



WILDWINGS

The Antarctic Peninsula and Polar Circle aboard Akademik Ioffe, 24th January – 4th February 2006

‘Antarctica for Independent Travellers’ (a sample voyage report) by John Brodie-Good

23rd January

A four-hour delay on our domestic flight (good old Aerolineas Argentinas!) meant a mid-afternoon arrival in Ushuaia. On a typically cloudy afternoon, a gap in the clouds just in time for our final approach and landing, revealed the shores of the Beagle Channel. A short drive brought us to our pre-cruise hotel for the night, and after unpacking, we ventured outside to see our first birds. Steamer-ducks swam just offshore, Kelp and Dolphin Gulls bathed in the shallows, Kelp Geese and Crested Ducks rested on the exposed sand whilst wintering Baird’s and White-rumped Sandpipers picked along the shoreline. Some Rufous-chested Dotterels also ran along the beach, a few still in full plumage. A female Austral Negrito flitted on and off the hotel’s signpost. A distant Black-browed Albatross wheeled over the waters of the channel offshore, lines of Blue-eyed Shags flying by and the occasional Giant Petrel. The excitement was rising, tomorrow we would be heading for the quayside and embarkation for our great adventure on the Southern Ocean and to the White Continent beyond.

We took the free shuttle-bus into the town centre to explore and eat before an early night. Most of the shops and restaurants are on the one main street, with side streets leading down to the port and its quay. Five ships were in, all Antarctic tourist vessels. They would be gone by the morning, to be replaced with more including ours. Over 30 ships now take visitors down to Antarctica, ship and itinerary choice are very important to enable the key wildlife to be seen on a single voyage. People in red parkas were everywhere, either those who had been or those who were about to go on board. It’s big business nowadays, but strictly self-regulated. Most ships belong to IAATO (International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators) who have operational guidelines for its members, but the environment always comes first. Rules extend to the maximum number of people ashore and their behaviour. WildWings have been a member for many years and had a major involvement in the production of IAATO’s Marine Wildlife Watching Guidelines for its vessels and Zodiacs. (Available on our website to download as a PDF).

A brief mobile phone conversation with Tony Marr ensued as he waved to us from the bridge of the ship he was working on, as they were about to take on a new load of passengers. We then took Tony’s dinner suggestion and walked down to L’Estancia, a typical Argentine meat restaurant. A pound of the sweetest, ‘melt in your mouth’ steak followed, washed down with a fine bottle of Malbec. The steaks (Lomo) were just over £4 each. It simply doesn’t get much better!

24th January

Sailing day! After breakfast our local guide, Estefan, picked us up and took us into the Tierra del Fuego National Park for a few hours. A short drive to the east of the town, the snow-capped Darwin’s Range forming the backdrop for this special place. Southern Beech Trees dominate the flora, interspersing the rivers and lakes. A brief stop at the old rubbish dump did not reveal White-throated Caracara as hoped, but our main target for the morning was one of the world’s largest woodpeckers. Shortly after passing through the entrance we pulled over and took a short walk along a path into the forest. We had only gone a few hundred yards when we heard a faint but distinct tapping sound from within. We slowly and carefully went off the path into the tangle of dead and live trees towards the sound. We were rewarded with over 30 minutes watching a family of Magellanic Woodpeckers at close range. Two adults were feeding their well-fledged young, drilling and tapping into tree trunks both upright or on the ground. An amazing experience, and one we took as a great omen. Photography was surprisingly difficult because of all the small twigs and leaves in the way - single-point focussing was the only way.

Elated, we drove onto the campsite and cafeteria area by the main lake. There were a lot of people around, mainly coach parties, pre- or post-cruise. Even so, we saw more of the special birds including a pair of

handsome Spectacled Ducks on the river nearby. All too soon it was time to head back to town via a quick stop for Austral Pygmy Owl of which, despite a couple of tape attempts, there was no sign. (We did get a response but it turned out to be another birding guide! One of his 'party pieces' apparently).

Early afternoon found us hanging around by the harbour, waiting for our 16.00 transfer to the ship. The 'Akademik Ioffe' gleamed whitest amongst the vessels tied up at the quay. A mid-sized ship, with her 'small ship' feel and 'large ship' quietness and stability, making her and her sister ship 'Vavilov' a favourite with our customers for some years. My partner and I were going to join her as independent passengers on a regular departure, not as part of a birding or wildlife group.

Before we knew it we were onboard and settling into our cabin - spacious with two single beds, plenty of storage space, windows (which opened), a sofa, small desk and chair plus a spotless bathroom with shower. There were plenty of power points for charging batteries and running laptops etc. (US or Continental-type plug adaptors are required). We were soon exploring the ship, especially the outside decks to work out the best places from which to sea watch, depending on the conditions. Then it was time for the welcome briefing and with our fellow shipmates we assembled in the dining room to meet the Expedition Team.

