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THE LAST WILDERNESS

By Bob Maysmor.

"If Antarctica were music it would be Mozart. Art, and it would be Michelangelo. Literature, and it would be Shakespeare. And yet it is something even greater: the only place on earth that is still as it should be. May we never tame it." ~ Andrew Denton.

Whether you head south to the Antarctic Peninsula from Ushuaia in Argentina, or you sail from Hobart or Bluff for the Ross Sea, you are embarking on a journey to the world's last great pristine wilderness. It is a journey lacking in colourful cultures and costumes, in rhythmic music and dance, in architectural delights and in ethnic cuisines and all the other human attractions that travel can offer. But it offers something much more than that: an experience unmatched by any.

A day out from reaching the great southern continent, the sighting of icebergs stimulates excitement onboard ship. The tabular icebergs provide welcome confirmation that the worst of the southern ocean swells are over and remind us that we are nearing our destination, and by the end of the day we see land. A chain of islands, including the South Shetlands, Brabant and Anvers, protects the peninsula's coast and provides ice-free landfalls for the inflatable Zodiacs. One of the first landings may be to view the abundant wildlife on Aicho Island with its eerie moon-like landscape and welcoming party of resident sea lions, seals and penguins.

Tides and weather conditions determine each day's programme and destination. Landings may include visits to scientific stations and historic sites such as Port Lockroy on the Neumeyer Channel or visiting the abandoned whaling station on Deception Island. Others may be made to visit the penguin colonies at Brown's Bluff or at Baily Head, where the natural amphitheatre is home to thousands of inquisitive chinstrap penguins. All around this isolated and unique environment spectacular iceberg sculptures cascade across the sea, their glistening whiteness, tinged with pink and turquoise, deep blue and silver, depending on the light and time of day.

Watch for the marine mammals – all six species of seals including the fur seal, crabeater, Weddell and leopard seal, often seen sunbathing on slow-moving ice floes, and for the humpback, minke and orca whales, as well as dolphins, surfacing from below the icy waters. Apart from the array of penguins, there are 30 other bird



Top left: A seal pup on Aicho Island.

Top right: The serene beauty of the Weddell Sea.

Left: The Silverseas Prince Albert II cruising among the ice floes.



species including the wondrous albatross, the family of petrels, cormorants, terns and gulls and the scavenger skuas that often prey on the chicks of other birds but also feed on the rich ocean krill.

Cruising up silent sounds, you can gaze mesmerised at the perfect reflections of ice mountains mirrored in the tranquil water and enjoy the long daylight hours offered by the southern latitude. Midnight excursions on the Zodiacs may lead to an encounter with a breaching humpback whale or a pod of Peale's dolphins on escort duty through the ice floes.

This is a place unlike any other on earth, where wild-

life flourishes despite the harsh conditions and where the most developed vegetation, other than tussock and moss can be the lichen that covers the rocks. Coloured rescue orange and sunflower yellow, this minimalist flora was once described as being the rainforest of the Antarctica.

With sea legs now well-established, the return voyage is more comfortable, and heading north – with weather permitting – there is opportunity to view the legendary Cape Horn before plying the calmer waters of the Beagle Passage to return to Ushuaia and so end the journey to the last great wilderness that is Antarctica. 🌐

Above: A lazy seal dozing on the ice.

Below: Part of the British research station at Port Lockroy on the Neumeyer Channel.

