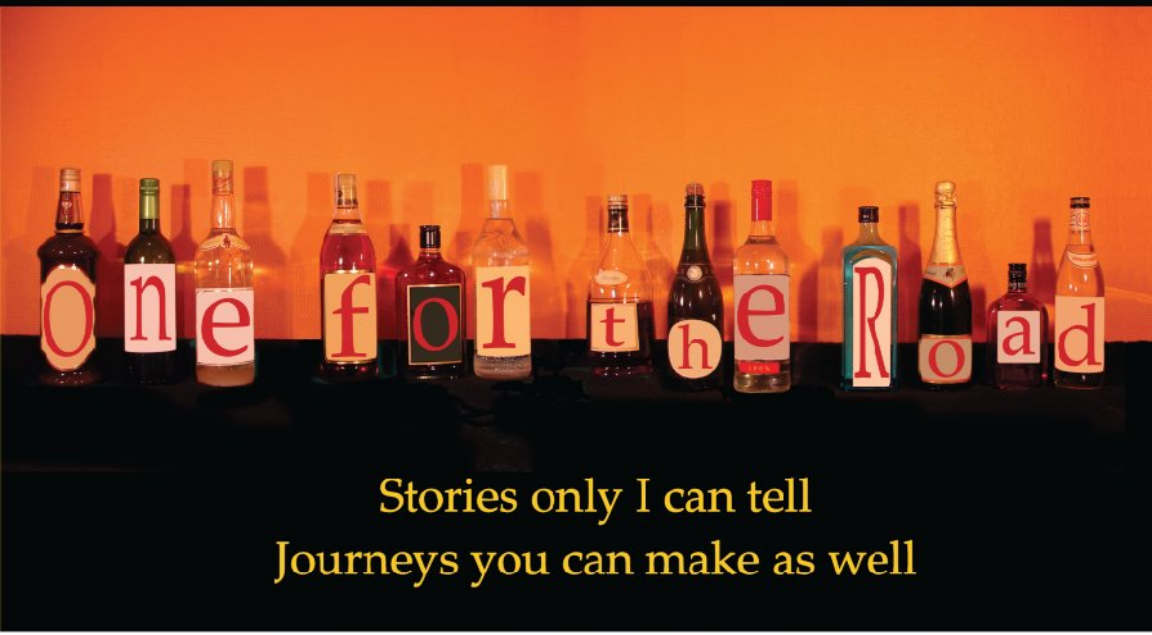
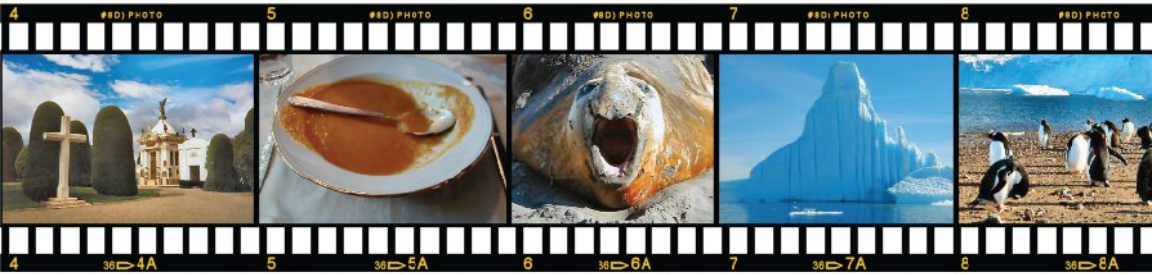
B.C. TØRRISSEN

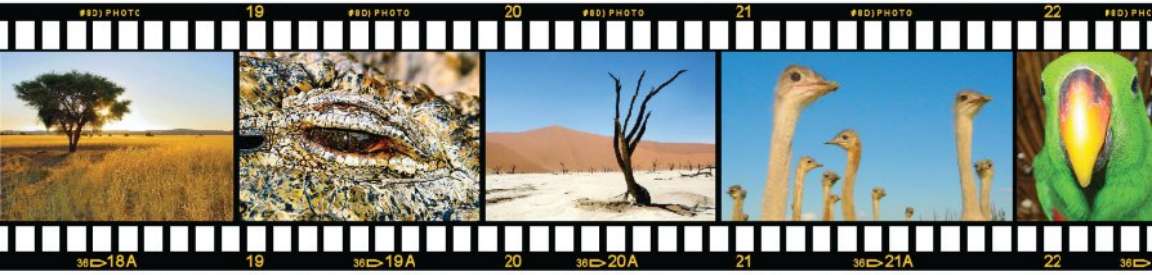


Stories only I can tell
Journeys you can make as well

FIRELAND, PATAGONIA, ANTARCTICA



SOUTH AFRICA, SWAZILAND, VIC FALLS, BOTSWANA, NAMIBIA



RUSSIAN FAR EAST, SIBERIA, URAL, VOLGA, MOSCOW

One for the Road

Stories only I can tell.
Journeys you can make as well.

Bjørn Christian Tørrissen

Translated from Norwegian by a Babel fish

USPN

Ursine Self-Publishing Nomads

Excerpt from the book One for the Road
Please consider getting the full version of the book from bjornfree.com

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The Utterly Deep South

– Wow! You've been to the South Pole?

I'm often asked this question when someone looks at a map of the world on which I have drawn the different routes I have travelled. But no, unfortunately I haven't been to the South Pole. To go there I would first have to give a travel agency all my money and then some, or I could have spent years on becoming an expert on polar mites or something like that, so that the US Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station would accept me as a visiting scientist. I'm not *that* patient.

What I *have* done, which surprisingly many are unable to distinguish from a polar expedition, is to visit the Antarctic Peninsula more or less on an impulse. Yes, you can do that. As an extension to the Andes mountain range, a thin finger of land stretches out from the massive, cold continent north towards South America. The two masses of land are only a centimetre or so apart. On a typical table globe, that is. In reality, that centimetre turns out to consist of an insane number of millimetres.

The prelude to my Antarctic experience was a typical backpacker tour of southern South America. After a long night on a bus through Patagonia I was dropped off in Punta Arenas, the southernmost town in mainland Chile. It's a beautiful, small port by the Strait of Magellan. The view is magnificent, not because of the sea, but because of what can be seen across the water; an island with one of the most alluring names in the world. Tierra del Fuego. Fireland.

While I waited for the town to wake up and offer me a place to stay, I sat down in a café and had breakfast. I was surrounded by a group of strange, bearded men wearing wellies and woollen sweaters, having heated arguments that I understood nothing of, even though it was the first decent English I had heard in South America. It was as if I had fallen through a hole in time and space and returned to my student life at university. Fortunately that was not the case, but the men *were* scientists, and they were excited. Later that day they were leaving on a ship bound for Antarctica, where they hoped to find out once and for all whether global warming was happening or not. I became just as excited, not for scientific reasons, but because this was the first time I had ever heard of a boat to Antarctica. And it was soon leaving from where I was! Since I had no other plans, I decided to go to Antarctica as well.

My newborn dream quickly experienced a serious setback. The mischievous expedition leader was happy to tell me that their ship had no empty berths. Besides, there wasn't enough time for me to grow the required tangly beard and fill it with old bread crumbs before the ship was leaving. I suffered my defeat with dignity, because I knew that when I make up my mind about something, I *will* find a way to get it done, sooner or later. This was that kind of something. But first I had to find a place to stay in Punta Arenas.

Accidentally I found a house with a familiar sign indicating the presence of Hostelling International lodging. I entered and requested a bed. A grandmother named Sonia demanded fifteen thousand pesos for the privilege, and gave me a key and a great number of do's and don't's to live by, presented in a rapidly flowing river of Spanish. “No penguins in the room after 10pm” was the only one I thought I caught.

The Chilean peso was new to me. I came straight from Argentina, where the largest note I had seen was a fifty. My breakfast had cost me thousands, and an ATM by the bus terminal had supplied me with a seemingly vast sum of money, so I figured that fifteen thousand probably was a fair price for a dorm bed.

Our path through Patagonia, Fireland and the Antarctic Peninsula

Strangely, the door that had a lock matching my key led into a room with only one bed in it. I had to reassess the hostel situation. Instead of a room full of snoring Germans and a floor covered by piles of clothes and leftovers, I had been given a sterile hotel room. This wasn't what I had expected. I went downstairs to the common area and my growing suspicion reached supersize. This was no hostel, this was a full service bed&breakfast in disguise!

The living room walls were lined with shelves, full of knick-knacks, bric-bracs, fancy ware and trinkets. South American painted masterpieces like "Llamas in the sunset" and "The Inca woman with the big boobies" on the walls watched me warily enter the room. The air carried evergreens performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Sonia stood in the doorway and smiled. I could sense that she was about to offer me tea and biscuits. It was like a scene from a really scary short story by Roald Dahl. I knew I had to leave at once, or at least as soon as I had taken a long, hot shower, with the door securely locked.

From the quiet B&B I went straight to the other end of the scale. In a worn-down shack I found a real hostel. For a fifth of the room price at Sonia's, an old, toothless man gave me half a promise that even though the place seemed chock-a-block right then, there would be a bed for me to sleep in by the evening. Now, don't get me wrong. I don't mind a bit of comfort. But right then I wanted to stay in a place where I was likely to meet other travellers, so I bought his promise. Leaving my backpack in the least crowded corner of a room, I went out to start my search for a way to get to Antarctica at a price I could pay.

The choice of tickets to Antarctica was unfortunately rather limited for those without wealthy sponsors or in possession of a doctorate and a long, unkempt beard. One option could have been to hitch a ride with the Chilean navy. Each year a few boats travel to the white continent to resupply the country's settlements there. These outposts are inhabited mainly by Chileans who sit around and look grumpy because they have been put there. Chile has a long-term plan, where the idea is that having people in Antarctica for long enough will eventually entitle them to claim the territory as part of Chile. Now, since Argentina is doing exactly the same thing literally next door, I'm not confident that the plan will work. In the meantime, their supply ships sometimes accept paying passengers on their two month tour of all the settlements. Provided you speak Spanish fluently, and that you show up at the right time, that is. When I showed up, the last boat that year had left several weeks ago.

The good news was that DAP, a Chilean airline, offered to fly me to Antarctica. The bad news was that they wanted 2,500 US dollars for the job, or 3,800 US dollars if I wanted to stay the night there with the

penguins and a few grumpy Chileans. Call me frugal, but the offer made me less optimistic about ever getting to Antarctica. If I were to get there, I clearly would have to do it from somewhere else. Ushuaia in Argentina was my best bet, and I decided to go there the next day.

To dampen the pain from the temporary setback, I set out to take a closer look at the town and maybe get something else to think about.

What first struck me about Punta Arenas was the large number of green spaces and small parks. Maybe it was particularly noticeable because I had arrived there by bus, passing through hundreds of kilometres of barren, Patagonian plains. There had been no trees along the road. They had all been cut down a long time ago and transformed into derelict fences, meant to keep cows and sheep from straying onto the road. In most cases it seemed the fences instead kept the domestic animals that had strayed onto the road from getting *off* it again, but I'm sure it was well-intended.

Anyway, in Punta Arenas the municipal gardeners prided themselves on making the trees look anything but natural. Especially in the town cemetery, where the trees formed long rows of enormous, rounded, chlorophyll-based obelisks. They had grown surprisingly tall in the harsh climate, probably thanks to the continuous supply of fresh nourishment that the purpose of a cemetery entails. The graves there were literally overshadowed by the trees, even though the largest mausoleums were anything but modest.

No one can walk those cemetery avenues and not find anything of interest. Like in any other place that is or has been important to the naval world trade, a number of Norwegian sailors had found their overgrown graves a long way from home there. Yet the most fascinating stories buried at the cemetery belonged to other graves.

The far end of the cemetery was dominated by the first human rulers of the region, the Yahgan people. It's just about the only place you can see them these days. No one knows exactly when they arrived, but they were definitely there in 1520, when the Portuguese Magellan arrived and discovered the southern tip of South America on his quest to complete the first circumnavigation of the globe.

Magellan may have given Fireland its name, but it was the Yahgan who were responsible for the fire. More than anything it was their clothes and their flames that distinguished the Yahgan. Their clothes were special in that they had none. Instead they wore seal blubber to stay warm. I strongly suspect that was a bad move, inspiring just a bare minimum of mating, which must have kept the population dangerously low. Their use of fire was also both a blessing and a danger. They carried open fire wherever they went. Apparently wearing blubber was only efficient to a certain degree. Even in their canoes they kept small fires burning, and when I say canoe, I really mean hollowed-out and eventually burnt-out tree trunks. The winds can be fierce there and you can ski in Fireland for several months of the year. Under those conditions, nudity and a dependence on portable fire doesn't exactly imply that the Yahgan were technologically advanced, about to leap forward and conquer the world. Nevertheless, they fared much better in the area than the first Europeans who arrived to Christianize the South American pagans.

The first wave of Europeans perished while attempting to establish a colony in the tough climate. But three hundred years after Magellan, when large groups of heavily armed shepherds, whalers with pneumonia and tuberculous gold diggers arrived, the natives were forced to succumb to the Europeans. One factor accelerating the process was that the Yahgan so loved the taste of the bleating, white, woollen and stupid llamas the newcomers brought, that the rightful owners of the sheep introduced hunting of natives as a recreational activity. However, the deathblow to the Yahgan didn't come until the Europeans started hunting seals. Valuable oil extracted from the blubber was sent away to illuminate city streets in Europe. Instead of ungodly animal fat, the natives were given heavy, damp clothes to wear. Sickness sent them in droves to the cemeteries soon thereafter, and that's where you'll find them today.

From the graves of the natives, as simple in their design as the lives the Yahgan lived, you can wander along literally heaps of final resting places of poor workers and sailors. They all came to Patagonia hoping to find more wealth than their native countries could offer them. Most of them ended up living the same lives they had lived in Europe, only in a much harsher climate.

