

Rare Adventures in Subantarctic Waters

I discovered my “Exploration of the Antipodes” cruise aboard the MV Orion through US-based adventure travel specialist, AdventureSmith Explorations (adventuresmithexplorations.com) which represents many first class expeditionary options.



I shared with company owner, Todd Smith, that I wanted a small-ship cruise itinerary truly off the beaten path, and he met my request immediately. What Todd proposed for me was one of the most rarely visited regions on earth: the Subantarctic islands of New Zealand and Australia with landscapes characterized by tundra, permafrost, and volcanoes.

I had never heard the names of any of them, so that was a good start, and, he assured me that they were all UNESCO World Heritage Sites which I count as a bonus endorsement in my travel selections.

Sailing from Auckland, New Zealand, we headed southeast toward what UNESCO describes as “the most diverse and extensive of all Subantarctic archipelagos”: the five NZ island groups comprising the Bounty Islands, the Antipodes Islands, the Snares Islands, the Auckland Islands and Campbell Island.

Our Australian island of exploration was Macquarie Island, the most southerly point of our journey and arguably the high point of an itinerary full of exciting encounters. Isolated, windswept, fragile and each one unique in the world for its endemic birds, marine mammals and plants, they are today considered irreplaceable. They occupy predictably stormy latitudes between the Roaring Forties and the Furious Fifties, also known as the Albatross Latitudes.

On our cruise the latitudes’ bad reputation was demonstrated only by a number of days of 20 foot/6 meter swells between the islands. Otherwise, we were blessed with a rare abundance of sunlight and blue skies day after day, making each island visit a photographic delight.

Orion Expeditions gifted each guest with a cosy winter jacket with hood, but we were instructed to bring thermal underwear, a toque or balaclava and winter gloves, rain pants and gumboots for “wet” landings. We needed them for all our two- to three-hour Zodiac excursions: some required going ashore for guided walks, and others followed dramatic coastlines with a naturalist aboard to point out well-camouflaged birds and marine mammals. Some species had declined to only a handful of creatures in the 20th century before beginning celebrated comebacks in their now-protected environments.



When I first looked at the 16-day itinerary, I noted a number of “at sea” days, some with two days and nights of sailing time between islands not conveniently spaced for the benefit of visiting tourists. Except for a dozen avid seabird watchers who gleefully bundled up any time from dawn to dusk to haunt the upper decks in search of rare seabirds, I suspected these “at sea” days might be a little dull compared to the exhilarating Zodiac island-visiting days. I was wrong.

Eleven naturalists were on board to share their diverse knowledge with informal chats or during stimulating lectures. Three or four illustrated lectures were scheduled during every “at sea” day in the comfortable theatre on the Orion’s top deck with subjects ranging from wildlife species and plants, to bird migration, island geology, the colorful but tragic (for the animals) whaling history, and attempted human settlements. Attendance was always enthusiastic with plenty of questions for each lecturer, but if a guest wanted to watch a lecture in their stateroom, each one was broadcast on their TV.

There were also three gourmet-quality meals a day to truly savor at a leisurely pace and an ample tea spread in the afternoon, a well-stocked library, an entertaining musical duo nightly, and surprisingly competitive group games of Trivial Pursuit at tea time. The Orion is, after all, a sophisticated, spit-and-polish 103-meter/338-foot cruise ship minus the casino, the crowds, and nightly Las Vegas-style floor shows!

I can now count myself among the one thousand or so people granted permission in 2011 to visit these precious Subantarctic islands. I did so under the strictest quarantine and human activity restrictions in the world, designed by the NZ and Australia Departments of Conservation to protect the fragile populations of indigenous plants and animals still struggling to make a comeback from near extinction due to catastrophic human interference over several earlier centuries. Today we come humbly by invitation only!

Until the past decade, the continent of Antarctica was near the top of the average adventure traveler’s life list precisely because it was an experience few would ever expect to achieve. Today, with 40,000 tourists annually arriving in Antarctica, it is now a “been there, done that” check mark on many top ten lists.



Near the end of our 16 days navigating the high seas, I asked veteran Orion Expeditions leader, Mick Fogg, how he would rate this Subantarctic cruise among the wide range of itineraries he has created and supervised. He didn't hesitate to declare this close to his favorite voyage.

"Every island is different," he declared enthusiastically, "unique in its own right, and far more diverse in flora and fauna than the Antarctic. We haven't passed another ship or seen a plane for 16 days ... that really shows how off the beaten path we have been!"

By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her Travel with a Challenge web magazine, www.travelwithachallenge.com, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

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