



LOG OF MV POLAR STAR

Weddell Sea & the Antarctic Peninsula



14th – 24th FEBRUARY 2009

Written by Joel Turner
Edited by Ali Dean
Species List: Mick Brown

MV Polar Star

Weddell Sea & the Antarctic Peninsula

Captain	Jacek Majer
Captain	Leszek Slawski
Staff Captain	Dariusz Zarwalski
Chief Engineer	Zenon Berger
Second Officer	Roberto Sain
Third Officer	Jerry Malapad
Hotel Manager	Florin Blaj
Head Chef	Robert Ward
Doctor	Richard Acland

Expedition Leader	Hannah Lawson
Expedition Staff	Summer Allman
	Chris Bateman
	Mick Brown
	Louise Cunningham
	Ali Dean
	Joe Koch
	Joel Turner
	Andy Wenzel

Saturday, 14th February - Leaving Ushuaia

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 54° 48.6' S

Longitude: 68° 17.9' W

Wind: Force 2 South

Sea Conditions: Calm (wave height 0 – 0.10 m)

Pressure: 994 mb

Temperature: 12°C



Bright sunlight lit the snow-capped mountains that surround the port of Ushuaia, a stunning backdrop as we arrived at the gangway of the *MV Polar Star*. Although renowned for its changeable weather, today this curious town at the southern tip of Argentina was blessed with fine conditions. An air of excitement and anticipation surrounded our ship as we climbed aboard while her Captain and crew were busy making final preparations for a 12 day expedition to the wilderness of Antarctica. Once onboard we attended a welcome briefing where we were introduced to both Asteria and Polar Star staff; each giving short introductions and explaining their expertise and experience. Staff Captain Darek followed with a safety briefing which highlighted a few important rules

which would help to ensure a safe trip for all and as we left the observation lounge, all the ladies present received a red rose in celebration of St Valentine's Day. At 18:30 we undertook the mandatory lifeboat drill which brought us out onto deck in bright orange life jackets, mustering under the lifeboats as would be expected in an emergency. It was then time to find the dining room and enjoy our first meal onboard.

USHUAIA

Ushuaia lies at the extreme tip of South America, on the island of Tierra del Fuego, the land of fire. Its name is derived from a Yaghan word (the language of the nomadic Yámana Canoe Indians) meaning "inner harbour to the westward." In 1906 the Argentine state founded a penal institution in Ushuaia largely for hardened criminals. The prisoners were responsible for most of the pre-1940 construction of the town. The prison ceased operation and was incorporated into the Naval Base in 1940. Ushuaia now has a population of about 60,000 permanent residents. They are descendants of English missionaries who stayed on as farmers, of Yugoslavians and Romanian miners, of sailors from Spain and Italy, who signed off or jumped ship here, of Chileans who came looking for work, of a few Germans, and just a handful of people bearing some blood from the veins of the native Indian population.

This is the southernmost city in the world, and it boasts graceful frame houses, self-made cabins and modern concrete buildings; but they all have the same roofs. There are no tiles here, only metal sheeting that is bolted down. The slopes are now being developed with smart hotels and ski facilities.

A spectacular chain of mountains, the Cerro Martial, rises behind the town, to the north. The ruined forest behind the town was caused by a terrible fire in 1918. The fire began to the west of town and raged eastward, so out of control that the townspeople thought they might have to take to the sea in boats. Doused by torrential rain, the fire, which had lasted three months, was so intense that even the tiny trees were destroyed and the ground left exposed to erosion.

We enjoyed our first meal onboard before heading out on deck to experience the Beagle Channel so named after the ship which circumnavigated the world between 1831 and 1836 with a certain young man on board, learning his trade and leaving his indelible mark in history: Charles Darwin. The Ushuaia port authority supplied a pilot to navigate us safely through the channel whilst the expedition staff helped to spot wildlife from the bridge. The Beagle Channel had already surprised us with an incredible sighting of a humpback whale performing three powerful breeches off the stern of the ship earlier in the evening and continued as we passed a large Magellanic penguin rookery on Martillo Island. Turkey vultures and brown skuas circled above the colony constantly on the lookout for easy food. Occasionally we saw these penguins swimming out in the channel close to the ship and Mick reminded us that this would be our last chance to see these birds as they are not an Antarctic species. Black-browed albatrosses and blue-eyed shags were spotted in abundance along with South American terns which flocked in huge numbers around islands in the channel. Hannah pointed out the southernmost town in the world; Puerto Williams, Chile, to those on the bridge. Originally a naval base founded in 1952, the settlement now has a population of 2000 people including one of the last fluent

speakers of the language spoken by the Yámana Canoe Indians. This tribal group was encountered by Darwin during his time in the Beagle Channel. We also passed Gable Island, opposite Puerto Williams, which was central to the creation myth of the Selk'nam Indians. They believe that this small island floated above a huge flood that covered the Earth and as a result all life derives from survivors that took refuge there.