Unless you became a Menendez or a Braun, that is. At the other end of the cemetery I found them, the wool aristocrats archived inside tombs the size of houses. These families controlled the vast grazing lands of Patagonia. There they kept sheep, and it was a lucrative business. Numerous military coups and a chaotic economy have by now almost eliminated the presence of the rich families, but their impressive houses, monuments and graves are still there.

A section of the Punta Arenas cemetery

More encouraging than the cemetery was a visit to the penguins in the Otmay Sound. Just a short bus ride from town, a small colony of Magellan penguins had established themselves. Even though they weren't many, they still offered first-class entertainment.

It was mid-January, the time when the penguin chicks start moving around. Hence, a large part of the avian crowd consisted of birds who A) didn't know how to fly (and never will), and B) had not yet learnt how to walk (and never properly will). Walking penguins are always fun to watch, but watching them fall over and over again is even funnier. I easily spent two hours just observing them falling onto their beaks and backs while trying to conquer and descend small mounds. After each fall and subsequent tumble down to the bottom of the hill, the penguin in question quickly stood up and looked around, as if to make sure nobody had seen it fall. But I had.

Back in Punta Arenas it was getting dark, and it was time for me to rest. The old geezer at the hostel had of course forgotten all about me as soon as I had left. Now all the beds were taken. He generously offered me to sleep under half a Ping-Pong table in the lounge. It still cost five US dollars, which turned out to be about one dollar per hour I actually slept there.

Usually I don't mind sleeping on a hard floor. The problem with *this* hard floor was that it was located in the middle of a Jewish kibbutz. Twenty Israelis sat in a circle, most of them armed. Not with guns, but with something far worse: Guitars! With them they performed "Hevenu shalom a lechem", "Alleluja" and other lethal numbers. The congregation only took short breaks from the playing and singing to tell jokes, mostly the one about the annoyed Norwegian in the corner. Then they laughed loudly and lengthily, before they continued the concert. Good fun, for them.

I'm not saying that it necessarily is a bad thing to share a room with Israelis. In a time when their politicians work hard and successfully on making Israel unpopular and despised by most of the world, backpackers from the country have found some sort of a sanctuary in South America. Mainly because there are almost no Muslims around, but also because the low cost of travelling there appeals strongly to them.

Now, Israeli backpackers are not satisfied just because something is *cheap*. When they find something at a reasonably low price, they will go on to torment the seller of the item or service into an even lower price, through protracted and intense bargaining. Young Israelis usually pay for their travelling with money they receive when they complete two or three years of military service. Of course they try to make this money last for as long as possible, before they again have to return to the chaos at home.

After a few haggling sessions with aggressive ex-soldiers, the seller will not want to waste more of his time. He will instead put up a sign with fixed (low) prices for Israelis. So if you come to a hostel in South America and there's a price list written in Hebrew on the wall, and the majority of the guests make strange noises from the back of their throats when they speak, *and* they behave like a bunch of rowdy soldiers, then

you know that you've found the cheapest lodging in town. If you ask, you'll get the Israeli price for your bed. Just be prepared to pay the additional price of being subject to Israelis singing.

I was unable to fully appreciate the fact that I probably spent little money on accommodation. Instead, I pushed my ear plugs so far in that they met in the middle of my head. This allowed me eventually to mentally leave my surroundings behind, a room full of big noses and musical happiness around half a Ping-Pong table.

Five hours later I returned, celebrating the beautiful morning with a loud and elaborate repacking of my backpack and all the crackling plastic bags inside it. I also took the opportunity to render my personal interpretation of "Morning has broken" and a selection of old, Norwegian folk songs. Some of the songs may have come out in slightly altered, anti-Semitic versions, but fortunately I have completely forgotten about that. Anyway, my revenge was sweet, and I was going to Argentina on the morning bus.

Whichever way you approach Fireland, it is with a special feeling of being at the edge of the real world, in a twilight zone where nothing is certain and where anything can happen. Well, anything except the wind dying down and Argentina accepting that the Falkland Islands are British, that is. My first arrival, by bus and ferry from the north, is the one that sticks in my mind.

An hour or so after leaving Punta Arenas the road changed from an almost acceptable highway to being uncomfortably bumpy and winding. The woman in the ticket office had forced me to choose a seat number from her computer screen. Something had gone terribly wrong, and it *may* have been caused by a misunderstanding on my side. I didn't get a panorama view from the seat next to the driver. Instead, I had apparently picked the seat behind the toilet in the back of the bus, where it always smells so badly of disinfectants that soon after sitting down, you'll catch yourself dreaming about the smell of shit instead.

That far back in the bus, especially on a wet day with lots of mud and puddles on the road, it doesn't take long before all the windows are completely covered with dirt, so that all you see is what goes on *inside* the

bus. That's especially unfortunate when nothing at all happens inside the bus, while at the same time an enchanting landscape is rolling by outside. On that particular day, however, it turned out I had gotten an excellent seat after all.

Just as we entered a seriously bad and bendy stretch of the road, a middle-aged man, clearly dressed for doing business, swayed carefully towards the small bathroom. In addition to his business suit, he also wore the forced neutral look on his face that we all try to apply when we need to go to the bathroom in a bus, and we have to walk past a dozen sceptical co-passengers to get there. The man went inside and closed the door. I had just started thinking that maybe the smell of disinfectants actually was the lesser of two evils, when the road suddenly impressed us all with an unusually violent curve. For a second there, we were well on our way to a successful take-off. Only a second before the point of no return, the bus changed its mind and came crashing back down to Earth. That's when it happened.

Inside the toilet, the man did not perceive the decision of the bus to stop the ascent. So he kept flying, straight through the door and another four seat rows towards the front of the bus. There he made a brutal landing, with his pants below his knees and then a bit. It would be an understatement to say that he seemed surprised. His frame of mind was rapidly changing, though. He let loose a tirade of expletives, immediately doubling the size of my Spanish vocabulary. At the same time he fought to get his pants back on, all the while enjoying the undivided attention of his audience, which included all passengers from rows 11 through 16. A steady flow of new, athletic moves by the bus made his efforts rather fruitless, and the onlookers got a good look at his usually most private parts.

Finally he managed to cover up. Then he curled his back so much that he nearly turned into a ball. He rolled to the front, where he worked hard on disappearing into his seat. I have never felt more like applauding anyone. It had been the greatest show on Earth. Fortunately I managed to keep the cheering inside, as did the other people on the bus.

We had another six hours to go, so the full story about the lavatory gymnast in seat 4C spread to the whole bus before the ride was over. The infamous one sat crumpled up in his seat, staring with empty eyes into the floor in front of him. Life is truly full of surprises!

Choosing a highlight of the day would be hard. The flying man was outstanding, but the crossing of the Strait of Magellan, from the mainland to Fireland, was also quite the climax. When the road suddenly ended on a pebbly beach, I was convinced that the bus driver was lost. The only man-made object in sight was a picturesque lighthouse at the far end of the beach. We had reached Punta Delgada, meaning "The point where the strait is at its narrowest". And it was.

Even though I could see land on the other side of the water, it was as big a mystery to me how we would get there as it must have been to the first Europeans who came there in their small sailing boats, aeons ago. These waters had sunk *many* proud ships and ended the lives of more than a few foolhardy captains. Even though it usually is easier and safer to cross from the Atlantic to the Pacific through there than by rounding Cape Horn, it still isn't necessarily a trivial affair.

That day the conditions were typical. A strong current ran in the sea from west to east, accompanied by an equally forceful wind. A sudden gust almost sent me swimming when I left the bus to help the driver hunt down the ferry landing that I assumed had drifted off. I only managed to avoid becoming waterborne by grasping and holding on to a piece of rope fastened to a concrete block. While hanging there, I discovered the vessel that would take us across. It lay about midway between the two sides of the strait, and seemed to enjoy itself so much that it only moved slightly back and forth. After five minutes of intense studies I noticed that it was actually moving towards our beach, slowly, fighting a zigzag battle against the wind and the waves.

Crossing like that makes it hard to predict exactly where you will reach land. Hence they had not bothered with building a normal ferry landing, nor did they use a normal ferry. Instead they used Bahia Azul, more than anything reminding me of the landing crafts the Allies used in the Battle of Normandy in World War II. Barely a hundred metres from the shore,

the ship directed its bow towards land and pushed forward with full power. Soon the ship was stranded on the beach. A metal plate in the front was lowered and used as a landing stage for all the people and cars on the boat.

It was almost as if I could hear soldiers swearing, the thunder of anti-aircraft guns and machine gun bullets whispering around my ears. It was probably just the wind playing tricks on me.

Then it was our turn. We got on as fast as we could, and then we were on our slow, zigzagging way to Fireland. About the crossing there's not much to say, except that we could choose between languishing inside a smoke-filled room with a TV showing only vague, blurry pictures of a football match, or to stay out on the deck and watch penguins and dolphins play in the sea. Surprisingly few chose the latter.

Bahia Azul docking, sort of

The name of the landing point at the other side of the strait was even more fitting than the first one; Puerto Espora, "The Sporadic Harbour". The ferry had no schedule, it just offered continuous rides from one side to the other and back, from dawn till dusk as quickly as the weather and the tide allowed for.

Our crossing took a good forty minutes. Although the landing on the other side appeared slightly more controlled, it was still done by using the technique of running the boat onto the beach. Safely on land again the first thing that met me was something that *could* have been the result of a local farmer's charmingly lacking English skills, but unfortunately it wasn't. Along a massive fence covered with barbed wire, every few metres a sign exclaimed "Mine fields! DANGER". My feeling of being in a 1944 version of Normandy didn't exactly weaken.

The story behind the sinister placard was a narrowly avoided war between Chile and Argentina in 1978. At the time both countries had strong, nationalistic leaders, who constantly quarrelled about a number of unsettled border disputes. One of their disagreements concerned the three tiny islands Picton, Nueva and Lennox in the Beagle Channel, a water passageway in southern Fireland. An old agreement between the countries was not sufficiently precise when defining at what point the channel became open ocean. International naval law had gone from defining the national economic zone from reaching just three miles to a full two hundred nautical miles out from the coast. Now the ownership of important fishing grounds was at stake, and there were plenty of reasons to fight for it.

Various independent third parties had throughout the years tried to mediate in the matter. In 1977 Queen Elizabeth II of England had a go, concluding that the islands were most probably Chilean. Roused by great success in the football World Cup the next year, Argentina decided that there had been enough diplomacy, and began a military build-up in the area. They were clearly planning on invading the uninhabited islands. Chile showed no sign of intending to give the islands away just like that, and declared that an attack would be responded to forcefully.

Luckily, for once God stepped in and stopped the war, just as the battle cry was about to sound. The newly elected Pope John Paul II told the two parties to stop the silliness and instead come visit him in the Vatican so they all could talk it through. The good Catholics of both countries complied. Five years later a peaceful agreement between the countries was ready. In the meantime Argentina had become a democracy (*and* lost the Falklands war), so a referendum about the agreement was held in the

country. Not wanting to offend God's messenger to humanity, a large majority of the voters of course accepted the agreement. The three islands have been Chilean ever since, but with a reduced economic zone. That way the Argentinian fishermen of Fireland could continue doing what they do best, and everyone was happy.

Yet the scars from the military build-up are still there, in Fireland and in more than twenty other disputed areas along the world's longest border between two countries. There are several old mine fields, many of them not at all adequately fenced-off. Most of the landmine-infested areas are fortunately located well away from densely populated regions. Still, to someone who likes hiking in the mountains, it is important to know that there *are* landmines around, and the clearing efforts are performed by cows and sheep, very slowly.

Fireland is a massive island, almost half the size of Iceland. As we have learned, it is split between Chile and Argentina, and this they have managed to do in a most awkward way. If you're going by land from mainland Argentina to the Argentinian part of Fireland, you will have to go through Chile. And yes, there are also parts of Chilean Fireland that you have to go through Argentina to visit. That's what you get when you're too eager to use your brand new ruler to draw borders on a map.

This complexity has led to (mind you, this is my own rough estimate) about forty percent of the population on the island working either as border guards or as waitresses and cooks in the roadside cafeterias at the border posts, where people often have to wait for a long time. At least judging from my crossings of the border, when the border control was performed with more emphasis on thoroughness than on efficiency. It was late in the day before I reached Rio Grande, the largest Argentinian city on the island.

There I discovered that my ticket for Ushuaia, the "capital" of Fireland, wasn't for Ushuaia after all, but for Rio Grande. Which was lucky. Now I didn't have to wait three hours for the corresponding bus to Ushuaia after all. Instead I could pay a minibus driver ten dollars to take me to the end of the world, which Ushuaia for all practical purposes can be said to be.

I had been in South America for about two weeks, and fittingly my ride through the last bit of Fireland became my trial by fire, so to speak, when it came to having a conversation in Spanish. My satisfaction was enormous when it went well. We both jabbered away, the driver and I, and there was much laughter and smiling. I'm not quite sure what we talked about, but I think it had something to do with his children.

And thus it was that one midsummer night in January I arrived in Ushuaia. I can no longer recall exactly what my expectations for Ushuaia were, but if my confusion had been total when I arrived in Fiji and discovered that it was India, I was no less bewildered when Ushuaia turned out to be exactly like my home town in Northern Norway.

In the harbour lay trawlers and small fishing boats in front of a neat row of fishermen's shacks. Behind them a patchwork quilt of small and cosy-looking houses with a green forest background spread up a steep hill. Where the green ended, a layer of white snow took over and covered the ground all the way up to the mountain peaks that shone brightly against a deep blue sky. Outside the mouth of the Beagle Channel the mighty ocean rested temporarily. A more obvious sister city for the towns of Lofoten in Norway would be difficult to find. They could easily have sold the same postcards both places without anyone noticing. I really felt at home there.

