On the trail of Shackleton in Antarctica

BY JOHN BALLEM, CALGARY HERALD

"We have just learned that Plan A won't work," the exuberant tour guide announced.

"The landing strip on King George Island is covered with mud and wet snow, so our chartered jet can't land there. But there's a Plan B." Of course there would be a Plan B. When travelling in the Antarctic, there has to be a Plan B, and Plans C and D as well.

Plan B promised to be more exciting than the original. Tomorrow we would be airlifted to King George Island in a Hercules of the Uruguayan air force. The briefing session went on to deal with other matters: how to don the life preservers in case we had to ditch in the Drake Passage; maintaining the required distance from the penguins; zodiac protocol; and other stuff we needed to know.

I lingered behind as the meeting broke up and the other 35 members of the "Fly and Sail" expedition filed out of the Shackleton Bar. I wanted to study the paintings that covered the walls. They depicted every stage of Sir Ernest Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic Expedition, beginning with Endurance, his three-masted ship with an ice-strengthened hull, sailing from Plymouth, England, on Aug. 8, 1914.

Shackleton had once planned to be the first man to reach the North Pole, but was deprived of that distinction when Robert Peary made it to the Pole in April 1909. Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer, won the race to the South Pole in December 1911, beating his rival, the celebrated and ill-fated Robert Scott, by one month. By way of a consolation prize, Shackleton was determined to become the first man to lead an expedition across the continent of Antarctica.

The paintings portrayed Endurance entering the Weddell Sea in December 1914 and becoming trapped in pack ice in January 1915. As was the case with Arctic exploration, the hope and expectation was that the ship would be released from the grip of the ice at the end of the Antarctic winter and the expedition could continue. But the ice began to crush Endurance, forcing the 28 men to abandon ship on Oct. 27, 1915, and set up camp a mile or so away on the ice. From there, they watched Endurance break up and slip beneath the Weddell Sea on Nov. 21, 1915, some 280 days after first becoming trapped.

Fascinated, I went from painting to painting, showing the crew finally being able to launch the three lifeboats in April 1916 and sail and haul them to Elephant Island, so named because of the elephant seals found there.

There they made camp, hunting seals and penguins for food.

In 1995 I was near Elephant Island, but was prevented from landing by Force 7 winds. Still I was able to see through binoculars the rocky beach where the longboat would have been launched to begin Shackleton's incredible rescue voyage. While temporarily safe on the island, Shackleton knew they were hopelessly stranded. No ships would pass by, and no radio could summon help. The nearest habitation, the whaling station on South Georgia, was 1,500 kilometres away, across the most storm-tossed stretch of ocean in the world, with waves cresting to 15 metres.

I had made four crossings of the Drake Passage, and knew how awesome those waves could be. I marvelled at Shackleton and his five companions setting sail in a 6.7-metre open boat. After 16 days they reached South Georgia, landing on the south side of the island and having to climb a mountain to reach the whaling station. But that was not the end of the ordeal. The dispatched whaling vessels were defeated by the ice.

Shackleton then raised money in the Falkland Islands for another rescue attempt but this, too, was unsuccessful. One of the last pictures showed Shackleton in Punta Arenas, standing outside the mansion, now the Hotel Jose Nogueira, where I was staying, and which houses the Shackleton Bar. The Chilean government and the people of Punta Arenas got behind the effort and commissioned the Chilean cutter Yelcho to rescue the men left on Elephant Island. The cutter, with Shackleton on board, arrived Aug. 30, 1916, justifying the faith of the men who never doubted their leader would come back for them. Every man who had set out with Shackleton from England two years before survived. There were many epic voyages in the Heroic Age of polar exploration in the early 20th century. A few may have equalled, but none surpassed, Shackleton's Trans-Antarctica Expedition.

As we droned smoothly on in the Hercules, my thoughts reverted to Shackleton and his five companions battling the turbulent seas in their open boat. In our four-plus-hour flight, we crossed into Antarctica, which encompasses everything south of the 60th parallel.

We had a soggy but safe landing on Frei Station, a large scientific establishment operated by Chile. The base is Chilean, but it's not Chilean territory. Under the Antarctic Treaty, sovereignty claims have been deferred indefinitely.

A short zodiac ride brought us to the "sail" part of the expedition, the Grigory Mikheev anchored offshore. As adventure cruise ships go, the Grigory Mikheev was comparatively small, being only 70 metres long.

