



## Above the weather

Paul A. Orosco of Okmulgee, Okla., took this photo of rain clouds over Tulsa after his flight took off. Submit your photos at [dallasnews.com/travel](http://dallasnews.com/travel).

### SPECIAL REPORT: CRUISES

# WAY COOL



Photos by BRETT S. DEUTSCH/Special Contributor

Icebergs in a shallow section of the Lemaire Channel in Antarctica form a magnificent natural sculpture garden known as Iceberg Alley.

## Ice is nice, and some fans will follow it to the end of the earth

By BRETT S. DEUTSCH  
Special Contributor

I'm entering Drake Passage, where 30-foot waves are common and 50-foot waves aren't met with astonishment, on a voyage from the tip of South America to Antarctica. And I'm being guided by junkies.

To get their fixes, this collection of naturalists, historians and other "Antarcticologists" have left their loved ones and eschewed lucrative jobs to lead shiploads of tourists through treacherous oceans and over penguin guano.

There is little choice for someone who yearns to spend more than a brief holiday in Antarctica or to see more than an isolated scientific base. Antarctica is the most remote and wild continent. It has no native human inhabitants, no tourist facilities and no industry. Working aboard a tourist ship is the only practical option for someone like Chris Edwards, who fell in love with Antarctica when working there for the British Antarctic Survey in the early 1970s.

Mr. Edwards says he quit a well-paid career as an oil industry geologist in Scotland to work for "not even half-decent" pay as a geology lecturer on the M/S Explorer because traveling to Antarctica "is something that grabs you. It's not a holiday, it's a spiritual adventure."

To experience Antarctica's allure, I traveled to Ushuaia, Argentina, the world's southernmost city and the Western Hemisphere's gateway to Antarctica. There, I joined 103 other travelers and boarded the ice-strengthened, double-hulled Explorer for a 10-day Antarctic voyage.



Gentoo penguin chicks chase an adult, hoping for an afternoon snack.



Tourists pause for a close view of a leopard seal, a fearsome predator that generally eats penguins.

# Scenery and wildlife draw people to Antarctica

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We were heading for the Antarctic Peninsula, the continent's northernmost and warmest area. Averaging between about 25 and 40 degrees Fahrenheit during summer, the peninsula boasts the continent's greatest amount and diversity of wildlife.

But first we had to cross the Drake, which Mr. Edwards calls a filter. Six hundred miles of famously rough water separating Antarctica from South America, it's one reason, Mr. Edwards explained, that Antarctica remains such a pristine place, hosting just 29,576 tourists last summer season.

We left Ushuaia at 6 p.m., entering the Beagle Channel under a deep blue sky. Seabirds, including terns, cormorants and skuas, soared and dive-bombed as we floated past Magellanic penguins foraging in the water. As afternoon turned to evening, we passed an islet where a half-dozen southern sea lions dozed, and passengers spotted a small group of Peale's dolphins from the deck. By 10, a pink sunset softly illuminated the glacier-covered mountains and green hills lining the channel's nearby shores. I had nearly forgotten the looming Drake as I relaxed alone on deck, observing the Southern Cross shining brightly from the Milky Way's expanse.