But Ushuaia wasn't my goal, just a necessary stopover on my way further south. Finding the local hostel didn't take much wandering through the streets of the small town. Halfway up the hillside it had a great common area with a panorama view towards the harbour. It was the perfect place to sit and be on the look-out for a ship to Antarctica.

Like most hostels in remote corners of the world, this one was also full of familiar faces. Even though I had not travelled for long in South America, I still met several "old friends" in Ushuaia. They were people I had met or at least nodded and smiled to on buses or in hostels. When you meet again like that, common etiquette among backpackers is to update each other on all useful information you may have gathered since you last crossed paths.

The most interesting piece of information I received came from Daniel, a two metre tall Belgian. He told me the story of a ship that had left port just hours ago to go on a two week cruise to the Antarctic Peninsula. The most annoying part of the story was that up until the last minute they had offered berths at two thousand dollars a piece!

After a few minutes of banging my head against the wall, I realized that there had to be other similar offers around. I went out to look for them. In the marina I quickly found a southbound boat. Unfortunately it was a tiny sailing boat, containing a group of mad Dutch people. I'm sure that if I had read the terms of my travel insurance, I would have found their boat listed somewhere in the section "What the insurance does *not* cover".

I moved on to where the larger boats docked and asked around at the various shipping companies. A Russian sailor sent me to the offices of the travel agency Rumbo Sur, which is Spanish for "Direction South". It sounded promising. I was directed to Manuela. She had the lovely accent that can only emerge when someone speaking Spanish learns to speak English from Russian seamen. It was straight out of a low-budget spy movie.

Surprisingly, she offered me a round-trip ticket to Antarctica for just 50 dollars. If I wanted to, I could even sit in the front of the rowing boat, so that the others wouldn't see it if I skipped a few strokes. I would have to catch the food myself, as much seal and penguin as I wanted. Both were delicacies, she claimed. Especially after a couple of weeks at sea with nothing else to eat. She advised me to stay away from the whales, but when she heard that I was Norwegian she said I should decide for myself what to do.

At least that was what I half expected to hear. I was prepared for almost anything. Most trips to Antarctica are done by Russian ships and crews who have little to do at home as the winter storms rage in the northern hemisphere. Fortunately the conditions in the Antarctic cruise industry were decent. Manuela demanded only two things before she would begin to search for a ticket: 1) I had to sign a voluminous, official-looking document, in which on behalf of myself and possibly also all of

my current and future fellow countrymen I promised not to inflict any damage upon the fragile life and landscapes of Antarctica, and 2) I had to give her 1,600 dollars and a photocopy of my passport. Never before had I parted with so much money for a ticket, so I hesitated for a full two seconds. Then it was done. With a bit of luck I would have my ticket the very next day, she said.

I walked out from Rumbo Sur and wandered restlessly around Ushuaia, barely able to think about anything but Antarctica. My mind was distracted by a souvenir shop that apparently used a different advertising agency than the rest of the businesses in Ushuaia. While most of them called themselves something with "at the End of the World", this one simply said "Souvenirs from the Bottom of the World". It's not that stupid, of course. Many similar establishments in Norway will tell you that they are "Top of Europe" or something like that. But with some of the connotations of the word "bottom", I found it a bit funny anyway.

A couple of blocks further up the hillside I entered a neighbourhood where the line between the bottom of the world and the arse of the world was truly a thin one. A gardener caressed the greenery in the garden of a Swiss-style timber chalet. On the next lot there was no proper house, just a draughty shack. It was built from a pile of bricks, many of them broken, and it had a basic tin roof. Plastic bags acted as windows. Inside, behind the "door", a plastic curtain that was pulled to the side, I saw a woman with a screaming child on her back preparing dinner on a stove.

For being in a town in Northern Norway the contrast between rich and poor was rather noticeable.

Early the next morning I was on the doorstep of Rumbo Sur when they opened. B-movie Manuela was happy to tell me that I was going to Antarctica! She had received confirmation that a berth in a four-person cabin on the M/V Mariya Yermalova was mine. The ship had a strengthened hull, Manuela claimed, and would be able to handle any close encounters with icebergs without sinking. At least she had not sunk yet. Which was good, as Mariya was just the ship that had left for Antarctica the day before. So before I could begin my Antarctic adventure, I had to wait for two weeks for Mariya to return.

Beside myself with joy I bounced back to the hostel. Alix, a French girl I had met there, turned green and disappeared silently out the door when I showed her my ticket, so I had to find somebody else to share my happiness with. The previous evening I had asked Daniel, who was getting up early to go hiking in a nearby national park, to wake me up before he left. I had expected to be tired after the long day on the bus from Punta Arenas. Since he had now overslept by several hours, I felt it was okay for me to terminate his sleep.

I think I woke Daniel up simply by standing next to his bed and beam my happiness down at him. Since I don't speak Belgian I have to assume that the mumbling before he turned to the wall and fell asleep again were his most sincere congratulations. I took my ticket and my happy face back to the common area. Alix had returned. After two cigarettes outside she had decided to go to the land of penguins as well, and now she insisted on being taken to the ticket office. A little bit later, two Cheshire cat smiles floated through the streets of Ushuaia.

There's no doubt that Ushuaia is a fine town, and Fireland does offer great experiences for people fond of fly-fishing, hiking in the mountains and enjoying large, juicy steaks. Yet, after a splendid hike and a glacier walk on nearby El Glaciar Martial, I realized that it would be impossible for me to spend two weeks there and still be smiling. A long evening at the hostel in the company of an Argentinian who didn't hear voices talking in his head, but drumming, also contributed to making me come up with a plan B. Fortunately there is much amazing scenery to enjoy just north of Fireland, in Patagonia. So I left.

Due to its location at the end of the world, far away from most places, people usually travel to and from Ushuaia by plane. The lack of bus passengers had also led to a lack of scheduled buses, and the next available seat out of there was several days away. Next morning I got up early, trusting that surely someone would oversleep and miss the five o'clock bus. Yet when I came to the bus station all the seats were occupied, the driver said.

From what I could see, several of the passengers were invisible men. I went over and talked to one of them. Understanding my situation, he

immediately offered me his seat. He would be happy to stand, he said. I explained this to the driver, but apparently it was against the regulations. I had to wait for the next available seat.

I'm not one to turn down a challenge, so I walked up to the main road, straightened out a thumb and prepared myself for a long day of hitch-hiking. After two minutes I got a ride with a taxi driver with probably not the best sense of business. He had just gone off duty and gave me a free ride all the way to the road police station in the outskirts of Ushuaia. All trucks with heavy loads had to stop by there to be weighed and to declare where they were taking what, before they were given a permit to drive on the flimsy road leading to the northern part of the island.

It was a strikingly beautiful morning, one of those you can only experience in Northern Norway. Hoping for some sympathy, I gave the road police my story while they enjoyed their breakfast coffee. The result was that they ordered the next truck driver who came by to take me as far as I desired. He complied without any complaints. The policemen had guns.

The ride provided me with a new opportunity to practice my Spanish, as the driver was very inquisitive about life in Norway. By leafing through my phrase book, I came up with a number of interesting facts about my country and about Norwegians. I concentrated on getting the sentences grammatically correct, and not so much on the actual meaning of what I said.

Four hours later the driver kicked me out in Rio Grande. Enough was enough, no matter what the police had told him. Before he drove off, he said that he would certainly never visit Norway. It may have been something I said. Should I ever want a new job, the Norwegian immigration authorities could probably find something for me to do.

My day had transformed into a very good one, as I arrived in Rio Grande half an hour *before* the bus I had been denied a seat on. The driver looked with disbelief at me as I stood smiling and waving at him when the bus arrived at the terminal. Half the group of invisible men got off in Rio Grande, and there was also a change of drivers. I was suddenly welcome to join the party for the rest of the ride to Punta Arenas. I guess

the first driver just had a bad day. I know his hair did. Anyway, I was well on my way back to Chile.

After a long day on the bus and a short five dollar night in Punta Arenas, I was back at the bus terminal. This time I managed to get the fabled seat number 1 on the morning service to Puerto Natales. Usually that's the best seat you can get, as it puts you just behind and above the driver. You get a panorama view of the landscape ahead and on both sides, from where you're likely to spot condors, foxes, the llama-lookalike guanaco and the South American ostrich, the ñandu. The bad news was that seat number 2 was annexed by an obese Chilean. The good news was that he had obtained most of his body fat while studying in the USA. Finally I could have Chile explained to me in a language I mastered.

Three cramped and sweaty hours and a long, tragic story about a Chilean's life later, the bus rolled into Puerto Natales, a seriously tiny town in the middle of the Magallanes region. It quietly lies next to a fjord that would have felt at home even if it had been bought by an eccentric zillionaire and moved piece by piece to the west coast of Norway.

Most travellers who go to Puerto Natales are really heading for the Torres del Paine National Park. It's a spectacular piece of wilderness a short distance inland. Due to its distinct differences from the rest of the Andes, it has been dubbed the Alaska of South America. Much smaller than the real thing, of course, but it still contains all the important bits, save for the grizzly bears. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

What they *do* have is a number of mighty mountains, frothing rivers, enormous glaciers and lots of wild, yet mostly harmless animals. Then there is of course the main attraction, the Towers of Paine, behemoths in hard granite, two thousand metres tall peaks pointing straight up from a land which otherwise has been lying completely flat all the way from the Argentinian coast, hundreds of kilometres to the east. It seemed like the perfect place to while away a few days while waiting for the boat to Antarctica.

I travel light. It's a virtue I learnt out of necessity when I ... when *someone* accidentally set a hotel in an undisclosed town somewhere in South-East Asia on fire and suddenly had to leave. But that's another

story, which may still be under investigation, so enough about that. In this context, the important thing is that I was in a haven for hikers, but I didn't have the equipment necessary to enter the wilderness. Fortunately, tiny Puerto Natales had several places where I could rent hiking gear.

I rented a tent and found a place where I could experiment with assembling it without being disturbed or observed. Halfway through my third unsuccessful attempt suddenly a bell rang. Not inside my head, unfortunately, but from a large building nearby. And voilà, immediately I was surrounded by a hundred curious school children, eager to make fun of me and my skills as an outdoorsman. Even though I always had thought that I perform best under pressure, it didn't feel that way now.

Luckily I didn't stab any of the tactless onlookers in their eyes with the tent poles, and after some time I had figured out both how to build a tent from the many parts I had rented and how to take it down again. Content with myself, I left the schoolyard and headed for the grocer's to fill my backpack with chocolate, potato chips, soft drinks and other stuff essential for a mountain hike.

Prepared for anything that can be accomplished with a tent, some snacks and lots of energy, I was taken by a minibus and a boat deep inside the national park. Without lifting a finger (just my backpack a short distance), I got all the way to a camping ground by Lake Pehoe. It was so far away from civilization that I couldn't even buy a cold Coke there, almost. The Point of No Coke is hard to find these days.

My plan was to do the "W", a two or three day hike that looks like a W on the map, going through the most scenic parts of the park. With more time and chocolate on my hands, I would have done the whole circuit of the park to see the surreal mountains from all angles. The Towers fit in with the rest of the landscape just as well as the Eiffel Tower would have done among African mud huts. It was an impressive view.

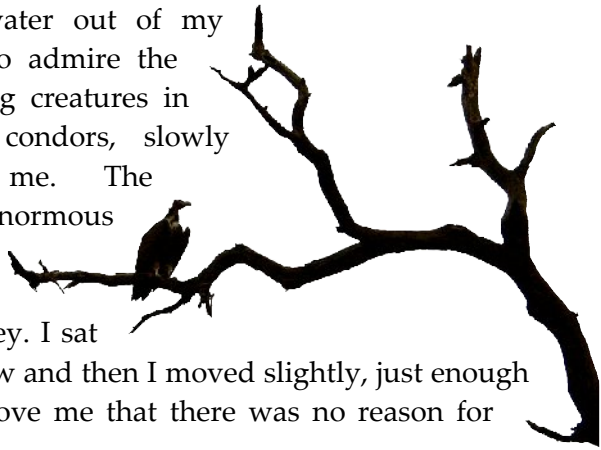
The peaks soon disappeared in heavy, low clouds, and rain started to pour down over the small town of tents. Most people stayed under canvas, but I had been doing too much sitting on my butt in buses lately, so I wanted to walk. After putting up my tent in record time (just under

an hour, meal break deducted), I found a path leading out of the camp and up a valley towards Lake Grey.

Seeing the dwarfish glaciers in the relatively mild, coastal climate of Fireland had not prepared me for the massive ice I met at the northern end of Lake Grey. I was stunned. As part of the third largest ice massif on the planet, after Antarctica and Greenland, even the lone arm stretching down the valley I walked through was the size of largest glacier in Norway. From there the ice stretched 300 kilometres to the north. The wall of ice crashing into the lake was a kilometre wide and rose up to thirty metres in height. Having something like that meet you around a bend in the path is enough to make you go silent, I tell you.

The glacier also froze when it saw me, but in the water I could see evidence of ongoing movements. Small icebergs floated in the lake in sizes and colours that only hinted at the age and the might of their mother.

It was only me and It there. The rest of the campers probably still sat in their tents and cursed the weather. I got some chocolate and drinking water out of my backpack and sat down to admire the view. The only other living creatures in sight were some large condors, slowly circling high above me. The atmosphere with the enormous glacier and the sound of silence was well worth the four hour walk up the valley. I sat quietly and just sensed. Now and then I moved slightly, just enough to tell the carrion birds above me that there was no reason for them to come any closer yet.



Ice in such abundance is an eternal play full of surprises for the patient spectator. Millennia of preparations for my visit had given the ice green and blue colours you normally have to consume questionable chemicals to experience. It made me even more enthusiastic about going to Antarctica.

