



PHOTOS BY BRETT S. DEUTSCH | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

In Antarctica's Lemaire Channel, an inflatable Zodiac boat pauses to allow passengers time to appreciate the scenery.

ANTARCTICA | Experiencing the extremes

TO THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

Ice junkies will get there, even if it means taking a job on a cruise vessel.

By BRETT S. DEUTSCH
Special to The Star

I'm entering the 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 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 vessel 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.

Edwards resigned a career as an oil industry geologist, he said, to work for "not even half decent" pay as a geology lecturer on the M/S Explorer.

Traveling to Antarctica "is something that grabs you," he said. "It's not a holiday. It's a spiritual adventure."

Somewhere out there

To experience Antarctica's allure, I traveled to Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world and the Western Hemisphere's gateway to Antarctica. There I joined 103 other tourists

SEE ICE | G6

where i've been

An Independence reader was charmed by the Cotswolds. Share your stories with us, too. | G3

light the candles

America's oldest city, St. Augustine, Fla., marks its 442nd birthday this month. | G4

storm stories

Hurricane Katrina tours are still big business in New Orleans. | G5

Taking Space Camp for a spin

Kids are happy campers at Alabama's museum and education center.

By JOHN HORN
Los Angeles Times

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. | "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five!" the kids yelled.

It wasn't as deafening as Times Square on New Year's Eve, but the 300 or so children attending Space Camp were as enthusiastic as any midnight revelers.

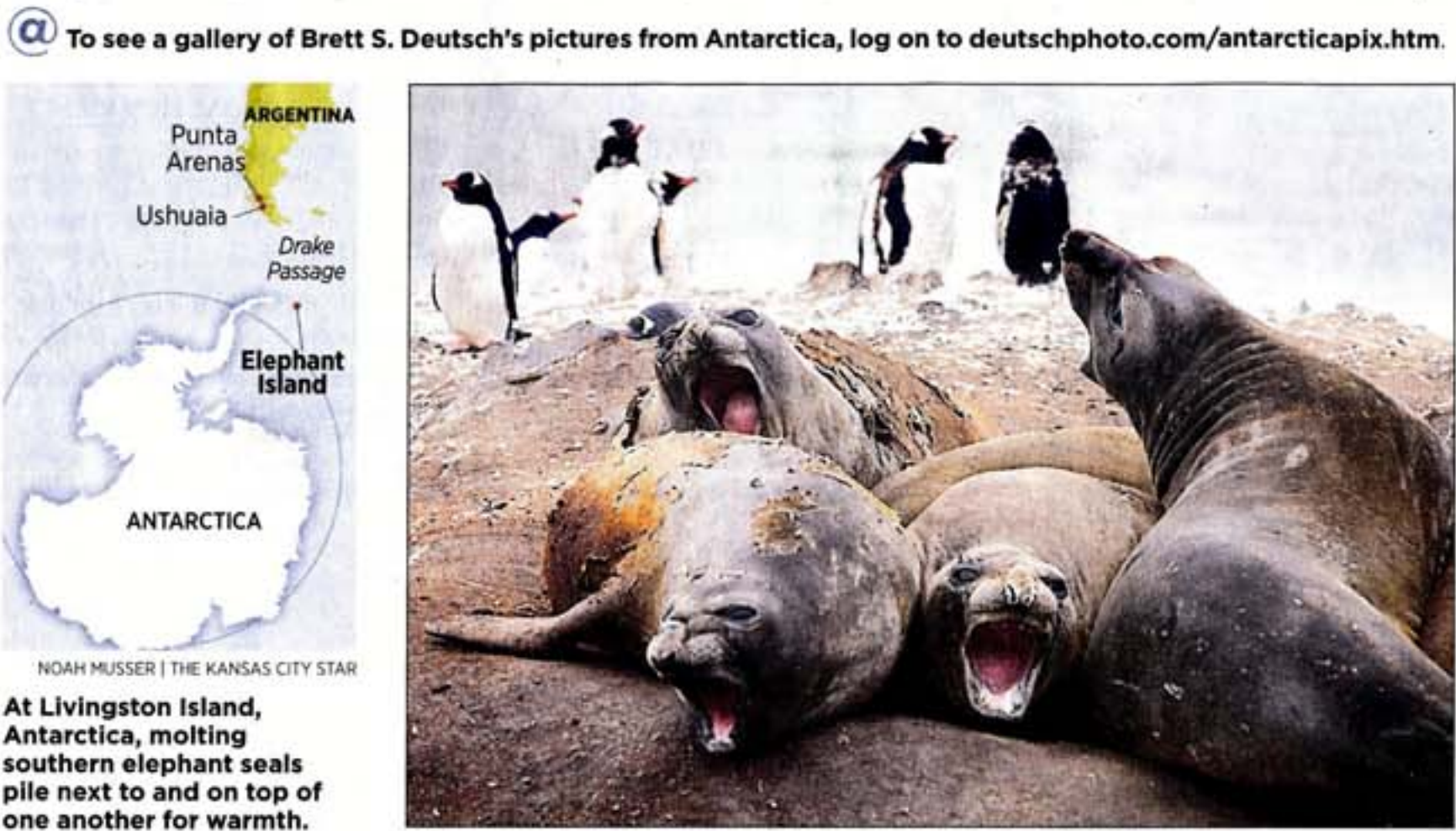
The space shuttle Atlantis was poised to blast off, and, by luck, its Friday launch coincided with our trip to Alabama to learn about astronauts.

The campers — some as young as 7, many in their teens — continued the countdown, a crescendo of "four, three, two, one!"

