

travel & escapes

VACATION ON ICE

Robin Robinson shares her adventure on the Silver Endeavour, a new luxury cruise ship that offers first-class trips to pristine Antarctica

A thick layer of sea ice is gathering around our ship. Ice chunks of varying sizes — some as large as grand pianos — bob and float nearby. Just beyond, massive white icebergs with blue underbellies stand sentinel offshore of the pristine Antarctic coast.

From the deck of Silver Endeavour, I can't help but think about the many ships and polar explorers whose ambitions — and sometimes lives — were cut short by encounters with sea ice and icebergs. I am filled with awe, yet unafraid.

Silver Endeavour, Silversea Cruises' newest ship, was built for this. Her Polar Class 6 ice-rating means she can cut through a metre of first-year ice. In addition, the luxury 200-passenger expedition ship is equipped with advanced technology that allows it to turn "on a dime" to prevent ice build up.

"Silver Endeavour is by far the most interesting and technically advanced vessel I've ever been in charge of," Captain Niklas Peterstam says.

Peterstam is a highly experienced polar navigator, and the officers and crew are well-trained, but nothing is taken for granted in this place of unpredictable seas and extreme weather.

"Safety first" is the mantra heard repeatedly during the mid-November voyage that takes our group of 21st-century explorers to the coldest, driest, windiest place on Earth. "In Antarctica, safety is the main concern ... We have a Plan A, a Plan B and a Plan C," Marieke Egan, our expedition leader, tells us at our evening briefing. When conditions don't allow, "we pivot," she adds.

Egan and her team are our main points of contact on board and on land. In addition to their guiding qualifications, many team members have impressive backgrounds. Egan is a naturalist with a degree in psychiatry. Assistant expedition leader Jamie Watts is a marine biologist who spent two winters with the British Antarctic Survey. Claudia "Clodie" Holgate is a bird expert, geographer and environmentalist who is also an advanced life support flight paramedic. Alexandra Hansen is a historian, anthropologist and wilderness first-responder.

Unlike Caribbean or European cruises, guests don't wander around Antarctica on their own. The expedition team is always with us, and there are protocols.

Egan says before guests go ashore in motorized Zodiacs, an expedition party "scouts" the location. They determine whether it's safe to land, and if it will be a "wet landing" or a "dry" one.

A wet landing means stepping off the Zodiac into water, a dry one means



A Zodiac motors through sea ice to take guests to shore. Penguins are plentiful on Robert Island, and a southern elephant seal chills out on the beach.

stepping onto a rocky beach or perhaps a snow-covered hillside. I am a wee bit concerned about the mechanics of this but stepping in and out of the rigid inflatable boats proves easy. The scouting team also identifies dangers such as crevasses, and marks a path for us to follow.

The Antarctic continent has no countries, no citizens and no government. It is regulated by a seven-country treaty that sets conditions for visitation. As a member of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, Silversea ensures these conditions — designed to protect the environmentally sensitive wilderness — are met. For instance, only 100

BEFORE YOU GO

The onboard experience is pure luxury, with well-appointed balcony staterooms, excellent service, beautiful public spaces, and four restaurants and a café serving delicious cuisine. Silversea offers two types of all-inclusive Antarctica cruises. Some itineraries are round-trip from Puerto Williams, Chile. These longer cruises make a two-day crossing of the notoriously turbulent Drake Passage there and back. A shorter option, called the Antarctica Bridge, skips the Drake and flies guests to and from the ship on King George Island. For details, see your travel agent or visit silversea.com. Our journey was a "shakedown" cruise, a dress rehearsal before regular cruises start. About 100 journalists and travel professionals sailed a modified itinerary from Puerto Williams, then back to King George Island.

A loud disagreement, which fortunately doesn't become serious.

A line of gentoo penguins marches awkwardly along a "penguin highway" from their nesting ground to the sea. A few seem eager to greet us, and I have to move often to keep the required distance. Further in, nesting penguins guard rocky nests. Holgate says the skuas circling above are waiting to swoop in and steal the eggs.

Landings at Neko Harbour on the Antarctic Peninsula, Cuervo Island and Petermann Island follow with sightings of gentoo, chinstrap and adèle penguins, fur seals and winter wonderland views of glaciers, dazzling blue crevasses and snow-covered mountains. Humpback whales are spotted close to the ship.

On Nov. 19, we sail into the beautiful Lemaire Channel, where Silver Endeavour is formally named. Guests board Zodiacs for sea-level views of the ceremony and watch as Aston cuts the cord to smash a "champagne" bottle made of ice against the hull. Glasses of actual champagne are served.

A landing at Deception Island is planned for the next day. Antarctica, however, has other plans. Thick fog is expected to blanket the region and we must disembark a day early or risk being unable to fly home. After a sailpast of Deception Island, we head to King George Island, where we do our gear and board the Zodiacs for one final wet landing before flying to Punta Arenas, Chile, the first leg of our journey home.

Our first landing is Robert Island. It's summer in the southern hemisphere and the temperature is 2 C. Southern elephant seals laze at the water's edge. They seem indifferent to our presence and placid until two of the enormous creatures have

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