

TRIP REPORT – ANTARCTICA

Falkland Islands – South Georgia – Weddell Peninsula – South Shetland Islands

21.10.22 – 12.11.22

Overview: I had booked the trip back in 2019, but had had to put it off due to the Covid pandemic sweeping the world, closing borders etc. Finally the day had arrived. It was a 21 day trip – the longest I could find – starting in Buenos Aires, Argentina and finishing in Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina. With time spent in the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and along the Weddell Peninsula in Antarctica itself. I was aware there wouldn't be hundreds of new birds for me, having seen most of the Albatross species on pelagics out of Australia – mostly off Tasmania. There would, of course, be endemics on the islands, 7 potential species of Penguins and the possibility of a few Petrels along the way. Then again it was Antarctica! Who wouldn't go if they could? I had also booked a spot on the kayaking team. There were limited numbers so I felt lucky to be included – and, as it turned out, it was one of the highest highlights of the trip.

Travel: I had arrived in Buenos Aires (BA) the week before and spent a week in Iguazu for which I have uploaded a separate trip report. Following the polar expedition I planned to spend a week in Ushuaia – I will also upload a trip report for that.

Accommodation: I had booked the trip through **Chimu Adventures** and Craig had done all the organizing, forwarding the paperwork and answering my questions over the previous two months. I travelled with **Poseidon Expeditions** on the Sea Spirit, a 90 meter, 5 deck ship capable of holding a maximum 114 passengers. There were 97 other guests on board with me and approximately 70 staff – an impressive ratio. The service on board was 5 Star – a level at which I don't normally travel! However, that was the way it was done and I wasn't complaining. As I was travelling alone I had booked a shared three-berth cabin – the cheapest option – but expecting to spend minimal time in the cabin, I didn't mind who I shared with. I just wanted to go to Antarctica!

The night before embarkation I was booked into the Alvear Art Hotel in BA as part of the 'deal' – I had been staying in a 3 star hotel beforehand, 300 meters away.

Friday 21.10.22

And so it started:

15.00 I retrieved my bags (I had already checked out and paid my \$95 account), loaded up and walked the 300 meters to the Alvear Art. This hotel was a 5 Star place, doorman and busboys (?) all hanging around eager to help and I stomped in carrying laptop bag, 2 rucksacks and my yellow drybag, in my dirty hiking boots, birding pants and t-shirt. Typical birder.

I checked in and was advised my room wasn't ready because they had had a 'problem with a pipe'. So I hung out in the lobby for an hour and a half trying to stay awake. During that time I checked in with the Poseidon people in the lobby and received my final instructions, luggage labels and medical form to complete.

Finally my room was 'ready' – although it had been ready for some time, because when I got up to room 405, Russell from South Australia was already there. We introduced ourselves and started to get acquainted as we'll be spending the next three weeks living together – along with a Mr Gao – onboard the ship.

Eventually Russell and I went out for something to eat, Mr Gao having not shown up. We walked around for a while and finally decided on a slightly upmarket kind of place where we shared a vegetarian pizza and had a beer each. (5,400 pesos or approx \$50Aus) Returning to our room, Richard Gao from Shanghai - but has spent the last two years in south America - introduced himself as our third room mate.

We just poked around for the rest of the evening and then crashed around 10.

Saturday 22.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 1

Finally the big day arrived. I was awake at 5.45, but lay on in bed until 7.15 when I thought it was best to start getting it together. The other two woke as I started packing up my stuff in preparation for the move to the ship.

We went down for breakfast around 7.45 and dropped our bags at reception to be taken separately. After breakfast I spent the time updating my photos and bird lists and, finally, updating the last entry in my blog. I guessed I wouldn't be able to do that again until we berthed at Ushuaia in 23 days time.

At 11.15 Russell and I were in reception waiting to board the first bus, Richard was on Bus no 3. We left the hotel at 11.30 and soon after midday were ushered through a scanning process – I don't know why really – and a passport check before boarding Sea Spirit and joining the other guests in the lounge area. We were given a brief briefing and then taken in groups to hand in our medical forms and our passports which were then held by the ship. Then we were taken to our cabin – 341 – and left to unpack and generally start settling in.

I chose the bed by the window, Russell took the larger sofa bed – we left the other middle single to Richard. When he arrived we discussed changing beds every 7 days so that we all took turns on the sofa bed and/or the bed by the window. We all agreed to that scenario, which was great. At 13.00 we had lunch. A 3 course a la carte delivery which was very 5 star. This was way above what either Russell or I had genuinely expected, but it seemed to be the norm. We sat at a table with 5 other guests, including an older couple from Melbourne, 2 individual guys from the Netherlands and a 30 something woman from Germany. There seemed to be a number of people travelling individually which I found surprising. I had thought most would be with a group or at least in couples.

After lunch and a bit of free time, most of which I spent exploring the ship and on deck looking for stuff, we had the main briefing of the day. It appears there are only 98 passengers on board (which is brilliant!) out of a possible 114. This is the first trip of the season (we knew that) and the team were flexible when it comes to doing things – which may work to my advantage later in the trip. A large percentage (maybe 50%) were Taiwanese with a fair number of Germans, a few other Europeans and a few from the UK. Most appeared to be at least my age or older, although there were a few younger people on board. I had been expecting a large number of Americans, but so far had only identified a couple. The ship is quite small – I joked with Russell as we boarded suggesting this was just the ship to take us to the ship – and was built in 1991. It isn't a cruise type ship – there is no ongoing entertainment or classes in embroidery or line dancing. The trip was actually referred to as an 'expedition', which, of course, suited me down to the ground, and there was a very strong focus on preserving the environment and wildlife. The briefing ended with an emergency lifeboat drill during which we had to wear lifejackets and meet in designated muster areas. While we stood on deck waiting for the exercise to finish a large hawkmoth appeared from somewhere and I grabbed it off the floor. I took it back to my cabin and took some photos.

(Side Note: Later a lady approached me and asked me about it. She believed it was a **Popular Hawk Moth** from the Northern Hemisphere. I had found out the boat had recently been to Iceland and Greenland before sailing down to Argentina so its quite possible it was 'smuggled' down in a life jacket?)

The rest of the afternoon I spent mostly on the deck until 17.30 when we were issued with our expeditionary (take home) parkas and heavy duty (borrow) wellington type boots. I didn't see much – about a dozen **Brown-hooded Gulls** and a couple of **Snowy-crowned Terns**. We were still relatively close to the coast and apparently will travel south before turning east to the Falkland Is, our first destination. The sea was relatively calm, with just a slight roll noticeable and the weather forecast for the next 4 days was to continue as is.

At 19.00 it was dinner time. As Russell said it's just eat, brief, eat, brief.... Amazing amount of food and selection on the, again, 3 course, a la carte meal. There were at least 5 starter choices and the same on main course as well as a list of an 'always available' selection.

Towards the end of dinner the ship picked up a much more noticeable roll, nothing dramatic, but a bit staggy at times.

So!! It's really happening! Finally, I'm actually on my way to ANTARCTICA!! It just seems so unreal. Its still hard to believe – but has become a little more believable today. I met up with Gaston, the expedition ornithologist whom I had bumped into on Thursday in BA and it does appear that I am the only serious birder on board – well, no one else showed up on deck with bins! Maybe I was the only one stupid enough to bother!

Sunday 23.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 2

I woke up at 5.15 and read for a while, getting up at 5.45. I was on deck just after 6 with a coffee and a smoke and during the day returned to the same spot whenever I had 'free' time. It was a bit slow to start with but during the day we had 100s of **Great** and **Manx Shearwaters**, a load of **White-chinned Petrels**, **Black-browed Albatross**, approx 10 **Brown Skuas**, several **Wilson's Storm Petrels**, **Southern Giant Petrels** and **Sooty Shearwaters**.

We also had

Yellow-billed Terns – about 20 altogether over the first few hours

South American Tern – only saw 2, once, but the red bill was clear to see.

Magellanic Penguins, I was surprised to see so far from shore (land no longer visible, although we were still heading SE). Groups sitting on the water, head pattern clearly visible.

Olog's Gull. A guy showed me a photo on his camera that I was pretty sure was one of these. An hour or so later a similar aged gull appeared and I got my own photos – quite likely the same bird.