Each ship has an Expedition Leader, who works with the Captain of the vessel, and a team who look after the passengers on board the ship. 'Ioffe' is one of the Russian-run vessels, her Captain and crew among the most experienced Polar seamen in the world. Our EL was David McGonigal, an Australian from Sydney, who Dick Filby and I had travelled with many years before on a voyage called the North East Passage, in 1994. David has since written two highly acclaimed books on Antarctica, and in addition to being knowledgeable about the region, is an accomplished photographer. He is also a very nice guy and very approachable. As a passenger you are as entitled to have your wishes heard as any other passenger, so by all means get to know your EL and ask him or her any special requests you may have during your voyage. During the meeting I mentioned a certain large penguin I had heard about recently - David's smile filled me with hope. The briefing included the safety drill and the promise of a lifeboat drill within 24 hours (as it happened, within 24 minutes before we left port). Life on board ship was explained to those that were new to expedition cruising. Such things as there being no locks on cabin doors and always keeping a hand for the ship when moving around at sea.

We were also introduced to the rest of the Expedition Team, who I had heard were particularly enthusiastic on these two sister ships. Ziggy from British Columbia would be our naturalist, Alun, a completely 'mad' but amazing Welshman, our glaciologist. Graham from Australia ran the Zodiac Operations (he left Oz for a two week holiday in 1997 and hasn't been back since!) and Ben and Charlie from Canada would run the optional kayaking excursions and be Zodiac drivers along with Ray, Scott and Sergey. It was quite a team and the laughter was already flowing.

We did not sail until 21.00, by which time the light was fading fast as it had turned into a dull and drizzly evening. As we were heading east along the Beagle Channel, good numbers of Imperial Shags, a few resting groups of Black-browed Albatross and the occasional giant petrel were noted.

25th & 26th January

We were to start our visit to Antarctica by crossing 'the line', so we took an almost due south course for the two days at sea crossing the infamous Drake Passage, whereas most vessels were tracking south east. I took up position on the bows on the first morning in a fairly lively sea, in particular a big oceanic swell from the west. Squalls came rushing through all day and most of the second morning. Behind us already could be seen the dark silhouettes of the islands at the bottom of the continent as the first pelagic sea birding began. Sooty Shearwaters and Black-browed Albatross were present in much smaller numbers than in early November and groups of Imperial Shags could be seen for the first hour or so. The first great albatross were quick to appear, both Northern Royal (3+) and Southern Royal (2+) to be fairly quickly replaced by Wandering Albatross for the rest of the first day, and most of the second. It's not easy counting because many of the Wanderers seemed to spend many hours around the ship, but 10+ for the first day and 20+ for the second felt right. The reality though is that we had 1-4 Wanderers present at any one time and I am never bored of these ultimate travellers. Often they would be hanging back in our wake but would frequently come forward along the sides of the ship and occasionally fly around the bows, often just a few yards away. The first of over 3000 photos we took on the trip were already being snapped. Lovely Grey-headed Albatross also started to appear, double figures by the second day, presumably birds from the Chilean colony at Diego Ramirez? They tend to stay that little bit further away from ships than other species and it can be harder to get good photos of them as a result. Black-broweds were also present but I noted nearly all the albatross were adults. This certainly applied to the great ones, and the youngest Wanderings seen on the entire voyage were looking like 3rd year birds. I hope the younger birds were not all hooked on fishing lines. The overall numbers of the smaller tubenoses however were very low throughout the downward and homeward crossings, largely I suspect due to the light winds we

encountered. Both species of giant petrel were present (rumours abound as to their imminent lumping as one species), two or three White-chinned Petrels, a handful of Wilson's and Black-bellied Storm Petrels, a single Common Diving Petrel, two Antarctic Prions, and eight Cape Petrels on the second day. Blue Petrels appeared in better numbers at least, more on the first day.

It was pretty quiet cetacean-wise too with some distant Humpback blows and on the second afternoon, a loosely scattered group of Minke Whales lunge-feeding. The swells were finally dying out by this time. It should be noted here that your ship's naturalist is unlikely to be out on deck or looking from the bridge whilst at sea. In fairness to them they often have other duties onboard and are often giving lectures on the sea crossings. There may not be any other birders onboard either so if you are planning to travel independently expect to be largely self-sufficient when it comes to seabird identification. An escorted group departure will suit you better if you lack confidence or want to really maximise your sightings.

27th January

The day dawned overcast again, but our first iceberg, a nice tabular one was off on our port bow. A group of about five Humpbacks could be seen on the surface directly in front of the ship as if a welcoming party for what lay ahead. After a quick breakfast we were back out on deck, as the visibility seemed to be worsening. A number of Grey-headed Albatross could be seen, with fewer Black-broweds, and we still had a Wanderer or two for the first couple of hours. The air temperature was dropping noticeably now. We were getting closer to the ice. An announcement from the bridge gave us about an hour until we crossed the Antarctic Circle and soon the bows were becoming the busiest place on the ship as nearly all the passengers came out or went topside above the bridge. A table was set up groaning with bottles of Champagne and orange juice. The fog had really closed in now and we were suddenly in a sea of pancake ice with blue skies above us, a surreal scene. Without warning the ship's horn sounded. We were there, we had crossed the line (66.33 degrees south). The majority of Antarctic Peninsula trips do not reach 65 degrees south but the circle does not normally offer any more wildlife species than further north, except for increasing your chances of a vagrant Emperor Penguin.

