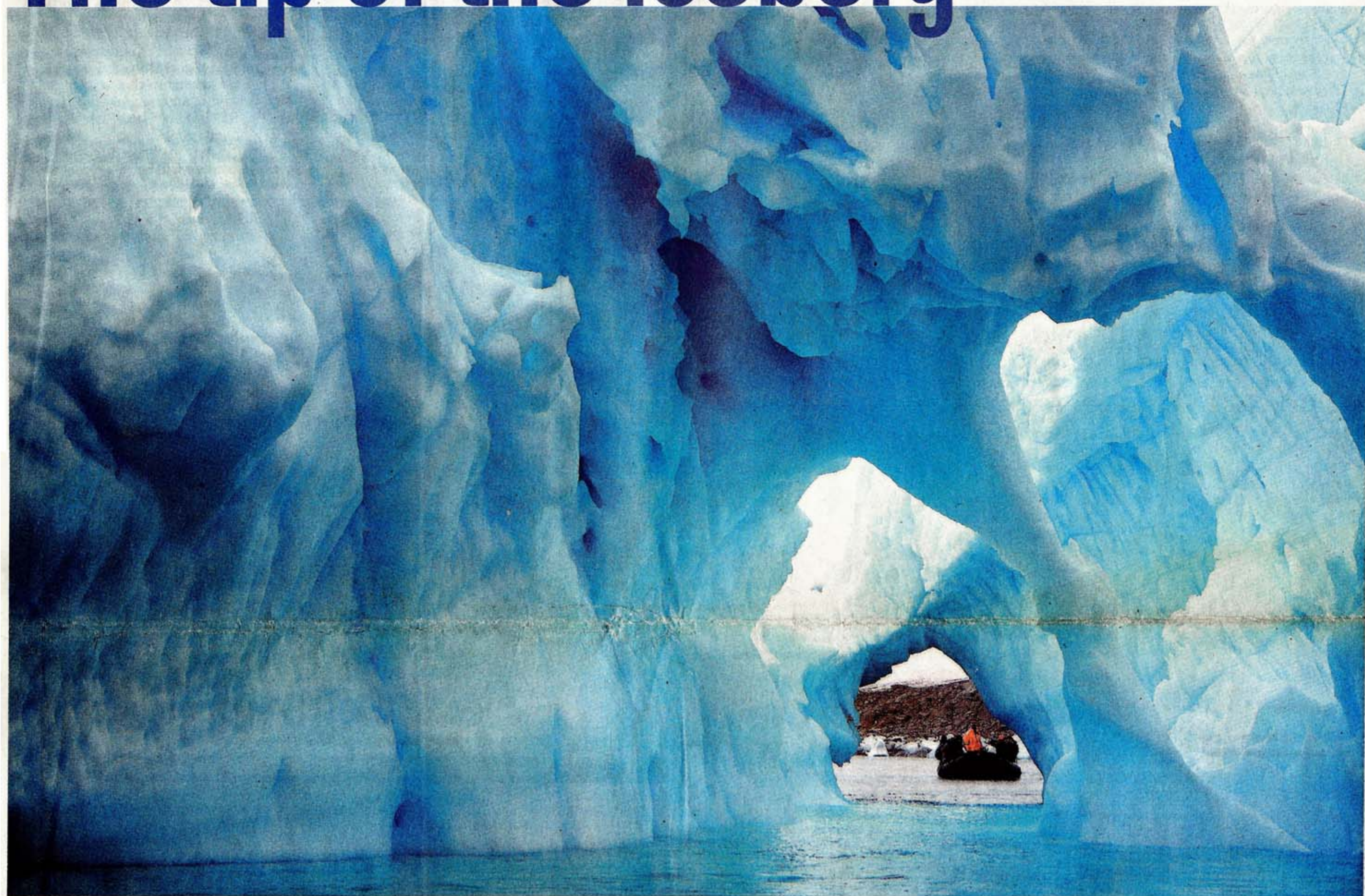


S T Y L E W E E K L Y
TRAVEL

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 23, 2007 • SECTION L

The tip of the iceberg



ROB STIMPSON FOR THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

The number of tourists visiting Antarctica has quadrupled over the last decade — and environmentalists are wondering how many visitors the fragile continent can safely sustain.