I also believed I had a juvenile **Long-tailed Skua** and a single Chilean Skua, but not 100% certain on either – just being cautious really.

I did miss a Grey-headed Albatross, seen by a group with Gaston, the resident ornithologist.

It was just brilliant watching the Shearwaters and Albatrosses cruising alongside the ship – I never tire of watching these birds.

Twice breaching whales were called – once a Humpback which I didn't try to get out to see - and the second a Southern Right Whale which I didn't try for either because they were all too far away to be worthwhile and by the time one gets on deck...

Dolphins were seen several times and I managed to catch a jumping **Dusky Dolphin** at one stage – the only one I saw that was identifiable.

I also believe I had a **Antarctic Minke** turn briefly, just once, no blow.

On a couple of occasions **South American Sea Lions** were seen floating on their backs with their flippers in the air.

We had three briefings – one to introduce the expedition team members, the second a talk on Pelagic Seabirds and the third on Cetaceans. Apart from those – and breakfast, lunch and dinner I spent my time on the deck.

The weather continued more or less calm with just a slight roll noticeable, although it was predicted that tonight the sea conditions would worsen and sea sickness tablets should be taken. All in all the first day at sea was excellent – and a lot more birds than I had expected at this latitude.

Some details:

Buenos Aires to the Falkland Islands is approx 1,900 kms and takes 4 days – we may get there Wednesday evening or Thursday morning dependent on sea conditions. I didn't realise it would take that long.

Falkland Islands to South Georgia is over 1,400 kms and takes 2.5 days.

South Georgia to the South Shetlands and the Antarctic itself is 1,300 kms and another 2.5 days.

South Shetland to Ushuaia – 1,000 kms and 2 days.

The expedition leader gave an excellent summary and begged for flexibility as everything depends on the weather – and the captain.

Monday 24.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 3

Up and out at 6 again. Seas a little bigger than yesterday and it was colder.

Just a quick note. I hadn't worn any thermals yet. It had been quite pleasant and at times quite warm out of the wind. Even in the wind, once the sun was up properly, it wasn't bitter – cold, but livable in a long-sleeved T-shirt, long sleeved shirt and my Karrimor fleece. Long pants, (no thermals), socks and hiking boots. Some folk were wearing their expedition parkas, hoods up, gloves on, but I was trying to minimize protection to acclimatize myself gradually. Overnight it had dropped to 8C, so the temperature was coming down and apparently the sea temperature had dropped 3 degrees since leaving Buenos Aires.

I spent two hours on deck. The bird numbers had dropped off quite dramatically since the previous day. More (juvenile mainly) **Southern Giant Petrels**, a few **Great Shearwaters** – approx 50 throughout the day – a handful of **Manx Shearwaters** and a few **Black-browed Albatrosses**.

About a half hour in and I saw my first (of this trip) Wandering/Royal Albatross. During the day I saw about 8, a couple of which were close enough to definitively ID as **Southern Royals**. Photos of others taken by the Taiwanese group also proved to be Royals, not Wandering.

Late in that watch **Cape Petrels** started to appear, looking cute as they circled the ship. We had breakfast and I went back on deck from 9-11.00. Just before I had to go to the mandatory Kayak briefing, I saw my first (ever) **Atlantic Petrel**. Brilliant! Very like the Tahiti Petrel of the Southport pelagics.

I also had a couple of **White-bellied Storm Petrels** – also a lifer. It was good, because the Stormies came around singly and so made it easier to follow with the boat's height in between the waves. There were also a number of **Wilson's Storm Petrels**, but easy to differentiate given the underbelly views.

The kayak briefing was in great detail and safety stressed repeatedly. The putting on of the dry suit, the booties, the life jacket and the kayak skirt was demonstrated and then we were all provided with items of the same that will remain with us for the voyage. We had to put it all on to the instructor's satisfaction. We were told exactly what to wear under the dry suit too – no cotton, all merino thermals (check), fleece (check) and two pairs of thick socks (check, check). We were also provided a small dry bag to put the small stuff in – beanie, gloves, water bottle. They showed us how to wrap our parkas up so they were compact and would be carried in the accompanying safety zodiac while we paddled, in anticipation of landing. Getting in and out of the kayaks would be done via the zodiac and it was stressed that we needed to be capable of hauling our own weight over the inflatable edge of the zodiac. It sounds like a challenging operation, but all will be good! I think.....

After lunch I went back out to the deck and wandered around for a while. The birds were few in number and now seemed to be primarily **Atlantic Petrels**, although few in number, not the masses of other birds we had had the previous day. Interesting really. We must have moved out of the main feeding/fishing area overnight. Now it was 'just' **Atlantic** and **Cape Petrels** in small numbers and the occasional **Great Shearwater**, **Southern Giant Petrel** and **Storm Petrel sp.** We were still two days from the Falklands and I was really enjoying this 4 day seawatch, because basically, that's what it was! I knew it wouldn't appeal to everyone – some might have found it boring - but I never tired of watching the Albatrosses, Shearwaters and Petrels soaring around- just awesome!

Other passengers used the time between food (!) to walk around the deck (the ship is only about 90 meters long so it's a short walk), go to the gym, sleep, read or, in a couple of cases, use the hot spa on the open deck. There were also a couple of presentations around previous historical expeditions to Antarctica – Shackleton and so on – which I didn't bother attending, but they did help take up people's time, I guess.

I spent some time alone on deck during the latter presentation until 16.30 when I decided to have a shower and some quiet time alone in our cabin.

Then it was dinner time – again....

Tuesday 25.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 4

Out on deck again just after 6. Almost a flat calm. Virtually no wind. The ship's wake was creating a bigger wave than the ocean itself. The birds, although fewer in number, were cruising slowly along, gliding in the ship's wake or just off the rear – perfect opportunity for photographers, stable platform, slow birds, close proximity. The Taiwanese contingent were making a day of it, huge lens, tripods, all the gear.

I spent two hours seawatching from the upper deck. Nothing new, but saw my first Prion of the voyage and had good views of a **Southern Fulmar**.

Through the day the Prions, presumably **Fairy**, and any photos I saw seemed to bear that out, increased in number with several always passing the boat. A conservative estimate of at least 150 through the day was probably way under estimated.

A few **Northern Giant Petrels** were spotted among the many **Southerns** and we had a few (less than 5, I believe) **Wandering Albatross** – my first confirmed view.

I saw a porpoising **Magellanic Penguin** briefly and what I believe was a single **Southern Elephant Seal** checked us out as we passed.

In contrast to previous days I recorded only 3 **White-chinned Petrels**, 2 or 3 **Sooty Shearwaters** and 1 **Great Shearwater**.

The morning continued calm, wave height increased with the wind in the afternoon, but it all settled down again by evening.

We had a couple of briefings.

The first advised us that thanks to the excellent conditions we would arrive at the Falklands a day early – the next morning! So the brief contained all the advice and instruction regarding getting

in and out of the zodiacs, how to prepare and how to sit in the boats. Walking on the private island we will land on was also outlined and what we would see – a Black-browed Albatross rookery and the penguin species we could expect. The plan is to land first at a quiet inlet on the east side of the Falkland, then move during lunch to a second spot. The next day we should visit Stanley, the main town on the Falkland west coast.

Gaston gave a briefing regarding the birds of the Falklands and how we might see them, then the kayak 'team' were called together and we discussed the first kayak outing of the trip, planned for 8.00 the next morning. It would be a short, getting set up outing of about an hour thus giving us time to walk across the island to the rookery. I was very glad of that as I didn't want to miss a landing if I could avoid it.

Later in the day we had to collect all the clothes and baggage we would be taking onto the island and have it bio-security checked by the expedition leaders. That involved vacuuming all pockets and bags, checking all Velcro for any bits of vegetation etc and washing our footwear, firstly in soapy water and then in a special disinfectant, to avoid taking any seeds or dirt onto the land. Bird flu was of particular concern at this time.

Apparently South Georgia is even more strict and there are biosecurity officers there who may do spot checks. My gear took about 40 minutes work – and as I am going to land in the kayak gear (dry suit, booties etc) most of my stuff that got vacuumed won't be worn tomorrow morning anyway. However tomorrow afternoon is predicted to be a 'wet' landing and we'll need to wear the provided rubber boots and our own waterproof over trousers. The advice was if you didn't have waterproof over trousers, you wouldn't be landing anywhere.

