

## Travels to Antarctica - February 2005

I have always been fascinated by the wildlife in Antarctica, both on land and in the water. Since we have cruised around the outside and through the center of Europe, I was looking for some other place to go. I was disposing of some old International Travel News magazines, and came across a multi-page story on Antarctica. I had a copy of an old brochure for the Marco Polo, and checked their web site to get an update. I also looked at some expedition type ships, but they were very expensive due to the small number of passengers.

I discussed the situation with Sally, who did not want to face the long flight from LAX to Miami to Buenos Aires, having done it years before and before her brain injury. She allowed as how she would let me go by myself, and to compensate, I would take her somewhere at a later date. I booked the trip with the single supplement, and got my confirmation. I was still worried about leaving her alone for 12 days, and told her that. On a previous South American cruise, I had gone to the Galapagos and Macchu Pichu by myself, but she was on the ship with a medical staff if needed.

In October of 2003 we were scheduled to go on a trip in California, but at the last minute Sally was not feeling well, and I figured that this would be a good way to see if I could leave her alone. I spoke to her on the phone the first 2 nights, but when she did not answer the third day when I called again, I called my neighbor, who had a key, to look in on her. After some anxious minutes, another neighbor called me back. Apparently Sally had some sort of seizure and could not get to the phone. We thought she had been there for 2 days! I told them to call the paramedics. They called back later to tell me Sally was being taken to the hospital suffering from dehydration and hypothermia.

Well, that sort of made the decision for us. It was obvious that I could not leave her home alone, so I cancelled the cruise.

In June of 2004 we got a brochure from Vantage offering the same cruise again, but deeply discounted. They offered a 2 category upgrade, \$198 credit from our river cruise, and \$500 that was compensation for the high water on that cruise. It also turned out that as past passengers, we would get some other perks. After much discussion (pleading), Sally agreed to go if I would take her on a Silverseas cruise as compensation. Vantage has a practice of sending out a number of mailings prior to the cruise. We already got the first one about suggested clothing, plus they have already made our air arrangements. I called the airline and gave them our frequent flyer numbers, and then went to their website to select our seats, as they had given us center seats on some legs. It was really great- all I had to do was point and click!

We were going to spend 3 days in Buenos Aires, then fly to Ushuaia to board the ship. Vantage sent us some information regarding two items of clothing we really required for the Zodiac travel- a pair of waterproof pants and boots. I visited the cruise board website, someone suggested getting the boots from Home Depot, as they were inexpensive enough to leave- I went there and bought a pair for \$14, no big deal, and I do not have to take them back home.

Since the first time we planned the trip, Sally's condition has deteriorated to a point where she is having problems walking any distance. I had bought her a "transfer" wheelchair that has 4 small wheels instead of 2 big and 2 small wheels. In checking with the cruise line, they said we would have to supply our own on the ship. We were lucky that on our last cruise the ship had some wheelchairs for us to use. I was going to see if there was a box at work that I could use as I did with Sally's walker, but Sally came up with the bright idea of seeing what kind of a box the wheelchair came in. I went back to the place I bought it, and the box it came in even had a handle! That way I can ship it through as baggage.

The flights from LAX to Buenos Aires via DFW were not that bad, and we were met by "Nacho" Eiras, the Vantage tour manager. I cannot say enough about the efforts he made to assist us in getting Sally from place to place.

We were put up at the Marriott hotel that was around the corner from Florida Street, which was a pedestrian street lined with shops and restaurants. I wandered around and found a "Locutorio", which is an Internet café. The price was less than one US dollar an hour, which was one heck of a lot cheaper than the ship, which charged 75 cents per minute! I was really upset at this, as the Radisson Navigator only charged \$6 per hour, and that was for internet access only. I could use the word processor without charge.

We had lunch at the hotel the morning we arrived, and I ordered a Quilmes beer, which is the most popular Argentine beer, and Sally had a glass of Argentinean Chardonnay, which was quite nice. After lunch I went to the concierge and asked if there was a wine shop near the hotel, and led me around the corner from the hotel to point out the shop. I bought a couple of bottles of the Chardonnay, and returned later to buy 2 bottles of a late harvest wine.

In my travels I found a restaurant called "Monte Carlo" a block from the hotel, and we had steak dinners there two nights in a row. The cost was about \$35 for the two of us, including drinks and dessert!