The sinking of a Canadian cruise ship raises questions about the future of tourism in Antarctica

BY BRETT DEUTSCH

Just after midnight on Nov. 23 last year, alarms woke the *MS Explorer's* passengers. It was not a drill.

The ship was taking on water after hitting an iceberg near the South Shetland Islands north of the Antarctic Peninsula. All 154 crew members and passengers abandoned ship and spent the night in lifeboats before another cruise ship rescued them.

The *Explorer* wasn't so fortunate. She joined countless ships that have sunk in the Southern Ocean since the 16th century when Sir Francis Drake discovered the eponymous, famously

rough 1,000-kilometre passage separating Antarctica from South America.

Such a fate was nearly unimaginable to me when I sailed aboard the *Explorer* nine months earlier. My biggest fear was of seasickness while crossing the Drake Passage.

After all, the *Explorer* — sailing since 1969 — was the first passenger ship designed for polar expeditions. She had an ice-strengthened hull, a captain with years of ice-navigation experience and a staff of seasoned Antarctic veterans.

The sinking of "one of the best-run vessels with the most experienced crew" raises questions about the safety and environmental impact of Antarctic tourism, says David Bederman, a law professor at Emory University who represents the Antarctic and South-

ern Ocean Coalition.

ANTARCTIC TOURISM HAS QUADRUPLED IN the last decade to about 30,000 annual visitors, most of them to the Antarctic Peninsula — a 1,300-kilometre-long finger stretching toward South America with the continent's mildest climate and greatest concentration and diversity of wildlife.

Despite the risks tourism poses to the Antarctic environment — including pollution and disrupting animal life — many environmental organizations support tourism based from small- to medium-sized ships such as the *Explorer*, which cause the least impact.



REUTERS/CHILEAN NAVY

The *MS Explorer* sinks hours after hitting an iceberg in November. All 154 passengers and crew escaped unharmed. If it had been a bigger ship, spilled fuel could have caused serious environmental harm.

See ANTARCTICA on L2 & 3

ANTARCTICA: Extraordinary destination

CONTINUED from L1

"It would be wonderful if heaps of young people could see Antarctica, how wild and remarkable it is," says University of Auckland professor Maj De Poorter, an Antarctic environmental advocate and adviser to the World Conservation Union. De Poorter says such new "ambassadors" could work to preserve

Antarctica's environment. But she adds that she would hope that such trips would be seen as something outside of conventional tourism.

"It would be sad if (going to Antarctica) was just another tick in the box. If it's not going to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience, it would be better not to go."

For me and the other Antarctic visitors with whom I've spoken, it was just such an extraordinary experience.

Ottawa resident John Cartwright, a birdwatcher who was onboard the *Explorer* with his wife Jean Mair in November, says the trip would have been a once-in-a-lifetime experience even if the ship hadn't sunk.

"If you like spectacular scenery, it's something you'll never see anywhere else — including the Arctic," says Cartwright, 70, who recounts seeing a stunning flat-topped iceberg that he estimated to be 60 or 70 kilometres long.

Others echo Cartwright's comments.

"I (feel) privileged to be there, humbled, and I suppose you can say absolutely in wonder and awe of Mother Nature," says Chris Dolder, who was the assistant expedition leader on my trip. "I feel like I'm alive out here. 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."

Inflatable Zodiacs with outboard engines ferried us to twice-daily landings in Antarctica.

Our first such outing was to Elephant Island, where Ernest Shackleton and his men were stranded for 135 days in 1916. We cruised among massive icebergs which were covered with Chinstrap penguins.

Continues on facing page

if you go...

When: The "summer" season for travel to the Antarctic Peninsula begins in November and ends in March.

How to get there: Most voyages to the peninsula begin in Ushuaia, Argentina. Tourists typically fly to Ushuaia via Buenos Aires, Argentina or Santiago, Chile. A recent web search found round-trip fares from Ottawa to Ushuaia starting at about \$1,900. From Ushuaia, there is only one practical way to get to the Antarctic Peninsula: aboard a ship or yacht across the Drake Passage. Expect to pay at least \$5,000 per person for a shared berth on a small- to medium-sized ship, or at least \$2,000 per person on a large cruise ship. Travellers with flexibility can often obtain large discounts by booking at the last minute in Ushuaia.