Drinks and many photographs followed and we awaited the next announcement, as the ship now seemed to be just drifting in the ice. The first of several Snow Petrels appeared, flying in and out of the mist, not a bad start! David told us we were going to hold position as the Captain had a surprise for us if the fog would only lift. We did not have to wait long, when suddenly a whole new pristine world appeared all around us. A huge tabular iceberg was now on our starboard side with the mountains of Adelaide Island directly ahead. The occasional Snow Petrel came around and small numbers of Antarctic Terns could be seen fishing and resting on small pieces of ice. Our first Brown (Sub-Antarctic) Skuas were also around. Even some of the Russian officers were out on deck with their cameras as we drank Champagne in this amazing scenery.

We stayed drifting through lunchtime (in Martha Strait, just west of the Cristal Sound) and in the afternoon piled into the Zodiacs for our first ride. This was an introductory cruise amongst the pancake ice around the ship and we all managed great views of both Crabeater and Weddell Seals hauled out on the ice, relaxing as only seal's can. Some of the Zodiacs saw some penguins but in spite of a last minute attempt by Scottie our driver to find them, we returned to the ship, penguinless! Plenty of time yet. Any nerves amongst the passengers who had not been in a Zodiac before had quickly dissipated and everyone agreed it had been a fantastic first day. We steamed back north and turned east during the night.

28th January

I had heard about two Emperor Penguins, which had been seen this austral summer at both sites we were heading for today. An adult bird had been seen twice in French Passage on ice, so I was back on the bows by 05.00, 'scope setup on my tripod as we headed east into the area. According to the crew there was much more ice here several weeks before so I enjoyed the bergs and snow-capped mountains all around instead, the cloudy start to the day showing signs of breaking. I saw my first penguins though, Adelies and a few Gentoos, sitting on small pieces of ice, and a wintering Arctic Tern, due to head back north soon. After breakfast we were in position for our first landings. We chose a Zodiac going to the Argentine Islands and the only Adelie Penguin colony of the trip, whilst others went to visit the former British hut near Vernadskiy, the Ukrainian scientific base (sold to them by John Major for £1). David in the lead Zodiac pushed it up against some rocks and we scrambled ashore.

A short walk up a snow-covered slope brought us into the midst of a colony of the smallest of the true Antarctic penguins. These tough little birds were having a good breeding season with most couples having two well-grown chicks to feed. We sat down on the edge to watch the proceedings and take some photos. Parents walked up and down the hill, the ones returning from the sea heading for the crèches containing their offspring. This would then result in the ensuing chase for food. The adults guarding their charges did not miss a trick. On a number of occasions chicks tried to break out of their crèches or follow their parent

back down towards the sea but they were quickly shooed back into their respective groups. Skuas were ever-present and a classic looking pair of South Polars chased each other around the sky. I thought there were many more skuas in general than 10 years ago.

Back in the Zodiac for the ride over to Wordie House, part of the former British base now run by the Ukraine, and onto the base itself. We enjoyed a short tour of the base, led by a very enthusiastic young scientist, we came away impressed and we headed for the 'Ioffe' and lunch. The early morning murk had now cleared and we enjoyed largely blue skies and no wind. These conditions were to last another three full days, a total of almost five days in all. Put into context, one of the Expedition Team who was on the ship for four months last season recalled just three such days! We were very lucky indeed, and we made the most of it. The majority of passengers seemed to be on 'office hours' however and you rarely saw them out on deck before breakfast or after 'teatime'. You can make lots of new friends, eat long meals and drink in bars at home as far as I am concerned, but while Antarctica and it's wildlife is around you, there is only one place to be - outside! For most people, this will probably be your one visit to Antarctica - make the most of it! The daylight at this time is almost 24 hours so you will need to pace yourself, or within a few days exhaustion can set in. Be outside for as long as you comfortably can though, to better your chances of seeing the hard-to-get species like Antarctic Petrel. Even species like Snow Petrel should not be taken for granted, some people miss them. (The only ones we saw were down at the Polar Circle.) Even during the quiet wildlife periods there is always the ice and scenery to enjoy, whatever the weather.

The ship repositioned to Port Charcot on Booth Island as we ate lunch in time for our afternoon landing. This was the site of the second Emperor Penguin I had heard about, this bird being immature. I knew David had spoken to our sister ship 'Vavilov' who had been at this site in the morning, and finally I could wait no more. "How did they get on?" I asked. "You'll be happy" came his reply. We stood in line on the side deck, waiting for our Zodiac ride to shore, the sun making the afternoon feel quite warm. The mist above us suddenly rose revealing three stunning snow-capped peaks next to each other, and within a minute they had disappeared again. On the other side of the ship was a huge ice field. What a place, we were so lucky!

The short ride to shore and we were off, up the snow-covered slope to the teeming Gentoo Penguin colony above us, a walk of only a few hundred yards. We humans walked on the left, the Gentoos on their path to and from the beach, to our right. David had sent a few staff ashore first, especially to police visits to 'The Dude' who was still very much present. All pretence of cool had gone now and we arrived at the group of rocks rather out of breath. We waited our turn and soon took the few steps up to where Charlie and Ben stood, eight or so passengers at a time. The huge young penguin was just a few yards away, resolute, with it's back turned to us, seemingly oblivious of our presence. It was only my third Emperor, and one that at last I could photograph properly. It's flippers seemed fully moulted but its back was just starting with lots of white feathers coming out against the dark, and its head was starting to moult too. Would it become an adult after this moult? What a thought! - the sad thought being that we would not be there to see it.