As the sun set over the Beagle Channel, we watched as a boat pulled alongside our moving vessel to pick up the pilot and Captain Jacek resumed control of the ship, setting a course across the Drake Passage. Some of us ventured to the bar but many of us chose to retire to our cabins in order to recover from journeys of various duration.

Sunday, 15th February – Drake Passage

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 57° 29.7' S

Longitude: 63° 20.9' W

Wind: Force 3 Southwest

Sea Conditions: Moderate (wave height 1.25 – 2.50 m)

Pressure: 1002 mb

Temperature: 7°C

Hannah made her first wake-up call of the expedition at 07:30 this morning. A 3 metre swell gently rolled the ship while a cool, force 5 wind blew across the decks from the west. The skies were slightly overcast but visibility was good. At 09:30 Mick Brown began the expedition's lecture programme with *Birds of the Drake Passage and Antarctica* which gave us a general introduction to some of the fascinating sea birds we would be seeing throughout our time in the Antarctic. After a short break to refill our cups with tea and coffee and enjoy some fresh air on deck, we reconvened for a lecture with Joe Koch. His presentation, *Ice Worlds*, explored the ice features of Polar Regions and how they are affected by increasing global temperatures. After our first lunch at sea, the film *Station Princess Elisabeth – Building the Future* was shown in the observation lounge. This film documented the building of the new Belgian Station that will be inaugurated today. Andy concluded the day's lectures at 16:30 with his talk on whales, *Cetaceans of the Southern Ocean*. Throughout the day we had been joined by many seabirds; sooty shearwaters, several white chinned, black bellied, Wilson's storm and cape petrels alongside some larger birds, the black bowed albatross among them. Wandering albatrosses also circled majestically around the ship; their varied plumage indicating differences in age.



After a long day of learning, many of us took advantage of the ship's Happy Hour and relaxed together in the observation lounge. Those who made it to this evening's recap and briefing were reminded by Hannah of the importance of keeping "one hand for the ship"

at all times while we are in open seas. Mick explained the purpose of these recap sessions and encouraged us to use them as an opportunity to ask questions of the staff. He passed onto Joe who explained the circumpolar current and its effect on Antarctica as well as pointing out that we would be passing through the Antarctic convergence at some point this evening. Joel introduced the *Great Antarctic Iceberg Spotting Competition*. A competition sheet was posted in the observation lounge where we could guess the time and day we expected to see our first iceberg. A mystery prize would be waiting for the lucky winner. Dinner was followed at 20:30 with a showing of *Ice Worlds*, a film from the *Blue Planet* series which documents the advance and retreat of Polar ice in the Antarctic and Arctic and its effect on the wildlife.

Monday, 16th February – Drake Passage & Penguin Island

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 61° 17.6' S

Longitude: 58° 03.4' W

Wind: Force 2 Variable

Sea Conditions: Slight (wave height 0.50 – 1.25 m)

Pressure: 1005 mb

Temperature: 8°C

Our wake-up call came this morning at 07:30 and we were met with fine conditions on deck. Although a little overcast, visibility was good and temperatures on deck were a relatively warm 6°C. The ship was on course to arrive at Penguin Island later today with only 80 nautical miles to go. The *Polar Star* was rolling gently in a moderate swell, a very agreeable motion for this potentially wild stretch of water. An excellent turn out for breakfast was testament to these good conditions.

Jozef Verlinden invited us to the observation lounge at 09:30 for his lecture *South Shetlands & the Weddell Sea*, which looked at our proposed landing schedule from a historical perspective. During the lecture, Hannah made an announcement that there were



hourglass dolphins bow-riding and swimming around the ship. Those who came out on the bow were treated to a 20 minutes show as 6 of these wonderful creatures sped through the water close to the ship, occasionally ‘dolphin jumping’ completely out of the water in spectacular fashion.