Tours: Members of the International Association of Antarctic Tourist Operators promise to practise safe and environmentally responsible Antarctic tourism. A list of member tour operators, with links to their websites, is available at www.iaato.org

On sale: World Expeditions, an Australian small-group adventure company with its Canadian head office in Ottawa, is putting its March trip to Antarctica on sale. You can save as much as \$1,118 per person on the 50-passenger trip that sails from Ushuaia March 22 to April 1. Sale prices aboard the Professor Mulanovskiy (a ship owned by an operator that's a member of the Association of Antarctic Tourist Operators) range from \$4,922 U.S. per person (private twin cabin) to \$6,333 (for a suite). Those prices include accommodations, meals, expeditions and talks by Antarctic experts, but not airfare to Ushuaia. See www.worldexpeditions.com or call 613-241-2700.

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.

Guidebooks:

- Lonely Planet's *Antarctica* (3rd ed., 2005) by Jeff Rubin is an excellent, all-purpose guidebook to Antarctic tourism, wildlife, history and environment.
- The *Antarctica Cruising Guide* (1st ed. 2007), written by naturalists Peter Carey and Craig Franklin, is focused specifically on cruising in and around the Antarctic Peninsula.



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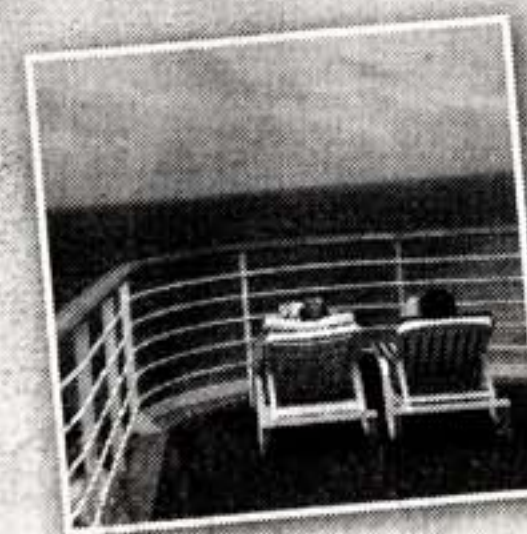
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DESTINATION DAYS FROM*

requires an extraordinary kind of tourism

Continued from page L2

We laughed as schools of penguins dived across the Zodiac's bow, crossing 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 watched them.

Antarctica's allure grew with each landing. I spied penguin chicks making their first tentative and clumsy swimming attempts. I cruised among enormous, sky-blue icebergs that looked more like Frank Gehry designs than chunks of ice. I watched humpback whales that were so close, I could identify each by its tail's shape and colour. I photographed a leopard seal swimming menacingly towards my Zodiac before disappearing into the black water below.

ENVIRONMENTALISTS, HOWEVER, ARE concerned about an absence of regulation over tourism in Antarctica.

With no government of its own, Antarctica is governed by the Antarctic Treaty, signed by 46 nations including Canada and the United States. The Treaty's Protocol on Environmental Protection designates Antarctica as a natural reserve, but does not directly regulate Antarctic tourism.

Antarctica's main defence against too much tourism is nature itself. It's far from most populated areas. And then there is the Drake — a piece of ocean where 10-metre waves are common and 15-metre waves aren't met with astonishment.

Chris Edwards, the *Explorer's* geologist when I was on board, fondly calls the passage a "filter" and credits it with keeping Antarctica so pristine.

But large, fast cruise ships fitted with stabilizers make voyages through the passage relatively comfortable — and airplanes can skip it entirely. So the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition — whose mission is to ensure the survival of the Antarctica wilderness — advocates regulating the large cruise ships that began sailing to Antarctica in the past decade and prohibiting activities such as the construction of hotels and paved airstrips.

Bederman, of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, says he thinks that questions about regulating Antarctic tourism will be on the agenda at the next Antarctic Treaty meeting, to be held in June in Kiev.

For now, the tourism industry will continue to regulate itself through an international association of Antarctic tourist operators, whose members include most Antarctic tour operators including the *Explorer's* owners, Toronto-based G.A.P. Adventures.

The Antarctic tourist operators association has developed wide-ranging regulations to ensure the long-term sustainability of Antarctic tourism, says its executive director, Denise Landau. They include establishing emergency plans, restricting ships from sending more than 100 people ashore at one time, keeping ships and passengers safe distances from wildlife and helping minimize the introduction of non-native organisms into Antarctica.

