

# Antarctica

by Chris Sterritt

We all have one special dream destination and mine was Antarctica. I have visited the Russian Arctic for five weeks under ice and have even taken a week's liveaboard out of Murmansk, but Antarctica has always been my ultimate adventure. Earlier this year, an email from Aqua Firma (<http://www.aqua-firma.co.uk>) spotlighting a late-booking special offer set me to thinking. It only took a few days before I had flights, a hotel in Ushuaia, capital city of Tierra del Fuego Province, Argentina and the 12 day boat trip booked!

The diving is so remote that you have to take everything you might need with you, including a spares kit, so I carefully prepared my dive bag and camera gear. I began to worry about flooding my housing. Ordinarily, I would see it as an acceptable risk and simply a part of diving with a dSLR. However, this trip was special so I couldn't bear the thought of wrecking my camera on the first day and coming home with no photos. A long talk with Steve Warren of Ocean Optics (<http://www.oceanoptics.co.uk/>) helped clarify my options. In the end, I took a spare Canon body with me and a housed

Fuji F30 as a second backup. I packed an extra Inon Z240 strobe along with various other spare parts so I didn't have much baggage allowance left over for clothing by the time thermals and waterproof outer garments were in the bag.

A week later and I was in Ushuaia with a day to kill before boarding M/V Plancius for my trip of a lifetime. I spent my day in the Tierra del Fuego National Park and walked for six hours along the most beautiful coastline I have seen. It was the perfect opener for my trip.

The next afternoon, I presented myself for boarding and got my first sighting of the Plancius, named after the 16th century Dutch astronomer and cartographer Petrus Plancius, which was entirely re-fitted in

*(Top) "Weddell Seal and M/V Plancius" Canon EOS 5D II with Canon 70-300 DO lens at 135mm. Aperture priority, F7, 1/160s ISO 100 Ambient light*  
*(Right) DiversIceberg.jpg "Getting a closer look at an impressive iceberg". Canon EOS 5D II with Canon 25-105 L lens at 35mm. Shutter priority, F8, 1/160s ISO 100 Ambient light*



*(Right) "Diving an iceberg"  
Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 15mm Fisheye lens. Manual exposure, F11 1/100s ISO 200*

*(Far right top) "Plenty to look at along the bottom"  
Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 16-35mm L lens at 16mm. Manual exposure, F10 1/80s ISO 200*

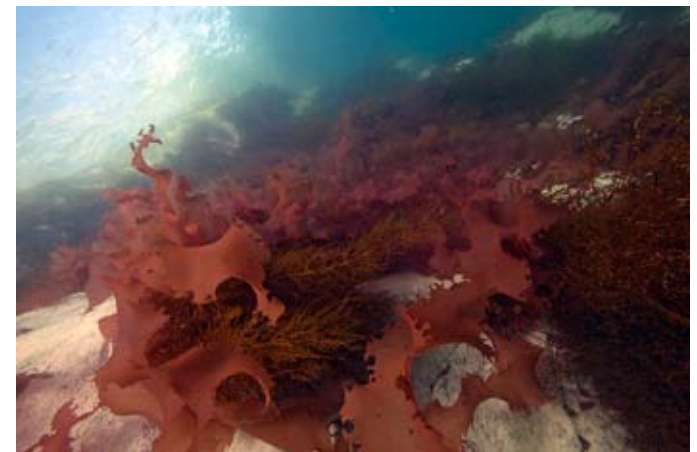
*(Far right bottom) "Macro Heaven"  
Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 100mm F2.8 IS lens. Shutter priority, F2.8 1/200s ISO 200*

2007. She is 89m long and 14.5m wide, carries a maximum of 114 passengers with 43 crew. This was going to be a luxury cruise ship rather than a diving liveaboard. In brief, we had fantastic accommodation, excellent food and the most helpful crew you could find. I was in a twin sharing with a non-diver and had more than enough room for all of my clothing and camera gear. Our cabin had 4 unused power points, so there was plenty of room for chargers. Dive gear went in a boot room next to the dive boat deck and stayed there until we returned to Ushuaia. We had adequate space in the heated room to hang suits and undersuits which always dried out thoroughly between dives. We were told that one trip had seen 34 divers aboard. With that number, the facilities would have been very cramped, but I am assured that a dozen or so divers is far more usual. The trip after ours, the final one of the Antarctic summer, had no divers on board.