Dixie Dansercoer continued the formal presentations at 11:00, with contributions from Stefan Maes, Yan Vershueren and Ivan Brems, with his lecture *(Ant)Arctic Matters – From expedition to (zero) emission exhibition*. Those of us who had spent time on deck were treated to sightings of a juvenile grey headed albatross alongside black-bellied, Wilson’s storm, cape, soft plumaged and northern giant petrels. It was clear that we had crossed the convergence as we began to see wildlife that is associated with the Antarctic. We saw our first chinstrap penguins porpoising through the water next to the ship as well as Antarctic fur seals. We

also spotted various whale blows from a distance; not close enough to make a positive identification although Dixie did draw attention to minke whales off the stern. At 14:30 we convened in the observation lounge for an expedition overview led by Hannah, which explained the IAATO (International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators) guidelines that are so important in protecting Antarctica from the negative impacts of tourism. We also attended the mandatory Zodiac briefing as our first trip out in the boats would be tomorrow morning. The first iceberg of the expedition was spotted in the distance at 16:05. This entertaining afternoon led nicely into tonight's Happy Hour where Ruel and Ruben kept us well oiled with their 'cocktail of the day'. At recap and briefing Hannah explained how this evening's landing would work and Andy answered questions about the hourglass dolphins we had seen earlier today. Joel revealed the winner of the *Great Antarctic Iceberg Spotting Competition*: Inge Jacques was presented with her toy penguin prize.

At 18:30 we dropped anchor off Penguin Island (62° 06.1' S / 57° 37.6' W), a small volcanic island off the coast of larger King George Island. The expedition staff warned us that the ride to the landing site would be uncomfortable on account of the swell and that high winds would mean getting rather wet. After a long drive to shore we met Hannah

who briefed us on the shore. Antarctic fur seals obstructed several paths meaning that we could not get through to the gentoo and chinstrap penguin colonies. We remained a respectful distance from these seals as they can be aggressive and carry a nasty bite. Even though we could not reach their rookeries, we passed both species of penguin on the shore as they made their way too and from the sea on feeding trips. A young elephant seal emerged from the water with sleek appearance, joining us on shore for the remainder of the landing. There



were also numerous Southern giant petrels nesting on the higher ground with half grown chicks in their nests. In this area of Penguin Island there was a high proportion of white morph birds to be seen. The expedition staff explained that these petrels can be identified from their northern giant counterparts, which are also found in the Antarctic, by their lighter, greenish beak tips. Occasionally these birds flew low past us as they made their way out to sea, giving us great close up views of their huge, up to 2 metre wingspan. By the time we returned to the ship the conditions had deteriorated which made for an exciting drive back. At some points, the Zodiacs surfed down the front of large waves as we passed through the channel between Penguin and King George Island, increasing their speed dramatically. The conditions at the gangway made for a difficult transfer from Zodiac to ship but with the help of our drivers and the experienced sailors, everyone was back onboard safely by 22:00. Our first landing had been adventurous and set a fantastic precedent for future landings. The bar was packed this evening; music and laughter filled the room as Belgian beer flowed freely.

Tuesday, 17th February – Paulet & Snow Hill Islands, Weddell Sea

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 63° 34.2' S

Longitude: 55° 47.5' W

Wind: Force 2 Northeast

Sea Conditions: Smooth (wave height 0.10 – 0.50 m)

Pressure: 985 mb

Temperature: 2°C

We woke this morning as the ship navigated through Antarctic Sound. This channel, found at the northern extent of the peninsula, is often referred to as 'Iceberg Alley' due to the high concentration of icebergs that litter the passage. The ship was a little behind schedule this morning as Force 10 winds overnight had slowed our progress dramatically, but the Captain was confident we would arrive at Paulet Island in time for our morning excursion. After breakfast, those on deck watched as the ship manoeuvred to a safe anchorage off the northern shore of Paulet Island and ran a little too close to an iceberg. The berg touched the port side of the ship and bent some of the railings before drifting away from us, a red paint mark from the ship's hull staining its flank.

Zodiacs ferried us to shore where flagged routes were waiting to guide us through the plethora of fur seals that littered the hillside. We saw Adélie penguins, the adults often engaged in frantic 'food chases' as the chicks pursued them across the island in search of food. The vast majority of these birds had already left the island after a successful breeding season, to feed prior to their return to land for moulting. Along the beach, to the right of the landing site, a steep hill rose up from the shore. This was home to nesting Antarctic shags, most nests containing two well developed chicks and like the penguins, they were seen to constantly harass their parents for food. Some of us chose to climb to the top of this hill where we gained great views over the island's two melt water lakes and its rocky shoreline. Summer was positioned at the wintering site of Captain Carl Anton Larsen and his 19 crew of the wrecked vessel *Antarctica* that sank in 1903, to offer historical interpretation. The remains of the stone hut stood above the beach, closely guarded by a large male fur seal. Everyone was back



onboard for lunch and as we ate, the ship began its navigation to Snow Hill Island. On the way we passed numerous huge bergs, several humpback whale blows and an iceberg which was host to a large leopard seal, recovering its energy ahead of its next hunt. Before our arrival, Hannah gave an expedition briefing on tonight's landing and our guest historian Jozef Verlinden talked to us about Otto Nordenskjöld's Swedish Antarctic Expedition which began in 1902.