While the tourist operators' self-regulatory scheme is aided by the fact that Antarctica tends to attract environmentally sensitive companies with like-minded staffs and customers, I'm sure that my fellow pas-



BRETT DEUTSCH FOR THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Cruise ships big and small line up at the port of Ushuaia, Argentina, a city of 65,000 that advertises itself as the southernmost city in the world. At the tip of Tierra Del Fuego, Ushuaia is one of two primary gateways to Antarctica. The other is Invercargill, New Zealand's southernmost city.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WORLD EXPEDITIONS

People who visit Antarctica almost all come back in awe: it's not uncommon to cruise up close to penguins performing antics, massive icebergs, floating fur seals and humpback whales.

sengers and I sometimes accidentally strayed too close to the animals. And sometimes they strayed too close to us; penguin chicks waddled up to check out my boots and one curious Crabeater seal nearly boarded my Zodiac.

And because membership in the association is voluntary, the group has no power to prevent non-members

from operating in Antarctica. Landau says that five per cent of companies taking tourists to Antarctica currently are not members.

DE POORTER, THE ADVISER TO THE World Conservation Union, says the Antarctic tourist operators association "has the right idea, but it is not necessarily cautious enough."

She and Bederman say they worry that tour operators could be making short-sighted decisions by allowing ships with large numbers of passengers, permitting frequent landings in environmentally fragile locales and allowing tours that operate outside Antarctica's brief summer, when ships can get close to shore with less risk of striking floating ice or icebergs.

The continent now attracts about 30,000 tourists a year — which may not seem like a huge number, but, according to the Antarctic tourist operators association, about 85 per cent of those tourists land in just 20 of the most popular spots, all of them on the peninsula.

Although one long-term study found "tourist activities appeared to have no significant impacts on Adélie penguin populations," and although there are good environmental reasons to land many tourists at a few sites (rather than few tourists at many sites), De Poorter says there is little scientific consensus on tourism's cumulative impact.

HUGE CRUISE SHIPS, FROM LINES SUCH as Holland America and Princess Cruises, carrying thousands of people into Antarctica on each trip, bring additional risks says James Barnes, executive director of the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition.

Barnes says the *Explorer* sinking

probably won't result in serious environmental harm because only light fuel oil spilled. But he says that if a large cruise ship sank, there could be "serious harm to the environment from its heavy fuel oil."

Under current Antarctic tourist operators association regulations, these large ships stay in open water and don't permit landings. But Bederman worries that pressure will grow to bring the ships closer to land and to permit landings.

Julie Benson, a spokeswoman for Princess cruise ships, says her company follows all Antarctic tourist operators association regulations and has no plans to make landings in Antarctica. Holland America refused comment for this article.

Barnes says he also worries about the safety of the large cruise ships, which don't have ice-strengthened or double hulls.

Benson counters that with four years of "successful visits" to Antarctica and many years of cruising in similar locales such as Alaska's Glacier Bay National Park, Princess has proven it can sail safely and responsibly in Antarctica.

According to Benson, Princess's goal is to "avoid ice, not cruise into it," so it sails only at the peak of the summer season when ice floes are at a minimum. In addition to the ship's captain, Princess's Antarctic cruises carry an "ice pilot" experienced in Antarctic ice navigation, an extra mariner and an observer from the Antarctic tourist operators association, says Benson.

IN SPITE OF THE *EXPLORER* SINKING and environmental concerns, Antarctic tourist operators are reporting few, if any, cancellations, says Landau.

Cartwright and Mair, the Ottawa residents who were on the *Explorer*, say they would sail to Antarctica again if the chance came up, although the cost of a return trip might be prohibitive.

Similarly, 16-year Antarctic veteran Barbara Jones, who worked aboard the *Explorer*, says she has not been scared off.

The 60-year-old grandmother and Zodiac driver, who wasn't on the *Explorer* when it sank, says she'd love to work in Antarctica again.

"If there had been many lives lost, I would have decided that someone was trying to tell me something and (I would have) finished my career in Antarctica for the sake of my family. But (even) while the rescue was going on, I did wish I was involved. I felt confident I would cope."

Brett Deutsch is a New York-based writer and photographer. You can see more photos from his trip last year to Antarctica at www.deutschphoto.com

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