On my way back to the camp the sun burnt a hole in the clouds. The grey day turned into a long and beautiful late summer evening. The sunlight stirred some mixed feelings in me. It's not just the clouds that can be perforated over Patagonia. Through much of the year there's a hole in the ozone layer there as well. Fortunately the area is blessed with many clouds and much cold weather, so any human skin around is usually found inside clothes, protected from any dangerous radiation from the sun. A few years back newspapers all over the world reported that sheep in southern Chile and Argentina went blind because of the radiation that should have been blocked by the ozone. Later it has been established that this was not the case after all. A local viral disease turned out to cause the blindness. It still is important, even where few people live, to give some thought to what we're doing to nature. Even when the sun shines and the world seems to be just wonderful.

In the camp everyone had come out of their tents. Socks and sleeping bags were hung up to dry in every bush and tree that could carry the weight. Exhausted by my expedition to the glacier I lay down in the opening of my tent by the lake and read a book in the evening sun. I fell asleep to the sound of a campfire encircled by an international crowd. They tried to find songs that everyone could join in on, failing miserably over and over again.

The weather was still marvellous in the morning. I felt good about the coming day, even though most of my clothes were cold and wet. My hiking boots had spent the night outside and were covered by a thin coating of frost. I changed into what was left of dry clothes at the bottom of my backpack. It wasn't much. The camp was luckily still void of life when I left it and walked along the lake towards the mountains.

Almost as strange as the granite spires that *are* the Torres del Paine, is the fact that the lake below them is called Lake Nordenskjöld. Nearby is Lake Skottsberg, and one of the glaciers there is the Glaciar Upsala. Despite their location these are all Nordic names, derived from the first scientific explorations of the area. Those expeditions, slightly like my own, were precursors for an invasion of the Antarctic continent in the name of science. These names cause great frustration for the Chileans, as they still have no idea how to pronounce them.

The day was young and I kept running into animals that had not yet had their morning coffee. Guanacos, foxes and hares were everywhere, seemingly indifferent to my presence. That's either a good or a bad sign. It's good if the animal isn't afraid of humans because it has not had any bad experiences with people yet. It's bad if it means that the animals only think of people as suppliers of edible rubbish. I don't know what they were thinking about me, but they had probably seldom seen a human move as fast as I did. The brisk walk was necessary in order to maintain my body temperature. It worked well until I discovered that even though it wasn't raining, my clothes were still soaking wet. Strange, since I generally don't sweat. Or maybe that's not entirely true. Either way, I stopped to let my clothes dry in the sun. As I waited I felt happy to be in such a beautiful place.

My joy abruptly came to an end when I removed my socks and discovered that half a toe was missing. It was simply gone, gnawed off by sock and shoe, without the least trace of the banquet they must have had. I covered the remnants with a plaster and walked on carefully, all the while telling myself and the vultures overhead that this was not a problem or at most just a very small one.

Campamiento Italiano was the next campsite, two hours anxious walking away. A small and dense forest there offered shelter from the wind. I left my backpack and made a detour up a steep valley, Valle del Frances. Through it the Frances river ran violently with the unmistakable colour of glacier water. An hour up the valley its source came into view. Rays from the sun found their way between the rocky towers and painted the glacier a sparkling, bluish white.

Every now and then a thunder-like sound was heard. At first I looked around for flying cows, as I had passed a number of signs warning of a nearby mine field. But there were no airborne, cloven-footed animals to be seen. A bit further on the source of the noise was revealed. The loud crashes were the delayed sounds of large chunks of ice falling off the glacier and down the steep mountainside deep inside the valley. I decided to not proceed any further in that direction and sat down to enjoy the show before I returned.

Until 1959 today's national park had been used as pastureland for sheep. There they enjoyed the grass, the greenery and possibly the view as well. Plants and trees in the park were still recovering after the ruminant ravage, but the land already seemed like real, peaceful wilderness. As long as you didn't step on a land mine, that is. If you did, the routine would of course be to jump twenty metres straight up and scatter yourself over an extended area. It serves as a definitive end to any hike, and is not recommended. As long as you stay on the trail, like you should in a national park anyway, everything will be fine.

During the next five hours I walked east along the lake. The clouds rested on top of a heavy drizzle. When I finally arrived at the campsite at Estancia de las Torres in the evening, I was extremely happy to find that they offered something similar to a hot shower there. Both my toe and the mountain peaks had now disappeared completely. I put up my tent (in less than half an hour) with the opening in the direction where the map insisted there were mountains. Then I lay down to grow a new toe.

The afternoon passed peacefully, until two Chilean families arrived with the mother of all tents. My view stayed undisturbed, so I didn't mind. Neither did I mind that they built a full asado, a giant barbecue and invited me over to taste a roasted lamb, a quarter-cow and a few other domestic animals. For a couple of hours I completely forgot the clouds above and my lacking toe below.

On my last morning in the park I was awoken by the view outside. Finally I was favoured with a magnificent postcard panorama of the majestic towers. Lacking a complete set of toes I was forced to stay put by my tent and just admire the mountains from there. They were so beautiful and impressive that I almost was relieved I couldn't go any closer to them.

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My hardships in the wet and wild mountains, and quite possibly a touch of gangrene in my stray toe, resulted in me smelling not exactly of roses when I returned to Puerto Natales. Some would probably even say that I stunk. I shared a dormitory with three Chilean ex-marines. They were probably trained to handle worse things than a mouldy European,

but I still chose to move on after only one night in their company. My next destination was El Calafate, just across the Argentinian border. It took a while to find a ticket seller with no sense of smell, but after a couple of failed attempts I succeeded.

The hostel in El Calafate was of such high standards that as an average backpacker I almost felt out of place there. They really had all the facilities a wanderer could wish for; hot water, a fireplace, a snack-bar, laundry machines and a drying room. I checked in and immediately carried out a thorough cleaning of both my body and my clothes. Afterwards I took the wet clothes outside. The brisk wind and the intense sun in the desert-like town quickly dried both me and my clothes in less than an hour.

When I finally was cleansed of all unpleasant odours, it suddenly struck me that I was the only person in the hostel in that condition. The others in the common area were mainly men wearing beards with twigs in them, dressed in well-used and not exactly washed out hiking clothes. They all wore the tormented expression of caged animals, a deep desire to be not *there*, but somewhere out in the nature, alone and as free as the wind blows. In this place, toe or no toe, everything was about hiking. And deodorant was just a long, meaningless word.

I was slightly worried that I would be bored in El Calafate, since the main activity there was walking and my toe wasn't quite, well, there. It turned out there was no reason to worry. I soon got sick and could put all my energy into getting well again. Careless consumption of unwashed fruit was one likely source of my discomfort, but there may well have been another explanation. To regain my membership in the smelly club, I spent my first afternoon in El Calafate conquering a peak just outside town. Even with only nine toes available it was an easy climb, or at least the ascent was straightforward. From the top there was a fantastic view towards the town and a deep blue lake surrounded by a brownish semi-desert. A powerful wind over the edge of the mountain only slightly diminished my pleasure. The Western movie mountains invited my imagination to dream up an adventure starring just Pocahontas and me. I was a bit disappointed when what I found at the top of the mountain was not the very last Mohican, but a communications tower.

The descent was more troublesome. The ground was part porous, red rock, part sand and loose pebbles. To avoid falling down the steep slope I often had to grab whatever vegetation that miraculously had managed to get a good root-hold there. All well and good, you may think, but this way of securing myself came with a major drawback. The vegetation consisted of cacti and other plants with sharp edges, spikes and prickles. Soon my hands were full of scratches and wounds, and it's likely that some kind of lugubrious poison found its way to my inner organs through them.

I returned to the hostel bleeding. No matter the reason, two hours later I experienced a heavy headache, and my stomach reported that in the immediate future it would very much like to empty itself simultaneously through as many exits as possible. The message was clear, but it was hard to follow up in an appropriate way. While I understood that the stomach situation was serious, the rest of my body insisted that it would not do anything right then but to lie down and rest. Somehow I managed, but I was happy to discover that I shared a room with two medical students from New York.

Well, at least that's what they said they were to their cute, new, female friends from Chile. It was almost impossible to drag the guys away from them, but I really wanted to know how long I had left to live, so I persisted until they came with me. I think I annoyed them. After all, they had only nine days to experience all of South America before they had to go back to the USA. Their schedule was tight and had priority high above the Hippocratic Oath. They both took caffeine pills to avoid having to sleep too much. Judging from their appearances I have to say that if you want really big eyes, that must be a good medicine to take.

After an extremely quick examination they told me I wasn't suffering from anything serious. It was probably just food poisoning or Dengue fever. Or maybe a brain tumour. Or something else. Their diagnostics didn't convince me of their medical prowess, so I let them return to their amigas. But first they had to promise to check on me in the morning. Then my eyes closed, as my body commanded me to fall asleep.

I don't know whether they checked on me or not. For all I know the medical students were merely products of my imagination. When I finally regained consciousness they were gone. Instead a German couple had taken their beds. They seemed a bit surprised that I was still in bed when they checked in late in the afternoon. For a while I sensed indulgence from them, but as the hours passed the tolerance and the pity changed into other feelings. At first they probably thought that I was just a seasoned drinker, recuperating after a very good evening. Later I became more of a pain in the butt and annoying. I didn't even confess to anything being out of the ordinary. Instead, when they asked if I needed any help, I just muttered that no, no, I wasn't sick, everything was fine.

I don't know what's with me. I *am* a man, and when a man is sick, he should want the whole world to feel sorry for him. Not so with me. Not at all. I have probably told others so many times that I never get sick, that eventually I have come to believe it myself.

Whatever the reason, for the rest of the day I was sick and in bed, barely able to move. The longer I stayed in bed, the less sympathy I received from my roommates. Every now and then they popped in to see if maybe I was getting up any time soon. They were recently engaged and I could sense that they wouldn't mind having some privacy.

Late in the afternoon I had gathered enough strength to crawl out to the common area and sit by the fireplace. When the Germans saw me, they jumped up and practically ran to our room. Being of an efficient breed it didn't take them more than half an hour to return, now a lot more enthusiastic and smiling than they had been earlier.

Through my personal fog, I conveyed my apologies and admitted to being slightly sick. I also told them that actually I had not even tasted alcohol in my entire life. They confessed to having suspected my illness the whole day, although they had a hard time believing my latter claim. Thus the ice was broken, and we soon discovered that we would break more ice together later. By a cosmic coincidence, we were all going on the same boat to Antarctica the following week! Knowing that we would soon be imprisoned together inside a Russian hull, a new friendship was instantly born.

The Germans spent the next day going to Perito Moreno, another section of the same Patagonian ice cap that I had seen in Torres del Paine. I was in no shape to go with them, or anywhere at all, but they let me borrow their Antarctica guidebook. My day was evenly split between reading on a small patch of grass in the sun, sitting on the toilet and running between those two activities. Considering my general condition, I had a great day.

The next day was even better. I woke up with three quarters of a toe back in place, and a pair of underpants that were practically as clean as they had been when I fell asleep the night before. Encouraged by this I walked down to Laguna Nimes, a wetland area nearby reputed to be an El Dorado for bird watchers. There I sat for a long time watching swans, flamingos and other beaked creatures whose names I don't know, all the while concentrating on not thinking about having to go to the bathroom.

Two Canadian bird watchers with big eyes and binoculars fit for studying mosquitos were so excited about the amazing birdlife that they came over to share their joy with me. I guess my concentrated stare and absolute stillness must have impressed them. They pointed and gesticulated, explaining that we were in fact looking at the only two-coloured swans in the world. “Hooray!”, I grunted, giving them the most enthusiastic thumbs-up I could manage. Evidently happy with my response the Canadians smiled and left my life.

Back at the hostel the Germans had been replaced by a Swedish blonde and a Swiss girl whose parents must have been suckers for clichés. They had named her Heidi. This may very well have induced several traumas throughout her childhood, but the only one I know for a fact that she suffered from was a fear of flying. And yet she had managed to get to South America.

She had paid 1,300 US dollars, almost twice the price of a plane ticket, to travel for three weeks on a container ship from Italy to Buenos Aires. For her money she had gotten a two room apartment on the ship as well as free access to as much fresh air as she could take and to the video library on the ship. The selection of videos had obviously catered mainly for sailors spending long periods of time away from women, but she had

nevertheless been happy with the voyage. After some reckless flirting with the crew they had even built her a swimming pool in an empty container. I was fascinated by her strong desire to see the world in spite of her obvious handicap.

I learnt all this over dinner. Even though it was nice to hear about sea-level Atlantic crossings, I was more interested in finding out whether the chicken I carefully consumed would come out again in an at least somewhat controlled manner. It did, and through the right exit, just in time for me to return to Ushuaia.

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Lineas Aéreas Privadas Argentinas (LAPA) took me back to Fireland. The view from the plane was splendid; glaciers, dramatic mountains, plains and moors across the whole spectrum of colours. Just before we landed I even recognized the steep, peaky mountains of my home country outside the window. Beautiful!

To me there was an attraction inside the plane as well. No, not the bearded stewardess, but a new air sickness bag. New as in unused, of course, but also new as in different from any of the air sickness bags I already owned. I collect these useful and at times indispensable items, and the LAPA bag scored high on the scale for "How to say what the bag is for, without actually saying it", a most important quality for such an item. Writing "Barf bag!" just like that can be enough to trigger a bout of puking if someone's feeling a bit queasy, so you don't want to do that. This bag said "Para uso exclusivo a bordo en vuelos de LAPA", meaning "Only for use on LAPA flights". No mentioning of it having anything to do with nausea, just a most careful hint that it could be of theoretical use in a flying plane. Very classy. I helped myself to the bags from six seats before Miss Moustache, the stewardess, began looking more fierce than I liked.

For once I had actually booked my accommodation ahead, and that turned out to be a good thing. The hostel was swarming with low-budget, Antarctica-bound backpackers. It surprised me, since I had learned from

the Germans' guidebook that the average age for Antarctica passengers was about 60 years. It appeared that the clientèle on "my" ship would be unusually young.