The plan called for almost three days sailing



each way, with diving in the South Shetlands and the Weddell Sea. However, a force 11 storm whilst crossing from Argentina to Antarctica through the notorious Drake Passage pushed us a long way west of course and as no headway was being made, Plan B was devised. It is said that you don't take a trip to Antarctica, but that Antarctica takes you. We were now heading for the western side of the Antarctic Peninsular, with our first landfall to be at



Port Lockroy, a scientific station part of the British Antarctic Survey.

During the crossing, the expedition crew kept us entertained with various lectures. We had Antarctic Photography Tips, documentaries about Port Lockroy, Antarctic Weather, Antarctic





*“Kelvin found a beautiful pygmy octopus”*

*Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 16-35mm L lens at 20mm. Manual exposure, F6.3 1/80s ISO 400*



*“Antarctic Fur Seal”*

*Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 16-35mm L lens at 16mm. Shutter priority, F5.6 1/100s ISO 200*



*Canon EOS 5D II with EF 16-35mm f/2.8L lens at 16mm, manual exposure, F10 1/100 sec, ISO 200*

Mountaineering and Antarctic Wildlife. There were others, but I didn't see all of them. On the return sailing, Kelvin presented a talk on the underwater world using photographs we had taken during our dives. Most of the divers learned a lot as we don't always know a great deal about what we are photographing. The other passengers enjoyed seeing what was below the water line and we received a lot of compliments. It was very nice to be able to contribute a little.

Eleven of the hundred or so passengers were divers and we had a pair of highly experienced guides running the diving operation. Henrick Enckell, the dive manager, had been delayed in at least 3 cities on his way to join ship and arrived without any of his luggage. This was not the first time that this had happened to him, so we wondered if we had a real Jonah in charge of diving operations. Alas, poor Henrick, I knew him well.

Our second dive manager was a large Scot going by the name of Kelvin Murray. Kelvin was Diving Officer of the British Antarctic Survey at Rothera for 18 months, so confidence was restored. One day, you may be lucky enough to meet this chappie and dive with him. In the mean time, trust me when I say that he's not half bad in the water and a very knowledgeable marine biologist.

Our first briefing whilst crossing the Drake Passage had introduced us to both Henrick and Kelvin as well as laying out a few general safety rules. With no easy access to SAR facilities or a chamber, we had to be very cautious in our diving. There was to be an absolute 20 metre depth limit with further diving banned for anyone who disregarded this. No solo diving was permitted although the behaviour of underwater photographers was anticipated. We were asked to be sensible and take more notice of our buddies than sometimes

happens. Maximum dive times would be announced before each dive and we were asked to respect them, particularly for the first few dives. We were reminded of the pristine nature of the Antarctic and requested to respect all forms of wildlife. Any specimen collection would be rewarded by an end to our diving and possibly by prosecution as well. Nothing unreasonable there and it was reassuring to see that our safety was genuinely a priority to our guides.

The dawn of day 4 aboard found us sailing through the Neumayer Channel in flat seas and we arrived at our first dive site, Port Lockroy. Looking out of the window, we saw massive mountains covered in blue-white snow, huge glaciers crumbling at the sea's edge and lots more snow! By this stage, we all had hundreds of ice and mountain shots. What on earth would we do without digital cameras?