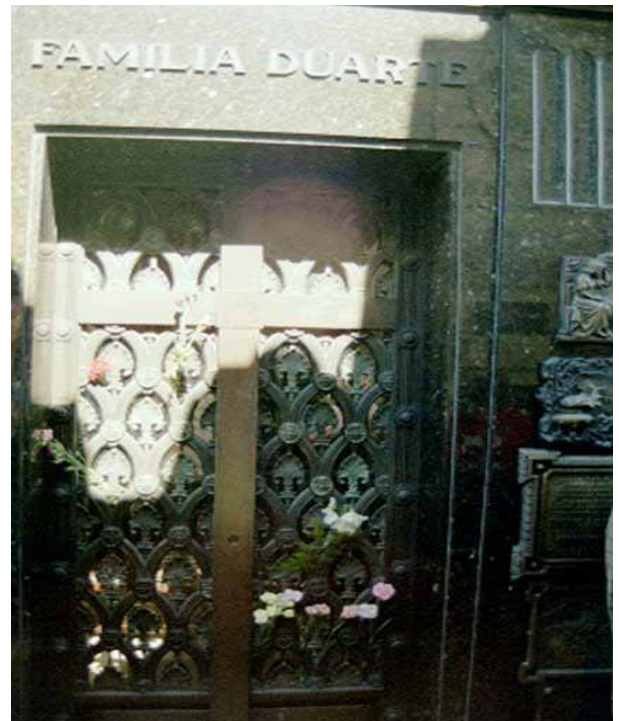
The main street below is billed as the "Widest street in the world", and its centerpiece is the obelisk commemorating Argentina's Independence. One of the things Argentina is famous for is the Tango, so we opted to go to a Tango show. They offered Tango lessons, dinner and a Tango show.



We were also taken on a tour of Buenos Aires, and went to some places I had not seen before. One stop was at the Recoleta Cemetery, where Evita Peron is buried. She is buried 8 feet down, because her body was once kidnapped and held for ransom.



Our final stop on the tour was an area called La Boca, which is sort of a bohemian area with artists showing their paintings and sculptures. The most fascinating parts were the colors the buildings were painted and the figures that were on the balconies.





Saturday morning, bright(?) and early we were taken to the charter terminal at Buenos Aires airport for the flight to Ushuaia, at the tip of South America. The flight was pleasant, and the landing was a little exciting in a 20 knot crosswind. We collected our luggage and were taken to the ship by bus. We were immediately taken by the scenery-snow capped mountains all around the town.



Our cabin was small but functional, with no sitting area but a shelf that pulled out from the dresser to perform as a desk. It was quite a step down from the 250 to 300 square foot suites we have had on other cruise lines. I had downloaded an 11 page trip story from someone who had taken the same cruise previously, so we knew where everything was and how the zodiac transfers would be handled.

On our first night at sea, we cruised through the Beagle Channel to get to the Drake Passage. This can be some of the roughest water in the world, but fortunately, it was not too bad. As we approached the Antarctic Peninsula, we spotted an iceberg about the size of the ship! Fortunately, it was a distance away.

Our first point of call was at Deception Island, which is the submerged caldera of a volcano that was breached at a point called Neptune's Mouth, which was large enough to let the ship inside.



Once inside the caldera, we could see the remains of a Chilean base that was evacuated after an eruption. The water in the caldera was moving up and down 6 feet, so no ship could get to them, plus there was a rain of hot ash and smoke.





As we circled the inside of the caldera, there were places where we could see steam rising from underground hot spots. I have read where some ships scoop out a basin, and people peel out of their parkas and go into the water in their bathing suits! Thank you no.

The following day we started out by cruising the Lemaire Channel between the mainland and Booth Island, but had to turn around halfway down because the channel was choked with ice. Unfortunately, there was a low cloud cover, because this is called the “Kodak Channel” because of the spectacular scenery.



Our first Zodiac experience was to cruise around Cuverville Island. The ship had a great system, as each person was given a colored tag with A, B, or C written on it. We all met in the lounge, and when a group was called we proceeded down to the Zodiac platform and were helped into the boat. We took off and headed to the island, dodging icebergs, and when we got downwind of the rookery, the smell was enough to make one's eyes water. I discovered that the smell was not too bad when you are in the middle of the rookery, but being down wind you got the whole impact! Right in the middle of my trip, the weather turned nasty-the snow was blowing horizontally and the wind whipped up the waves. Plus we had to dodge the icebergs! The wind was so strong, one of the skua gulls hovered over our boat, and I was lucky enough to get a picture of it.





We were only supposed to get our feet wet on this excursion, but with the snow and the waves breaking over the bow, more than that got wet! In fact, it got so rough that after we reboarded the ship, further Zodiac trips were called off until the weather cleared, about 4 hours later.

Our first landing on shore was at Port Lockroy, where there used to be a British station during WW II. This was a “dry” landing, as we stepped out of the Zodiac onto a rock ledge. We were greeted by a Naturalist who gave us a time limit, and showed us the signs that kept us away from the penguins.