At 18:45 we began to leave the ship on long Zodiac rides to shore. 25 knot winds and a choppy surface meant that we all got our fair share of sea spray as it whipped up over the pontoons. On land snow was falling, often the wind blew it horizontally across the shore. Summer was stationed at the hut in which Nordenskjöld and his six colleagues lived for 2 years from 1902. The hut is maintained and kept in remarkably good condition by Argentina. Ali had marked a route up the hill behind the hut which gave us some good exercise and offered truly Antarctic views as we watched our boats on their journeys too and from the ship. Although the winds were extremely strong and snow covered much of the ground, Ali managed to point out various geological features. Numerous basaltic dykes stood proud of the surrounding sedimentary rock which is softer and more readily eroded. On our return, the wind had picked up a little and the gangway operation was challenging but everyone was checked onboard by 20:30 and a late dinner was served at 21:00 before we retired to the bar for a cold beer.

Wednesday, 18th February – Brown Bluff, Esperanza & Gourdin Island

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 63° 30.8' S

Longitude: 56° 51.9' W

Wind: Force 7/8 Southwest

Sea Conditions: Slight (wave height 0.50 – 1.25 m)

Pressure: 986 mb

Temperature: 2°C

Our wake-up call came slightly earlier than planned this morning at 07:10 as two humpback whales were swimming close to the ship, occasionally showing their tail flukes. During breakfast the wind speed increased to over 50 knots giving the whole



surface of the sea a wild appearance. As soon as we arrived at Brown Bluff, it was clear that a landing would not be possible. Wind speeds as high as 56 knots meant that we would not be able to operate the Zodiacs safely. We saw the reddish-brown volcanic cliffs that give the flat-topped mountain its name before motoring towards Esperanza Base in hope of better conditions. During this navigation Dixie Dansercoer showed a film record of his trans-

polar expedition and answered questions on this incredible adventure. Unfortunately, on arrival at Esperanza Base, the katabatic winds were still far too strong to operate in. However, the scenery around this area was incredible. Huge tabular icebergs were scattered across the water and the winds blew snow in clouds across the tops of the ice cliffs that towered above the shore. The captain cruised the ship across Hope Bay and up to the snout of Depot Glacier to give us time to enjoy this Antarctic scenery. The afternoon was spent onboard the ship watching the ice and snow go by. Meanwhile Hannah had hatched a plan to navigate to Gourdin Island in the hope that conditions would allow us to make an after dinner landing this evening.

A confused swell and 25 knot winds made for another tricky time at the gangway but we were used to these conditions by now and the operation of getting everyone ashore went without a hitch. From the ship we passed a huge tabular berg that had drifted close to the island. We rounded a series of small islets and headed for the tiny sand beach where Hannah was waiting for us. Three types of penguin have rookeries on this island. Adélie, chinstrap and gentoo penguins share the Island's snow free rock outcrops to support their colonies. Snowy sheathbills were never far away from the guano rich rookeries, scavenging around the rocks for food. Numerous Antarctic fur seals were scattered around the sandy beaches and rocks, often sitting in a doglike fashion, their external ears clearly visible. There was enough space to pick a suitable path around them and head up the hill behind the landing site where Ali and Summer were based. The views from the top were fantastic. We could see the huge ice cliffs that form the edge of the Peninsula in the distance, as well as enjoying the fabulous reds and oranges that were painting the sky as the sun set. The sky was becoming dark as the last of the Zodiacs left the shore to return to the ship. Tonight the bar was full of revellers once again, enjoying fine company and exquisite Belgian beer.