***“Dinner time”***

***Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 16-35mm L lens at 16mm. Shutter priority, F5 1/80s ISO 400***



***“This is my patch”***

***Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 16-35mm L lens at 25mm. Manual exposure, F6.3 1/60s ISO 400***



***“Diving an iceberg”***

***Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 15mm Fisheye lens. Manual exposure, F11 1/100s ISO 200***

Conditions were very good with some of the best visibility of the year. However, this didn't mean Red Sea clear water; there was a lot of plankton and long algal strings on all of the dives. We were not lucky with cloud, having total cover for all of our diving bar the final dive. This meant that ambient light was restricted and rather flat. All of the sites apart from the 2 iceberg dives were perfect for a macro lens, but it was difficult to choose macro as the prospect of photographing penguins, Antarctic Fur seals and Leopard seals was strong.

On the morning of our second day of diving, Kelvin jumped in with us and was our expert underwater eyes. Only three of us were diving with Kelvin as all of the others elected to go kayaking. During the dive, Kelvin found so many macro goodies that I was annoyed I had chosen to dive wide angle. I was ever so slightly happier when we were buzzed by a 3.5 metre Leopard Seal. My

pleasure lasted about 2 minutes before it turned to concern. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that we were being warned off by this magnificent, powerful predator. The aggression was muted to be sure, but was constant. When I reached 40 bar, I looked at Kelvin and asked, “Up?” He concurred.

We slowly rose along the bottom, but the buzzing never ceased. My worst moment came immediately upon surfacing when I realised that I couldn't see where the seal was. She circled Kelvin and I as the 2 Japanese climbed into the RHIB. Every 10 seconds or so, I ducked my head to have a quick peek at our lady friend. Kelvin may have used a few Celtic words of encouragement when asking Hiro to expedite his exit. This was the dive I came for, but I really think we should be careful what we wish for as it was the first time in my entire life that I thought that I could die by animal bite.

Rather oddly, 2 divers elected to go ashore

***“Macro Heaven”***

***Canon EOS 5D II, Subal housing, twin Inon Z240 strobes, Canon 100mm F2.8 IS lens. Manual exposure, F10 1/60s ISO 200***





rather than dive the second dive that day. The dive was pleasant and unremarkable. Unremarkable for a dive in Antarctica that is! Upon surfacing, we were given the choice of landing for a bit of penguin bothering, having a look see if we could find the Leopard seal or returning to the Plancius. I was considering Option 3, but the democratic majority chose number 2 - Leopard hunting. Thank goodness they did.

Within minutes, we saw her bobbing along with a rather frantic Gentoo penguin ahead. The fated penguin looked fairly comic as its efforts to stay ahead became ever more frantic. Within 2 minutes, there was a great swooshing of water followed by a flying penguin. This wasn't normal penguin flight activity as it appeared to be flying feet first. We saw the seal grab our hero's legs and go under. For the next 5 minutes, we followed slowly in the RHIB as the penguin was drowned. Cameras primed, we dropped in, snorkels at the ready. All except for me as I had left my snorkel onboard the Plancius. Anyhow, our Leopard seal ignored us and proceeded to flail the little penguin and eat it.

She allowed all 9 of us to approach within a metre as we clicked away. At one point, she flipped the dead penguin towards me and the carcass slipped under me to waist

level. At this point, an unpleasant image popped into my mind: what if she shot up from underneath me to grab the carcass in her jaws and bit me instead? I may have whimpered as I finned away as fast as I could. We stayed with the seal for what seemed like an age, but eventually returned to the Plancius for tea and medals.

All too soon, our diving was over and it was time for a thorough rinse down with the fresh water hose. Given the sea state on our crossing of the Drake Passage on the way out, everything was carefully stowed and the boot room was secured. It took us 3 days to get back to Ushuaia, but this time the Drake Passage was a real pussycat and the boat hardly rolled or pitched.

I called this a 'trip of a lifetime' but that's probably incorrect as I am already thinking of when I can go back.

**Chris Sterritt**



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