

FEATURE · ANTARCTICA

Camping in *Antarctica*

Antarctic camping shore excursions elevate a polar cruise into a genuine expedition for anyone cruising to the White Continent.

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My shovel hits the ice with a satisfying thwack. I push hard on the handle and it pierces the surface and sinks into the soft snow. I wiggle the blade until there's a decent mound of snow atop it and swing it onto the growing mound of snow beside me. I get into a rhythm and before too long have dug a hole about two metres long and half a metre wide. It's just big enough to contain a body. My body.

Each thrust of the shovel echoes a gravedigger's rhythm. It's methodical, purposeful and oddly satisfying. *Thunk. Thunk. Thunk.* But I'm not digging a grave. Rather, I'm creating a bed.

A safe haven for the night. This hole, which is just large enough for my own body encased in a bivvy bag, will provide protection against the Antarctic night. It's just deep enough to allow any wind to blow over the top of me should a storm roll through.

We're camping out on the ice during a 14-day Antarctic expedition with Chimu Adventures. This unusual shore excursion is one of the highlights of our voyage to the White Continent and I'm equal parts excited and nervous. As a devotee of tropical climates – where swimsuits are the norm and sunscreen is the only protection required – Antarctica presents a real challenge. At Portal Point (64°S) on the Antarctic Peninsula, temperatures plunge to -20°C, which is colder than most household freezers. As I lie down in the hole to check it's large enough, I'm concerned about staying warm during the frigid night ahead.

But I'm not alone, thankfully. There are about 50 intrepid campers braving the extreme conditions of an Antarctic night on the ice. We've all happily signed up for an overnight adventure that promises to be one we'll never forget. Ocean Endeavour anchors nearby – a safety net in this remote wilderness. Highly experienced expedition crew are equipped with first aid kits and VHF radios in case things go horribly wrong in one of the remotest places on Earth.





WHAT'S ANTARCTIC WEATHER LIKE IN SUMMER?

It's early December – the height of summer on the White Continent – which means almost 24 hours of daylight. At this time of the year, darkness doesn't really fall. There's a gentle transition from bright sun-kissed daylight to pastel hues of twilight which lasts a couple of hours before daylight resumes. On this particular night we're blessed with perfect conditions.

The moon is full, there's barely a breath of wind and the dazzling snow we're camping on is pristine. On our trip ashore in a fleet of zodiacs after dinner, we slow to watch a leopard seal lolling on a snow-capped headland and delight in penguins on an ice floe. This is wild nature at its most raw and it rarely gets better than this.

WHAT IS IT REALLY LIKE TO CAMP IN ANTARCTICA?

I'm camped about a metre away from another solo traveller who I've become friends with. Narelle, who hails from Hobart and is more accustomed to cold weather, is equally nervous and animated. The excitement of doing something as novel as camping in Antarctica has reduced us to child-like, elated delirium.

After prepping our 'beds' we lie down and try to get comfortable. But sleeping in such unusual circumstances feels like cheating and we chat away quietly. We're both too wired to sleep and we laugh raucously at the most mundane things.

We've come ashore after dinner, emptying my bladder before boarding the zodiac for the trip ashore. Expedition crew have set up a rudimentary camping toilet a short distance from us campers – a snow-walled toilet with a bucket lined with a bin liner. Though the view from the loo is something special, it's really for emergencies only and I make a mental note to drink little water during the night.

All visitors and tour operators in Antarctica adhere to a strict 'leave no trace' protocol which protects this pristine wilderness. Before each shore excursion we're given briefings on where to walk and how to behave to minimise impact on the environment and its inhabitants. Before we return to the ship after our camping expedition, we fill in holes left by camping and walking in soft snow so as to remove hazards for penguins.

WHAT EQUIPMENT IS NEEDED TO CAMP IN ANTARCTICA?

Eventually I'm exhausted and I snuggle down into my bivvy bag, pulling the hood over my head and zipping myself in. I feel a bit like the meat inside a sausage and it's not easy to move around. I'm dressed in four layers on the bottom (five if you count my underwear) and five layers on top. I'm wearing two pairs of wool socks. My waterproof boots are the only piece of clothing that I'm not sleeping in.

My bivvy bag with its waterproof outer is designed for polar climates. It's a bit like a cross between a swag and a sleeping bag. It does an admirable job of keeping the cold at bay. But, nevertheless, I feel a chill seeping through the layers.

IS CAMPING IN ANTARCTICA WORTH IT?

It's hard to find a comfortable position within the confines of my snow-lined bed. Eventually tiredness takes over and I succumb to intermittent sleep. Around 3am I unzip my hood and poke my head out. The view across this icy haven is mesmerising. The sky is a deep shade of purple. There's not a breath of wind. A full moon hovers above puffy clouds, casting a twinkling stairway to the moon across a glassy sea. The eastern horizon is tinted pale orange. The icy peninsula beyond my seaboots is a dull muted grey. Beyond the occasional snores of my fellow campers, the silence is palpable. The tranquillity absolute.

The delirium I felt earlier is now replaced with contentment. An overwhelming gratitude for the privilege of this moment. To be fully immersed in nature at the bottom of the world.

It's one night I will never forget. ■

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