All in all it was pretty intense and the 'guidelines' (read as 'rules') were pretty rigid – as, I guess, they have to be to protect this fragile environment. Fragile in the sense that any exposure to a disease like bird flu would decimate whole populations and put specific species at immediate catastrophic risk.

A final brief before dinner by the on-ship photographer regarding taking photos in Antarctica was interrupted momentarily by 3 **Hump-backed Whales** passing off the starboard bow and everyone crowded out to see them before returning to Pete's talk.

Wednesday 26.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 5

What a day!

We all awoke at around 5.30 and, basically, got out on deck as soon as. It was a misty, damp, cold morning, but we were here, at the Falkland Islands. A day early, choppy looking water, strong wind, but all looking good for a landing. (It always depends on the conditions at the time of landing. The weather and the seas in this part of the world can change. Very quickly – as will be seen.....)

I had both **Imperial** and **Rock Shags** fairly quickly while we cruised slowly to our anchor point in the inlet.

We had breakfast and then were scheduled to depart. The zodiacs were lowered into the water and we checked off the ship by swiping our individual credit-type cards in a scanner. That way they knew who was ashore and as we swiped them again on our return, whether anyone had been left behind.

I was in the first zodiac to leave the ship and we were all carefully seated by a couple of guys on the ship and the boat driver himself. All very controlled and supported. We all sat, hands inside, bags between your knees and the driver steered the zodiac into shore. This would be a 'dry' landing, as a short jetty had been built on the beach so I was wearing my own hiking boots for comfort on the 2.5 km walk across this part of the island. I also had on my Berghaus waterproof over pants, my Expeditionary (bright red) parka, my flotation device and a beanie. Underneath I only had a long-sleeved t-shirt and long-sleeved birding shirt. No thermals. My bins, gloves and camera/bum bag arrangement were all secured in a dry bag I had brought for the purpose – most people were similarly dressed and prepared. Hands and face were a bit cold in the wind, but otherwise I was quite warm and comfortable – it was about 6C.

We landed, again assisted by the expedition leaders, and were welcomed ashore by the owner of the island. A number of islands are privately owned and this was one of them. The owner was paid by the ship per passenger to land and provided a morning tea of home baked cakes and such – I actually didn't partake, being interested in the birds and not wanting to spend time indoors. The first bird I saw was, I was sure, a **Blackish Cinclodes** fly by as we landed. I didn't see that particular bird again, but saw a couple more along the way.

Austral Thrush was next, acting like a Blackbird, saw quite a few on the first part of the walk. We had a few minutes before setting off and I managed to see **Kelp Goose** along the shoreline. Then **Upland Goose** – and they were all along the walk, some with goslings along side. There were a few **Ruddy-necked Geese** here and there, but they were in the minority to the Upland.

Before we left the beach I spotted a single **Crested Duck** some distance away and a pair of flightless **Falkland Steamer Ducks**. I didn't get photos then, but later. The latter one of the two endemics on the Islands.

Magellanic Oystercatcher looking very like every other Pied Oystercatcher from a distance and a pair of **Blackish Oystercatcher** were also along the stony shoreline.

A pair of **Yellow-billed Teal** in a soak were the only ones I saw all day and several **Turkey Vultures** soared overhead.

I made sure I was at the forefront of the walking group alongside Gaston and he soon spotted a **Dark-faced Ground Tyrant** ahead on the track.

Two **Long-tailed Meadowlarks** were poking around nearby adding some colour to the rather bleak landscape and we also had **Striated Caracara** fairly soon which was seen well by everyone birders and non-birders.

Two raptors appeared overhead and Gaston called them as **Apomado Falcons**.

The 2.5 km walk ended at the top of a steep slope falling away to the ocean below. Down this slope and on similar slopes nearby was the **Black-browed Albatross** and **Southern Rockhopper Penguin** colony. We all quietly moved down the established tracks through the long marram type grass and feasted on the spectacle before us. We had to stay 5 meters from any animal or bird and they had right of way when it came to movement. We were advised to remain quiet and move slowly and give everyone their due, there wasn't a sound from the 90 odd people present. I spent about 30 minutes then headed back up the tracks and, eventually, back to the landing site. Unfortunately there wasn't time to look for my other target bird – Cobb's Wren (endemic) as its habitat was tussock grass and the nearest was several hundred meters away.

I was handed off into the third zodiac to return to the ship. By now the waves and wind had picked up considerably. We had 8 plus the driver (Pete, a Dutch guy) in the boat. As we approached the landing 'marina' on the back of the ship we watched the previous two zodiacs land their passengers. It was pretty hairy. The zodiacs were going up and down and the sea was creaming across the marina – and then pouring into one of the boats as it tried to dock.

Pete told us it was gonna be dangerous and we should pay attention to all instructions. I was pretty nervous but determined not to panic. It was pretty scary.

When it came to our turn, we made two attempts before latching on. I threw the rope to the marina crew and they tried to secure the zodiac to the railings. The boat was going up and down and bumping hard against the marina. Pete started to offload passengers, got one off, then fell as the boat tilted and landed half on top of me with the passenger in his arms. Meanwhile the sea poured into the boat via my side and back. I stayed as calm as I could and helped Pete back to his feet. One of the other passengers, a small, elderly German woman, had also fallen and was lying on her back in the bottom of the zodiac. The boat was still going up and down and twisting from side to side. The water was still pouring in across my back and legs when the wave ran off the marina. Pete got the passenger he had been helping, off, then helped the fallen woman to her feet. He quickly guided everyone else off until only I was left and I got off safely and quickly.

Wow! Later it came out that it was the worst landing Pete has ever had and was considered pretty seriously dangerous.

The captain then turned the ship at an angle to the waves and used the turning propellers to flatten the sea out somewhat and the other zodiacs disembarked quite safely and without incident.

I expected to be soaked through, but was hardly even damp. My Berghaus overpants worked perfectly (thanks Mr H – I bought them in Belfast a few years ago and they've proved their worth!) and my parka took the water like a duck's back. My beanie was wet and I had a few damp spots, but other than that, all dry. Even my Gortex lined Zamberlains didn't get wet inside!

It was quite an experience and made it all so real. I wouldn't have missed it for the world!

As we had lunch the captain took the boat a short distance to our second planned landing spot – The Neck on Saunder's Island. It was almost flat calm and the landings went without any trouble at either end. Except this was a 'wet' landing and we had to wear the provided rubber boots. Stepping out of the zodiac into the knee high waves, helped and supported by two expedition team leaders and the boat driver was a dawdle though and we all got ashore dry.

This spot was the **Gentoo Penguin** rookery.

Along the way **Magellanic Penguins** appeared to have individual 'properties' – not in a rookery like the other penguins.

On the main beach on the other side of the rookery – a handful of **King Penguins**.

Overhead and two on the ground – **Brown Skuas**

On the beach – **Dolphin Gulls**.

And a pair of **Falkland Steamer Ducks**.

Magellanic Oystercatchers proved to be quite different from Pied on closer inspection – their yellow eyes were weird!

A pair of **Brown-hooded Gulls** put in a nice appearance.

And I found a pair of **Crested Ducks** doing their thing in a rock pool.

Man it was just AWESOME!!

Eventually we were taken back to the ship – safely and completely boring this time! Then it was time for a de-brief and dinner.

The plans for the next few days were laid out.

Tomorrow is Stanley, the Falkland Island capital – and a visit to a nearby location called Gorse Cove – especially for the birders. (Thursday)

The plan then WAS to head for South Georgia on Friday, but the weather was showing an average 7 meter wave height between here and there and a 4 meter wave height at South Georgia in two days time so.... As we have a day in hand (we arrived a day early at the Falklands) they plan to spend another day here (Friday), before following that storm to South Georgia and hopefully the wave height will be only 4 meters and 2 meters on site.

We'll know more tomorrow, but that's the way it is in this part of the world – Plan A becomes Plan B changes to Plan C, D, E, F..... All good, we're here and so far so good.

What a day!!