After ten minutes we walked back down a bit to the edge of the main colony. The Gentoos were doing well too, mainly two chick families. A smaller group of 20 or so Chinstraps almost seemed as noisy as the hundreds of Gentoos. We were on the lower ridges of a mountain and all around the most spectacular scenery imaginable. There is a paradise on Earth, it's just a frozen one! Our first sheathbills could be seen amongst the penguins, like pure white chickens picking up the detritus of the colony, rather than us. Skuas were ever-present, the adult penguins stabbing their beaks towards them if they got too close to their youngsters. The queue for the 'big boy' had gone, so we went back up to watch it again. It was now lying down and eating snow, before after an hour or so, we reluctantly had to start heading down towards the shore.

Wilson's Storm Petrels were 'butter-flying' among the ice as we returned to the 'Ioffe' in the late afternoon sunshine. A small yacht and one of the smaller Russian ships could also now be seen, her passengers having landed somewhere else out of sight. We steamed back to our morning's area and hove to for the long night ahead. 'Vavilov' appeared and lay a few hundred yards across the water from us as the evening moved towards sunset.

After dinner I heard David saying he was going over to the other ship and I asked to go with him. Having heard him turn down staff and crew requests I was pleasantly surprised when he told me to meet him at the gangway and keep quiet! We raced over with a Russian crew member who was being swapped between the two ships, and were soon welcomed onboard by most of their Expedition Team. I wanted to compare the ships and surprise some WildWings clients we had on board. I was shown around and whilst the two vessels are very similar, 'Vavilov' has a superb upper deck lounge with an open deck area outside which 'Ioffe' does not. My clients were 'gob-smacked' to see me (they had not even noticed 'Ioffe' arrive) and delighted as I claimed we always visited our clients personally to make sure they were having the time of

their lives - which they were! Back to the 'Ioffe' as David was going camping ashore with some of our passengers for the night.

We elected to stay onboard as the skies were changing for what was looking to be rather special evening and the prospect of bedding down for a few hours on the ice did not appeal at that time. We could see our campers ashore standing atop an ice field, looking like distant penguins, whilst those of us onboard stood on the upper decks as the skies turned orange and then fiery red. Many pixels got fixed that night and as the evening turned to twilight, 'Vavilov's' lights burned brightly across the water.

29th January

Blue skies again in 'Heaven on Earth'! Our campers came back very early, one group enjoying a close encounter with a Minke Whale on the ride home. As breakfast was served we started steaming north towards the famous Lemaire Channel ('Kodak Alley') in mirror-calm waters, the mountains and glaciers reflected in the sea around us. One of the scenic highlights for many people, we had perfect conditions as we slowly steamed north, just about all the passengers now out on deck enjoying and photographing the ever-changing views. This narrow passage of water can often be blocked by ice, but not today. The occasional penguin floated past but was generally quiet for wildlife so far. This morning respect for Alun was rocketing as it emerged he had camped on many of the glaciers we were now passing, and he had climbed several of the peaks - a genuine gonzo explorer! With over 30 ships now visiting the continent, today was the day I thought we would see a few other ships, and by the end we had a total of six. However, we were only to see two more for the rest of the voyage.

We now sailed northeast across Flanders Bay towards our morning's landing. A distant large pod of Orcas could be seen on the port side as we turned east past Bryde Island towards Paradise Harbour and our landing on the continent itself. As we slowed towards the empty Argentine base another group of about 10 Orcas appeared ahead of us, but as only cetaceans can, seemed to vanish too quickly. We landed by the base and the majority of passengers walked up the nearby slope only to toboggan down on their backsides to the bottom again. We stayed by the landing, I was hoping to get a Zodiac to go and look for the Orcas. Whilst we waited a large crack could be heard from a nearby glacier and the sound of ice hitting water. David asked us to come up several metres from the beach in case the resulting wave was a few metres high as had happened to their previous visit, swamping an anchored Zodiac. A reminder that in spite of the perfect weather and natural beauty of this region, potential danger is never far away.

As soon as the first passengers were back we were off with Ray driving. Ziggy and his boat soon caught us up but after about 45 minutes we gave up and turned back towards the ship. Paradise Harbour lived up to its name, but could apply to so many other places down there. The blue skies continued as the light bounced off the glaciers all around. The scale of Antarctica is hard to believe. I had a reminder of this when I realised one of the largest ships was completely dwarfed by the 'small' distant glacier in front of.

Our afternoon landing was to be Cuverville Island and we went upstairs for a short nap after lunch. The early mornings and late nights were starting to bite and we missed the alarm clock and the landing! A Gentoo colony with some whale bones scattered all around, a few Zodiacs encountering the first Leopard Seals on the way back we were told. Phew, we had not missed anything critical.

We set sail again, all the while passing through the pristine scenery that surrounded us. David told us during dinner that tomorrow we were looking for Humpbacks, in an area with one of the highest concentrations in the region. I stepped out of the side door to see two Humpbacks surface just behind the ship. I stuck my head back through the dining room door and emptied it within seconds, luckily David had finished talking by then. We spent the rest of the evening sailing slowly towards Wilheimina Bay, the evening sun twinkling on the wavelets. Surely we wouldn't get another day of these incredible conditions? I could see at least 20 Humpbacks miles away, deep inside the bay. We went to bed excited.