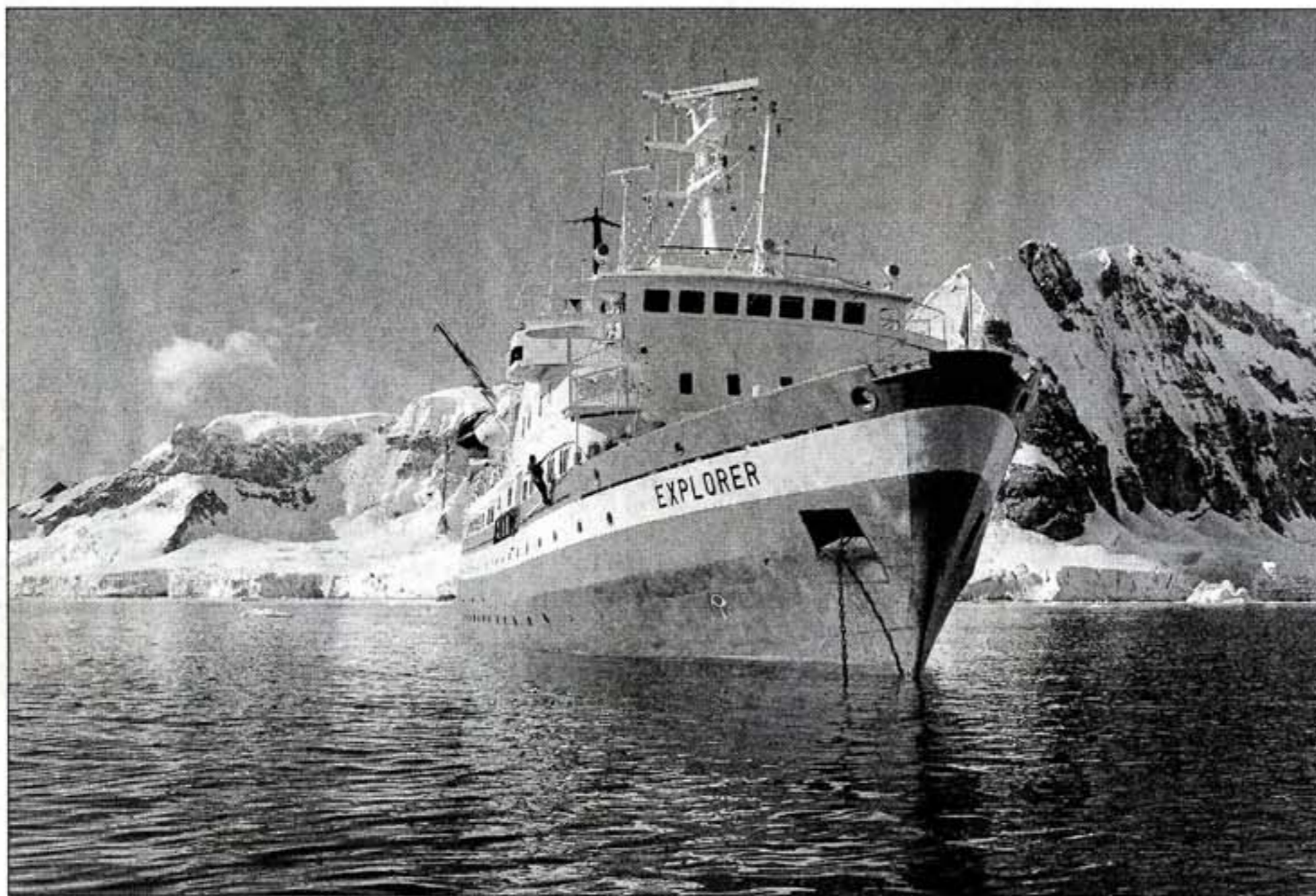
When the rock of the ship awakened me that night, however, I knew our 36 hours in the Drake had begun. With each roll, I slid from the head to the foot of the bed and back. Perhaps it was the effect of the seasickness medicine, but it wasn't bad, pleasantly lulling me back to sleep.

These 7- to 10-foot waves, however, were mere ripples by Drake standards, said assistant expedition leader Chris Dolder. He quietly told me about their previous trip: huge seas and storm-force 10 winds (on a scale of one to 12) pitched and tossed everyone throughout the crossing.

I took advantage of the two-day crossing to observe the staff in its adopted habitat, listen to lectures on topics ranging from marine mammal behavior to Antarctic volcanoes, and learn what makes Antarctica so addictive.

The ship's ornithologist, Chris Cutler, educated passengers about the seabirds, including an albatross that followed us for most of the crossing. With newfound knowledge, I was captivated by the graceful and tireless flier. As Mr. Cutler explained, an albatross can fly a thousand miles on a single foraging trip — using little energy and rarely flapping its wings — by flying in a low sine-wave pattern that takes advantage of wind-speed gradients near the ocean's surface.

I was beginning to grasp what



Photos by BRETT S. DEUTSCH/Special Contributor

The Little Red Ship, as the M/S Explorer is called, was the first passenger ship to travel to Antarctica or to make it through the Northwest Passage.



A gentoo penguin chick poses for a portrait. Curious and playful penguins often approach visitors.

makes these highly educated, well-trained people return season after season. Still, I had to ask what the fascination was.

Mr. Dolder, who had abandoned his London home to work in the Poles for a third consecutive season, explained: "Some people like holidays in resorts. I hate that. I like being in the wilderness. ... Here, I experience the extremes. ... You can barely comprehend the power and beauty" of the wildlife.

Mr. Dolder got his first taste of the ice during a college summer assisting a professor who was studying plants in the Swedish Arctic. It was life-changing: "With 24 hours of sunrise, it's... a jaw-dropping experience. You look at your watch in the middle of the night and say 'Bli-mey!' You have worlds of energy and think you can do anything. You have to force yourself eventually to go to sleep," he said.

Mr. Dolder returned twice to the Arctic, but after graduation he became a globe-trotting business consultant, visiting the ice only

during brief vacations. On one such vacation, Mr. Dolder visited Antarctica for the first time, retracing the route of explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton from the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula to South Georgia Island.

Mr. Dolder said he felt "privileged to be there, humbled, and I suppose you can say absolutely in wonder and awe of Mother Nature." Hooked, he decided to lead such tours, even though the low pay would mean struggling to find short-term consulting contracts during the off-season to support his habit.

"I feel like I'm alive out here," explained Mr. Dolder. "If you ever asked if I'd work on a cruise ship, I'd say 'no way.' But a cruise ship doesn't stop in the middle of nowhere and send out little boats farther into nowhere."