They applauded as Atlantis cleared the tower and thundered into the Florida sky, watching raptly as the orbiter's crew jettisoned its solid rocket boosters (or SRBs) and activated its main engine cutoff.

During our 2½ days at Space Camp, my son, Charles, and I would learn (and repeatedly fail to remember) all manner of NASA acronyms, clamber into low-gravity rides and simulators, study rocketry history and wobble around in a pretend space walk. Watching the Atlantis launch with

SEE SPACE | G5



At Livingston Island, Antarctica, molting southern elephant seals pile next to and on top of one another for warmth.

To see a gallery of Brett S. Deutsch's pictures from Antarctica, log on to deutschphoto.com/antarcticapix.htm.

NEXT WEEK: WHAT'S A VISIT TO ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK WITHOUT THE ANIMALS?

LAKE OF THE OZARKS



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ICE: Penguins and pods of orcas among sights

FROM G1

and boarded the ice-strengthened, double-hulled Explorer for a 10-day Antarctic voyage.

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

But first we had to cross the Drake, which Edwards fondly calls a "filter." Six hundred miles of famously rough water separating Antarctica from South America, it is one reason, Edwards said, that Antarctica remains such a pristine place. Only 25,191 tourists visited last summer.

We left Ushuaia at 6 p.m., entering the Beagle Channel under a deep blue sky. Seabirds, including terns, cormorants and skuas, soared and dove 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.

These 7- to 10-foot waves, however, were mere ripples by Drake standards, said assistant expedition leader Chris Dolder. He quietly told me about a previous trip in which huge seas and storm-force 10 winds (on a scale of 1 to 12) pitched and tossed everyone throughout the crossing. I detected a slight smile on Dolder's face. Addict.

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

Ornithologist Chris Cutler educated passengers about the seabirds, including an albatross that followed us for most of the crossing. As Cutler explained, an albatross can travel 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 makes these highly educated, well-trained people return season after season. Still I had to ask what the fascination was.

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

Dolder said his first taste of the ice — during a college summer helping a professor study plants in the Swedish Arctic — 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 'Blimey!' You have worlds of energy and think you can do anything. You have to force yourself eventually to go to sleep."

Dolder returned twice to the Arctic, but after graduation he became a globetrotting business consultant, visiting the ice only during brief vacations. On one such vacation, 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.

"I (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



Gentoo penguin adults and chicks relax in the sun at Danco Island, Antarctica.

PHOTOS BY BRETT S. DEUTSCH | SPECIAL TO THE STAR



A fissure in an iceberg floating past the M/S Explorer reveals the ice's brilliant blue core.



Two gentoo penguin chicks chase an adult, hoping for a late afternoon snack.

low pay would mean struggling to find short-term consulting contracts during the off-season.

"I feel like I'm alive out here," he said. "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 further into nowhere."

Going with the floe

I soon learned what Dolder meant. On our third afternoon, we reached Elephant Island, where Shackleton and his men were stranded for 135 days in 1916. The temperature was just above freezing, and a light mist fell as we boarded 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 covering the nearby beach, rocks and icebergs. We laughed as penguins porpoised across the Zodiac'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 them.

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

You would not suspect Jones is an Antarctic thrill seeker. She appears more suited to the role that keeps her occupied the 10 other months of the year, 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 "the best thing I had ever done," she said, and she decided she would never go back to a "normal" job.

Jones said she never tired 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."

But 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 a Zodiac 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. Edwards was amazed to see his first emperor penguin in eight years of leading trips. The nearest rookery, he said, was 200 miles south. Dolder crowded in with passengers to snap pictures of a pod of orcas hunting a minke whale.

None of these events, however, matched Jones' sighting,

which was one of the biggest thrills of her Antarctic career. While driving a Zodiac full of passengers (sadly I was not one of them), 10 minke whales charged by the Zodiac.

Seeing one whale up close is always exciting though not unusual, Jones said, 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?'" she said, and then paused. "Then I see the ice, and I forget that." Brett S. Deutsch is a freelance writer and photographer in New York.

TRAVELER'S CHECK | VOYAGE TO ANTARCTICA

GETTING THERE

The "summer" season for travel to the Antarctic Peninsula begins in November and ends in March. Most voyages begin in Ushuaia, Argentina, generally reached from Buenos Aires. A recent Web search found round-trip fares for that route from Kansas City International Airport starting about \$1,300.

From Ushuaia, the only practical way to the Antarctic Peninsula is 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 in early season to \$8,450 for a double suite at peak season.

Details: gapadventures.com.

OTHER OPERATORS

Many other tour operators cruise to Antarctica. Travelers with flexibility can often obtain large discounts by booking at the last minute in Ushuaia.

Large cruise lines, including Princess Cruises, Holland America and Crystal Cruises, offer a few South American voyages a year that round Cape Horn and cruise around the Antarctic Peninsula and nearby islands.

Because of the size of their ships and their lack of Zodiac-style boats, passengers aboard large cruise ships cannot dis-

embark 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 onboard your ship or yacht.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators promise to practice safe and environmentally responsible Antarctic tourism. A list of member tour operators, with links to their Web sites, is at iaato.org.

GUIDEBOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Antarctica* (third edition, 2005) by Jeff Rubin is an excellent, all-purpose guidebook to Antarctic tourism, wildlife, history and environment.

The recently published *Antarctica Cruising Guide* (Awa Press) by naturalists Peter Carey and Craig Franklin focuses on cruising in and around the Antarctic Peninsula.

Brett S. Deutsch, Special to The Star

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