

## **A Fortnight Down Below**

Towards the end of February I became one of the twenty-five thousand annual visitors to Antarctica. The first time I hear that statistic it sounded terribly inflated, but in a world measured in billions and trillions, this number sounds almost cozy.

Ushuaia has but one pier and tethered securely to the last berth, the Plancius was neither the largest nor most colorful on the dock that day, but I viewed her as a taxi with lifeboats, and as long as the cab drops you at your destination, the cosmetics don't really matter all that much.

A gaggle of passengers and luggage were piled near the gang-plank, Scurrying about, the staccato clicking of digital cameras, like gulls pecking the shore at low tide; documenting all visible features of boat, pier and place. I had my "world" strapped to my back, so after a few "pecks" of my own, I was up the gangplank, equally as giddy to begin this, the most remote voyage of my life.

Accommodation: If this were a plane, I'd clearly paid for economy class; on a boat the term could be 'steerage', but the four souls in room 203 chose the term 'ballast'. Clearly designed as a 'triple' with three of everything down to the complimentary water bottles and chocolates, adding a fourth just meant there was less room for both passengers and gear to get jostled along the voyage ahead. There would be no jostling of anything; we were packed in too tight.

As the Plancius slowly spun her way thru the Beagle Channel, we 'centurians' were kept on the move, attending all manner of briefings, announcements, drills; then returning to our berths to unpack. The general congestion and commotion suggested an arctic dance competition. We the happy-hundred attempted each style of 'dance' to the best of our abilities; trying to keep our ports from our starboards and get settled in.

Along the way we were introduced to our life-boats which resembled more of an amusement park ride than a survival vessel; each designed to carrying half the passengers and crew, all wearing life preservers. Most scoffed at the premise, but we, the 'ballast of 203' might appreciate the additional room.

The calm waters of the Beagle Channel gave us a smooth exit from civilization. During the on-board introductions, our captain mentioned that the upcoming Drake Passage would hopefully pass beneath our keel without incident, but then he paused and laughed, 'well it's always good to hope.' That was enough for me as I took up my place in the queue for a sea-sickness patch, just in case hope ran out.

All decks of the Plancius were a flurry of activity. Being a 'floating base-camp' in the Antarctic, all one-hundred souls were dressed for action, clad in miles of Gortex, festooned with all manner of Velcro, snaps and zippers that glittered in the deck lighting.

Within two hours the Beagle led into the Drake Passage and the real sea voyage began. Having heard tales of rough-seas in no way prepares one for the reality of the situation. While I had no doubts the Plancius, with her steel plate construction, would weather the Drake in good stead, I couldn't say the same for myself. My internal bravado had me valiantly try to "tough it out" and remain vertical, but I

quickly found the only solace was being laid out in bed. The ship wasn't merely 'tossed' at sea; it went through the 'agitation' cycle through the Drake, with all of us packed inside.

My cabin-mates were suffering the same or worse than I was, which offered small solace along with the rolling and rocking on board. Somewhere in the first three hours of this 'agitation' my sea-sickness patch got jarred loose, but by this time I had resolved to laying prone for as long as it took to reach calmer seas. Unfortunately the crew had other ideas. Every other hour for the first twelve, there was some manner of orientation that *had* to be attended. Since we in 'ballast class' had signed up for all of it, we were constantly shuffling up three decks to learn how to buckle into this, or fasten ourselves unto that. Then we'd race down the three decks to the safe haven of our room 203 before we vomited.

The Passage takes two days and the only way to describe it as being "cocooned". Most would venture out only to catch a bit of food or attend an orientation but the halls and lounges remained barren as we rock and rolled our way southward.

On the morning of the third day, the seas flattened out, the anchor dropped and we were at our first "base". The internal "quease" we all felt passed as quickly as it came, and we were ready to leave the ship.

Over the next six days we would climb, kayak, snow-shoe, camp, hike and boat in and around this perpetual winter wonderland. The point-by-point details are still a blur, but thankfully the camera delivered pin-point focus and I can't wait to share it all once it's all processed.

I am "home", I am safe and on the move again. Trading my Argentine pesos for Bolivian bolivars and going to see the Amazon. My beard is doing well and misses you all terribly, so does the face behind it.

More later when it happens to me...