30th January

After an early breakfast the Captain moved the ship into the bay, but as we went in a Katabatic wind came up from the glacier in front of us. I took some shots of a young Kelp Gull for Angus Wilson and kept watch for the whales. There was no sign of the group from the previous evening and the wind showed no sign of abating. We turned north along the east coast of Nansen Island towards Enterprise Island where David planned a Zodiac cruise for the rest of the morning. The Zodiacs split into two groups and we headed towards a pair of Humpbacks, which had been spotted as the ship came to a stop. The pair swam steadily, breaking the surface to blow a few times and then going back down showing their tail flukes as they went. We followed at a reasonable distance, getting super views, but ultimately the pair were not interested in us and kept going. We then moved into the coast and went round a small whaling shipwreck, with some Antarctic Terns on board, busy preening themselves. Just around the corner we came across a small colony along with a few breeding Kelp Gulls whose brown chicks sat nervously on rocks just above the sea. The

weather was stunning again, the local wind of earlier had long gone. It was Bar-B-Q lunchtime on the back deck, enlivened towards its end by a group of 10 or so Orcas sneaking past us against the shoreline.

In the afternoon we went into Charlotte Bay and boarded the Zodiacs for an exploratory cruise and floated along yet more glacier faces. Just before boarding I thought I was hallucinating, as against a distant ice face seemed to be an old three-masted schooner in full sail. I was not seeing things, as we went in to the bay the Dutch vessel could be seen sailing out and away past us. In the distance the whales awaited us, a few of us happened to be looking in the right direction when one breached, clean out of the sea, twice. There were more close Humpback encounters to follow, this time everyone got great views but like the animals in the morning they had business elsewhere and cruised away from us. Still, it was magnificent being out in the sunshine in this special place. A large 'dry-dock' iceberg contained over 10 Crabeaters hauled out was well photographed by all. We ventured as close to the ice faces as we dare, distant calving of ice a constant reminder to take care. The 'Ioffe's' Zodiac operation however was quite simply the best and safest I have seen. A brief opportunist landing on some moraine gave us a few minutes on terra-firma as we shared the small pebbly beach with some adult Gentoos, some of which were trying to impersonate chilling seals, completely splayed out over sun-warmed rocks by the water's edge.

Back on board and northwards again. We went in for dinner. The main course was just about to be served when an announcement was made. We had Orcas outside. We pounded up through the ship to the top deck to see a pod of about 15 animals split into two and keep just ahead and to one side of us. They still kept several hundred yards away but gave us our best views of the trip and reasonable chances to get a few decent record shots. I suspect they were much closer when the watch officer on the bridge spotted them. After dinner was complete we went back out on deck for another hour or so, just continuing to soak it all in. Words, photos and film just cannot do it justice. Our first Southern (Antarctic) Fulmars could at last be seen, small rafts resting on the water.

31st January

The good ship 'Ioffe' was definitely blessed on this trip, another blue skied morning and still no wind. Our morning's landing was to be a small un-named island just south of Trinity Island, a compact Gentoo colony. Before breakfast I picked up another group of distant Orcas but they eventually veered off even further away. They had all been Type Bs apparently, penguin and seal munchers. The Zodiacs took us ashore and many people dallied by a patch of snow, which contained both dozing Crabeaters, and two Weddell Seals. The Gentoos here also seemed to be doing well, two chick families everywhere but no shortage of attendant skuas either. Yet more glaciers faced us and frequent cracks saw quite a few pieces of ice joining the Southern Ocean, with a small avalanche thrown in for good measure.

The kayakers were doing their thing as we sat down on one edge of the island where the penguins seemed to be going in and out of the sea. We immediately noticed that birds returning from the sea had pink under-flippers whilst birds heading in had whitish. The birds would walk down from their nests on the little island in ones and twos and assemble in groups of up to 20 on the rocks. Rather oddly, they seemed frightened of the sea, even running back if they got splashed with water! Eventually one would take the plunge and the little gang would all follow within seconds. Birds would also suddenly walk out of the water in small groups, pristinely clean and looking broad in the beam, full of food for their ever-hungry youngsters. We finally followed one up the island and soon watched it being relieved of its load. It seems unfair to mention that one of the staff slipped and slide down a hillside of penguin poo and pee, finishing in the 'lake' at the bottom. He would have got away with it had he not taken so long to clean up down by the water. I will not name him or tell you the ship ran a competition to name the island as we sailed away, or what the winning name was!

By the landing were many large whale bones, two skeletons of two small whalers' wooden boats and a few broken barrels. We returned to the ship via a short Zodiac cruise twisting and turning amongst the little ice-floes to the east of the island. The nervousness of the Gentoos was all of a sudden apparent. Within a few hundred yards at least nine Leopard Seals were hauled out. At least we did not have to witness what undoubtedly happened every day around here.

We started sailing again as we went inside for lunch. David's briefing started with his familiar words, "I have changed the plan for this afternoon, and we are going to Zodiac-cruise a narrow stretch of water called Graham Passage. There may be some whales there." (I suspected he had been talking to the 'Vavilov' again, and was proved right.) We sailed into a wide bay heading for our destination, a steady stream of Humpbacks passing us as we went, with another distant full breach. Finally we seemed to be heading for a glacier and a narrow gap revealed itself ahead. The ship stopped and the Zodiacs swung over the back deck. It was so warm (relatively) that I left my parka in my cabin and just put on my lightweight rainproof and then headed out to join the queue.