Alix, my French friend, had realized that the trip would eat a large share of her total travel budget. To make up for that, at least a little bit, she had spent almost no money since I last saw her. She had taken her tent to the cold, wet forests outside Ushuaia and stayed there for a week. Just for the last couple of days had she been back in town, trying to get hold of returning tourists from Antarctica to ask them about the trip. Good for me, as now she let me in on her fresh knowledge.

Where I had anticipated having to buy new clothes and other stuff fit for a polar expedition, it turned out that I would be fine buying just a few basic items. My final acquisitions for the Antarctica trip were:

- Sunglasses covering the whole eye region (the light in the ice is bright)
- Rubber gloves (to pull over woollen gloves to make them water-proof)
- Sea sickness remedies (no further explanation needed)
- Chocolate biscuits (emergency rations in case of a castaway situation)
- 24 cans of Coke (cheaper than in the bar)
- 6 oranges (to avoid scurvy during long periods at sea)

I would also need a pair of tall, robust wellies. Someone had told Alix that if we went down to the ship early in the morning, just as it returned from the previous trip, we would most likely find a pair of fitting rubber boots in the heap of wellies left behind by the previous batch of tourists.

The reason we needed rubber boots was the way you get on land in Antarctica. Usually it's a "wet landing". Zodiacs, small yet sturdy rubber dinghies with outboard motors, are used to bring the passengers on shore. Due to the lack of piers in Antarctica, the Zodiacs can only get so close to the beach, and usually you have to wade the last bit. As a young boy, my friends and I sometimes went sailing on small ice floes that formed on a small

inlet close to my home. Even though this was ages ago, the rule that requires ninety percent of floating ice to stay below the surface already applied. So we often got stuck on our frozen ships in the shallow water.

To avoid having our mothers find out about our sailing adventures, we had to strip off shoes and pants and walk half-naked through the icy water back to the beach. It wasn't pleasant, but then again, neither would we have enjoyed parental punishment for sailing on the ice floes. I didn't want to refresh my memories of "wading on the rocks", so to speak, so I had better get a pair of rubber boots. Since I didn't want to carry them for the rest of my trip through South America, I decided to try to find a sufficiently fitting pair on the boat.

My only worry on the day of departure was the discovery of another possible side effect of my unkind encounter with the evil mountain flora of El Calafate. Several mysterious, open wounds and blisters appeared on my fingers, in my armpits and various other more exotic locations on my body. I will spare you the details, but I'm guessing it was similar to what many middle-aged men returning home from wild trips to the dark alleys of Bangkok may experience upon returning home.

I couldn't let a minor plague or whatever it was get in the way of my trip to Antarctica. I cleaned and took care of the weird wounds, packed my stuff and got down to the ship early to find myself a pair of second-hand rubber boots.

I found a pair that fit perfectly, and being early I also got to choose freely among the four berths in my cabin. Not really knowing what criteria to use, I decided that it was probably a good idea to reduce the potential height of falling, so I picked one of the lower bunks. Later this turned out to be the right choice. Soon my new cabin mates arrived; a Japanese, a Swiss and an Israeli, all fairly young and all backpackers. They seemed almost disappointingly normal, considering the unusual journey we were embarking upon.

Only one practicality was left before I could leave. I went back on land and published my will and a few last words on my Web site. Of course, I had kissed the toe of the Patagon native on the Magellan monument in the town square in Punta Arenas, so this wasn't really necessary. It's an

old tradition among sailors to do so, as it is supposed to ensure that sooner or later you will return to Punta Arenas. But you never know, you know?

And then we were off, just over a hundred passengers on the Mariya Yermalova. It was a mixed crowd with an average age well below 60 years, possibly even below 40. This was probably a result of the relatively inexpensive tickets. The tour operator went bankrupt just a few months later. It wasn't the low prices that forced them to close down business. A certain event in New York City on September 11 later that year made rich Americans less eager to leave their homeland. This created a dramatic shortage of potential passengers for all cruises to Antarctica.

That the ship carried so few passengers was important to me. Tourism in Antarctica is regulated by a set of rules that the tour operators themselves have agreed on. The goal is to minimize the damage the tourist industry inflicts upon the extremely fragile eco-system. One rule is that no ship can have more than a hundred people on land at the same time. There were almost exactly a hundred passengers on Mariya, and some of them were decidedly more interested in buffets than in penguins. This meant that I was likely to spend a lot of time exploring Antarctica on foot.

All in all more than twenty nations were represented among the passengers, and we could very well have founded the Association of Travelling Eccentrics. There were retired Americans with blue hair, big bellies and the latest in expensive consumer electronics. We had a group of British mountain climbers, some with numerous Everest expeditions on their CVs. And then there were backpackers of all sorts, ranging from a relatively tidy me to the most deodorant-shunning, sandal-wearing and price-conscious hobos imaginable.

Some had hitch-hiked through South America to get to Ushuaia. The money they paid for two weeks of cold uncertainty in Antarctica, could have bought them many months of basic travelling elsewhere. A guy told me he had asked whether there was a discount if he was willing to sleep in the lifeboats instead of in a cabin. There wasn't. I, for one, was rather pleased that they had not told him it would cost extra. Anyway, we were

not your typical group of cruise passengers. In general I have always found that special destinations gather special people. In this case that was a good thing.

In addition to the passengers there was also a literally motley crew of fifty sturdy Russian men and women. Most of the time they were invisible, but they were far from inaudible. Then there was a group of people that we would both see and hear a lot from, a group of experts on polar matters. They knew everything about seals, whales, seabirds and ice, and they were there to tell us what we saw and what we shouldn't do. The ship's doctor was another Russian. I'm sure he spoke his own language fluently, but all he could say in English was "I hope no problem!" as he showed us his large bucket of seasickness tablets. His hope was in vain.

When we were done with the introductions, a lifeboat drill was held and some practical information was given. We were warned that strange things *would* happen on the ship. The sewage system was similar to the ones used in planes. Instead of flushing the waste down using water, a vacuum mechanism was used to suck it away. Unfortunately, sometimes the sucking might reverse, so we were strongly advised to quickly step away from the toilet after pushing the flushing button. "This is a Russian ship, so things that do not work, do not work differently from how they do not work at home", was the message. I spent some time analysing that sentence. Something must have worked, though. Dinner was ready.

It was a true feast, and the warnings about high seas ahead were instantly forgotten. The low-budget travellers were especially eager to get their money's worth. After all, they had burnt off a considerable part of their total travel funds on this singular excursion. Now, while a free buffet may be a good thing to take advantage of when on land, like in say Las Vegas, I'd like to inform future Antarctic travellers that the same does not necessarily apply on a ship in the South Seas. It is wise to leave some room for the food to move around in while it's being digested, since it's very likely that suddenly you will need that space. The lovely entrecôtes they served made it impossible for me to stop eating before I was more than full, so I should know.

A cosy and relaxed mood set in after dinner. People made small talk and played various card and board games to get to know each other. The seemingly most hard-boiled travellers gathered to swap stories from the road. The Japanese, of course, immediately started taking photos and writing postcards. Mysteriously all the Israelis had disappeared. I imagined them wandering the corridors below in search of their Promised Cabin. A more probable explanation for their disappearance was the rule that any alcohol enjoyed in the common areas had to be bought from the bar on the boat. I suspect that in one of the cabins, serious amounts of cheap, South American liquor was consumed, presumably accompanied by a lot of guitar playing and singing in Hebrew.

Those who didn't feel like getting to know a lot of people right away, could instead get acquainted with the library. It contained an excellent collection of books on polar topics, including a book about Titanic, I particularly noticed.

The cool and young fraction of the guides and experts immediately began working on making the passengers worship them. Groupies-to-be gathered around them and listened to their cock-and-bull stories. The more experienced guides knew all too well what the future would bring, so they went to bed early. When the captain suddenly appeared in the bar, wearing his uniform and an increasingly fuddled smile as he enjoyed a tall glass of vodka, I decided it was time for me to go to bed as well.

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About a thousand kilometres of open water separates the southern tip of America and the land stretching north from Antarctica. The wet gap is known as the Drake Passage, after the English captain Sir Francis Drake, the man everyone except for a few British school children have forgotten as the leader of the *second* successful circumnavigation of the planet. He was the first to actually round Cape Horn, thereby dismissing the myth that Fireland was part of a large continent to the south of America.

These waters come in two versions, like a maritime Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. One of them is calm and quiet and is called The Drake Lake. The other is not as peaceful and has aptly been named The Drake Shake. The latter is more often around and is part of the reason why the sea at

sixty degrees south is also known as the Screaming Sixties. They are the evil cousins of the Roaring Forties and the Furious Fifties. If you travel in these waters you learn this terminology soon enough. I know I did.

Even though we were about to be served a big helping of the Drake Shake, for now the sea was calm. Before I went to bed I took a walk on the upper deck. The night was beautiful, all dark except for the crystal clear sky dotted with stars. It may look like there are countless stars up there, and maybe there are, but the human eye can only distinguish some six thousand of them, both hemispheres combined. Supposedly you can see the most stars from the southern hemisphere, and on that night I could believe it. I could also vaguely see Fireland on the right, sorry, on the starboard side of the boat. I waved at it to remind it that we had agreed to meet again sometime soon.

Feeling happy, I went to my cabin and my bed. I lay awake for a long time, listening to the creaking from the walls of the ship and to the messages that went to the crew over the intercom, in Russian. It was a bit like being in a James Bond movie. Soon I was fast asleep, dreaming of critical and dangerous special missions, a mastermind to fight and a number of most friendly women playing various small parts.

At 4:04 in the morning I woke up when someone pushed me around in the bed rather violently. “Stop it, Nikita!”, I mumbled, before I discovered that I was actually alone in my bed. More to the point, there were certainly no female supermodel in a bikini there. We had reached the open seas. Before I went to bed I had taken a couple of seasickness tablets, just in case. Now they helped me doze off again, into a restless sleep.

At 6:42 I woke up again. The Japanese in the top bunk had fallen to the floor like a kamikaze sleepwalker. He landed on everything that the previous evening had been on our bedside tables. “Prease excuse, I trouble!”, he declared before he bravely climbed back up and regained his position.

At 7:30 I did *not* have breakfast. Others somehow fought their way up to the galley and initiated feeble attempts at eating. Most of them gave up and returned to their beds when after a while they started to get wet on their feet from all the coffee, milk, tea and cereal floating on the floor.

Some just gave up, but didn't have the energy to return to their cabins. They spent the next two days on wooden benches in the library.

At 9:30, still in the morning, five people attended a lecture about our big friends, the whales. I clung to my bed and tried to sleep, or at least to keep my eyes shut and think of something pleasant.

At 11:30, fifteen brave passengers turned up to learn about the albatross. There's no doubt that the albatross is an interesting creature, but the audience was still most impressed by the lecturer, who actually managed to stand upright most of the time. I still clung to my bed, on the verge of becoming a believer so that I would have someone to pray to.

At 12:30, two dozen people tried to have lunch. In the end they settled for tomato soup served in paper cups, after soup plates had proved unsuitable containers for the liquid meal. How the people in the kitchen even managed to *make* tomato soup, now that's a mystery I can only theorize about. Myself, I spent some of the time in bed, some of the time on the floor, and by then I had made my first, strenuous trip to the bathroom. There I had filled my water bottle while I with great fascination observed the water gushing out of the faucet at most unusual and variable angles.

Tomato soup planning a spectacular escape

At 14:00 a lecture about Antarctica's geography was the most exciting thing on the boat. “Bring your blanket, pillow and some barf bags!”, a voice commanded from the loudspeaker. I slept on the floor, temporarily having given up on staying in bed.

The doctor reported that during the last six hours he had handed out extra strong seasickness tablets to more than thirty needy passengers, and that was a new record! We were all proud, and we became even prouder when we were informed that throughout the whole day waves of up to 10 metres had hit us straight on from the front. At no time had we moved faster than 8 knots. That's just about my average jogging speed. Doing the maths in my head, I calculated that if this continued, I would run out of seasickness tablets before we'd covered a quarter of the distance to Antarctica. On that depressing thought I decided to drastically cut back on my drug use.

The solution became to forget that I was being tormented by the ocean, and instead think of it as an incredibly long roller coaster ride. I discovered that I was the perfect size for my bed, or maybe it was the other way around. By lying down on my stomach with my hands extended, I had a good grip on the bedposts in the upper end while at the same time I could "stand" steadily with my legs pressed against the lower end of the bed. That way I could lock myself to the bed with relative comfort. I closed my eyes and visualized how the ship moved between and through the waves. By trying to predict the movements of the boat, I could counteract them by distributing my weight to this side or that. A huge amount of concentration was required to do this, and it helped me avoid spending too much time being thrown out of the bed. It also helped me forget to be seasick.

The only thing still bothering me was a Russian maid. Every now and then she came by to do a bit of dusting and tidying. She would say “Zorry to yoo!” and smile at me in the same way I imagine the Devil himself smiles at newcomers in Hell.

All in all it was nevertheless a pretty neat situation, being imprisoned in a bed in a boat in the middle of a storm, while the air was filled with Russians screaming on the intercom, messages I sometime almost could

decipher. I was especially fascinated by this one; “Zbigniew moshna machinistr *something something* schdawoodsch KAPUT!”, with lots of loud and panicky yelling going on in the background. This was exciting stuff!

Little by little I learned to recognise the patterns in the behaviour of the sea. I knew exactly how long it would take from a wave hit us, making the hull boom loudly, until an invisible force would try to pull me out of bed, and I knew which arm and leg muscles I needed to tighten in order to stay put. When I finally tightened and loosened my muscles automatically, I could start thinking again. It felt like meditation, at times coming close to an out-of-body experience. Suddenly I realized that this was exactly what I always had imagined a trip to Antarctica to be like, ever since as a young boy I started reading about the hardships of the early polar explorers. Should I just have gotten on a plane? Bah! That way I would never understand the remoteness of the seventh continent.

