



To the end of the earth

*Shaun Prince heads to Antarctica, where
wildlife and wonder awaits*

The Arctic is getting crowded. A strange observation, you might think, but such is its growing popularity as a tourist destination that it no longer has the holiday bragging rights it once did. No, if you truly want to get away from it all – and see nature at its most glorious – then Antarctica is where it's at. A place barely touched by man, aside from a few scientists and the odd wildlife documentary crew.

There are some truly wonderful and exotic locations on our planet and I've been lucky enough to report on many of them, and simply relax in many others. So when an invite from Eyos Expeditions drops in my inbox inviting me on one of their luxury Antarctic yachts it takes me all of three milliseconds to reply 'most definitely'.

I've always been aware that tourism existed in the northern and southern poles, however the thought of being on a cruise liner-style ship, along with hundreds of tourists, left me cold. Eyos Expeditions spotted that there plenty of people like me – who wanted a luxury trip to the ends of the Earth, but wanted it to be a small, bespoke and intimate affair.

This insight saw them combine their vast knowledge of expeditions with a handpicked selection of seasoned captains and luxury yacht owners to create an experience that words can barely do justice. But let's try.

Before the trip I'd brought enough equipment and clothing to, it seemed, survive a complete winter out on the ice. After all, I reasoned, the southern pole is one of the coldest and most inhospitable places on Earth, so it made sense to be over prepared. 14 jackets, several pairs of boots and some bright orange woollen hats later, and I was packed and ready to go.

The trip officially started in Punta Arenas – a strange sprawling metropolis on the southernmost tip of Chile. We were staying in a quaint hotel called Dreams on the first night, which was apt as I imagine the whole expedition team went to bed dreaming of the adventures that lay in store.

Prior to leaving Punta Arenas to head to King George Island, news came back from the Eyos team that a delay in departure was looking likely due to adverse weather conditions. It was hard to square this info with the fact that in Chile







we were basking in sunshine – it's amazing the weather vagaries in this part of the world.

As we waited for news of better weather we at least had a plethora of cold climate clothing shops to check out. A bit of extra winter accessories shopping it would have to be. Hmm, now do I really need that flare gun?

With a brief window of clement weather our private jet was scheduled for take off over the infamous Drake Passage – a stretch of rough water that only the most seaworthy legs can endure. Three days by boat, as adventurous as it may be, was best left to the hardcore nautical nuts. I prefer to enjoy it at a favourable altitude with fine food and a Baileys for dessert.

On arrival at King George Island my fellow guests and I finally saw the truly beautiful ship which we were to call home for the week. The Hanse Explorer has a ton of stats surrounding it – most of which passed over the head of a landlubber like myself. However, I can tell you

that this metal-hulled ice breaker sleeps 12 guests very comfortably, along with 14 crew and its fuel tanks would keep her powering along for 50,000 nautical miles. Should nuclear apocalypse ever happen, I'd want to be on board this boat.

The crew were fabulous, with expert naturalists on board who briefed us thoroughly on what we might see. Some might expect polar bears, for example, but while they are good swimmers they can't make it through Drake Passage. As a result, most of the land mammals in Antarctica are free from predators. It's like a chill-out zone for penguins and seals.

You will see penguins on this trip. Trust me. I saw thousands. And lots of seals too. Don't ask me to list the names of each seal type – go to Nat Geo for that – I simply categorised them as fat ones, fatter ones with small heads and furry ones. To be honest, I only had one thing on my mind. Whales. Specifically, killer whales.

Whales such as humpback and minke were







HANSE



guaranteed, according to the Eyos team. However, spotting the stunning and powerful killer whales would not be so easy. Luck is something that was in our favour from the moment we arrived in King George island and that was evidenced by the weather. Upon our arrival, the sky turned blue and the sun shone for 23 hours a day with a dusting of theatrical clouds to add to the already amazing landscapes.

Day one and the dulcet tones of our Captain – I'm sure he did advertising voiceovers in a previous life – came over the PA. The announcement was that off our port was a pod of killer whales and the zodiac boats were being prepared for launch.

As the zodiacs lowered into the water, us guests got into our winter clothing in what's known as the mud room. Ready for a first outing with a pod of killer whales – you could see the child-like excitement building on everyone's faces. After some good-natured jostling for position for taking pics, it soon became clear that the expedition leaders would ensure that we all got

a chance to capture the perfect image. While respecting the animals' space, of course.

Seeing pods of killer whales within hours of being on the Hanse Explorer was amazing and, as luck would have it, we saw another pod the next day. In fact, every day we saw something memorable and truly life-changing. No matter who you are or what you do, or how cynical you may be about life, there is something about being on a trip like this that is humbling and uplifting in equal measure.

The team at Eyos along with all the crew on the Hanse Explorer made the trip memorable. It was like being surrounded by a group of good friends, with a backdrop of landscapes so breath-taking that some of the guests broke down in tears. We saw avalanches, glacial shearing and icebergs as big as hotels. We kayaked, we climbed, we lay on pebbled beaches as penguins passed inches from us and all of us had our own Antarctic-defining moment.

Mine was during sunset as we sat in a zodiac among a pod of feeding humpback whales. The motion from the ocean gently moved our little blow up rib until we were completely among the whales, who continued to feed – completely unfazed by our presence to the point they came so close I felt I could practically touch them.

The sun was setting beautifully, the landscape was picture-perfect, the weather was cool but not cold and it was free from any sound pollution. Here we were at the bottom of the world – and I would go back there in a heartbeat.

As someone involved in the finance business – as well as being a travel scribe – people look to me to find out where best to invest their finances. In some ways, an expedition with Eyos is one of the best investments you can make. After all, you can spend your money on luxury goods but memories like those I've described will never be forgotten and can never be taken away. This trip will live with me forever.

HOW TO DO IT

EYOS Expeditions will lead you to the most remote regions on Earth in safety and luxury. Its hard-won knowledge, gained through many years exploring remote cruising areas, and the contacts the team has made along the way, will be an asset to any vessel setting off into the wilderness.

The company represents a worldwide network of travel and marine professionals with knowledge and experience that leaves virtually none of the globe unknown. They have spent decades designing once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

eyos-expeditions.com