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ANTARCTICA

Voyage to the bottom of the world

Take a shortcut over the Drake Passage to maximize your time at this bucket-list destination

By **MARK SISSONS**
Special Contributor

The land looks like a fairytale," wrote Roald Amundsen about Antarctica. "Great God, this is an awful place!" countered Robert Falcon Scott, Amundsen's doomed rival in their race to the South Pole.

Both explorers got it right. The world's coldest, highest, windiest and driest continent is both starkly beautiful and beautifully stark, truly a land of extremes. One that continually reminds you of your existential insignificance in the face of such an immensity of ice and snow and rock.

As adventure writer Jon Krakauer wrote, "Antarctica has this mythic weight. It resides in the collective unconscious of so many people, and it makes this huge impact, just like outer space. It's like going to the moon."

All of which makes exploring the fringes of the frozen continent a dream journey for adventurous travelers. But one that for most involves a stomach-churning crossing — the notoriously tempestuous Drake Passage between the southern tip of South America and the Antarctic Peninsula. The Drake Shake, as this dreaded body of water is nicknamed, has turned many an otherwise intrepid adventurer into a retching wreck.

Luckily there's an easier option that slices several days and untold high-seas misery out of an Antarctic voyage. You can soar over Cape Horn and the Drake on a two-hour flight from the southern Chile port city of Punta Arenas to King George Island off the Western Antarctic Peninsula. Offered by Antarctica XXI, the first adventure tour operator to

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Of all the sea birds that live in Antarctica, the largest in number and best known are the seven species of penguins that call the frozen continent home.

Mark Sissons/Special Contributor



Company Brewing, which opened last year in the Riverwest neighborhood of Milwaukee, has a bar salvaged from the Schlitz tasting room.

Sheryl Jean/Special Contributor

New craft breweries in old beer city

By **SHERYL JEAN**
Special Contributor

MILWAUKEE — Beer made Milwaukee famous. The names Blatz, Miller, Pabst and Schlitz once dotted the city, but only Miller remains (as Miller Coors since a 2008 merger).

Now the city once called "the beer capital of the world" is showing it still has suds as a craft beer movement steams across the country.

Milwaukee's beer-preneurs proudly draw on a hops heritage dating to 1840, when the city's brewery tradition began thanks to immigrants from places such as Germany, Poland and Wales.

"I hear about new breweries opening up left and right," said Michelle Rubio of Stevens Point, Wis., who stopped by Lakefront Brewery for a pint last month while in Milwaukee with friend Jacques Revord. "Beer has been so ingrained in Wisconsin, especially

in Milwaukee."

Here's a sample of six craft breweries in the area:

Company Brewing

This 1-year-old neighborhood watering hole does a good job of combining craft beer with an eclectic bistro menu, with items such as grilled octopus and homemade steak. Owner and home

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Antarctica shortcut gives bucket list a bump



A sea kayak adventure in the icy waters of the Antarctic Peninsula offers an exhilarating opportunity to explore.

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sell an air cruise to the bottom of the world, it's perfect for time-challenged travelers and the seasick-susceptible who still want to check Antarctica off their bucket lists.

Terra Australis Incognita

As I exit the Antarctic Airways jet on barren King George Island, a rush of frigid polar air fills my lungs. No customs formalities or immigration lines await on this windswept outpost shared by Chile's Frei and Russia's Belingshausen scientific stations. There's just a cluster of drab buildings and a transplanted Russian Orthodox church perched on a distant hill.

Several Zodiac boats are ready to ferry us to the 68-passenger expedition vessel M/V Ocean Nova anchored in the harbor. Built in Denmark in 1992 to navigate the ice-choked waters of Greenland, its reinforced hull is ideally suited for expedition travel in Antarctica.

The Ocean Nova makes a five-day voyage between the South Shetlands and the Antarctic Peninsula's finger of land, the continent's most accessible, scenic and wildlife-rich region. It's the migratory home to tens of thousands of seabirds, penguins, seals and whales. Its knife-edged fjords are lined by snowy mountains rising straight out of the inky ocean filled with treacherous pack ice and tabular icebergs as big as aircraft carriers.

Standing on deck beneath a midnight summer sun, I gaze toward Terra Australis Incognita, the unknown land of the South. Covered by a mile-thick ice cap roughly the size of the United States containing 90 percent of the world's fresh water, the world's largest desert was the only continent fully imagined millennia before it was discovered.

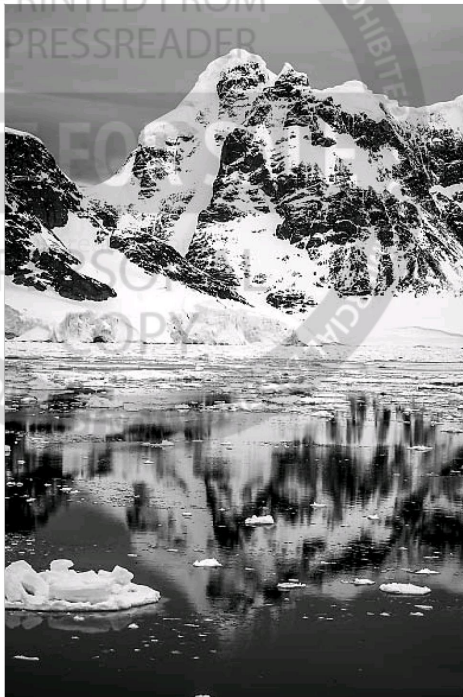
The ancient Greeks' fascination with symmetry convinced them that a continent must exist at the bottom of the world massive enough to counterbalance the Northern Hemisphere's land. They called the top of the world *Arktikos*, which means "near the bear," after the constellation Ursa Major. Its polar opposite they named *Antarktikos*.

