



# The last wilderness

**Fiona Harper** voyages to one of the most remote places on the planet, where extraordinary history comes with rare wildlife sightings.

**T**en days after departing Bluff on a blustery evening, we step ashore on the Antarctic continent at Ridley Beach beneath the basalt bluff of Cape Adare.

Apart from a brief conversation with a Parks Tasmania ranger on Macquarie Island, we have seen no sign of human life on our crossing of the Southern Ocean bound for the Ross Sea.

Yet here, in the most incongruous of places almost 3000 kilometres south of New Zealand, a tiny timber hut sits on a pebbly beach bathed in golden sunlight well after midnight.

Carsten Borchgrevink's hut is surrounded by a heaving Adélie penguin colony, its cacophonous chortling echoing off the cliffs below snow-capped mountains. Tabular icebergs catch the low rays of sunlight on their flanks. The cloudless sky blushes fairy-floss pink. There's not a breath of wind to stir the sea.

Three days earlier, Heritage Adventurer was navigating through the Screaming Sixties when we spotted our first iceberg rising from the Southern Ocean like a frozen castle, all razor-sharp spires and deep caverns carved by wind and sea.

Two days before that, in the Furious Fifties, we crossed the Antarctic Circle and celebrated with a polar plunge and a pledge to "advocate for the importance of Antarctica, its wildlife, history and splendour".

Before this, we island-hopped through the Subantarctic Islands, which are like emerald stepping stones strewn across the sea between New Zealand and the white continent. It feels momentous to arrive



Scott's Hut at Cape Evans is an Antarctic time capsule.

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Emperor penguins are easily identifiable by their golden markings.

in a region that sees little more than 1000 visitors each year. Its remoteness is the main reason fewer than 1% of Antarctic travellers venture into the Ross Sea.

For some, that distance is a deterrent. For others, myself included, it is the attraction, with languid sea days filled with lectures, documentaries and socialising with fellow passengers.

There are few places left on earth where



The wildlife is a key drawcard for visitors.

human impact has not reshaped the landscape.

The Ross Sea is one of them. Though to be fair, early explorers earnestly attempted to make their mark as they searched for the South Pole. Many perished trying. At Cape Adare, where Carsten

Borchgrevink's Southern Cross Expedition's hut still stands, we step ashore into the heart of Antarctica's largest Adélie penguin colony.

The smell of guano is pungent, but it is the cacophonous chortling that resonates.

It feels like Grand Central Station on steroids as thousands of birds bustle about their penguin business.

International Antarctic Association of Tour Operators (IAATO) guidelines dictate that we keep at least 5 metres from wildlife, but the curious penguins never got that memo. They waddle straight up to my boots, inspecting these strange intruders on their turf.

Antarctica is the only continent where humans' first dwelling still stands, and walking around this modest six-by-five-metre hut is like stepping directly into history. Walls are etched with caricatures and calculations; a pencil sketch sprawls across the low ceiling above one bunk.

Ten men spent a difficult year here, surviving largely on penguins during the 24-hour darkness of an Antarctic winter.

Physicist Louis Bernacchi later wrote, "may I never pass another 12 months in similar conditions and surroundings".

## Fact file:

Heritage Expeditions is a New Zealand family-owned company that has been visiting the Ross Sea for more than 30 years. A 28-day expedition visiting Antarctica's Ross Sea costs from NZ\$53,780. Departures are available on January 6 and February 1, 2027 and January 5 and 31, 2028. See: [heritage-expeditions.com](http://heritage-expeditions.com)

**Sustainability:** Ocean and river cruising have an impact on the earth's waterways. To reduce your impact, consider offsetting carbon emissions and booking with cruise lines that use cleaner fuels and adopt recycling practices.

The writer was a guest of Heritage Expeditions.

Stepping over the threshold at Robert Falcon Scott's hut at Cape Evans, I feel like a voyeur into the past. Smoke, tobacco and the pungent residue of men living in tight spaces cling to the polar air. It feels like the last man has merely stepped outside and will return momentarily.

Packing crates are stacked precisely, forming an unspoken barrier between officers and men. A cache of congealed seal blubber is piled in the lean-to, its glistening flanks slick with rancid oil.

A newspaper lies open on the table, abandoned mid-read. Holed socks drop from lines strung between bunks.

Tin cups hang by the stove and shelves sag beneath the weight of arrowroot, beans and cocoa tins. In the far corner, the science lab is strewn with glass beakers and instruments awaiting the return of an absent researcher.

While the Ross Sea's place in history is remarkable, its wildlife alone is reason enough to venture this far south.

One morning, expedition leader Christian Engelke rouses us at 4am for an early wildlife excursion, his soft German accent reminding us, "this is what you signed up for".

With 24 hours of daylight, sleep feels like an indulgence when the Antarctic landscape is begging to be explored.

Adélie penguins may be the most common, but little-seen emperor penguins are the ones everyone hopes to see. They breed on vast platforms of pack ice, enduring winter gales while tending to eggs (or later, chicks) atop their feet.

Nearly a metre tall, they are unmistakable, with golden swishes tracing their chins and wrapping around their shoulders.

They share the ice with leopard, crabeater and Weddell seals, which bask languorously, belching like obstinate teenagers.

Along the ice edge, killer whales stalk



History and wildlife co-exist in Antarctica.

toothfish or spyhop through cavities in the ice, their enormous heads bobbing like black and white ping-pong balls.

Minke whales glide silently through krill clouds, while humpbacks flash massive tail flukes before disappearing into an ocean so deep it's almost black.

Here at the farthest reaches of the world, history and wildlife co-exist companionably.

An expedition cruise to the Ross Sea is not for everyone. While Heritage Adventurer offers exquisite comforts the early explorers could only dream of, a sense of adventure and curiosity to embrace the unknown is still required.

The Ross Sea offers a rare perspective on endurance and human insignificance.

It is indeed a real privilege to visit a place where nature still rules.



An iceberg drifts off the remote Balleny Islands.

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