Thursday, 19th February – Half Moon & Deception Island

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 62° 36.3' S

Longitude: 59° 43.6' W

Wind: Force 3 Southeast

Sea Conditions: Moderate (wave height 0.10 – 0.50 m)

Pressure: 1002 mb

Temperature: 4°C

At 07:00 this morning the ship dropped anchor at Half Moon Bay. Many of us had suffered a fitful night's sleep on account of the nocturnal movements of the ship. Our navigation across the Bransfield Strait had been hampered by a 4-6 metre swell and force 9 winds which had caused us to pitch and roll significantly. As we woke this morning however, the mountains of Livingston Island were lit by the morning sun to dramatic effect as our ship sat sheltered in the bay; a welcome stillness affecting our vessel. The temperature outside was cool 2°C and conditions were looking very promising for our morning landing. We could see Teniente Camara Station, an operational Argentine Base, above the boulder beach; blue and white flags adorning the orange huts. The igneous andesite rock that forms the bay was crosscut by a number of basaltic dykes that were weathered green, brown and orange. We landed on a small beach and were briefed by Hannah before leaving the boats to explore the island. On our way to the chinstrap penguin colony we passed the wreck of an old wooden water boat that would once have taken fresh water out to larger whaling ships. The chinstrap penguin chicks were



moulting, soon they will fledge and their parents will stop feeding them. It was possible to walk right along the beach to the Argentine station, passing many fur seals on the way, to meet the friendly staff there and visit their small shop. We sent numerous postcards care of their postal service and they agreed to stamp our passports with the official base stamp. Dixie and Herman had spent the morning in their inflatable kayak, enjoying a

leisurely paddle around the bay before Hannah swapped into the craft and paddled her own way back to the ship, much to the Captain's delight! We returned to the ship in time for lunch

The early afternoon was spent on the ship as she motored back across the Bransfield Strait towards Deception Island. Snow covered the island in the distance which was clearly visible even though the skies were overcast. 20 knot winds raced across the sea from the West causing a swell that rolled the ship. Cape petrels and southern fulmars flew around the ship, enjoying the strong gusts, and those on deck questioned the wisdom in preparing for the traditional Deception Island swim. Hannah announced that the Captain would soon be undertaking the remarkably tricky manoeuvre through Neptune's Bellows: the small pass into the island. Captain Jacek took us through the narrow gap between the submerged Raven Rock, hidden from sight, and the towering Cathedral Crags, with absolute precision. Zodiacs ferried us to shore towards the rusty ruins of the whaling station where we were met by Hannah. A walk was organised up to Neptune's Window, led by Mick, where the island's discoverer, Nathaniel Palmer, once climbed looking for birds' eggs and found a view which is said to have shown him the continental land of the peninsula. Cape petrels played in the updrafts from the precipitous cliff that plummets nearly 200 feet to the rocky shore below. Wilson's storm petrels appeared occasionally, in complete contrast to passing giant petrels. Three of these smaller petrels could easily stand on the beak of one of the larger birds. The cape petrels could be seen nesting in various locations, closely guarding their single fluffy chicks that were often seen flexing their wings to build up important flight muscles. Another hike, led by Joe, went out to the old BAS hangar then up to the top of Ronald Hill, where the wind was rather ferocious but views were fantastic out across Port Foster.



We were joined by numerous fur seals on the shore and watched skuas bathing in the fresh water pools above the extent of high tide. Unfortunately the conditions were not

right for the geothermal waters to reach the beach but this was not enough to discourage some keen swimmers. Herman set precedent as the first of the swimmers but was soon followed by others, keen not to be outdone. Absolute chaos unfolded; quick dashes into the water for photos were accompanied by screams as the true temperature of the water was realised. As our valiant swimmers left the water and dried themselves frantically in the wind, Zodiacs began the return journey to the ship where a cup of hot chocolate and rum was waiting for us. After dinner at 21:00, Jozef Verlinden spoke about the Gerlache Strait and the 20 landing sites that were visited by Gerlache himself during his 1898 expedition.

GEOLOGY OF DECEPTION ISLAND

Deception Island is the remains of a previously much larger volcano that is mostly submerged. Port Foster (max. depth 190 m) is a breached caldera that formed when the centre of the volcano collapsed below sea level after a huge prehistoric explosive eruption. Eruptions have continued at irregular intervals, the first historically recorded by Wilkes in 1842 who saw “the entire south rim of the crater on fire”, and the latest episodes occurring in 1967, 1969, and 1970. The 1967 eruption destroyed a Chilean scientific station at Pendulum Cove and a British station at Whalers Bay and required evacuation of the bases under emergency conditions. The eruption in 1969 destroyed both the Chilean and British bases, and the whaling station, and the five British personnel were evacuated hurriedly. No permanent occupants live on the island, but both Argentina and Spain have summer stations there.