Thursday 27.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 6

When we woke we found ourselves in the outer harbour off Stanley, the capital of the Falklands.

The bunker barge was alongside and they were preparing to refuel. No smoking onboard.

The crew did a trial zodiac run to the inner harbour but it was too wet to transfer us so we had to wait until the ship finished bunkering and we headed in to the inner harbour. By midday we were being transferred to a wharf in downtown Stanley.

I took a zodiac and wandered the foreshore. There were **Upland Geese, Steamer Ducks, Kelp** and **Dolphin Gulls, Rock** and **Imperial Shags, Southern Giant Petrels** and the occasional **South American Tern** but the only new bird I added to my Falkland Island list was **House Sparrow**.

I visited the general store and bought some cigarettes – not many as they were horrendously expensive – a couple of lighters and had a coffee (good, barista made). I chatted for a few minutes with three local girls of around 14 years of age to find out what it was like living here at the bottom of the world.

I wasn't overly impressed with Stanley, although it was nice to be somewhere where they drove on the left again.

At 14.30 as we waited for a bus to take us to Gypsy Cove, around 15 minutes away, a female **South American Sea Lion** sat on the dock nearby.

I managed to get photos of **Blackish Oystercatcher** along the rocks, where **Black-crowned Night Herons** and **Rock Shags** were breeding.

Around 15.30 a group of us elected to walk back escorted by Gaston on a birding walk. Most of the participants were not hardcore birders and had difficulty seeing Steamer Ducks never mind identifying them but we got lucky and had a single brilliant **White-bridled Finch**.

We were picked up by the ship after about 6 kms and relaxed on board. However, as we waited for the ship to dock several **Commerson's Dolphins** appeared.

Back on board the evening briefing was a bit somber. The weather was predicted to be generally horrific the next day. We would stay docked to the wharf overnight and, hopefully, leave Stanley around midnight the next night. The expedition team leader had organised two guest lectures from Stanley to talk the next morning, bus shuttles to take anyone who wanted into Stanley and 3 separate walk/tours for the next afternoon. Amazing work – to organise these options at short notice to keep people occupied. Their attention to detail and consideration for the passengers was exceptional. They didn't have to do this stuff. The whole trip was weather dependent – we all knew that – and they could have just said, 'suck it up', but they went out of their way to arrange

stuff as alternatives. This was my opinion but others who had cruised before were similarly complimentary and somewhat impressed by the effort made. We had the usual a la carte 3 course waiter/waitress served dinner. The food is just exceptional. Breakfast and lunch were generally buffet style with a huge range of choices. There was also other stuff you can order that's not set out – but was always available – poached or fried eggs or an omelet for example at breakfast. It was just extraordinary! The evening dinner was so well presented – 5 star stuff. Now maybe some people would expect this, but for me it was just so luxurious. Obviously our rooms were served every day – beds made, turned down in the evening with a chocolate on the pillow. The staff would do anything, anything, to make your day and trip perfect. The expedition team were so friendly and helpful and interested and informative. It was just blowing me away!

Friday 28.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 7

A 'make and mend day' to use the age-old seafarer's jargon. We remained tied up to the dock all day as the storm passed over. High winds persisted, up to 45 knots at times. It rained a bit in the early morning but the winds were so bad the port of Stanley was actually closed to incoming ships.

We were all thankful we were not en route to South Georgia where the seas were predicted to be 7 meters plus...

Most of the offered tours were cancelled due to the weather, but the local information sessions went ahead and an extra one was added in the afternoon, as the trips were not available.

I didn't do much, just updated all my photos and wrote up my preparation blog stuff. Late in the afternoon I did take the shuttle bus into Stanley and sent off some more postcards. I nearly fell off the gangplank on exiting the ship as a gust struck and I wasn't prepared, but other than that it was a pretty quiet day.

In the evening the expedition team leader announced we would depart for South Georgia between 22.00 and midnight and we should take seasickness tablets if prone to being ill. The seas over the next couple of days were expected to be around 4 meters, but we were planning on following the foregone storm south as close as possible to get to South Georgia ahead of the next low pressure system approaching from the north. There were no promises made of course, but she hoped we would be protected on the east side of the island once we got there and hopefully would be able to land at some stage. The trip to South Georgia was expected to take two and a half days.

I didn't do any birding, but did see some **Falkland Steamer Ducks, Southern Giant Petrels, Rock Shags, Turkey Vultures** and **Kelp Gulls** knocking around the harbour area.

Apart from the aforementioned we just enjoyed the three meals and general company during the day.

I took a tablet as I went to bed at 21.30.

Saturday 29.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 8

We were well out to sea when I got up at 6. We had sailed before midnight and there was no land in sight. It had been a bit bumpy and the swells had increased, but was still very manageable – I enquired and was advised the swells were 3-4 meters.

I had taken a seasickness tablet before going to sleep, but didn't take another. On deck it was colder, a bitter wind, greyish skies and I had a shower or two of light rain as I seawatched.

As one shower crossed the stern of the boat a rainbow appeared. One end touched the deck below me and the other the edge of the ship on the opposite side. It was a complete rainbow, almost two thirds of a circle and seemed to be within touching distance! It only lasted a couple of minutes but another passenger managed to capture it on his phone camera.

Bird-wise it was pretty much as previous sailings – **Northern & Southern Giant Petrels, Black-browed Albatrosses** and **Cape Petrels** made up the bulk, while **Wandering Albatrosses, Southern Fulmars, Wilson's Storm-Petrels** and **Prion sp** moved through every few minutes.

I seawatched until breakfast at 8 and had a few **Atlantic** and **White-chinned Petrels, Sooty Shearwaters** and one **Great Shearwater**.

After breakfast I resumed my position at the stern, seated, feet on the lower rail, huddled down in my bright red jacket, beanie, overpants and, for the first time, gloves, and worked on identifying the Prions buzzing backwards and forwards around the ship.

I was pretty confident I had a few **Slender-billed** and one or two **Antarctic**, while most were **Fairy** or just unidentifiable.

Lunch was called at 12.30 and I sat on to let the queue reduce. Just before I headed in I had my first **Grey-headed Albatross** of the trip. There had been at least one seen from the ship and one nesting on our first stop in the Falklands but I had seen neither.

After lunch I went out again for another hour and a half and towards the end of that had a **Light-mantled Sooty Albatross** that circled the boat and flew really close several times at my level.

Brilliant views!

The bird numbers dropped a bit after that so I gave it away and headed in for a bit of a rest.

The briefing in the evening emphasized the bio-security on South Georgia. We had been through another rigorous check during the day – vacuuming our beanies, gloves, jackets, gloves – anything we would take onto the islands and scrubbing and disinfecting our boots etc. It was very intense. We were advised we could not sit down anywhere on the island – we must remain standing everywhere to minimize contact and avoid transference of material. The wildlife was detailed and we were warned to be aware of the male Fur Seals and watch out for rampaging Elephant Seals - and they weren't joking.

After dinner we headed for bed and put our watches an hour ahead to compensate for South Georgia time. The windows were all blacked out too and the deck lights dimmed to avoid birds landing on the ship – apparently this is a real issue at South Georgia. I was hoping to see some Prions in the hand.

Sunday 30.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 9

A bit of a slow day for birds in some ways, but I did add two new species to the trip list.

I didn't get up till 6.45, dawn already at least an hour gone. The birds were much less and this pattern continued through the day. I seawatched as 'normal' until breakfast and afterwards for most of the morning. I did take a break around 11 and read for a while, but when lunch was called I hung around to give the queue a chance and almost immediately had a **Light-mantled Sooty Albatross** hanging almost overhead. At the same time I spotted two **Grey-headed Albatross** around the ship – the same time as the previous day? I didn't see either species again any time during the day.

The birds of the day were **Blue Petrels** however. They were first seen by Gaston early on and continued to show up among the Prions all day. I reckoned I saw about 20 in total, but, as with all pelagics, were they the same two or three birds circling the ship or 20 individual birds? It's always difficult to know. We also had several (those numbers again) **Black-bellied Storm Petrels**. They actually seemed to be in about equal numbers with the **Wilson's**.