This time we ended up in Alun's Zodiac, which we felt was going to be an experience. We cast off from the ship and started towards the passage ahead, following two Zodiacs and the paddling kayakers. "My Zodiac is a democratic one" our temporary captain informed us and requests were taken as to people's interests. The not too distant blows of a small group of Humpbacks made the first decision for us. As we reached them we realised they were doing something different, finally I knew I was going to witness bubble-feeding with my own eyes. Sure enough, bubbles started appearing just in front of us, a minute or so later three Humpbacks surfaced just 100 yards away from us and almost as quickly fluked as they went back down. They were not breaking the surface with mouths agape as I had seen on TV but we did see for the first time the flat top of their heads. They moved slightly west of us and Alun slowly followed, the engine almost idling. A pair of Humpbacks surfaced again, this time just literally yards away from us, the closest animal giving a pronounced tail slap during its first breath. "What did that mean?" said Alun aloud. "We are too close" I replied. He held back for a minute or two and the pair began feeding again. Not only could we hear their breathing we could hear an almost bell-like sound as their lungs emptied. A humbling experience to be so close to these great whales in this frozen wilderness. Elated, we headed in to the narrow passage, largely choked with small ice floes.

We spent the next two hours slowly cruising along, a Humpback could be seen amongst the ice too. We cruised by the largest Antarctic Tern colony we had seen yet, including many flying youngsters for the first time. A few seals were found hauled out although much of the passage was actually in the shadow. We emerged at the other end, the ship ahead of us having sailed around the island that formed the passage. We had been in the Zodiac for nearly three hours and people were starting to get cold. Alun, bless him, had been told off the day before for not being out for long enough, so to make sure he got a gold star took us on a quick whizz around the ship before turning back in. The ship was already moving again as the last Zodiac was craned back on board, and we went in for dinner. A cloud bank on the horizon hinted that the weather was at last going to change, and not for the better. More Southern Fulmars as dark set in.

1st February

We had crossed the Bransfield Strait during the night and awoke to a grey overcast day with light winds. The dark shape of Deception Island could be seen directly ahead of us. Our first albatross for days appeared and a handful of Black-broweds. We had a small group of Cape Petrels around the ship, once they came round the bows and a bird hung in the air just two feet from my face. I could have caught it. Even though the sun had gone, distant icebergs still seemed to possess an inner glow.

We arrived during breakfast and stood by the infamous narrow entrance to the caldera, Neptune's Bellows. We were waiting for our sister ship 'Vavilov' to come out before we could go in. Her Captain lined her up for her run and she steamed past us back into the open sea. Our turn, we set our course and slowly moved in past the cliffs on both sides, skilfully avoiding the hidden rock and shipwreck, which lie just under the surface. Cape Petrels wheeled around the bottom of the cliffs, many pairs could be seen up on high. We turned sharp right as our landing was on the black sand beach at Whaler's Bay. A small Argentine navy vessel was already there, people from her could be seen all around the bay, unfortunately some of them walking in 'off-limits' areas ashore. However, David reminded us he expected us to comply with the rules.

The contrast with the previous days was severe, a few whale bones, abandoned buildings and fuel tanks lay around, black was the main colour. The skies continued to darken and soon light snow was falling as we went ashore. A lone young male Antarctic Fur Seal was at one end of the beach, eventually flushed back into the sea by a group of Argentine personnel. Otherwise just a few skuas sat around. We walked over to the old British hanger, the first flights in Antarctica took place here. We met the Captain of the navy vessel, who seemed very friendly and had given a lift to a number of staff from the nearby Polish base for his mini-cruise (patrol). The wind had been getting up and we were now in a blizzard, it was coming sideways. Time for a swim for some, or rather a quick dip in the thermally heated waters along the beach. The hot spots were very small and we understand you went from zero degrees to very, very hot in about a centimetre!

Back to the ship and out to sea, the wind continuing to rise all the time. We sailed west towards Livingstone Island, now in a Force 9 northeasterly. David announced at lunchtime we were heading for Hannah Point, which he hoped would be sheltered in spite of the conditions. He was as always correct although we faced our bumpiest Zodiac ride yet. I had forgotten all about Hannah Point, it is one of two sites in the Peninsula where Macaroni Penguins breed. It was the ship's first visit this season and we would discover for ourselves if there were any there. It is only a small colony and has been in steep decline for some years. Passenger behaviour ashore at the last Gentoo colony had not been what it should, but David had not missed it. This colony was tightly packed and he organised for us to be walked, in groups of 10 or so with a staff member, in tight, slow-moving crocodiles. I found myself being one of the guides (which I had to 'wing', never having been there before). Ziggy went first and was quickly waving and smiling, at least one Macaroni among the Chinstraps.

Our first new species here was Southern Elephant Seal, of which several large pups lay on the landing beach and a larger group were found further on...and if you think penguins are smelly! Whilst some of the animals were the largest seals we had seen so far, they were a fraction of the size of a full grown male. Although we had only a few hundred yards to walk, progress was very slow. The penguins were given total priority, as they should. This colony had no shortage of predators either, with not only nesting skuas, but a few pairs of Southern Giant Petrels to which we gave a very wide berth as they will desert their nests at the slightest provocation. One adult with its chick had blood dripping from its bill, its head and a neck completely red from eating a recently deceased penguin. We also saw our only sheathbill chicks, rather cute in their grey down.