Polar paddle

The highlight of my Antarctic voyage — other than a jolting polar swim one morning in 70-knot winds that gives me a new appreciation of the word frigid — is the opportunity to embark on sea kayak twice a day to explore the coastline and calmer waters found in bays and inlets.

"People talk about the serenity and being able to experience Antarctica at your own pace," says the Ocean Nova's kayaking guide, New Zealander Ben Jackson. "Kayaks offer you that next level of exploration. You feel more connected with the environment around you and have a zero impact presence on that environment."

Only a handful of Ocean Nova's passengers sign up for kayaking and we quickly bond as a team in our yellow survival



Photos by Mark Sissons/Special Contributor

Most visitors travel to the western coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, sailing along spectacular fjord and among towering icebergs.



One of the best ways to explore the Antarctic coastline is by sea kayak. An increasingly popular optional activity on many adventure programs.



Remnants of a long-abandoned whaling station litter the shores of Mikkelsen Harbor. One of several shore excursions on the Antarctic XXI cruise through the Antarctic Peninsula.

suits. With daytime summer temperatures hovering around freezing, the suits are essential, as are basic paddling skills.

"You don't need a world of experience to kayak in Antarctica, just the right attitude, enthusiasm and a sense of adventure," assures Jackson. Age isn't a barrier either. One of our group, 78-year-old Joan Luxe, is a retired educator from Tempe, Ariz., who only learned to kayak at age 70.

"Initially there was an element of fear," she admits, "and I said to myself, 'I hope I can do this.' But life is that way: You have to take risks."

As the Ocean Nova sails into Mikkelsen Harbor at the northern end of the Palmer Archipelago, we gear up for our first polar paddle. Once used by whalers for mooring factory ships, Mikkelsen is home to a large, Gentoos penguin colony, an unoccupied hut

and a scattering of whaling remains. Boarding a Zodiac, we tow our kayaks past a pod of orcas on patrol before launching them in calm but still hypothermic waters.

After a few hesitant strokes, we fall into a comfortable rhythm and are soon gliding along the shoreline, inspecting skua nests tucked into the black cliffs above. Just after Jackson warns us to avoid paddling too close to smaller



The M/V Ocean Nova, which was built to navigate the ice-choked waters of Greenland, is ideally suited for expedition travel in Antarctica.



After a two-hour flight from Punta Arenas, passengers arrive at King George Island in the South Shetlands, which is shared by Chile's Frei and Russia's Belingshausen scientific stations.

If you go

Antarctica XXI's eight-day seven-night Classic Antarctica Air Cruise departs from Punta Arenas in southern Chile from the beginning of December till mid-February. The program includes flying to and from Antarctica by air, and cruising by ship along the Antarctic Peninsula. Per-person rates start at \$10,795 for a triple and \$18,995 for a twin shared cabin (antarctica.com). This writer booked through Montana-based Adventure Life (t-800-344-6118, adventure-life.com).

icebergs in our path, a kayak-swamping chunk from one plunges into the water nearby, dramatically punctuating his point.

Soon a pair of Weddell seals appears alongside our kayaks, popping their whiskery noses and puppyish eyes out of the water to study us. "Seal seals haven't been hunted off Antarctica for generations, they aren't afraid of humans. But keeping a respectful distance is still the rule, especially with the giant elephant seals we encounter onshore one morning at Yankee Harbor. These great barking beasts may look docile flapped out in the snow like giant sausages, but venture too close and they could rise up and bear down on you surprisingly rapidly given their ungainly shape.

Reaching Mikkelsen Harbor's landing zone, we disembark to join our fellow passengers on terra firma, where a tuxedoed welcoming committee awaits; dozens of Gentoos penguins busy going about their business of collecting stones for their nests.

Here, and on later close encounters with the Antarctic's signature ambassadors, I marvel at the penguins' utter disinterest in us as they waddle back and forth, always in a hurry and incessantly squawking. Seldom was a movie title more accurate than *March of the Penguins*.

Educational adventure

Back aboard the Ocean

Nova, the expedition staff delivers fascinating scientific lectures and tales of early explorers who first charted these waters, enduring unimaginable hardships. We also learn about Antarctica's uncertain future, including the impact of climate change in this remotest part of the planet, which is warming at a more rapid rate than anywhere else on Earth. This truly is an educational adventure at the end of the world.

"What's so impressive is that life is so adaptable everywhere, even in this harsh environment," reflects passenger Mark Houston after one wildlife presentation. The retired petroleum industry professional from Austin says that what gives him hope for mankind are accomplishments like the Antarctic Treaty signed in 1959, which has held up largely because of the dedication of scientists and others to preserve this environment.

"The only other example of such cooperation I can think of is the International Space Station," he says.

Late that evening, while I watch the nearly impurity-free Antarctic light reveal astonishingly vivid shades of white and blue within passing cathedrals of ice, another space reference comes to mind. Apollo astronaut Buzz Aldrin's famous description of the lunar surface as magnificent desolation also applies to Antarctica, our last great wilderness, and the coolest continent on Earth.

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