Other than that it was a pretty quiet day. The seas continued around the 3 meter size, I thought, but the wind dropped off, the sun shone most of the afternoon and the sky was blue. The weather was truly fantastic considering what could have been. It was colder, 4C in the morning, but wrapped up well, it was easily manageable. Still no thermals, just beanie, thin gloves and the supplied jacket, which was phenomenal! It's clear how far south we have come, as the sun was now shining straight down the wake from the north (obviously) where before it had been overhead during the day.

Other birds: Gaston had seen a single Soft-plumaged Petrel, and expected more, and one of the Taiwanese dudes had a picture of an Arctic Tern.

In the afternoon Gaston gave a presentation re the birds of South Georgia. I then spent some time with him, kindly, describing for me where to go in Ushuaia. He was a professional bird guide there so the info was very welcome and reliable.

The meals continued unabated. And we still had two more weeks of this!

Monday 31.10.22

Antarctic expedition Day 10

I was up at 5 and out on deck. It was 0C and there was a shallow drift of snow on the deck. The westerly wind was freezing. Within 10 minutes a small snow storm came in and visibility dropped to about 30 meters. An **Arctic Tern** showed up during the snow fall – really weird seeing it happily flying through the weather close behind the ship.

It didn't last too long and the sky cleared – to show South Georgia on our port side. Steep, snow covered mountains reared out of the sea – it was pretty spectacular.

Birds were few around the ship – a few **Giant Petrels**, a handful of **Cape Petrels** and the odd **Black-browed Albatross**. Most significantly there were several **Grey-headed Albatross** circling the ship.

I wandered up to the bow where it was relatively sheltered and had several **Blue Petrels** hammer across the bows. I soon saw small groups of **Diving-Petrels** flying away from the ship.

One only came close enough for me to be confident it was a **Common Diving Petrel**, bearing in mind South Georgian Diving Petrels were a probability.

Another snow storm came down upon us and out of the murk a pure white **Snow Petrel!** Wow, one of my target birds, absolutely beautiful. I chased it down the ship to the stern and watched it swoop and dive around before disappearing again.

After breakfast I headed out again and Gaston and I watched several **Soft-plumaged Petrels** drive through another snow storm before it cleared and we were sailing slowly up Fortuna Inlet. The scenery was spectacular, including the Fortuna glacier (my first) oozing out of the mountains to the sea.

Along the way several **Antarctic Terns** passed the ship while the odd **King Penguin** dived out of sight at the ship's approach.

Apart from those species there was little to see bird-wise, but the scenery just kept on coming and with the bins the beaches could be seen to be covered in seals and King Penguins.

I didn't bother going to lunch – there was just too much to see and so only myself and a Taiwanese birder saw the second **Snow Petrel** of the day.

Several **South Georgia Shags** also flew by, but I didn't get the camera on them. Mind you they looked pretty much like the Imperial Shags we had had at the Falklands, but they are a separate species (tick!)

A landing was planned and as the sea was calm, the wind had dropped off or we were protected by the island itself, it looked good to go. Kayaking was also on the cards....

I changed into thermals for the first time, 2 pairs of thick socks, a light fleece, dry suit, booties, the kayak skirt and the life jacket, beanie and gloves and hung around waiting for the go. 6 of us had decided to kayak out of the 12 on the list. My kayak buddy, Joanna, was ready to rock n roll and eventually we went down to the marina at the back of the ship, loaded into a zodiac and headed off to a slightly more sheltered bay to start. Joanne and I were the second kayak off the ramp and we managed to both get into the craft from the zodiac without too much trouble. I was in back with steering control and Joanne up front.

We kayaked around for about an hour seeing **Southern Elephant Seals** and **Antarctic Fur Seals** along the beaches and in the water. We didn't get too close to anything and it snowed throughout. In fact it snowed all afternoon – not heavily, but continuously.

I was pretty busy trying to keep the kayak in a straight line and match my paddle stroke to Joanne's and still get a look at everything that was going on. It wasn't cold, but my hands did get wet despite being in gloves and inside pogies - a cover attached to the paddle. I had also added my muff to my ensemble and was glad of its additional warmth around my face.

After the hour or so, we met up with the zodiac – which had been following us at a discreet distance as safety/rescue boat – and climbed back out of the kayaks into the zodiac. It was easier than I had expected and all managed to complete the maneuver without incident.

They dropped us on the beach with all the other passengers and we set off for the King Penguin rookery.

At the landing one of the expedition team, knowing my bird interest, pointed out the endemic **South Georgia Pipit** nearby. I got a view before it flew, which was lucky because it was the only half decent view I got of the species on the day.

The beach was littered with **Antarctic Fur Seals** and groups of **Southern Elephant Seals**. Some of the males were colossal, while the Elephant Seal females suckled large young and bawled at each other. **King Penguin** groups and individuals wandered around in between the seals, the passengers and each other. It was a scene out of a National Geographic documentary. All a bit surreal really.

Further along the beach the third endemic of the day – **South Georgia Pintail**. About 30 birds scattered over a relatively small area, feeding within meters of the passing visitors. They looked pretty much the same as the Yellow-billed Pintail I had seen in BA, but...tick!

I walked the km or so to the rookery which was still 250-300 meters away at the closest point.

There were a heap, at least hundreds, of large brown juveniles and many of the thousands of adult birds appeared to be molting hence the distance preserved between us and them.

I took some photos and videos but started feeling cold and very tired so made the hike back to the landing zone, stopping to allow Penguins to cross my path as the wont took them – they have right of way and must be allowed to proceed. Fur and Elephant Seals had to be avoided too as they have a tendency to aggression, the former to the visitors, the latter to each other.

I got the first zodiac back to the ship and stripped off my gear prior to getting a very welcome cup of coffee and cigarette.

The rest of the afternoon was spent reviewing my photos, updating my lists and reliving the day with the other guests. It was a pretty cool day!

Tuesday 1.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 11

I didn't hurry to get up and out. We were moored in Jason's Harbour and there were few birds around. It was very calm and after breakfast we went kayaking again.

It was brilliant. Calm, virtually no wind, sunny spells, patches of blue sky in between the light clouds. Ab-sol-ute-ly magic!

Joanne and I managed more efficiently this time and it was a much more pleasant experience. We saw **Elephant** and **Fur Seals** on the beaches and rocks, quite close, from the kayak. A couple of **Fur Seals** in the water checked us out but didn't venture too close.

At one point as we negotiated our way around a small rocky outcrop, a very strong wind gust descended unexpectedly and we were literally pushed onto the rocks. The kayak hit but didn't mount the rock and we were blown clear back into the bay we had just left. It was probably more dramatic than it sounds – certainly felt like that at the time, but it was all over in a few seconds and we were supported quickly by Eduardo in the zodiac – we continued, unfazed by the incident.

We disturbed a colony of **Kelp Gulls**, they took off and one shat on me. **Brown Skuas** patrolled the cliffs and a couple of **Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses** were nesting on the grassy slopes, **Giant Petrels** sitting on the water just meters away, while **Antarctic Terns** flew on and off the rocks, calling in protest. I GoPro'd the whole adventure.

After two hours – which felt like 40 minutes – we landed on the beach with the other guests and hiked up to a hill overlooking the 'harbour'. We had to be careful as individual Fur Seals hike themselves up into the tussocky grass and hide away – coming upon one can be a little dangerous. We saw a few **South Georgia Pintail** but I was looking for, and eventually found, a **South Georgia Pipit** that I managed to get in camera.

We returned to the zodiac – we were the last ones to leave the beach – had our boots scrubbed and slowly patrolled along the beach front checking out the **Elephant Seals** lazing and quarreling on the beach with the males controlling their harems.

Back on board and another deep clean of all our gear before lunch, then a bit of hanging around as an inspector came on board from the South Georgian government to inspect the ship and give us clearance to land at Gritviken, an abandoned whaling station.

When we finally got to board the zodiacs for the trip ashore he was checking every person – bag and boots primarily – before we could board.

We landed and visited Shackleton's grave – and a whiskey toast was arranged for those who wanted it.

We walked along the sea front to the whaling station and the remains of the steel vats and whaling ships. It was quite interesting.

But my main focus was the **Antarctic Terns** perched up and nesting in the remains of the whaling machinery.

A couple of **South Georgia Shags** showed quite well too.