As we went further north the 'greenness' of this colony was pronounced with both species of vascular plant present and lots of moss. As we walked up the beach we reached the Macaroni in amongst the nesting Chinstraps. Hard to pick up for some of the passengers, its gaily-decorated head was easy for us to spot. We moved on slowly and found another one, this time almost the closest bird, preening and much more photogenic. A few minutes later and we found a pair, cuddled up together. A total of four, but sadly no sign of breeding. (I met a Russian ornithologist the next day who was pleased to hear there were still some there, but said our numbers were the lowest. If they try to breed, the Chinstraps attack the chicks when the parents go fishing. However, Macaroni is the 'commonest' penguin in the world I have since read.) A very nice bonus and giving us an above average penguin list for the Peninsula. We moved slowly on through the colony towards the Gentoos at the western end of the point.

The ride back to the ship was pretty wild, but great driving by Ben ensured we got back still largely dry. For the first time we had dropped anchor and were to remain here for the night and move north again early the next morning. A stunning pure white giant petrel could be seen flying around but never came close enough for decent photos.

2nd February

We awoke after our only really 'bumpy' night, still in a northeast gale. Another, larger tourist ship could be seen taking a real pounding out in the main strait, waves crashing over its bridge. David told us we too had been dragged off the anchor in the early hours. His expertise came into its own again as he suggested we could get ashore at Yankee Harbour, partially sheltered by a shingle spit. He was proved right and we Zodiaced ashore for a short walk along the beach of this Gento colony. Again, a very heavy skua presence, and at least two large live penguin chicks were witnessed being dispatched by them and fed to their young. The snow was falling again and another young fur seal held court on the beach, its back covered in the fresh snow.

Our plans to visit Half Moon Island in the afternoon were shelved and we headed back south for a while as David went to the bridge to make a new decision. At lunchtime he told us he had spoken to the base commander at Bellinghausen, the large Russian base on King George Island, and in spite of the late notice we were welcome to visit. We sailed into the blustery bay mid-afternoon and sadly seemed to suddenly be back in civilisation. The Russian and largest Chilean bases (Frie) are adjacent and now physically merged. Another empty Argentine base was in front of us. We almost did not go ashore but caught the last Zodiac for an hour or so walk before we heading back out into the Drake and towards Ushuaia. The rest of our passengers were standing by one of the main buildings as we stepped ashore after a very lively landing. Our Zodiac picked up four of the other drivers on the way in and I felt a bit sorry for Ben who now had multiple backseat drivers!

As we walked away from the beach we passed a figure in a hooded red parka. "Hello" she said. I peered into the hood and nearly fell over. It was Denise Landau, Dick Filby's wife. Talk about a small world! She was participating in an international workshop (as part of her Executive Director of IAATO role) and happened to be in the commander's office when David's radio call came through. After exchanging happy greetings she took us on a private tour of the bases. We met a number of the staff including the Russian ornithologist mentioned previously. She showed us her room, a ship's container painted white, propped up on bricks with a small window on the side. The Chileans charge up to US\$1000 a night for these 'rooms'.

Little wildlife except for a few Gentoos and slightly surprisingly three young Adelies. Our last Zodiac ride and we set sail for home. That night after dinner the staff held an auction for the 'Save the Albatross' campaign - an excellent idea. Ziggy was M.C. and seemed a natural. The 10 items for sale raised over US\$6000 with over \$4500 alone being paid for a nautical chart with our course plotted, and signed by the Captain. How an Australian passenger was going to get the autographed bent-up Zodiac propeller he had bought home caused much discussion in the bar. Donations were also being taken at reception and it was suggested a CD of the best photos taken by the passengers, along with a selection of my own of the

different wildlife species we had seen, be offered for \$25 each. The CD sales raised a further \$1150 and our grand total was just over \$9000. Pleasingly the 'Save the Albatross' lecture had also been delivered earlier in the voyage. Some ships do not feature it because they do not want to 'upset' the passengers', so full marks to the 'Ioffe'.

3rd February

We awoke already well into the Drake and a light swell and little wind. Good from the travel comfort point of view but a bit disappointing for seabirds (and cetaceans again in spite of the good watching conditions). The conditions meant the ship was travelling at its highest cruising speed, and by late afternoon I realised we were going to cross it in one day at the current rate. (Most ships allow two.) Within an hour of arriving on the bows the first of about 10 Soft-plumaged Petrels had overtaken us. We had an escort of a few Wandering and Black-browed Albatross throughout the day, but only a few, with five or so Grey-headed noted too. The most numerous bird was Black-bellied Storm Petrel, seen about every 30 minutes or so. Otherwise a handful of White-chinned, Cape and Blue Petrels, a few prions and two diving-petrels. A group of small penguins sp heading north in the middle of the Passage seemed slightly early to me. The only cetacean was mid-morning. Distant splashing made me lift my bins to discover a multiple-breaching Hourglass Dolphin on our port side. Its beautiful body markings seen clearly as it rolled over and over sideways.