We spent an hour looking at the penguins and taking all sorts of pictures, then it was time to go back to the ship. The ship had a great system for cleaning the penguin guano off our boots—there were 3 crewmen with buckets of seawater and big brushes. We just lifted one foot at a time and they scrubbed the boots for us. Our next landing was at Paradise Bay, which had a Chilean Army base on it. They had a gift shop, but the men were having breakfast and did not want to be disturbed. Two of them came on board later, and were stamping peoples’ passports and selling souvenirs. I bought a CD with hundreds of pictures on it. It will take a while to look through all of them.





There were many nesting penguins with one or 2 chicks. Sadly, there were a few that still had baby feathers on that may not make it as they needed their regular feathers to stay warm.



Our last stop in Antarctica was at Half Moon Island, so named because of its shape. The weather, which had been so beautiful the day before, turned to rain. In the four days we were there, we had all 4 seasons! This was also our only wet landing—we slid to the front of the Zodiac, and timed the waves so we only stepped off into a few inches of water. There was an old whaleboat of indefinite age there, plus of course, penguins.



After leaving Half Moon Island, we recrossed the Drake Passage and landed back in Ushuaia for an overnight stay. One of the things I wanted to do was take the "Train at the End of the World", which was a narrow gauge train that went through the National Park.



The locomotives were really cute, and had been made in England in the 1990's. The coaches were cozy to say the least.



We made a stop at a place called "Cascada de Macarena" which was a waterfall, although not a large one.



When I got to the end of the line, and was waiting for the return train, I noticed that there was a little car parked on a siding that was a bathroom car. When the second train arrived, the locomotive uncoupled, and moved to the other end of the string of coaches. I got in, and expected to head back to the main station. The train proceeded a little ways, then switched to a siding and backed up. I then saw the reason- it hooked up the toilet car and was taking it with us!

I took a taxi back into town, and told the driver to drop me on the main street, Avenida St. Martin. Right on the corner was an Internet café, so I went in to check my e-mail. I was quite surprised to see Nacho, our tour director there also.

I have a 1993 South America guide book that listed two restaurants in town that served king crab, and I walked down the street and found one called Moustachio. I checked the menu, and sure enough, they had it. I ordered it "Natur" and it came on a plate as about one half pound of pure crabmeat. I also asked if they had Quilmes bock (dark) beer, and the waiter said they didn't, so I asked for a regular. The waiter returned with the Quilmes, and a local dark beer called Beagle. I selected that, and it was quite good. In fact, I took the bottle so I could soak the label off. I also had a Ziploc bag in my camera bag (never without one), and put part of the crab in it to take back for Sally. She was surprised and really enjoyed it.

I checked the ship's dinner menu, and it was not that exciting, so I told Sally I would see how far the closest restaurant was from the ship. Unfortunately, it was quite a distance, so I had a bright idea. I went into the restaurant and ordered king crab to go. They put it up in a nice plastic box with some dressing. When I got back to the ship I got an ice bucket to keep it chilled. At 4 PM, when it was tea time, I went to the lounge and got plates, forks and napkins. I pulled out the little desk piece in our dresser, and we sat there and enjoyed the crab!

The next day was our departure day, and since our flight was leaving in the afternoon, the ship had scheduled a bus trip through the National Park. It was a nice idea, instead of spending hours in the small terminal.



We made a number of stops, including one at a large beaver dam. It seems someone got the bright idea of bringing them down from Canada. The problem is they had no natural enemies, and the local people were not interested in trapping them for their fur. We also stopped a Bahia Ensenada (Ensenada Bay), where you could look across the water and see a part of Chile.



We also stopped at the official end of the road, with signs marking it. This is like the sign on Key West Florida marking the end of US Route 1.



Finally, we were drive to the airport for our flight. I had Sally's wheelchair with us, so it was not a problem getting her on the aircraft. Nacho, our Tour Director, made arrangements for us to be in the first seats in coach. When we got to Buenos Aires, there was a special truck waiting that raised to the airplane door so Sally could get wheel on, then lowered and swung around to let her off.

There was a van waiting for us and another passenger to take us from the charter terminal to the American Airlines terminal which was a zoo. I collected our luggage and got an airport wheelchair so I could pack Sally's for shipment.

The flight to Miami was uneventful, but it got in a 5AM. We collected our luggage and went through customs and Immigration and were taken to our gate. Unfortunately, the plane did not leave for 3 hours, and we were stuck there. I finally got a wheelchair for Sally to go to the bathroom, but while in there she lost her balance and fell, hitting her head. I assessed the damage and we decided, that if anything had to be done, it would be in Los Angeles. I put a big Band-Aid on her head and we finally got on the plane for home.

We had a long discussion on the plane, and decided that that was our last trip. We cannot be left at the mercy of others to help Sally if she needs it. Hopefully, her condition will improve to a point where we can do some domestic travel, perhaps by train.

In summary, was the trip worth it? Absolutely!

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