After a couple of hours we boarded the zodiacs back to the ship and the usual evening followed – sort photos, write notes and have dinner.

Wednesday 2.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 12

I got up at 6 and headed on deck. Once again we were half way into another sheltered bay - Ocean Bay. Birds were once again few and far between so I headed down to queue for breakfast at 6.20, 10 minutes before the official call.

Once breakfast was over I prepared for another morning's kayak. We boarded the zodiacs at 7.50 and headed over to the most sheltered part of the bay. It was very calm with long, slow swells pushing through. Once everyone was 'loaded' into the kayaks we set off as a group. Eduardo leading in a single kayak and Eloise following in a double. This morning there were 5 passenger kayaks and I had swapped places with Joanne. She was steering while I sat up front and kind of provided the engine power when we needed it.

We kayaked into a sheltered bay. There were **Antarctic Fur Seals** in the water and on the rocks, **Southern Elephant Seals** lifted their heads and snorted at us in disgust. The **Giant Petrels** must have roosted there because there were 40 or 50 of them paddling around, washing and preening and giving us side-eye as they swam away. A couple of curious juvenile male Fur Seals swam

around the kayaks, raising their heads to goggle at the intruders – they were very cute. Once again, **Antarctic Terns** and **South Georgia Shags** were around in small numbers. Just heaven!! We moved along the shoreline close to the kelp-covered rocks and into small side bays. It was snowing lightly and quite cold, but wrapped up well in our dry suits, beanies, thermals, muffs, gloves, booties, fleeces..... it took me more than 10 minutes to prepare beforehand – we were warm and comfortable. My hands got a little cold as some water got inside the pogies but otherwise just fine.

Another bay we stopped at, the Fur Seals and Elephant Seals were clustered on the beach and their calls echoed off the cliffs – a harsh coughing call, varying in pitch and depth. A large male Fur Seal showed, to me, the first indication I had had of a warning to keep away, as he moved between us and a group of juvenile males. He growled and coughed and his body language seemed to me to be semi-aggressive, while it looked like the fur on his upper back and nape was raised. I hadn't noticed this level of what I took to be a warning before. The young males seemed keen to come and visit us and did move round him to stand on the edge of the waves moving their heads from side to side as if trying to focus their big, dark, liquid eyes on us. But didn't venture further. Unreal!

We eventually headed to the beach to attempt a landing on the shingle but an Elephant Seal was attacking one of the beached zodiacs and complicating the immediate area so we diverted to a zodiac transfer. I decided that going back to the ship was the best option for me. I was tired after two hours kayaking, dying to go to the toilet - despite going several times after breakfast and avoiding drinking anything – and I figured there wasn't anything 'different' to see at this particular landing.

Back on the ship I divested myself of all the gear, relieved the pressure on my bladder and had a coffee or three.

I was glad I did return as shortly afterwards a snow storm enveloped the bay and the land disappeared – it was a complete whiteout. The beach landing was closed down and everyone ferried back to the ship well before lunch!

The afternoon dragged a bit as we moved during lunch time to St Andrew's Bay where we hoped to land to walk a short distance to the biggest King Penguin rookery in South Georgia. I had elected not to kayak, instead do the landing and walk. While we waited I saw at least 2 **Snow Petrels** (possibly the same bird twice?) and **King Penguins** porpoised past the ship coming and going from the open ocean.

It was really amazing when you looked out your cabin window from your air conditioned, warm, clean, serviced cabin and a SG Shag swims past, a couple of Giant Petrels glide over the water followed by a Snow Petrel, then a Brown Skua ploughs determinedly towards the land, all backed by sheer snow covered mountains, a grey cloudy sky and dark blue choppy sea. It's just surreal really. I have to keep mentally slapping the back of my head to ensure I know I am really here!

I was out on deck later in the afternoon watching for Diving Petrels (I didn't see any), casually checking the **Snow Petrels** (~30+) crossing the mouth of the bay, with the occasional close passer-by, and the **King Penguins** porpoising past in small groups (as you do) when suddenly a large white chicken sized bird flew up from below the stern. A **Snowy Sheathbill**! Wow! It was so unexpected, but instantly recognizable and once again, there was no one else within sight. However, on the lower deck one of the Taiwanese birders had managed to capture it on his camera. Over the next hour I saw at least 3 birds – all at once – and several sightings of one and two birds together. Two of them landed on the rear deck – on the zodiacs and pecked away at the rubber attachments. Just brilliant! I wasn't sure, as a result, whether there were more than 3 birds or the same ones kept re-appearing to a maximum of 10 – but it didn't really matter!

At 18.30 a landing was called and within 30 minutes or so 98 guests and approx 10 expedition leaders were on the shore at the biggest **King Penguin** rookery in South Georgia. There were, as usual, masses of **Elephant** and **Fur Seals** on the black volcanic sand beach and approx 250,000 King Penguins across the kilometers of beach and hinterland. A lot of the Penguins were in moult and were standing in a river that flowed from the nearby glacier as they apparently do when they are in that condition. It was a pretty stunning sight and just over whelming really.

I Go Pro'd the zodiac transfers and they were wet and windy!!

Back on board an hour or so later and it was dinner and a briefing about the next day and then it was crash time – I was, again, pretty knackered.

Thursday 3.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 13

I was on deck just after 6 again. The ship appeared to be steaming south offshore – land only visible on the starboard side. The seas were relatively calm, but only a few birds around. We anchored in another bay with the intention of kayaking and a landing, but the weather didn't give up. Strong gusting winds and a short choppy sea denied us both outings. I did, however, spot 2 white morph **Southern Giant Petrels** sitting on the water 400+ meters away among a flock of regular **Giant Petrels**. This was announced over the PA and, surprisingly, 50% of the passengers crowded to the port side to see the birds. We did see a couple more through the morning – presumably different birds in a different bay.

Due to the conditions the captain and team leader quickly decided to move to our second planned location – Coopers Bay. On the way we had a couple of brief views of **Humpback Whales** and started seeing **Chinstrap Penguins** among the **Gentoos** surfacing and diving alongside the ship. We anchored there within a couple of hours and sat and waited for a while for the team to check on conditions. It looked superb with flat seas, no wind and clear skies, but there was quite a long, heavy swell below the surface.

A zodiac cruise was arranged and I got away in the first boat. We were 10 passengers to a zodiac and while not crowded did make it challenging to see everything.

Our first stop was a small rocky cove backed by a steep hillside up which the **Macaroni Penguins** marched to their rookery on the hillside above.

A **Leopard Seal** patrolled the water and we had brief, relatively unsatisfactory views as it swam around.

Moving on from that we approached another beach where **Gentoo** and **King Penguins** hung out with **Elephant** and **Fur Seals** in abundance.

Navigating a tricky patch of sea our zodiac driver got us into another small rocky beach and here we had views of **Chinstraps** with a few **Gentoos** thrown in. We didn't have a lot of time in this location – good enough to see and photograph the Penguins, but not really long enough to really observe them.

Then it was back to the boat and Russell and I were the first in for lunch!

There was a planned cruise up a nearby fjord planned for the third site in the afternoon, but when we reached it, it was completely fogged out and the decision was made not to venture in.

The captain took the ship back north along the east coast of South Georgia and the seas were pretty heavy, especially as now we were heading into the 4-5 meter swell. The pitching increased dramatically and the thumping from the bow every few seconds quite obvious.

I took a tablet as a precaution and lay on my bed semi-dozing and reading when I finished sorting my 600+ photos....

I did make a couple of sorties onto the deck during the afternoon. A few **Blue** and **Snow Petrels**, lots of **South Georgia Shags**, a few random albatrosses, mostly **Black-browed**, the ubiquitous **Giant** and **Cape Petrels** and a few **Prions** that disappeared in the howling winds almost as soon as we saw them.

The briefing in the evening outlined the plan – we were leaving South Georgia and heading for Antarctica! We would round the northern end of the island and head southwest thus avoiding a storm that had come from the west. On the weather map it looked like we were hoping to cross to Antarctica in a gap between two fronts. The seas would increase in size – especially, we were told, the next night, but hopefully we would reach the South Sandwich Islands and the Weddell Peninsula in 3 days time. That would, we expected, give us two days before we had to head northwest to Ushuaia. I must admit I hadn't expected so much sea travel between destinations – however, a seawatch in these waters is always welcome, so long as one can stay on deck and on one's feet. It looked like we were in for a torrid time for the next few days.