4th February

A cloudy morning with light drizzle. Ahead could be seen the outline of the islands of Cape Horn, we had crossed the Drake Passage very quickly indeed. I expected many more birds this morning but it was still pretty quiet. A Grey Phalarope flying past was a slight surprise though. Chile is currently very territorial about Cape Horn and constant calls from their small base told us to "go away" and stay at least 12 miles offshore. Our Captain (Beluga!) knew this anyway and ignored them. The rest of the passengers ticked off the distant Horn amid some confusion over which island it was. As we headed north towards the entrance to the Beagle Channel, I popped inside the ship for a few minutes for a coffee and was talking to someone briefly in the lounge when the PA crackled into life and the words "bow-riding dolphins...", I did not wait a second longer and raced outside and along to the bow. A group of ten or so Peale's Dolphins were bow-riding and stayed with us for about 20 minutes. In spite of taking 170 photos of them only one was decent! Later in the day a second smaller group came in, which I missed, they too did not stay long and were apparently chased off by a fatter whiter animal. It sounded like I had missed Commerson's Dolphin again, but this last animal was only seen for a split second. Just another reason to go back again one day.

As we slowly steamed northwards more tubenoses started to appear, good numbers of Sooty Shearwaters in particular and quite a few Black-browed Albatross along with more Wilson's Storm Petrels. Plenty of Imperial Shags were also present with a young bird eyeing up the ship for a potential landing at one point. After lunch I came out in time to see a group of Rockhopper Penguins in the water briefly, not good enough views if you had not seen the species before however. A single South American Sea Lion popped its head up too as we passed by.

Late afternoon found us hanging around at the eastern end of the Beagle Channel as we were due to pick up our Argentine pilot at 20.00. Sooty Shearwaters passed continuously. Just before dinner I went out onto the back deck just in time to see dolphins all along our port side. I shouted back into the bar and many other passengers came out. This time, a group of Dusky Dolphins. Two seemed to be heading towards the bow but by the time I got there they were gone. Time for the farewell dinner. I sneaked out before dessert and had a quick look from the bow as we were now sailing back through the Channel and the light was starting to fade. Something made me look down and I watched five Dusky Dolphins bow-riding. I did not think David would thank me for calling them during the speeches, so I crept back in and stayed quiet.

A number of us came back out after dinner, as we still needed one more penguin. Within minutes we were passing a small group of islands and one had nearly 100 Magellanic Penguins on the shoreline. Our last birds were a raft of Black-browed Albatross as darkness fell. A ship could be seen coming up the Channel and heading out for the ice, it was 'Vavilov' again.

Every voyage to Antarctica is different. We had been very lucky with the weather but had also experienced the continent roar too. More wind in the Drake Passage would probably have yielded many more tubenoses but we could not complain about anything. It did remind me that the choice of ship and itinerary is very important, and to a degree the time during the Antarctic summer in which you visit. I have been lucky enough to have been before and I hope one day to go again. It simply is the most amazing place on the planet. If it's not on your places to visit list already, it should be.

Very special thanks go to David McGonigal and his superb Expedition Team, plus of course the Captain, officers and crew of the 'Akademik Ioffe'.

Observers: J.Brodie-Good and S-J.Thompson.

Species List

Birds -The Voyage

Emperor Penguin
Gentoo Penguin
Adelie Penguin
Chinstrap Penguin
Macaroni Penguin
(Southern) Rockhopper Penguin
Magellanic Penguin
Wandering Albatross
Southern & Northern Royal Albatross
Black-browed Albatross
Grey-headed Albatross
Northern & Southern Giant Petrels
Southern (Antarctic) Fulmar
Cape (Pintado) Petrel
(Lesser) Snow Petrel
Soft-plumaged Petrel
Blue Petrel
Antarctic Prion
White-chinned Petrel
Sooty Shearwater
Wilson's Storm Petrel
Black-bellied Storm Petrel
Common Diving-Petrel
Imperial Shag
Antarctic Shag
Pale-faced (Snowy) Sheathbill
Pomarine Skua
Chilean Skua
South Polar Skua
Subantarctic (Brown) Skua
Kelp Gull
Grey Phalarope
Arctic Tern
Antarctic Tern

Birds - Ushuaia & The Tierra Del Fuego National Park

Great Grebe
Neotropic Cormorant
Black-faced Ibis
Ashy-headed Goose
Upland Goose
Kelp Goose
Crested Duck
Flightless Steamer-duck
Spectacled Duck
Yellow-billed Pintail
Turkey Vulture
Black-chested Buzzard-eagle
Chimango Caracara
Southern (Crested) Caracara
Magellanic Oystercatcher
Blackish Oystercatcher
Southern Lapwing
Rufous-chested Dotterel
Baird's Sandpiper

White-rumped Sandpiper
Dolphin Gull
Brown-hooded Gull
South American Tern
Austral Parakeet
Magellanic Woodpecker
Dark-bellied Cinclodes
Bar-winged Cinclodes
Thorn-tailed Rayadito
White-throated Treerunner
Austral Negrito
White-crested Elaenia
Chilean Swallow
House Wren
Austral Thrush
Patagonian Sierra-finch
Rufous-collared Sparrow
Black-chinned Siskin

Mammals

Antarctic Fur Seal
South American Sea Lion
Leopard Seal
Weddell Seal
Crabeater Seal
Southern Elephant Seal
Peale's Dolphin
Hourglass Dolphin
Dusky Dolphin
Orca
(Antarctic) Minke Whale
Humpback Whale

www.wildwings.co.uk

www.savethealbatross.net