island; a kelp goose takes flight over Carcass Island.

head out to sea for the summer, so seeing the newborns with their mothers is really special."

As our South Georgia adventures continue across Elschul, Godthul and Saint Andrews, every shoreline illustrates his point—we see harems of females with pups, and giant bulls biffing with rivals. In fact, there are so many at Gold Harbour we can't land our Zodiacs—but on an island with 400,000 elephant seals, three million fur seals, and an estimated 450,000 pairs of king penguins, it comes with the territory.

Still, there's no other cruise ship in sight, and our feeling of wild isolation increases as we continue to the Antarctic Peninsula and arrive at Point Wild, where gusts blow the snow sideways and it's a chilly -2C. Braving the maelstrom on deck with hot chocolate in hand, it's difficult to fathom how, in 1916, survivors from Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition camped here for months. But when we sunrise to Cape Lookout a few hours later, bluebird skies and sunshine spotlight some 100,000 chinstrap penguins clinging to its crags. At Whalers Bay, clear horizons set the scene for a walk through the long-abandoned whaling processing plant—before winter returns with short, dramatic snow dumps.

Winding along the peninsula and through the bays and islands of the Gerlach Strait, the sea's stillness creates a perfect mirror for chalky peaks and lapis skies; their reflections ripple and swirl into a polar paisley as *Explorer* glides onwards. Further south,

the photogenic Lemaire Channel proves why it's also called the Kodak Gap, its moon rising against a baby-pink sky behind us, the setting sun carving an orange-purple path ahead. At Neko harbour, hiking through its gentoo colony would look like a walk through a monochrome screen saver if it wasn't for its powder-blue glacier.

"In early spring the snow is at its whitest—especially at these penguin colonies," Drennan says. "But later in the season, the colonies are anything but clean, tidy and white. They can have ankle-deep guano once all the chicks hatch."

On our final landing at Half Moon Island, I'm surrounded by sunbaking chinstrap penguins when suddenly the scene feels crowded: I glimpse an expedition ship in the distance, kicking off its own Antarctic season as ours is wrapping up.

"You look shocked, but seeing one other passenger vessel today shouldn't harsh your mellow too much," Drennan laughs, adding that in the peak of the 19th-century fur-sealing industry, there would have been many more ships here.

It isn't mellow I'm feeling as we cross the sleepy Drake Passage and Beagle Channel back to Ushuaia—it's buoyant, with my a body a touch of smug. Because as our expedition winds down, another ship appears on our horizon. Then we pass another, and another. Each one's filled with passengers eager to step into their own dream adventure—but following the frosty footprints we've left behind.

The writer was a guest of *National Geographic Lindblad Expeditions*.



Rachelle Mackintosh is a Sydney-based travel writer and nature photographer who's happiest when ogling landscapes and critters through her viewfinder.



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