Finally I also understood what Liv Arnesen, the first woman to ski alone to the South Pole, had meant when asked what she dreaded the most about her expedition. “The boat ride from Antarctica”, she had answered.

In the evening something happened. The weather changed or the captain got a brilliant idea. Either way, we started going *with* the waves instead of against them. My intestines shouted with joy, almost forgetting to complain about the lack of food to process. I could relax again, feeling more tired than I had ever thought two days alone in bed could make a person feel.

The next morning I was even able to walk around a bit. I still refrained from eating. I wasn't sick, and I wished to stay that way, so I couldn't trust my body with food just yet. We were halfway to Antarctica. I had swallowed half my supply of seasickness tablets, and it felt as if I had lost a similar percentage of my body weight.

No one was allowed on deck yet. To at least get a change of air from the cabin, I walked up to the bridge. The air wasn't particularly fresh there either, but I was encouraged when I saw that we did 14 knots, almost the cruising speed of the vessel. The equipment on the bridge,

however, wasn't that comforting; lots of pipes and buttons and maps on which the navigator kept drawing new lines with a pencil. On the walls there were some small and cute signs full of charming spelling mistakes, like "Insinerator" and "Exhcaust pipe". I was reassured by the Russian crew who seemed to know what they were doing, steadily filling new ashtrays with cigarette butts while drinking strong coffee from large jugs with pictures of naked women with, well, large jugs on them. Everything was like I had expected it to be. It would have to be good enough to get us through the storm.

As I wasn't chained to the bed any more, I started attending lectures. First I was amused by a session on penguins and then fascinated by a first-hand account from an early expedition to Antarctica, the Ronne expedition of 1947. The latter presentation was held by expedition member Bob Dodson, who was now almost two hundred years old, but still equipped with a good set of sea legs. Even though what he talked about took place less than a lifetime ago, his tale left us with no doubt that the conditions back then were even tougher than what we experienced. On the other hand, they didn't have exploding toilets.

When the sea had calmed down enough for us all to be able to scramble to our feet and ascend the stairs up to the lecture room, the mandatory briefing for visitors to Antarctica was held. The topic was IAATO's rules for behaviour on the Antarctic continent. IAATO is the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, an organization for all carriers of tourists to Antarctica.

The purpose of the rules is to prevent Antarctica's visitors from endangering themselves, others and Antarctica. If you're the kind of person who would choose to spend your vacation in Antarctica, you're likely to find the rules reasonable. It's only the tour operators themselves who enforce the rules, so you can look at them as guidelines for improving your personal safety rather than as limiting restrictions.

Typical rules are "Do not carry explosives", "Keep a safety distance of five metres between yourself and the penguins" (luckily they have been unable to teach the inquisitive penguins about the metric system), "Do not disturb any scientists you may encounter, unless they seem eager to sell

you strange items from their home countries", and "Do not walk into or under glaciers, as they are large and heavy and sometimes they collapse". My favourite rule by far is the one about no ship being allowed to have more than a hundred people on shore at any one time. This ensured that the penguins would always be in majority. That way everyone is guaranteed an unforgettable experience.

As we reached noticeably calmer waters, we saw that contrary to our suspicions we had in fact moved in the right direction. Icebergs appeared in the distance, sailing north, hopefully with a slimmer chance of survival than us. This resulted in a high-spirited mood among the passengers, with the notable exception of a seven year old with obscenely rich parents. He systematically worked his way through the common areas on board, aiming at puking into each and every coach on the boat before we reached land. Myself, I tried to rest as much as possible. After sixty hours half asleep on a roller coaster, I wanted to be ready for a few days with as much action and as little sleeping as possible.

In the middle of the night we reached the location where we would make our first landfall, Hannah Point. Even though this was Antarctica, a "place" where the year is rumoured to have only one day and one night lasting six months each, that island was no closer to the South Pole than Scotland is to the North Pole. So on that late summer night it was completely dark outside. But something happened just after five o'clock in the morning.

I stood in the darkness on the top deck of the boat and awaited my first good look at Antarctica. Suddenly I found myself in the middle of the kind of moment you know you're not going to have many of in your life. The sky above me had a thin veil of clouds on, so thin that the extremely bright stars could shine through it. The boat lay still in the water, but it had not anchored. It had to be ready to move on short notice, in case the water suddenly froze or a glacier dropped a serious chunk of ice into the sea, creating dangerous, tsunami-like waves.

We were in a bay surrounded both by mountains with jagged peaks and by some rounded hills. Everything on land was covered in a perfect, white film of ice, except for a narrow strip of bare and rocky land along

the shoreline. To the north-east a sunrise was ready to go, and the many photographers on the boat looked like they were about to burst with excitement. Antarctica was about to show off!

The sunrise was spectacular. The starry night was slowly replaced by an untameable play of red and orange colours sailing up from behind a mountain covered by ice. The light made the glacier on the other side of the bay blush, as if it had just been caught red-handed picking its nose, thinking itself alone in the ice paradise on that flawless morning. Seals and seabirds welcomed the day by singing, howling and screeching towards the sky, ever louder as daylight filled the world. It was a scene that made me feel warm inside, no matter how cold the tip of my nose was. I could only look forward to meeting the orchestra behind the symphony.

The expedition leaders, and now I really thought of it as an expedition, were used to dealing with American tourists. Since lunch was impossibly far away, they refused to put anyone on land before we all had eaten breakfast, even though the first-time visitors among us were desperate to get off the boat.

More than ever the James Bond feeling returned when I finally entered one of the Zodiacs. The plan had been to quickly find a place to land, but instead we were suddenly on a whale safari. Four humpback whales simply appeared out of the deep blue, each of them many times larger than the boat we sat in. Like us, they had chosen to enjoy their breakfast in the bay that day.

It seemed as if the whales had forgotten *and* forgiven the sins of my ancestors. They glided through the water next to us, slowly, smoothly and friendly. The whales knew that in the shallow bay, the sunlight on a morning like that would seduce their favourite food to move up to the surface en masse. A full-grown humpback whale can be fifteen metres long. A Zodiac can't.

We came close enough to the whales to make it *extremely* exciting to find out where they would surface next when they dived and temporarily disappeared. They are awe-inspiring creatures. The American woman

next to me had a religious moment, or possibly an orgasm. She uttered the incomplete sentence "Oh – My – God!" fifteen times over. I counted.

As a Norwegian I may have been the only one there to think that the whales looked good enough to eat. That said, I really hope the whale stock in the Southern Ocean will recover. Even though several species of whales still exist in large numbers both there and elsewhere, some other species, like the colossal blue whale, have gone right up to and possibly across the line leading to extinction. All because of short-sighted, profit-seeking humans. With the vast oceans and the few remaining whales, it will take them a long time to find each other and do what they have to do to multiply. I wished them good luck with that before Sergey Sailor steered Zodiac Six south, seeking shore.

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In spite of the thorough penguin lecture I had attended on the boat, I wasn't prepared for the tuxedo-clad welcome committee on the beach. Fair enough, they had not exactly cleaned the place for us, the whole shoreline was literally overflowing with shit, but I still felt welcome. Just around the corner from Big Damn Rock (you just have to love the simple logic behind placenames in Antarctica), during my first two minutes on the shore I was introduced to the chinstrap penguin, the Gentoo penguin, the albatross, the crab eater seal, several species of petrels, and a more than *slightly* enthusiastic expedition leader, Laurie Dexter.

Laurie is the kind of guy that runs a marathon before breakfast. He spends parts of the year making ski tracks from Russia to Canada. Manufacturers of expensive watches pay him to wear their products, to find out how robust the watches really are. A priest by education, on that day Hannah Point was his cathedral.

Laurie must have swum ahead of us, as he had already surveyed several kilometres of beach. He preached that just over the hill we would find a three-ton male elephant seal with his harem emitting various body fluids, gases and impressive sounds. "Isn't this glorrrrious, everyone?", Laurie asked us in his thick, Scottish accent. It was most definitely glorious and magnificent. Among the screeching seabirds above there

were Arctic terns that had travelled an even longer distance than me to get there. Ready to be overwhelmed I gently walked up the hill Laurie had pointed out.

The view from the top I will never forget. Eternal ice in every shade of bright blue and green. A dark blue sky over almost painfully bright, snowy mountains and a beach almost as white, but from penguin guano. Minor spots here and there bore a green shimmer of moss and lichen. Every inch of land seemed to teem with animals and birds living their lives as they should.

At the top of the hill I met Albert. He had spent most of his day dragging himself up there because he wanted to go fishing. When Albert wants to go fishing, he must first waddle up to the top of a long, declining runway. Then he must run down the hill, fast, but not too fast, until he either becomes airborne or he crashes into the water and has to walk back up the hill to try one more time. When a take-off is successful, he may be gone for up to five years before he again returns to land. Funny bird, the albatross.

Of course, an even more entertaining bird is the penguin. You probably agree with me that they are among the most comical beings on our planet, right up there with the lemur, the orang-utan and any human who has just stepped into a pile of dog shit. So you know they're funny.

What you may *not* know is what extreme creatures of habit they are. Even though they obviously swim better than they walk, they still spend most of their time in the dry, doing next to nothing. They will stand on a piece of rock or ice, depending on whether they want to turn their body temperature up or down, or they will wander along the beach, performing an entertainingly clumsy silly walk. They can spend the whole day walking a distance they could have covered in three minutes had they swum it instead.

That's not mainly because they walk so slow or that they swim so fast. The main reason it takes them so long to walk is that when a penguin starts to walk, it knows two things; its destination, and the route it will follow to get there. Now, if the penguin encounters an unexpected obstacle on its planned path, it will not make a detour. Instead it will just

stop in front of the hindrance and look at it accusingly. This will happen whether the impediment to further progress is another penguin, a five-ton elephant seal or a stupid tourist. The penguin will simply wait for the obstacle to go away, and then continue its promenade.

You may have seen photos of large numbers of penguins just standing around like a frozen parade in monochrome. I don't think they're really just standing there. What has happened is that they were all on their way somewhere, and then, unfortunately, suddenly they all blocked the way for each other. Thus they just seem to do nothing, but they're really waiting for one of them to die and fall over, to decide to go fishing or to be abducted by a scientist. Then the penguins will all get on their way again, until a new deadlock occurs.

Coincidentally, this is exactly what happens inside your "multi-tasking" computer every now and then. Most of the time it moves along nicely, but sometimes it just seems to freeze up and do nothing. This happens when two shebangs inside your computer simultaneously try to access the same part of the computer's memory or something. The similarity between those two situations struck me from up there on the hill, where I could see the deadlocks form and go away, over and over again. Maybe Antarctica is just a large computer? Or maybe the whole planet is? If so, I think we're long overdue for an upgrade, maybe for the forty-second time. But without giving more thought to that, let's return to Hannah Point.

I moved leisurely between hilarious penguins until I reached an open-air museum in Walker Bay. A number of fossils were on display on top of some flat rocks at the foot of a steep mountainside. According to the rules in the game of visiting Antarctica, you're not really supposed to pick up or move any objects at all, not even a pebble.

In this case they had made an exception. As people have walked up and down the beach throughout the years, scientists and probably tourists as well have come upon stones that really are petrified trees or contain other visible fossils. While it would be a big no-no to remove them from Antarctica, it's a splendid idea to gather the most interesting artefacts in one place where they can be found easily. I saw more fossils in twenty

minutes there than I have seen anywhere else. The swarming life in the area was evidently not a new phenomenon.

After four overwhelming hours on the beaches near Hannah Point the sound of howling seals was for a few seconds drowned out by mighty outbursts from the fog horn on Mariya Yermalova. This told us that unless we were back on the ship within an hour, we could look forward to a long winter in solitude on the beach there. It seemed like most of us chose to return to the ship, although reluctantly. Back on the boat we all tried to outdo each other in describing the fantastic experience we had just had. So far, actually being in Antarctica was much more enjoyable than getting there.

Contradicting my expectations from icy Antarctica, at lunch I sat in a lifeboat chewing on a slice of pizza and drinking a cup of hot chocolate as I enjoyed the sunshine and a temperature of 10 degrees Celsius. We were on our way to another landing. All around us was the magnificent view of an eternal winterland. The air was exceptionally clear. On the horizon we saw the looming mountains of the actual continent. Islands of all sizes glided by. Even the smallest ones carried glaciers. The passage to our next stop was unhurried and steady. Only for a few, short moments did we have excitement. Whales, even worse at flying than penguins, broke the surface of the sea just to crash back into the water again a moment later.

Nobody knows why they do this. Maybe to shake off parasites, maybe they jump just for the fun of it. Whatever the reason behind the spectacle, it was a treat to witness. “BREACH!!!”, the Americans shouted when it happened. Except for one of them, who had been pointing his camera on full zoom to the exact spot where a whale had surfaced. He just jumped up and down for several minutes, repeating a most versatile four letter word. I'm guessing that in this case the f-word must have meant “This photo will pay for my children's' education! I am so unbelievably lucky! Now, if I just had a double cheeseburger, life would be perfect!”

We sailed on to Deception Island. The name is unusually fitting, as it's not exactly an island. It's just the top of the cone of a collapsed volcano that barely sticks out of the water and becomes part of the South Shetlands archipelago. Another reason for the name is that from the

outside, the place seems impenetrable and without beaches. But actually the volcano's interior can be reached through a narrow, winding passage, the Neptune's Bellows. Many a treacherous rock lurk under the surface there, but if the mental condition of the captain allows it, the Bellows will let you through and into the safest natural harbour thinkable. Inside the crater lies Port Foster.