Friday, 20th February – Gand Island, Dallmann Bay & Paradise Bay

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 64° 26.6' S

Longitude: 62° 49.3' W

Wind: Force 2 South

Sea Conditions: Calm (wave height 0 – 0.10 m)

Pressure: 1003 mb

Temperature: 7°C

Hannah's wakeup call came as a bit of a shock to many this morning at 05:30. The expedition staff however were already up and preparing the Zodiacs for our pre-breakfast landing. We made our way up to the observation lounge for a strong coffee and croissants and looked out at huge ice cliffs through the windows. The views that greeted us were fantastic and justified the early start to even the most consummate of sleepers. We watched the Zodiacs driving around the ship on still water, painted orange by the rising sun, until we were called to deck 3. Hannah met us onshore at Gand Island with a short site briefing and helped us out of the boats. This island was named after the Belgian city of Ghent after its populace held subscription drives to help finance Gerlache's expedition. He later repaid them with this tribute. Flagged routes spread out around the island, avoiding numerous fur seals and small groups of moulting gentoo penguins. Joel had cut steps in the ice to access a peninsula where we could walk to the end and look back to where the ship lay at anchor. Here there was a small Antarctic cormorant colony perched on the top of a rock stack. Spread out on the rocks at the end of this spit of land were

thousands of limpet shells, deposited over many years by the kelp gulls that feed on this univalve. While we were all on shore, Mick drove a Zodiac across the bay on a different mission. In his boat was the de Gerlache family including Madame Solvay. Their destination was a bay close to the Solvay Mountain range that was named by Gerlache himself as a tribute to Madame Solvay's ancestors. Despite the swell, Mick managed to land the party at a spot where they were photographed holding a Belgian flag in tribute to their family's explorations in this area. Once we were all safely onboard ship and enjoying a well earned breakfast, the Captain motored towards Orne Harbour.

In a last minute change to the itinerary, 9 Zodiacs were launched at 09:00 in Dallmann Bay. There were several humpback whales around the ship and each boat had their own

encounters with these gentle animals. Some whales were resting, floating on the surface and occasionally blowing into the air while others were more active, following krill around the bay while feeding. We were so close that not only the exhale of air was audible but the subsequent inhale could be heard. As well as the whales, we saw a juvenile emperor penguin which is rare in this part of the



peninsula. There were also several Antarctic fur seals to be found, some in the water and others hauled out on icebergs floating in the bay. Once we were all back onboard, lunch was served.

After a quick lunch our navigation to Paradise Bay took us through the Errera Channel; a narrow passage that was littered with large icebergs in all shapes and colours. The Argentine station *Almirante Brown*, named after the father of their navy, sat on the shore as we anchored at 15:30 ahead of our afternoon landing. Although often unmanned, at the moment the base is occupied by maintenance staff, readying it for use by scientists next year. This would be our first landing on the continent of Antarctica and therefore an important stop for those wanting to tick off that elusive seventh continent. Half of us landed onshore while the others went on a Zodiac cruise around the glacier bound Skontorp Cove. Those in the boats watched as the land party hiked to the high rock outcrop to the right of the base. The hikers themselves were rewarded for their effort with great views over the bay below and found that a quick but daring decent could be made by sliding down the snow all the way to the bottom. This area proved to be fantastic for cruising; the cliffs that extended out around the bay to the right of the landing site were home to nesting Antarctic cormorants, snowy sheathbills and terns. We passed several huge leopard seals hauled out on icebergs. They paid our noisy engines very little notice as they lay still, resting before another hunting endeavour. In the meantime, large groups of gentoo penguins swam together in the bay, washing themselves clean of all the dirt and guano they had picked up in the rookery. As we motored further around the bay, huge glaciers came into view that stretched right up into the mountains. Heavily crevassed towards the snout, the ice looked particularly unstable in places and we could hear the cracks and booms of calvings from all around the cove. Some boats were close to a



calving which created a large wave that destabilised an iceberg causing it to roll and disintegrate in a dramatic fashion. The Zodiacs wove in and out of icebergs and brash ice, often following suggestions from those in the boat with cameras, searching for the perfect shot. Our drivers took their boats into the brash ice and stopped their motors, requesting silence for a couple of minutes. The sounds of the bay, so easily

drowned out by the noise of the engines, were incredible. Listening to the tinkling of brash ice, the lapping of waves against the cold, hard icebergs, the distant call of Antarctic seabirds and the occasional booming and cracking of the glacier was a truly memorable experience. On our return to the ship, a young crabeater seal became very curious of several of the Zodiacs and spent 15 minutes swimming around the boats, spy-hopping out of the water every now and again to get a better look at us and occasionally touching the boats with its nose.

