



Sacred Moments In South Georgia

photos and text by Mike Louagie

I recently did the most wonderful cruise of my life on Hapag-Lloyd's five star *Hanseatic*. We sailed in 18 days from Ushuaia via Antarctica, South Georgia and the Falkland Islands to Buenos Aires. Most passengers, if not all, booked this cruise to experience the magic of Antarctica. But I'm not going to tell you about Antarctica in this story. On these pages, you won't read about my first steps on Half Moon Island.

No comments on the Zodiac expedition into Paradise Harbor, watching a monstrous ice chunk breaking off the façade of a glacier and dramatically crashing into the water to cause a mini tsunami. Not a word about cruising into the breathtaking Lemaire Channel or between the small icebergs in the Errera Channel. Not a peep about Deception Island with its black beach. And knowing that you have probably already read a lot about penguins, I'll skip them too.

When we virtually closed the Antarctic door, heading northeast, many saw the rest of the cruise as a bonus: Why not visit some other places in the Southern Ocean while we were here? Some ships first go to South Georgia and then to Antarctica. *Hanseatic* was scheduled to follow the famous Shackleton route from Elephant Island to South Georgia.

Many of us knew about the heroic adventure of explorer Ernest Shackleton. During a 1915 Antarctic expedition, his ship, *Endurance*, was crushed by ice after having been stuck for 281 days in the Weddell Sea. Shackleton and his 28 crew managed to flee on three small boats to Elephant Island. There, they made camp and decided to row with five men to South Georgia for help. This heroic crossing in the worst imaginable conditions of icebergs and

storms took several weeks — but was rewarded. Shackleton was back on Elephant Island 105 days later, and his whole crew was eventually saved.

When we arrived in South Georgia (after some tough days ploughing through heavy seas), the first place we dropped anchor was Grytviken. The name sounds Scandinavian, and yes indeed, it was a Norwegian captain who founded a whaling station here in 1902.

Grytviken has some 30 cruise calls per year, and it is a tradition that each Captain organizes a ceremony at Shackleton's grave. After a short speech, the captain invites passengers for a drink of rum. For the rest, Grytviken is rather a sad derelict place, with exception of the church and the museum that are in pristine condition. The rusted ruins of the whale blubber cooking tanks reminded me that more than 175,000 whales were killed on South Georgia, a sad place indeed.

Around the island

For three days, Captain Ulf Wolter skillfully navigated from bay to bay. In general the weather was inclement, with often strong katabatic winds suddenly roaring down off the glaciers. On our last day, Gold Harbor proved to be the highlight of the cruise. About 15 minutes before disembarking we prepared for our daily ritual, donning warm clothes, waterproof trousers, rubber boots, a red parka and of course a lifebelt. No more than 100 people were allowed ashore at one time, so we were divided into two groups. First come, first served. The first group headed ashore, and I lined up with the others for our turn to tender.

When the first people from the first group returned,



we were struck by the strange glow on their faces. Call it hypnotized or lethargic; some seemed to have taken a whole box of seasickness pills. Finally, one lady beamed a panoramic smile. Enthusiastically she spread the message: We were about to experience the most wonderful landing of the whole cruise.

Once in the Zodiac we could fully assess the landscape. Gold Bay is a curving sandy beach surrounded by snow clad mountains and set off by the spectacular Bertrab hanging Glacier. The absence of wind made it peaceful. When approaching some rocks, we noticed a fur seal sitting on top, like the Little Mermaid in Copenhagen. Another rock had been taken by a huge male elephant seal (weighing as much as four tons). Was he real? Or a sculpture?

When we could finally set foot on the beach we were baffled by the full impact of what we saw. We started to feel the magic. Hundreds, thousands, of animals all over the place. Some people got tears in the eyes.

Fur Seals were rushing around everywhere, and as we moved they came close. In a prior briefing, we had learned how to behave in such cases. Fur seals are attracted by movement.

When they come too close, freeze (which is easy with such temperatures). Don't run away, they'll follow you.

We saw Gentoo and King Penguins (oops! said I wouldn't mention penguins) and Giant Petrels. A Light Mantled Sooty Albatross flew in effortless figures of eight. Skuas were around too, scavenging for any food. A dozen female Elephant Seals were sleeping together as in a harem, keeping each other warm. They were yawning, burping and groaning with open mouth. Luckily we didn't have to smell their breath.

Two eyes were not enough to absorb this wildlife. It was simply too much. But despite the seemingly endless wildlife performance, I suddenly realized that I was still standing only two feet away from the Zodiac. Time to march on to see the King Penguin colony. We couldn't believe what we saw: As far as we could see there were King Penguins. It was like a huge bedspread of white, orange and black covering the landscape. They were noisy and smelly.

Saying goodbye to this sacred place was not easy. Like the Pope, we could have kissed the ground, which we did not do because those cute penguins had left quite a mess.



Profile: **Svenja Klötscher**, Zodiac Captain

The *Hanseatic* has 12 Zodiacs to bring passengers ashore. We got to ask the driver of one, Svenja Klötscher, about her job.

Q. Why would a young woman be attracted to work as a zodiac driver in polar conditions?

A. I was born in the ultimate maritime city Hamburg and my father was in the container business. For a school project I did a hike in Norway and was thrilled by the landscape. It was love on the first sight. Soon after my studies I was offered a job at Society Expeditions, specialized in Polar expedition cruises. Even if I had to make beds, I would have gone.

Q. Did you do the housekeeping then?

A. No, I took care of the German passengers as assistant expedition leader. I had several contracts on the *World Discoverer* and on other ships.

Q. Why Zodiacs instead of tenders?

A. With Zodiacs you can really go to remote areas and land on beaches. You can easily switch off engines to listen to nature as cracking glacier ice before calving. Because of IAATO regulations only 100 passengers are allowed ashore at one time. On larger ships, passengers wait patiently, but we offer our passengers a Zodiac cruise in the meantime.



Q. Is it dangerous?

A. A Zodiac is not a toy, although it is robust and stable. It is made of five compartments, so even if two are hit, we are still afloat. It is only dangerous in surf and coral reefs. The passengers always receive a safety briefing at the start of the cruise. We tell them how to step into the boat, avoiding stepping on the rubber. They have to listen to our instructions and sit down unless they ask for permission to do something different. If somebody wants to make a special photo he can just ask. Then we reduce speed.