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TRAVELLERS TALES

Icy Encounters

Brian Anderson boarded the Molchanov and headed to the Antarctic Peninsula



The outboard motors droned as the three Zodiacs sped towards shore on the cold, bright morning of Friday 19th December 2003. As the small inflatable boats approached land, my first sensation was an overpowering and pungent aroma. After two and a half days sailing on the Professor Molchanov from the Argentinian port of Ushuaia in Tierra Del Fuego, this was to be our first landing in Antarctica.

The beach ahead was part of the Aitcho Islands in the South Shetland chain, and the strong, fishy smell emanated from the penguin excrement and layers of guano, which covered the rocks and foreshore. Immediately upon landing my ears were deafened by the sound of squawking penguins from the snow covered rocks. As I walked from the landing site towards the rocks, I was unprepared for a third sense, my sight, to be assaulted with the incredible spectacle of thousands of Chinstrap and Gentoo penguins populating the vast rookeries in front of me. Senses overwhelmed and by now, completely awestruck, I sat down on a rock at a discrete distance to observe the unfolding panorama.

Before me lay row upon row of flat, saucer shaped nests comprising small pebbles gathered by stealth and theft. Each nest was crisscrossed with lines of excrement squirts and dried guano, resembling lava streams on an active volcano. The combinations of these bold lines created abstract patterns, coloured in vivid hues of pink and orange by krill, the staple diet of penguins during the four months of the short austral summer.

The nests were occupied by sociable but noisy pairs, with one bird sitting incubating the precious eggs, whilst the other partner was preoccupied with frantically guarding the nest from stone-stealing neighbours by animated head waving and loud squawks. Snowy

sheathbills hopped hurriedly between nests devouring anything of organic origin, including penguin excrement, true scavengers of this wild Antarctic landscape.

I observed one Chinstrap penguin incubating its egg suddenly distracted by a neighbour attempting to steal a pebble from its nest. Rising abruptly onto its feet to chase the thief away, the penguin inadvertently exposed its two eggs. Within what seemed only a few seconds, a scavenging Brown skua dive-bombed from the blue sky and carried off one of the eggs to a nest ledge on the surrounding cliffs. With the egg firmly gripped between the strong talons, the skua cracked open the shell with its powerful beak and quickly devoured the contents.

After a few minutes quietly observing this savage drama, four inquisitive Chinstrap penguins waddled towards me. Two squawked excitedly and began gently pecking at my cold, exposed fingers as I tried desperately to focus my camera. Incredibly, all these incidents had occurred during this first landing, which lasted only sixty minutes. In that relatively short time, my thirty-one travelling companions and I had witnessed and experienced sights and sounds that could fill a series of BBC wildlife documentaries.

With her ice-strengthened hull, the Professor Molchanov is equipped to navigate the narrow inlets and iceberg alleys of the Antarctic Peninsula. Over the next four days we managed a further twelve Zodiac landings, with two on the continent itself. These trips further revealed the beauty and richness of the region's wildlife with similar close encounters with Macaroni and Adelie penguins, Brown and South Polar Skuas, Antarctic blue-eyed Shags, and four species of seal, including Weddell, Crabeater, Leopard and Southern Elephant seals.

There was also an impressive variety of wildlife to observe from the deck of our 236ft long, 2140 tonne expedition ship, the first Russian research vessel to carry passengers to Antarctica in 1991. During the stormy outward and return crossings of the 1000km wide Drake Passage, I saw Grey headed, Royal, Wandering, Light-mantled sooty, and Black-browed albatrosses, Cape, Snow and Blue Petrels, Southern Giant Petrels, Wilson's Storm Petrels, Southern Fulmars, Antarctic Terns and Kelp Gulls together with several sightings of Minke and Humpback whales.

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The real magic of these close encounters was the lack of fear exhibited by the various species. I found the whole experience emotional and most humbling. Life in Antarctica must contend with the harshest environment in nature and this closeness only emphasised to me the care that we must take as 'eco-tourists' to ensure our presence in this last wilderness on earth does not add more stress to this fragile and unique ecosystem.

Join us on board one of three icebreakers this winter. See page 14 or call us for full details.