Friday 4.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 14

During the night we had rounded the northern tip of South Georgia and now were heading south towards Antarctica.

The seas were 4+ meters and expected to worsen towards evening and over night. The wind increased during the day and was whipping the top off the waves. White horses everywhere and it was difficult to walk down the corridors. The ship was hit by a bigger set every few minutes and bang down into the trough, shaking the ship throughout – sometimes quite dramatically as we hit a bigger than average wave. Meals were served as usual, of course, but the numbers at breakfast were only about a third of normal and only a little better at lunch. Mostly people kept to their cabins venturing out only to get food or have a coffee.

I spent a little time on the rear of Deck 5 sheltered in the smoking area, but most of the day in the cabin, sleeping or reading and trying to update my blog. I took Dramamine every few hours just in case. I didn't feel bad at all, just tired – and I ate well at each meal.

There were very few birds out. A few **Antarctic Prions**, **Giant** and **Cape Petrels** and a couple of **White-chinned Petrels** and **Black-browed Albatross**, but most of the smaller birds had dropped away by the afternoon.

The seas got somewhat worse during the day; the waves exceeding 5 meters at times with the ship pitching heavily, the stabilizers, however, removed 80% of the roll which helped enormously. Dinnertime saw about half the guests present and I had the usual 3 courses. Somewhat luckily the meals weren't huge so it was quite comfortable. I continued to take Dramamine every few hours – more as a precaution as I hadn't felt ill at all, but with seasickness I needed to strike first before I felt any ill effects.

It was predicted to take us another 3 days to reach Antarctica with tonight and tomorrow morning being the worst before the weather easing in the afternoon.

Saturday 5.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 15

Overnight we had the biggest seas so far. In fact, one of the expedition leaders who had visited Antarctica 40 times claimed these were the biggest seas he had ever experienced.

I slept well, despite having spent some time snoozing during the previous day, but woke at 2am. Only half awake I thought it would be a great time to get onto the free wifi. It's a bit iffy and has been very slow due to 100 plus people using it. However, I figured at 2am there wouldn't be many! I was rewarded by managing to update my blog to date, photos included – but not videos – over the next hour and a half!

I got up at 7.15 and wandered outside for a coffee and smoke before breakfast. The seas were still pretty monstrous and the occasional set topping 6 meters. There were few birds around and I didn't stay long on deck.

Still taking Dramamine every 6 hours or so, feeling minimal side effects apart from a dry mouth and being 'tired', like everyone on board. I think the constant motion and demands on your muscle to continually re-balance, regardless of the wave size, is tiring. And one felt it especially when there was 'nothing happening', i.e. landings or photo opportunities. Again for some these 4 days transitioning to Antarctica may be boring. For me it continued to be really interesting and I spent time on deck on several occasions watching the occasional **Blue Petrel**, **Antarctic Prions**, **Giant** and **Cape Petrels**, **Black-browed Albatrosses** and a couple of sightings of **Light-mantled Sooty Albatross**, which, I have decided is my favourite Albert.

The seas moderated slightly in the afternoon, but the ship still 'banged' occasionally when cresting the bigger sets. Meals were about 50% attended, less at breakfast as I think people chose to lie on in bed. I still ate well – porridge, fruit and marmalade toast for breakfast, avoiding eggs just in case. Sushi and salad for lunch. Eating a little more lightly, but still had 2 deserts. Drinking coffee and smoking – I was really not feeling bad at all! Which is very welcome.

Sunday 6.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 16

We were advised to put our watches back by one hour to come back to Argentinian time. I, in my usual ham fisted way put my watch forward one hour...

As a result I got up at 6.30, in reality 4.30 – and went on deck. It was a wild morning. Heavy seas, howling wind from the southwest, rain or spray and a heavy fog reduced visibility to about 300 meters around the ship. There were more birds as the morning wore on. Much the same as the last few days. **Antarctic Prions**, **Giant** and **Cape Petrels** – the latter by the dozen – **Blue Petrels** – more of them than the prion sp – **Southern Fulmars** and 1 **Light-mantled Sooty Albatross** looking beautiful.

It took me a few hours before I realised my timing error, but I enjoyed having the deck completely to myself for 3 hours or so.

After breakfast I spent some time taking over 200 photos of the Prions. When I put them through my laptop I found a couple of photos of the same bird that I was positive was a **Broad-billed Prion** – a bird I had been looking for since we had left South Georgia. I discussed it with Gaston and he seemed relatively convinced. He sent the photo to some friends so we wait and see. But I was very confident.

After lunch I lay down for a while – I was pretty tired – and dozed. Later I took another 500+ photos of prions but the camera lens was fogged up and the light was shit and I only kept two average quality shots. I did see some whale blows – probably 3 animals together – some distance away, unsure of the species at this stage.

Monday 7.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 17

Finally – Antarctica!

The mainland in the Antarctic Sound didn't appear till mid morning. I was on deck from 6, but the birds were few and far between and the seas and wind were horrendous – but really exciting! There were more **Southern Fulmars** around the ship than **Cape Petrels** when I first emerged, but around the time we saw the mainland for the first time, the birds disappeared – totally. We saw our first icebergs around 6.30 and the morning was spent sailing into Brown Bluff, a sheltered bay on the east side of the peninsula, dodging some huge, some small, lumps of ice. The mainland was an ice shelf for the most part, it was hard to calculate the height but we guessed approx 30 meters or 100 feet straight out of the ocean. Backed by snow shrouded forbidding looking mountains and wide, snow covered glaciers it was just an awesome sight. It was very, very difficult to capture the feeling or a complete picture in a camera, I tried by using video but it was just not enough.

On the way into the bay 2 **Antarctic Shags** flew over the ship, but I had no hope of getting pictures in the short views.

A landing had been planned on the beach in the bay, an Adelie penguin rookery the target. Kayaking had also been proposed, however, the wind was around 60 knots all morning and into the early afternoon and it just wasn't possible to do anything. It was disappointing – not just to me but to a lot of the passengers as, in many cases, this was their 'last continent' and they needed to set foot on it.

We did see **Adelie Penguins** on an ice flow and very distantly we could see 100s, possibly 1000s in a rookery above the shoreline, but other than those the bay was virtually bird-free.

I was very tired and as there was nothing to look at beyond the immediate scenery I retired to my cabin and slept for an hour or so. I think the scenery was so vast and almost beyond imagining it was tiring in itself! Apart from the 4 days it took us to get there from South Georgia when the storms were so challenging and just surviving on the ship had been tiring. It sounds crazy – come all this way and then sleep - but I just needed to rest and with no birds at all around, did so!

Late in the afternoon the decision was made to leave Brown Bluff and head further south down the west side of the peninsula to another location for a hopefully better landing situation the next day. We needed to get out of the iceberg area, apparently they are not everywhere, the Antarctic Sound is the place to see them, but we needed to be able to navigate in daylight to avoid, obviously, running into one.

When we rounded the tip of the peninsula the wind coming off the glaciers and mountains peaked at 90 knots, it was unbelievable, apparently that was equal to hurricane force 12 on the Beaufort scale. The ship was heeled over about 25 degrees – it felt like we were in a sailing yacht - and the wind was howling across the deck. It was all OK, but a bit scary really.

We did see a few birds on that part of the trip – several **Snow Petrels**, 1 **Kelp Gull**, at least 2 **Wilson's Storm Petrels**, a couple of **Giant Petrels**, including another Southern white morph, **Southern Fulmars** and the ubiquitous **Cape Petrels** – but only a few. Gaston and I were checking every Cape in the hope of Antarctic Petrel, but no luck. It was surprising to me to see so few birds, I had imagined it to be teeming but the ocean was very empty. An Antarctic Minke had been seen right alongside the ship earlier in the day, but despite being on deck and right there on the spot, I had failed to see the animal. There were no other mammals seen either. Hopefully in the next couple of days we would get lucky!

Tuesday 8.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 18

What a DAY!!