Captain Sviridov had a good day. He wormed the ship expertly inside the sleeping volcano and brought us to Whalers Bay. Once again we landed with the Zodiacs. The tourist thing to do on Deception Island is to dig out a bath tub on the beach, capture a suitable amount of sea water in it and let unseen underground activities prepare a suitably heated bath for you. It's unlikely that many people have taken voluntary baths in the sea any further south than this, but there *are* many who have done so in Whalers Bay. Since I had used a bath tub and bathed in sea water before, I chose to explore the island instead.

From its name it's easy to guess that the first bathers in the bay were whalers and seal hunters. This was one of the most important locations for the massacre of the aquatic mammals of the Southern Ocean. Before the arrival of the factory ships, whales were towed to beaches like this, to be processed safely away from the stormy ocean.

In 1911 about three thousand whale carcasses laid scattered about on the beach. The whalers harvested only the blubber from the whales, the part of the animal that was easiest to exploit and transport back to Europe. Meat and bones were left behind. As opposed to whales, the beach in Whalers Bay is small. It must have been a strange sight, not to mention the stench, of three thousand giant lumps of meat and entrails decomposing slowly in the open air.

Now all that was left were a few large bones and the remains of small, wooden boats half sunken into the volcanic sand. Behind the beach there was a small, run-down village, an old whaling station with wooden houses built in an unmistakably Norwegian poor man's style. Beyond the buildings I found the man who may well have put up many of the houses. There he would stay forever, carpenter Hans A. Gulliksen, dead 1928, remembered just by a simple, wooden cross in infertile and

overwhelming surroundings. While some people made large fortunes from the butchering of whales in Antarctica, others lost everything.

One thing you wouldn't expect to find inside a volcano in Antarctica is an airport. Yet that was exactly what I found, complete with a large, old hangar and the wreckage of an old plane. In 1928 the Australian Hubert Wilkins came to Deception Island. He was sponsored by a filthy rich newspaper tycoon, William Randolph Hearst, who wanted exciting stories from the edge of the known world, and by Norwegian whaling companies, who wanted to see how far into Antarctica it was possible to fly. Of course, what they *really* wanted was a more efficient way to locate whales, now that for some strange reason they had become harder to find than they used to be. The whalers may naively have figured that it was just because the whales had become better at hiding.

Seaplanes were shipped in, and on November 16, 1928 for the first time in history a plane took off from Antarctica. The hope was that the calm water embraced by the volcano crater could be used as a "runway". A couple of test runs revealed some unexpected issues. Hubert nearly lost a plane when, during a landing on ice, it skidded into the sea. Also, whenever he took off, several seabirds were killed by the propellers. The air was thick with scavenging birds, attracted by the irresistible fragrance of the butchery on the beach. Several times Hubert almost crashed and killed himself as well as the birds because of this. A land-based airstrip had to be built.

Everything Hubert needed to set up a simple airport was shipped to the island. Eventually a flat and even airstrip was ready for use. But it was different from other airstrips. It wasn't straight, but curvy, a result of the natural inclination of volcano craters to be circular. From that airport large tracts of the Antarctic Peninsula were discovered and charted.

Hearst got his stories and the Norwegians got even more whales to hunt. Everyone had reason to be satisfied, except for Wilkins. He was bored now that the most imminent hazards had been taken care of. His solution was to buy a World War I submarine from the US Navy, paying one dollar for the death trap. You get what you pay for, but he still gave it the name Nautilus, after Jules Verne's book about underwater travels

around the world. In 1931 he decided to take Nautilus to the North Pole. Luckily, someone in his crew treasured his life more than Hubert did. Vital parts of the submarine were sabotaged just as they were about to take the submarine under the Arctic ice north of Spitsbergen. The expedition was cancelled and all the men returned home alive. Wilkins probably possessed more than an inkling of stark, raving madness, but he is still the least well-known of all the important polar explorers. He certainly deserves more attention than the world has given him so far.

In his rush to become a submarine captain, Wilkins still had time to do one more idiotic thing before he left the island. He proclaimed Deception Island to be a territory of the British Crown. As a result, British and Argentinian navy ships regularly visited the island the following years, removing their adversary's flags and proclamation signs and putting up their own. In much the same way two cartoon characters would do it, I imagine. This went on back and forth for a long time, until Great Britain in 1943 established a permanent, manned weather observation post on the island. The intention was to effectively stop Argentina's plans for the area.

In 1948, Argentina also set up a weather station, next to the British one.

Tension gradually built through the years, until in 1953 a group of soldiers from the Royal Marines were stationed there for the summer, to "maintain the peace". Apparently the navy of Chile had little to do at home at the time, so in 1955 they decided to colonize the island as well. No less than three different nations now claimed the small, hot doughnut of an island. The penguins were silent spectators to the madness, but in the end the volcano itself decided to put an end to the lunacy. In the late 1960s, steam and lethal gases escaped from the volcano, forcing the representatives from all the three nations to scurry off the island. Since then it has been a peaceful place to visit, except for when the water in the bay every once in a while starts boiling.

Back on the ship the journey south continued. Icebergs grew in size and number around us, and the waves began to grow a little as well. After dinner I was fortunately so exhausted that I immediately entered a coma-like sleep. The sea had settled before I woke up again. The icebergs outside were now larger than our ship, so I repeated the lifeboat drill on

my own a couple of times. I didn't want this to be the last day of my life, especially since it was set up to be the day when for the first time I would set foot not just on Antarctic islands, but on the actual continent of Antarctica.

I acquired the continent in Neko Harbour. It's yet another place with a Norwegian history, named after a floating factory from Tønsberg in Norway. Neko Harbour was no more a harbour than Turkey lays eggs or you can put Birmingham on your toast, so it was another wet landing in a Zodiac.

A small, wooden hut on a knoll over a rocky beach was the only visible trace of any human activity there. The building was covered in painted and sprayed messages from enthusiastic and patriotic Argentinians. The ugly writing on the wall fortunately drowned in the brilliant scenery around it. Mountains rose more than a thousand metres straight up from the ice and the sea, and an equally impressive wall of ice met the ocean in a continuous collision spanning from one side of my view to the other. It was a great place to remember as my first encounter with the Antarctic mainland.

A large number of penguins stood on a narrow beach and up the side of an icy mountain. A fresh batch of penguin chicks worked hard on getting rid of their baby feathers to get started on their way to adulthood. They generally do that by, well, just standing there, waiting for the down to fall off. It obviously takes a while. To avoid mass starvation their parents constantly walked and stumbled to and from the water with fresh fish for their offspring.

Penguins are like people, they really just like their own kids. They want as little as possible to do with bringing up individuals equipped with other genes than their own. Unfortunately it also seems that by standing among thousands of penguins year after year, adult penguins gradually turn penguin-blind. They have no idea how to visually tell two baby penguins apart. As you can imagine, these two factors combined has potential to complicate the feeding process.

Nature has found a way to help penguin parents solve the feeding problem. Nature seldom disappoints. In this case it had come up with the

Fodder Race, a highly entertaining spectacle which will become an Olympic event as soon as another ring is added to the logo of the Olympic Games.

To the uninitiated, the Fodder Race may at first seem to make about as much sense as a game of cricket. The secret to understanding what goes on lies in knowing that while the parent penguin cannot tell which chicken it should feed, the chicks *do* recognize their own parents. But even though the chicks know who they are *supposed* to be fed by, they are greedy opportunists and will often try to trick the parents of others into feeding them.

A fat penguin chicken awaiting more input

When a proud penguin mama or papa comes stumbling out of the sea with its beak full of delicious sushi, he or she will at first appear somewhat bewildered. The poor bird is trying to remember where it last spent some quality time with its offspring. After deciding on a spot it waddles there and starts emitting sounds, telling the world in general that there is food up for grabs.

Hearing this, a large number of hungry chicks will run towards the parent in the only fashion they know, meaning devoid of any grace or dignity whatsoever. They fall. They slide. They crash into stationary objects such as rocks, other penguins and panicky tourists who try really hard to comply with the five metres rule. When the cloud of chirping and

squeaking beaks approaches the food-bringing parent, the parent will also start to run, away from the hungry mob. The race is on!

And that's why in Antarctica you will often see an adult penguin run around with a long tail of young penguin buffaloes behind it. They run and they scream, they fall and collide and then scream even louder. Some of them will grow tired and resign from the race, others will keep running. After a while, often several hundred metres away from where it all began, there will be only one chicken left in the race. A winner is declared. All research has so far concluded that in most cases the winner *is* the actual offspring of the running parent. Whether that's a fact or not, the winning chicken will receive its reward; lovely, fresh seafood served from the parent's beak. The prize is presented in a short and tender family moment, before the mother or father returns to the sea to prepare for a new race. Junior will stay put, signalling satisfaction through its lazy, semi-shut eyes.

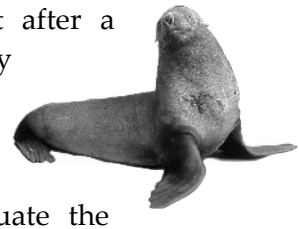
For a long time I sat in the middle of a crowd of penguins and let myself be entertained by the never-ending show full of action, smash-ups, slapstick, clumsiness, pain, sorrow and happiness. I'd like to thank Mother Nature for the privilege.

The small rocky headland of Neko Harbour is on all sides except from the sea surrounded by a gigantic wall of ice that keeps moving in on it. Just as the ice is about to swallow the puny piece of beach and naked stone, having spent millennia carefully preparing for the attack, the sea gets in its way. The currents and the salt tear the ice mass apart, and the crushed pieces of ice are taken away to be rendered harmless by the ocean while Neko lives on. The calving of icebergs is also the cause of another great act that continuously takes place in Neko Harbour; The Wave.

When a glacier calves, when hundreds of tons of ice break off and fall into the sea, the result is often that a massive wave is formed. As soon as the wave recovers from the shock of having come into existence, it will identify and attack everything and everyone stupid enough to be dazzled by the unfolding event. With forces of this magnitude on the loose, it is typical for simple-minded creatures to think “Whoa! Look at the size of that thing!”, and fascinated remain standing where they are, watching the

wave grow larger and larger as it comes closer. In other words: Waves hunt humans.

Penguins, on the other hand, in ways explained brilliantly by good, old Darwin, have learnt the following rule of thumb: When the sky is blue and you suddenly hear a loud thunder, it's a good idea to immediately run towards higher ground, no matter how stupid you look while doing so. There you must remain standing until you have forgotten what you're doing halfway up the mountain and you begin to feel a bit peckish.



My best ice experience ever occurred right after a particularly photogenic seal had wriggled its way out of the water and up to a suitable spot for some serious sunbathing. The photographers from the ship had with difficulty arranged their expensive equipment on the beach to perpetuate the flipper-flapping beach bum. Just as they started asking the poor seal to make love to their cameras, the glacier on the other side of the bay decided to drop a large chunk of ice into the sea. The glacier notified the world about this with a stomach-turning groan.

The seal got the message just fine, and it quickly returned to the sea, while the penguins followed their instincts and were soon on their way up the mountain. We humans, on the other hand, just turned around towards where the sound had come from, saw what was happening and thought “Whoa! Look at the size of that thing!”

The whole situation reminded me of a scene from The Muppet Show. The role of Kermit was played by the people, standing confused amidst an unruly chaos of strange creatures, played of course by the seals and the penguins, loudly and panicky scuttling around our feet. Anyway, there I was, hypnotized by the largest falling object I had ever seen. It dived from a considerable altitude and disappeared under the surface of the sea. Two seconds later it came flying up again and crashed against the glacier. Seriously annoyed now, the glacier hit back with all it had, and calved off an disturbingly large mass of ice. Soon a killer wave was rapidly approaching us.

That's when the veterans and guides from the boat, survivors from previous trips to Antarctica, started yelling at us to get the hell away from the beach. Most of us were pulled back to reality by this and followed the advice. The exception was the Japanese, experienced masters of ignoring warnings and messages they can never seem to make any sense of anyway. I ran up the mountainside while they eagerly photographed the incoming wave. Fortunately the wave was so worthy of being photographed that one of the Japanese ran out of film. As he turned around to get some more, he saw the rest of us standing together with the penguins high above the beach, screaming and waving at him. He managed to warn the others just in time, and they all escaped a cold bath and possibly death with a few seconds to spare. The only damage done were a few wet feet and some cases of rapid heartbeats. It was a powerful experience, a titillating sample of the kind of surprises Antarctica can provide.

Panicky penguins running towards higher ground

To take advantage of my sudden elevation, I decided to climb another couple of hundred metres up the mountain. I was rewarded with great views of a beautiful fjord, a scenery full of bright white and blue ice, sea and sky. Still, what struck me the most as I moved up and away from the beach was the increasingly noticeable fresh air. Or to be more blunt, the stench from the beach weakened.

In my joy over falling penguins, the Fodder Race and the new surroundings in general, there was one thing I hadn't paid much attention to until now. Penguin country is more or less covered in penguin guano, or as you may call it, bird shit. This makes the ground incredibly slippery. When you think about it, that explains a lot. For instance why the penguins have that silly walk. If we had to walk around barefoot in our own excrements, I'm pretty sure we would quickly develop a way of walking *very* similar to a penguin's, most of all characterized by small, fearful and careful steps. Actually, that *is* exactly the walking style people immediately adapt when they discover the slimy and slippery shit-covered beaches of Antarctica. So we don't really have any reason for making fun of the silly-looking penguins. We still do, of course.

Anyway, it *is* a rather smelly affair to visit the empire of the penguins. I'm not sure if it's just their faeces that causes the aroma surrounding them. Maybe the fatty liquid they excrete and rub their feathers with to protect themselves from the freezing temperatures also does something to the air. But they stink. They really, really stink.