I soon learned what Mr. Dolder meant. On our third afternoon, we reached Elephant Island, where Shackleton and his men were stranded for 135 days in 1916. The

## DigitalEXTRA

Slide show: See more photos from this Antarctica trip. [dallasnews.com/travel](http://dallasnews.com/travel)

temperature was just above freezing, and a light mist fell as we boarded Mr. Dolder's little boats, inflatable Zodiacs powered by 50-horsepower outboard engines, for the first of the twice-daily landings we would be taking in Antarctica.

It was a magnificent taste of what was to come. We cruised among massive, blue icebergs, watching hundreds of chinstrap penguins on the nearby beach, rocks and icebergs. We laughed as schools of penguins porpoised across the inflatable's bow, and we crossed our fingers as they carefully timed their hops into the water to avoid waves that threatened to (and sometimes did) somersault them into rocks.

Then we saw the fur seals. We jockeyed for position to watch them floating on their backs and swimming toward the Zodiac. Soon, they had us surrounded, watching us with their big, brown eyes as curiously as we were watching them.

How could this still be interesting to someone who had seen these animals countless times? I asked that of inflatable driver Barbara Jones, a 16-year Antarctic veteran.

You wouldn't suspect that Ms. Jones is an Antarctic thrill-seeker. She appears more suited to playing the role that keeps her occupied the other 10 months of the year in Scotland, that of a 60-year-old nurse with a husband, two children and two grandchildren. But a four-month nursing stint in the Falklands in 1989 captured her. It was

## WHEN YOU GO

### GETTING THERE

The summer season for travel to the Antarctic Peninsula begins in November and ends in March. Most voyages begin in Ushuaia, Argentina, to which you can fly via Buenos Aires. A recent Web search found round-trip fares for that route from Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport starting at \$1,250.

From Ushuaia, there is only one practical way to get to the Antarctic Peninsula: aboard a ship or yacht across the Drake Passage. Prices per person aboard the M/S Explorer for the 2007-08 season range from \$3,750 for a lower triple cabin during the early season to \$8,450 for a double suite during peak season. Information about trips aboard the M/S Explorer is available at [www.gapadventures.com](http://www.gapadventures.com).

Many other tour operators also cruise to Antarctica. Members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators promise to practice safe and environmentally responsible Antarctic tourism. Find a list of member tour operators, with links to their Web sites, at <http://iaato.org>.

If your travel dates are flexible, you can often get big discounts by booking at the last minute in Ushuaia. Large cruise ships such as those run by Princess Cruises,



Southern elephant seals crowd together for warmth during molting season.

Holland America and Crystal Cruises offer a few South American voyages each year that round Cape Horn and cruise around the Antarctic Peninsula and nearby islands. Because of the size of those ships and their lack of Zodiac-style boats, passengers aboard such large cruise ships cannot disembark in Antarctica.

### WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

There are no tourist facilities in Antarctica. Unless you are a scientist working there, you will be sleeping and eating on board your ship or yacht.

### GUIDEBOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Antarctica* by Jeff Rubin is an excellent, all-purpose guidebook to Antarctic tourism, wildlife, history and environment. The recent *Antarctica Cruising Guide* written by naturalists Peter Carey and Craig Franklin is focused on cruising in and around the Antarctic Peninsula.

"the best thing I had ever done," she said, and she vowed not to go back to a normal job.

Ms. Jones said she never tires of the inspirational scenery. "It makes you feel as insignificant as an ant. I love the scenery for being far grander than you can see anywhere else."

In the end, it was the wildlife and scenery that best explained the continent's allure. A penguin chick tried to clamber up my boots. I cruised in an inflatable among icebergs as huge as New York City buildings, bluer than the sky, and more graceful than any Frank Gehry design. I watched humpback whales so close that I could identify them by the shape and color of their tails. I photographed a leopard seal sliding off a chunk of ice and swimming menacingly toward my Zodiac before disappearing into the black water below us.

The staff also experienced new delights during the 10 days. Mr. Edwards was amazed to see his first emperor penguin in eight

years of leading trips. According to Mr. Edwards, the nearest rookery had only about 30 pairs and was 200 miles south. Mr. Dolder crowded in with passengers to snap pictures of a pod of orcas hunting a minke whale.

None of these events, however, matched Ms. Jones' sighting, which was one of the biggest thrills of her Antarctic career.

While driving a Zodiac full of passengers, 10 minke whales surfaced and charged by the inflatable.

Ms. Jones explained that seeing one whale up close is exciting, though not unusual, but this was the first time she had seen such a large pod so close, and it scared and exhilarated her.

"On a rough Drake passage, I sometimes say, 'What the heck am I doing here?'" Ms. Jones said. After a pause, she added, "Then I see the ice, and I forget that."

Brett S. Deutsch is a writer in New York.

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