I woke up about 4.30 and spent some time updating my blog as the wifi was essentially free of customers at that hour. I got up at 6 to find a calm sea, heavy fog, visibility down to about 200 meters around the ship and lots of small icebergs and chunks of ice. It was very quiet on deck, heavy snowfall during the night had coated the ship and a thick layer lay on the back of deck 5, my usual spot.

We had approached our first planned stop, but due to the conditions the ship had moved to Plan B and we were heading for Portal Point further south. Conditions looked dubious for a landing, but a few of us built a snowman on the back deck and had fun taking pictures.

We eventually anchored in flat calm water surrounded by icebergs and broken ice, no wind, 0C and better visibility – and it was snowing heavily.

Kayaking was on and 11 of us geared up and set off for the most unreal, amazing, exciting, superb, unbelievable, dream-like 2 hours of paddling through pancake ice on the water's surface, among broken ice we had to push through, round icebergs and over chunks of ice and it was snowing throughout! We saw a **Weddell Seal** at one point, it was lying on the rocks and sloped off quietly to slide into the water and disappear.

It was the most incredible experience I have ever had and the team of kayakers all reveled in it. In fact I can't really describe the feelings I had, it was just so surreal, so exactly what I had hoped for and something I will never forget.

We landed on a rocky beach at the end with **Antarctic Terns** overhead and actually set foot on Antarctica. It had seemed like it would never happen, but it did. We wandered around looking into huge chunks of ice on the beach – they were so blue inside – taking pictures and had a snowball fight.

Then it was back to the ship for lunch as we moved to Surprise Island, a little further south again. Again we anchored up and again the kayak team set off. The other passengers were on a zodiac tour – they had landed and climbed a small snow-covered hill in the morning. We were first onto the water and through the one hour paddle met up with the zodiacs at some points.

We saw a lot of **Antarctic Shags, Antarctic Terns**, a few **Brown Skuas, Kelp Gulls, Snow Petrels** and a few **Gentoo Penguins**. Another incredible paddle, but not quite at the same level as the morning. We saw the wreck of a whaling ship that had been run aground when on fire and lots of big icebergs which we got pretty close to.

When we returned to the ship they were setting up for the Polar Plunge.

This was an optional activity obviously and out of the 98 passengers only 29 opted in, including me. Stripped to my Speedos only and wrapped in a bathrobe, I queued up with the others wondering why I was doing this? But I knew I'd regret it if I didn't. My turn came and after the safety belt was strapped around my waist I jumped into the -1C water – and jumped back out as quickly as I could. Cold? Yes, obviously, bloody, freaking, freezing cold, but the expedition team were there to put a towel around my shoulders, help me back into my bathrobe and hand me a shot of pure vodka to start my blood running again. By the time I had reached my cabin, I was quite warm already. I dried off, had a quick one minute shower and dressed and felt like I could conquer the world!

It was just an incredible day.

After dinner in the briefing those of us who had taken the challenge were handed a certificate to recognize our 'bravery' – and our stupidity perhaps?

Wednesday 9.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 19

We woke to find ourselves outside the entrance to Deception Island in the Lesser Sandwich Island group, some distance from the Antarctic mainland. The island was an extinct volcano caldera which was accessible from the ocean via a narrow channel. The ship navigated the channel and we had a number of **Antarctic Shags** along side.

As we had breakfast, turned and anchored. There was a possibility of a landing but the wind was gusting at 60knots and so the ship raised anchor and cruised around the inside of the caldera waiting for a hoped for change of weather.

This didn't happen and so we left Deception Island behind and headed for the final stop of our Antarctic odyssey at Half-moon Bay.

A bit of excitement on the way as two **Humpback Whales** made an appearance – but it was only a few blows and brief views of the fins.

Here the weather was a little calmer and disembarkation began. It was a medium length zodiac ride to the beach, a trudge up a snow-covered hill, along a ridge line and down the far side to the beach.

There were several **Chinstrap Penguin** rookeries along the way, a few **Gentoo**s hanging around, 2 **Weddell Seals** and 2 **Antarctic Fur Seals**, while overhead a couple of **Brown Skuas** and several **Kelp Gulls**.

At one point a handful of **Snowy Sheathbills** turned up and walked around performing in front of the crowd, including a pair who appeared to be displaying to each other.

The rest of the day was spent basically lazing around not doing much as we started heading out into the Drake Passage for the two day, 3-4 meter wave, potentially roughest seaway in the world on our way to Ushuaia and the end of the trip.

Thursday 10.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 20

The ship plowed north all day in seas of 3-4 meters. The waves were hitting the bow at an angle, but the stabilizers maintained rolling stability, while the pitching forwards and back was manageable.

There weren't many birds in evidence at any time, although I checked the deck regularly. A small number of **Cape Petrels**, **Southern Fulmars** and a couple of **Giant Petrels** throughout, a few **Blue Petrels** and **Prion sp** early on, singles of **Black-browed**, **Grey-headed** and **Light-mantled Sooty Albatrosses** completed the scene – although no one appeared to be maintaining any sort of consistent watch.

A few **Humpback Whales** were seen, but were soon left behind in the 12 knot wake.

It was a day to rest, relax, swap contact details, eat (always) and sleep.

Friday 11.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 21

Another day at sea in moderate swell. Just after breakfast we had an opportunity to see Cape Horn from the ship. It required the permission of the Chilean authorities to approach within 3 kms of the coast and it gave us all a good view of this infamous landmark.

There were several presentations.

Disembarkation details – all very well organised with coloured ribbons and timed announcements as people would be bused from the ship, the next day, dependent on whether they were going to the airport directly or later, to a hotel or had other private arrangements. Gaston delivered a detailed description of the environment and population and the bird and animal life we might expect to see in Ushuaia and the surrounding areas.

There were a couple of other presentations I didn't bother going to. I stayed on deck again a fair bit with a couple of nice **Grey-headed Albatrosses** performing well around the stern while the **Giant Petrels** hung around giving us the side eye on the deck.

I did succeed in identifying a **Chilean Skua** among several other what appeared to be **Brown Skuas** in the Beagle Channel, but as usual with Skuas they didn't approach the ship, so much as just fly by intent on their business. **South American Terns** and **Imperial Shags** were common, but I could not find any diving petrels.

Late in the afternoon the chef organised donuts and assorted sweets on the rear deck where we were anchored awaiting a pilot to guide us in to dock.

While that was going on I was standing watching the channel, hoping for more Skuas or some diving petrels when I saw a bit of splashing a couple of hundred meters away. In the bins I had a brief view of a large Seal smashing the shit out of what appeared to be a penguin carcass. On enquiring Eduardo told me that **Leopard Seals** did occur in the channel but were 'pretty rare' – but I couldn't see it being anything but a Leopard slamming a penguin.

Dinner was a crazy end to the trip with Russell, and Marie and Ryan from Iowa, and Bella from Russia. We had a few good laughs – Russell and I playing off each other and generally making idiots of ourselves - and then the hotel, admin, wait-staff and chefs all came out and were introduced to continual clapping and cheering. There was a bit of a riot for a while, but good fun.

Saturday 12.11.22

Antarctic expedition Day 22

The morning started early – the wake up call at 6.15. I was up 30 minutes before hand and it appeared most people had anticipated the alarm.

Basically we put our bags out in the corridor and they were whisked away almost immediately to join others in the reception area. From there they were manhandled down a chain of workers to the dock and separated out dependent on your destination via the colour tags. All very organised! Meanwhile we had breakfast and then hung around the lounge or bar areas waiting to be called up.

I was in the last lot and spent the intervening time swapping emails and phone nos and saying goodbye.

Finally 43 years after I first planned it I set foot on Tierra del Fuego – it had been a long time a-coming!

Summary: The birds were much as I'd expected. I 'dipped' on a couple of half-expected species ie Cobb's Wren – no chance, Antarctic Petrel - ? I had hoped for a stray Spectacled Petrel on the first few days out of BA, but it had been a minimal hope. I had expected more whales- they were pretty thin on the water, I was advised that a later season visit, in December – February, would be better for whales. We also didn't see as many Dolphins as I had expected. However, all that being said, it was the most challenging, exciting, breath taking experience I have ever had and I have no complaints whatsoever.

I am based in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. For more details, photos and video links please refer my blog Reidcolin55.blogspot.com.

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