



The Start of an Icy Love Affair

SARAH PORTER, WILD EARTH TRAVEL'S BDM, RECENTLY VISITED ANTARCTICA ON BOARD PONANT'S LE SOLEAL.

I have a confession... Antarctica was not on my bucket list. I used to joke I was solar powered and allergic to snow, BUT... oh how things have changed!

Working for Wild Earth Travel for close to five years, I felt like I knew a fair bit about Antarctica. I did my homework and learnt from the best – Aaron Russ. The owner of Wild Earth Travel is an Expedition Leader himself and has travelled to the white continent over 130 times... he's grown up on an expedition ship, whilst my bach was always centred around sunshine and sand.





Sarah at Danco Island

The opportunity to visit Antarctica on Ponant's Le Soleal was a 'no brainer' - of course I would take the opportunity to experience it, and do so in style. I just had no idea that it would leave me with a new love and appreciation for this incredible place.

With Air New Zealand's direct flights to Buenos Aires, getting to Antarctica is somewhat easier than it has been. Ponant takes care of everything from Buenos Aires - transfers, dinner, a charter flight then leisurely lunch on arrival in Ushuaia; and this gives you a taste of the service and style that is to come.

Boarding Le Soleal was incredibly seamless, and somewhat surreal - yes, that man grinning and greeting passengers on the gangway was the Captain, and within ten minutes of a little simple admin, I was shown to my cabin where a bottle of chilled champagne was waiting, as well as my luggage.

After an initial 'welcome on board' presentation and safety drill, the bars and restaurants are quick to make sure you are settling comfortably into the famous Le Soleal hospitality. With less than 200

passengers (and over 150 crew), you are quickly made to feel at home on this modern mega-yacht.

Crossing the Drake Passage is all part of the adventure and, so long as you are prepared, it can be rather enjoyable! The first couple of days of this adventure can see a 'shake' or 'lake' across the Drake. With a bit of seasick medication (just in case), I soon realised you can run on a treadmill (holding on); do a stretch class and even don heels and a dress to enjoy cocktail hour with the Captain followed by a six-course degustation gala dinner. The live music after dinner saw the dance floor packed, and we were all having a giggle that this was all taking place in the middle of the Drake Passage!

Our first sighting, and landing, was in the South Shetland Islands. Walking up the beach with elephant seals, fur seals and both Gentoo and Chinstrap penguins was incredible. I was here, I was living it, and I wasn't even cold! The Americans in our group were quick to point out that Chicago was currently at -24C, and we were 'enjoying' +1!

The following days were filled with breath-taking scenery, incredible

wildlife, vast landscapes, rich history and dramatic ice. I never knew icebergs could be so enchanting - the colours, textures, shapes and scale were everchanging. We managed to see a vast range of wildlife, too - Emperor, Gentoo, Chinstrap and Adelie penguins; Leopard, Weddell and Crabeater seals; and Orca and Humpback whales.

Our days were spent with landings on the ice as well as time spent zodiac cruising. The only thing I could begin to compare zodiac cruising to is game driving in Africa. The viewing and scope of the landscape was breath-taking and this soon became my favourite activity.

The Expedition Team also doubled as our zodiac drivers, so whatever and wherever the adventure, an expert was there to answer our questions and enrich the experience. Ponant also offer kayaking in Antarctica, and 80 year old Sharon, from Australia, was quick to prove that age was no barrier!

After each 'outing', returning to Le Soleal seemed surreal - we were greeted with open arms and tight grips from the team helping us get

off the zodiac. After scrubbing a bit of penguin poo from our boots, the lounge awaited – live music, a hot toddy and the amazing crew there to welcome you back in unassuming French style.

Meal times on Le Soleal showcased incredible culinary talent; and dessert buffets, cheese selections and the amazing French bakery selection soon saw me making more use of the gym on board!

One evening we skipped dinner to experience a horizon filled with whales – Humpback whales bubble net feeding incredibly close to the boat, as well as Orca. We spent over four hours changing course to experience this scene, and many of us didn't leave the bridge until after 11pm.

Time spent on the boat was leisurely, and whilst the daily programme offered lectures, fitness classes and the like; an afternoon nap or quiet corner to read was also a valid option for many. Just when you thought the crew were doing more than enough to enhance the experience, an on-board pool party in aptly named Paradise Bay saw many take the plunge for a quick photo and cocktail!

Describing this experience is incredibly hard. It was enriching in so many ways – the history, the wildlife and the sheer scale of the landscape is indescribable. Antarctica is a destination that truly needs to be experienced to believe. I can still hear the cracking and rumbling of the ice; and I can still smell the penguins...they don't smell as good as they look!

As our Expedition Leader said at our last briefing: "Many people say they've 'done' a destination. You haven't done Antarctica. You have lived just a little bit of it."

It was a humbling experience and an extreme privilege to visit this white continent, and it's now top of my bucket list to return and live just a little bit more of Antarctica. ❖

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