The manner in which a penguin defecates is another of their many slightly eccentric traits. As you know, the birds like to just stand still as much as possible, so instead of walking around the corner when they have some business to do, they will just lean forward and give everyone around them a semi-hostile squint. It's their way of saying "There's nothing to see here, please keep moving along". And then they fire! The result is a metre-long, white, steaming line on the ground, sometimes with elements of red and yellow in it. Relieved, the penguin will shake its tail and get back to doing nothing. If you ever have to walk past a penguin, remember that literally going behind a penguin's back can quickly become an unpleasant experience.

Chances are that you'll never be lucky enough to meet and risk being squirted on by a penguin in the wild. I have, however, discovered another near-Antarctica experience you *can* have right in your own home. After the episode of the ice calving and the monster wave, one of the Russian crew members suggested that maybe it would be cool to take one of the ridiculously small Zodiacs and position ourselves below a huge, hanging wall of ice, so that we could get a close up view of what it looked like.

I figured that he probably knew what he was doing, maybe, and a little while later we were floating twenty metres away from a glacier that seemed to reach all the way up to the sky. It definitely looked like it was about to go sailing. To make the madness complete, Ivan the sailorman turned off the outboard motor, so that *if* something happened, we would really have no chance of escape.

When the engine stopped, all I could hear was wild techno music, which was strange, since this wasn't a disco, but Antarctica. I soon realized that it was the beating of my own heart I heard. When I managed to relax a bit, I discovered a new Antarctic quality. The sound of practically infinite amounts of ice melting in water, liberating air bubbles in the process, air that had been imprisoned in ice for thousands of years. The mere thought of the old air was fascinating, and the sound it triggered was an attractive, hushed ripple.

The greatest thing about the sound was that a few months later I managed to reproduce it at home. Certainly on a smaller scale, but still, it was very similar. Don't ask me how I came up with it. Just enjoy trying out my recipe for creating your own sound of Antarctica:

- Prepare *lots* of ice cubes from running or carbonated water.
- Get a large container ready, for instance a big casserole, a bucket or a bath tub.
- Place the container in a silent room. Fill it to the brim with cold water.
- Pour the ice cubes into the water. You should have enough ice to almost cover the whole surface of the water.
- Turn off the lights. Place your ear near the water. Listen.

That's it! I promise you that this is an authentic rendering of what life can be like when you're in a small boat in Antarctica, in water full of ice and you close your eyes because you're not that eager to look up at a mountain of frozen water likely to fall down on you. To me that's the sound of Antarctica on par with Russian swearing and seal farts. And you don't even have to take seasickness tablets to experience it!

Not all places in Antarctica look that interesting, but most of them have an interesting story to tell. One such place is the former Argentinian base in Bahia Paraiso, Paradise Bay. Something must have gone wrong in the translation from penguin speak, because there were barely a bird there when we arrived. The bay was nice, though. Plenty of icebergs floated around, and dozens of seals enjoyed the sun from on top of them. A wreath of tall, steep mountains surrounded the bay, and of course there were calving glaciers everywhere. Spoilt by breathtaking views as I was by then, the thing I liked best about the place was a hill I could climb and then slide back down again. Several times. Thanks to a lifetime of experience with having fun with snow and ice, and to my pair of super smooth trousers, I was soon king of the hill. A little bit later I also possessed probably the coldest butt on the continent.

To restore communications with my now numb behind, I broke off the sliding and walked over to the only buildings in Paradise Harbour; a couple of wooden cabins, a pier and some burnt-out ruins. There Super-Laurie recounted their history for me.

Once upon a time, in 1984, the time had come to replace the crew on the then active Almirante Brown research station. For natural reasons, the supply boat only came by once a year. It brought new people and everything they needed to spend the winter there, and took the people from the previous winter back home. After almost a year in the ice, the old crew was of course eager to return to Buenos Aires, where they would enjoy large steaks and long, hot nights dancing the tango.

It turned out that unfortunately the Argentinian logistics bureau for Antarctic operations had forgotten to include a doctor in the new crew. Or maybe they had just been confused by the fact that *all* the people they sent had doctor's degrees, without any of them actual being a medical doctor. Either way, the rules said that no one could spend the winter in Antarctica without having a medical practitioner present. It was promptly decided that the doctor from last year would just have to spend another year there. He wasn't too happy to hear this, but he seemed to accept his destiny and walked with his luggage and a pout back into the main building.

Unloading and loading of the boat took place, people said their goodbyes and wished each other a good warm or cold year, depending on where they would spend it. As the boat cast off, the now retired crew gathered on the quarterdeck. There they could have a last look at the poor souls left behind to defend the Argentinian sovereignty over hundreds of square metres of land by spending a winter where darkness and cold would soon prevail.

Before the boat had even left the bay, the passengers could see black smoke rise forcefully out of the main building, soon followed by ferocious flames. All of a sudden everyone on Almirante Brown stood outside and waved deliriously to the boat. It was *not* a wave of goodbye.

And that's how almost everyone, both the previous crew and the coming year's intended crew, got to spend the winter with steaks and tango in Buenos Aires. The only exception was the desperate doctor with an inclination towards pyromania. He spent that winter, and many summers and winters after it, residing in a madhouse.

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If you go to Antarctica, a place most people associate with the South Pole, travelling by boat won't get you far. Without an exceptionally thick and sturdy hull and a ditto wallet, the limit for how far to the south you can safely sail is approximately the southern polar circle. As you approach it, you're likely to be travelling down the Lemaire Channel. It's an extremely photogenic and calm, fjord-like section of the coast, where the captain will be chain-smoking and drinking a *lot* of strong coffee. Indeed, the large waves of the open ocean are avoided, but in return you risk getting stuck in a suddenly frozen sea. I could easily see that happening as we moved through the narrow passage.

Somewhat harder to understand was how the place had gotten its name. Charles Lemaire was a Belgian explorer, the first European to travel up the Congo River to remote regions of inland Africa. That is maybe the place on Earth with the least in common with Antarctica. Or maybe not? Going through the channel felt almost like gliding down a

river with beautiful, dramatic mountains on both sides. The peaks that should have been bright white were instead coloured orange by the rising morning sun.

We made it through and arrived at Pleneau Island. It's a small island, you can easily walk all around it on the beach in one morning. Penguins ruled the land there as well, and looming above the rest of them was a lonesome king penguin, almost twice the height of the others. In that size, a penguin's comical image quickly fades. Instead you find yourself starting to look for possible escape routes in case the penguin decides to come over to have a closer look at you, as many penguins do. Scientists have found fossils of giant, two metre, 135 kilogram penguins. We should thank Evolution for cutting off that branch of the penguin family tree before they came to rule the whole planet.

The greatest attraction on Pleneau is not the penguin colony, but an iceberg cemetery just off the island. Shallow areas surround the island, but further out the sea is very deep. When icebergs come sailing from the south and from the west, they run aground and get stuck just off Pleneau. Slowly they melt, and the stranded icebergs take on strange shapes that could not have formed if they were still floating around in the ocean. Some look like cathedrals, others like cruise ships, but they all appear mighty and enormous to a small human in a little boat floating next to the icebergs. Absolutely every shade of blue and bluish green are captured there, both in the ice and where the ice meets the sea and the sky.

A cathedral-like iceberg

The insane range of blue colours in icebergs is something you will never find in ice cubes from your own freezer. That's because your freezer is neither big enough nor old enough, no matter how much you would like to buy a new one. The blue can only develop if you pile up ice in layers of many metres, preferably kilometres. When that happens, the air is slowly squeezed out of the ice, and what you're left with is a chunk of compact, compressed water molecules with nothing between them. If the pressure is maintained for long enough, the

ice will go all the way from a sparkling, airy white through a selection of greens and blues, finally reaching the stage of "black ice". It's called this because it is close to fully transparent, and therefore appears almost black when floating in dark water.

An iceberg you meet in the Southern Ocean may have sailed for as much as ten years since it was calved off the mainland glacier somewhere far, far away. All floating icebergs melt continuously, usually more below the surface of the sea than above it, as the relatively warm sea water nibbles on it. This causes the weight distribution of the ice mass to change. Even though it happens slowly, sooner or later even the largest iceberg will roll over and rebalance itself in the water.

When this has happened at least once, the iceberg becomes more interesting to spectators above the water. Parts of the iceberg that used to be hidden in the sea can now be admired. On the previously submerged walls of ice we find long parallel and curved lines, paths left behind by millions of air bubbles liberated from captivity as ice became water. Assisted by gravity and the laws of physics, the bubbles eagerly float up towards fresh air and freedom.

Melting also takes place on the part of the iceberg that is above the sea, thanks to the relative heat from the sun, rain and the air itself. On top of large icebergs you therefore often find seals and seabirds taking advantage of the fresh water pools they find there. It's very similar to how you can find many animals and birds in and around ponds of fresh water on the African savannah.

Ice, animals and birds are all nice to observe, but a trip to Antarctica is not complete before you have seen how people actually live there. During the winter only about 1,200 inhabitants share the continent between them. In the summer the population is much higher, and it's interesting to see how the "locals" make their arrangements in order to survive in the ice.

Of all inconceivable possibilities, the Antarctica stamp I got in my passport was a Ukrainian one. I got it from the Akademik Vernadsky research station. Until 1996 it had been a British base called Faraday, and it is famous, well, *relatively* famous, for being where the hole in the ozone layer was first discovered.

Ukraine bought the buildings from the British for a symbolic dollar, and today a bunch of Ukrainian rowdies run the activities there. There's no doubt that the Ukrainians struck a bargain with this deal. Finally they have a place far, far away they can send their most peculiar citizens to for one year at a time. And if they don't turn into more normal people after one winter, they can just keep them there for another year.

Suspiciously many of the Ukrainians there had spent several years on the station already, and they still displayed a rather strange behaviour. In a predominantly nice way, mind you. They even ran a bar where they served all kinds of drinks, as long as you ordered either white or brown vodka. Women willing to donate a bra to decorate the bar even got the first drink for free. The boys there don't get out much, as you can imagine.

I supported the national economy of Ukraine, or more likely the personal economy of the scientists at Akademik Vernadsky, by buying a woven patch to put on my backpack. There was another way to part with money there. The Japanese in particular got out their big notes to take advantage of the small post office run by the Ukrainians. It was an official post office, and for a dollar each you could get a postcard and a stamp. If you licked the stamps and put them on the cards yourself, the Ukrainians promised that their national postal organization at some time in the future would do their best to introduce the card to international postal communication.

Although I sent a dozen postcards from there, I'm ashamed to confess that I doubted that the cards would ever reach their addressees. But the cards were probably taken away on the first post boat out of there. 378 days later, elated receivers of postcards started calling and mailing me to tell me that something unusual had arrived in their mailboxes. The lesson learnt from this is that you may not be able to make much sense of what the Ukrainians in Antarctica tell you, but you can trust them with delivering your mail!

I returned to the boat satisfied with having done just about everything you can do in Antarctica apart from putting on a pair of skis and shivering your cold way down to the actual South Pole. I was ready for something out of the ordinary, namely to travel north to get to South

America. No one was surprised to discover that we sailed straight into a new batch of the Drake Shake. I filled some bottles with drinking water and said “I am just going to bed and may be some time” to my new friends. I also wished them a nice weekend, even though it was just Wednesday. In the cabin I found my bed and put myself in the roller coaster position. There I stayed for the next four days, sometimes in bed, sometimes on the floor. It gave me ample time to digest everything I had seen and experienced in the *deep* south.

Rumours had it that on the return journey a series of excellent lectures on various polar topics were delivered. I left the cabin only twice; once to pick up my passport, now with a stamp from Antarctica in it, and once to drop off my tip to the crew. Normally I detest the whole concept of tipping. Coming from Scandinavia, where people are paid a decent salary whether they deserve it or not, tipping is just confusing. But when in Rome, you *do* do as the Romans.

The only problem is that I never know how much to give to whom. When I still try, it usually leads to me being stabbed with a fork in the back by a screaming waitress, or every employed person of the establishment will come out from wherever they were hiding to kiss my shoes. Sometimes I don't even understand what sort of extra service I have received that should be rewarded with a tip. On this particular trip, though, I felt very comfortable with leaving some non-taxable money behind. The expedition leader suggested a "fixed price", ten dollars per day, leaving it up to each of us to give more or less. All the tips were collected in a box to be split equally between everyone working on the boat. That sounded fair.

I left Antarctica not really knowing how I felt about the whole thing. Despite the high seas and the even higher ticket price, I was still glad I had done it. At the same time I was convinced I would never return. It is an overwhelming experience to see something like Antarctica, and I hope you get to do that or something similar at least once in your life. It was so untouched, pure and innocent that it almost hurt to return to the real world with exhaust fumes in the cities, with power lines often disturbing nature's natural curves and with pieces of rubbish almost everywhere. To Antarctica, the best would probably be if people (yes, including myself)

stayed away and were content just knowing that the clean and serene Antarctica exists. That would be the only way to assure that Antarctica can continue to be the largest area in the world not visibly damaged by us.

I spent the passage to South America lying down sipping on a bottle of water and philosophizing about the unparalleled Antarctica. In my drowsiness I held onto the bed posts and wondered what the strange sounds from the ship and the Russian messages on the intercom might mean for my survival in the immediate future. At last the sea calmed down again. We had rounded Cape Horn and were in lee of land. I walked up on deck and waved hello to Fireland. I allowed myself to fill with joy from seeing fresh, natural shades of green again. It felt good to have birds around that were smart enough to fear me and my fellow human beings.

The approach to Ushuaia through the narrow Beagle Channel makes it impossible to avoid getting rather close to Puerto Williams, a Chilean village. A navy vessel twice the size of our boat came from there and almost sailed straight into us, stupidly marking the marine border between the countries. It was depressing to witness this manoeuvre after my visit to the neutral and peaceful Antarctica. I hoped it was just a result of the navy officers being seriously bored.

We docked safely in Ushuaia. I said goodbye to my many new friends, before we all travelled north in every direction.

One More Thing...

This is a message to those of you who read the book without buying it.

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