All through the afternoon the weather had remained fair; blue skies heralding the start of the *Polar Star's* famous Antarctic BBQ. As we made our way back to the ship it was clear that preparations had already been made for tonight's meal; chairs and tables had been arranged out on deck and a huge BBQ was set up outside the observation lounge on deck 5. Tonight's BBQ commenced at 19:00 in the observation lounge. The Base Commander and staff from Almirante Brown joined us and shared their experiences with us over dinner. Bob, our head chef, and his team put on a fantastic spread, the ribs and king prawns were particular favourites.

Saturday, 21st February – Port Lockroy & Pléneau Island

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 64° 49.6' S

Longitude: 63° 30.1' W

Wind: Force 2 Northeast

Sea Conditions: Calm (wave height 0.10 – 0.50 m)

Pressure: 994 mb

Temperature: 7° C

We woke this morning as the ship entered the Neumayer Channel. The temperature on deck was 5°C and the sea was calm. We arrived at anchor at Port Lockroy at 07:30 and soon a scout boat was dropped and driven across to a small landing point where Rick Atkinson jumped aboard and was ferried to the ship. A former dog-sledder in the Arctic, Rick lives at Operation Tabarin Base (A) over the summer, maintaining the building and running the Post Office, with the help of his three assistants: Laura, Jude and Nikki. He ran a pre-landing briefing in the observation lounge after which we made our way through the wet gear room and out onto deck 3. This morning's landing was split between Goudier Island, the site of the base, and Jougla Point; a small peninsula on Wiencke

Island which encloses the whole bay. Hannah split us into two groups in order to give us all a good opportunity to see both sites. Half of us made our way to the base on Goudier Island where the lovely staff were close at hand to answer questions and speak a little about their experiences and the other half met Hannah onshore at Jouglia Point.

At Goudier Island, we picked our way carefully around the gentoo penguin colony which was blanketed in a mixture of mud and guano. The large fluffy chicks were undoubtedly the highlight and although we maintained the 5 metre rule as often as possible, these little balls of fluff were oblivious to any restriction to their wanderings. Those of us who sat down and stayed quiet often found themselves the centre of a penguin chick's curiosity and enjoyed an incredible experience. After an hour onshore engaging in some serious retail therapy in the little shop and perusing the beautifully restored huts, we swapped over and were ferried across to Jouglia Point. Once landed here, we walked around adult Antarctic cormorants and their fledglings. Gentoo penguin chicks, when not wandering around aimlessly, were sleeping on the rocks. A trail led to part of a whale skeleton that had been erected by Jacques Cousteau's diving team in the early sixties. They had salvaged the bones from the sea bed and brought them on land in their spare time, the remains of this collection is still visible today although partly covered in snow.



The ship began its relocation to Pléneau Island during lunch and soon after we had eaten we went out on deck to watch our passage through the Lemaire Channel. On arrival at Pléneau Island, the ship anchored and the expedition staff prepared for an afternoon landing and Zodiac cruise. The landing site really did turn up some treats for those who chose to go ashore. The island was ours to explore although Hannah did warn us not to walk on the icecap due to hidden crevasses. Gentoo penguins dominated the rocks with their guano covered rookeries although Antarctic terns and blue-eyed shags held some ground for their own colonies. Another addition to the island's wildlife population was a young male elephant seal in moult. He had established a quiet spot for himself in a cleft between two large boulders and didn't move an inch between our arrival on and departure from the island. These are the largest of the seal species; the males weighing in at up to 5 tonnes and reaching 6 metres in length. The rocks were made slippery by algae that is fertilised by the rich guano of the penguins, taking some people by surprise as they wandered around the island. A few Adélie penguins were found within the gentoo colonies and we took our last look at these Antarctic penguins as we would soon be travelling back across the Drake Passage.

Our cruise around the bay turned up several leopard seals, obviously attracted to the area by the large penguin population. Some of these animals were hauled out on icebergs but others swam around the Zodiacs, occasionally raising high out of the water to gain a better look at our rubber boats. One seal was particularly interested in the boats and with great views through clear water we watched this large predator as it twisted and turned

underneath us, sometimes touching the pontoons with its nose and mouth. Every now and again the seal would open its mouth showing off those magnificent incisors that help to



make it such an effective predator, which reminded us to keep hands inside the boat. The icebergs that choked the bay were magnificent, in all shapes, sizes and shades of white and blue. We also saw crabeater, fur and Weddell seals during the cruise. The Zodiacs wove between them through narrow passes and we enjoyed the shelter they offered from the winds that blew across the open stretches of water. The last

Zodiac was onboard the ship by 17:45 in time for Happy Hour.