Our first zodiac landing took place that afternoon, on nearby Ardley Island, where three species of penguins were nesting. There are 17 species of penguins in the world: these three the gentoo (identified by a red bill and strip of white on its head), the adelie (solid black head) and the chinstrap (an elegant black line below its beak) are the ones that spring to mind when "penguin" is mentioned. It was early December, summertime in Antarctica, and the nesting season was well underway. Unlike their larger cousins, the emperors, to eliminate the threat of predators, lay their single egg and raise the chick in the harsh, -70 C, and colder, winter -- the other species breed in the summer months. The eggs had been laid and a few downy chicks were spotted under a brooding parent bird. Walking along the rocky beach, we saw a Weddell seal. The giant animal didn't let us disturb its slumber.

Returning to the ship, we were told the weather wasn't promising where we were in the South Shetland Islands so we would sail across the Bransfield Strait to the Peninsula. The map of Antarctica is covered with the names of early explorers and others who played a role in the discovery of "the last place on earth." Edward Bransfield charted this region in 1820. Sailing out of Maxwell Bay that evening, I saw the Three Brothers on the far shore. As I took a photo, my thoughts were on the Three Sisters in the Canadian Rockies.

The Grigory Mikheev began to pitch and rock as we left the bay and it persisted through the night. Sticking a scopolamine patch behind my ear, I climbed into my bunk. Scopolamine is a drug used to make zombies in Haiti, but it also prevents seasickness.

Everyone was on deck when we anchored off Trinity Island and the crew began to lower the zodiacs. Getting out of the zodiac can be tricky because the bow is nudged up against the smooth, wet face of a boulder. That's not a problem for the gentoos which were nesting on top of a cliff. On the beach, skuas, the penguins' deadliest predators, patrolled the shoreline. The stocky, brown member of the gull family not only preys on the eggs and chicks, but forces adult birds to disgorge the fish they have caught.

Surprisingly, a survey of the impact of the increasing number of tourists was having on the penguin population found, if anything, it was beneficial. Penguins aren't bothered by humans, but skuas are, and tend to avoid the more popular spots.

Port Lockroy has to be one of the liveliest places in Antarctica, in people and penguin terms. Named after a French politician who supported an expedition to the region, it is the headquarters of the Antarctic Heritage Trust, and has a souvenir shop and a small staff. It is also an astonishing demonstration of just how tolerant penguins are of humans. Isolated from the rest of the world, they don't perceive us as a threat. Their nests, made of rocks since that is the only material available, surround the small wooden buildings. Two nests with

chicks crowd either side of the doorway. Bemused and charmed, we watch a gentoo present his mate with a rock to add to their nest.

Later that afternoon, as we headed south, I heard the familiar crash and boom of ice against the hull. We were in pack ice at the entrance to the Lemaire Channel. We stopped for a while before the captain decided it was safe to go into the channel.

Everyone on board was delighted with the decision as we crunched our way through the narrow, ice-choked passage with towering cliffs on both sides. We made a landing on Peterman Island at the end of the channel, the zodiacs picking their way around floes of blue ice. Two young elephant seals were sleeping peacefully in the pit their body heat created in the snow.

We were just north of the Antarctic Circle, and this was as far south as we would go. More spectacular sights were in store for us as we headed north. None could be more spectacular than the fantasyland of icebergs in the Couverville Bay. Giant icebergs, streaked with the brilliant green of old ice, rising from the sea, icebergs like small castles, and a graceful arch big enough to sail under. There are some 8,000 pairs of penguins on Couverville Island. Leaping through the water, the gentoos fished for krill off the shore, then climbed to their rookery high on a hill.

The entrance to Deception Islands leads to a vast inlet that is the crater of an active volcano which is reputed to erupt every 40 years. We were there on the 38th and took comfort from the margin of error. It sent clouds of steam rising from the water. Those of our party who had the foresight to bring swimsuits went for a dip.

Decrepit tumbledown buildings and a crumbling flat-bottomed dory on the beach were reminders the island was once a thriving whaling station. A disastrous decline in the whale population due to over-exploitation and the ban imposed by the International Convention on Whaling brought an end to that. The dory would be much the same as the longboat Shackleton and his companions sailed to the island of South Georgia. After an exploratory hike on Deception, we made a quick stop on nearby Half Moon Island to pay our respects to the chinstraps nesting there.

Appropriately enough for a summer's day in Antarctica, it began to snow as we sailed out of Half Moon Bay and headed for King George Island where the Hercules waited.

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