After dinner, which featured a fantastic king crab starter, we joined the team in the observation lounge. Andy showed his photos of a leopard seal killing a gentoo penguin, taken at Pléneau Island. Although some found this difficult to watch, it was a tribute to the power of these incredible creatures. Dixie Dansercoer and Julie Brown continued with a narrated slideshow of their 2008 Expedition, *In the Wake of the Belgica*.

Sunday, 22nd February – Drake Passage

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 61° 42.2' S

Longitude: 65° 26.5' W

Wind: Force 6 West

Sea Conditions: Rough (wave height 2.50 – 4 m)

Pressure: 1010 mb

Temperature: 5°C

We woke this morning to feel the ship rolling heavily. Although the weather outside was fine, a residual swell made for an interesting breakfast as we bumped into each other around the breakfast buffet. Many of us had taken sea sickness medication but some still fell foul of the conditions. At 09:30, Joseph Verlinden gave a recap of our landings from a historical perspective. This presentation was followed at 11:00 by Mick with his lecture, *Greenwich Meantime – Navigation at Sea*. He explained how early navigators managed to solve the problem of determining longitude using celestial navigation. This had all changed by the mid 18th century, following the invention of John Harrison's marine chronometer, which made it possible to fix longitude without the need for complex calculations making a previously difficult task relatively simple.

After a lively lunch due to the ship's irregular roll, we reconvened in the observation lounge for the film *Antarctic Challenge*. Introduced by François de Gerlache, this documented the Brabant Island Experience in 1984 when François and his colleagues over-wintered on Metchnikoff Point. Later in the afternoon at 16:30 the film *White*

Shadows by Didier Volckaert was shown. The filmmaker shot some of the footage whilst onboard the *Polar Star* last year, on the 2008 Asteria Expeditions Antarctica cruise.

At recap and briefing tonight, Hannah reminded us of the best way to move around the ship in a heavy swell, just like the humble penguin. Louise gave a fascinating insight into the lives of Southern elephant seals and the way in which they have been used to collect oceanographic data. Mick then showed two videos, one of a huge iceberg disintegrating and rolling and the other of a food chase within an Adélie penguin colony. After dinner, the film *L'Antarctique en Héritage* was introduced by Astrid de Gerlache and played in the observation lounge. This documented the expeditions of Adrien and Gaston de Gerlache.

Monday, 23rd February – Drake Passage

Time: 12:00

Latitude: 57° 06.5' S

Longitude: 66° 18.5' W

Wind: Force 8/9 Northwest

Sea Conditions: High (wave height 6 – 9 m)

Pressure: 1003 mb

Temperature: 7°C

Our final day at sea began with a 07:30 wake-up call. A 4 metre swell meant yet more rolling, which again made for an interesting breakfast. Throughout the morning the weather deteriorated and by 10:00 our ship was in force 8 winds. The sea surface was wild and the bow of the ship crashed through the water sending waves up over deck 5. At 09:00 Alison gave her lecture *My Home from Home* which gave a personal account of her experiences working for the British Antarctic Survey. Daniel Desmet took to the stage at 11:00 to speak about the proposed Asteria trip to the Congo in July 2009. The ship altered course at 11:30 after the ship rolled so violently that chairs and tables were lifted off the floor. Many areas of the ship's interior were damaged and an announcement was made that lunch would not be served in the dining room but instead brought to our cabins. The outer decks were also closed and we were advised to stay in our cabins.



After lunch, at 15:00, the Asteria staff showed a film of their Greenland expedition in 2005 which they hope to recreate in the future. After a short break the expedition staff showed one of their favourite films: *Around Cape Horn*; a short montage of unique footage shot from all parts of one of the mighty P-Line Cape Horn square riggers: the *Peking*. Matchless commentary by Irving Johnson, spoken over the silent film he shot as a young man, from the perspective of a robust old age makes this an unforgettable piece of cinema.

Throughout the afternoon were made our way ever closer to the Beagle Channel through wild seas. Our voyage finished in dramatic fashion; the Drake Passage really showing us what it is capable of and giving us a memorable experience of life on the open ocean.

"Virtually every visitor to the ice returns to "civilisation" converted into a passionate, life-long South Polar Ambassador. The enriched lives of these privileged few will never again be the same for they have truly experienced paradise on earth. That such a wondrous, unspoiled place still exists on this beleaguered planet, is one of the real miracles of the 20th century. The indescribable splendour of the magnificent final frontier and its remarkable wildlife must be forever regarded as an irreplaceable international treasure that justly deserves to be protected indefinitely for future generations."

(Frank Todd, 1988)