



OCEANWIDE  
EXPEDITIONS

## Expedition Log

# Antarctic Peninsula

3<sup>rd</sup> December to 15<sup>th</sup> December 2009

aboard the

## ***MV Professor Molchanov***



*The Professor Molchanov is a former research vessel from the Institute for Hydrometeorology in Murmansk, Russia, and currently under long-term charter by Oceanwide Expeditions. She was designed and built as an ice strengthened ship in Finland and launched in 1983. Measuring 71.6 metres (236 ft) in length and 12.8 metres (42 ft) across the beam, she draws no more than 4.5 metres (15 ft) under the keel, which allows manoeuvring in relatively shallow waters. The vessel was named in honor of Russian Professor Pavil Alexandric Molchanov, a famous meteorologist who claimed fame for his invention of radiosondes and stratospheric weather balloons. He was also the first Soviet Russian to participate in a Zeppelin airship expedition to the Arctic in 1931. Born in 1893, Professor Molchanov died during the WW2.*

With  
**Captain – Nikolay Parfenyuk**  
**and his Russian Crew of 19**

and

**Expedition Leader** – Rolf Stange, M.Sc. (Germany)  
**Guide/Lecturer** – Christoph Grieser, Ph.D. (Germany)  
**Guide/Lecturer** – Jan Naumann, M.Sc. (Germany)  
**Hotel Manager** – Jan de Ceuster (Belgium)  
**Head Chef** – Richard Arokiasamy (Malaysia)  
**Sous Chef** – Joe Donny Labansin (Malaysia)  
**Ship's Physician** – Dr. Jan G. Mühling (The Netherlands)

Together with

**51 Antarctic explorers from**  
**Australia (5), Austria (1), Belgium (2), Germany (3), Greece (1),**  
**Hungary (1), Israel (3), Italy (1 ½), Malaysia (2), The Netherlands (8),**  
**Poland (2), Portugal (1), Spain (9), Switzerland (1),**  
**U.K. of Great Britain (1), United States of America (10 ½)**

**3rd December 2009 – Ushuaia, Argentina**

*Position: 54°45'S, 68°30'W. Temperature: 8°C (07:00 am)*

*Weather: overcast with sunny spells and intermittent showers in the afternoon*

Ushuaia marks the end of the road of Argentina's Tierra del Fuego and for many the beginning of once-in-a-lifetime adventure to Antarctica. By the time summer arrives, this colourful, booming frontier town of 55,000 inhabitants bustles with adventurer from all over the world. The duty-free port clearly flourishes with tourism as the mainstay but also thrives on a sizeable crab fishery and a burgeoning electronics industry.

Ushuaia, (lit. "bay that penetrates to the west" in the indigenous Yaghan tongue) clearly benefits from its magnificent, although remote setting. The rugged spine of the South American Andes ends here to meet two oceans. As could be expected from such an exposed setting, the weather has the habit of changing on a whim and certainly lived up to its reputation on our inaugural expedition day. However, temperatures during the long days of the austral summer tend to be balmy providing one last respite before heading farther south to the 'Deep Freeze', an apt name for the Seventh continent.

Most of us had spent at least one day in Ushuaia, where 'Antarctica' naturally tends to be the talk of town among travellers. In turn, the excitement among the participants of our



*The Beagle Channel*

expedition was palpable during embarkation on the *Professor Molchanov* between 4 pm and 5 pm. Oceanwide staff welcomed us on the pier, led us to our cabins while the ship's crew dealt with our luggage. With just enough time to settle in and refresh ourselves we were soon summoned to the ship's bar for a welcome reception by our expedition leader Rolf Stange, a Geographer by training and a seasoned veteran to both polar regions. He introduced his staff of guides / lecturers, the ship's purser as well as the talented galley team. Following a short run-down of what we could expect life aboard to be like for the next 11 days, we toasted to an eventful but safe expedition cruise. The *Professor Molchanov* left the pier – as scheduled – by 6 pm after taking on an Argentine pilot who would guide us eastward out of the Beagle Channel, the historically disputed political border between Chile and Argentina. The famous seaway bears the name of explorer Robert Fitzroy's ship, on which a young man would serve, who ultimately revolutionized our view of life on earth – namely Charles Darwin. His matter-of-fact description of the spectacular channel centuries ago read “*about 1½ miles wide, hills on both sides above 2000' high...scenery very retired – many glaciers, uninhabited, beryl blue, most beautiful, contrasted with snow.*” It had made no mention of flagged trees along its shores, telltale signs of gale-force winds that pick up on a whim in this setting and happened to kick up just as we headed out on an easterly course.

Before settling in for dinner and leisure time out on the decks, we had to cover the mandatory safety and rescue briefing – a prerequisite for any ship-borne expedition. We practiced an authentic lifeboat drill, which required us to respond to an ‘Abandon Ship’ alarm signal by gathering in the bar as muster station donning lifejackets and warm clothing. Piling into the two lifeboats was part of the overall exercise. Following this essential drill we headed straight to the restaurants for our first delectable dinner.

Some weary travellers retired to their cabins right after, but many stayed out on the ship's decks spotting the first harbingers of subantarctic wildlife: Black-browed albatrosses, kelp gulls, rock shags and even some Giant Petrels. Just before midnight most had called it a night, it would be last time that we'd experience complete darkness for over a week. Yet, not all found sleep or even rest since we soon left the comforts of Tierra del Fuego's protective shores, passed mythical Cape Horn and headed out into the open sea. The wind had gained strength and the *Professor Molchanov* started rolling and pitching – the price to pay for the privilege of being granted access to Antarctica.



*A Cape Petrel enjoying, the stormy seas more than we did.*

#### **4<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Into the Screaming Fifties**

*Position: 55°45'S, 66°19'W. Temperature: 3°C (07:30 am)*

*Weather: overcast with good visibility, southwesterly winds (7 Beaufort) with intermittent gales*

Hardly anyone needed a wakeup call this morning given that the Drake Passage had lived up to its ferocious reputation tossing us around in our berths all night. Few had gotten more than just a few minutes of sleep and it didn't come as much of a surprise that only the hardy attended breakfast. While the officers on the bridge had tried their best to reduce the pitching

and rolling by changing our course slightly and adjusting forward speed to a mere 6 knots, we were clearly at the whim of the forces of nature. With 450 nautical miles to go, two full sea days still laid ahead of us and even the delicious, light meals dished up by the galley team lessened the effects of motion sickness to only a small degree.

Ultimately, it does take time to gain sea legs and there seem to be as many coping mechanisms as there are sufferers. While lying in one's bunk seemed to work for some, others preferred to relax in the bar with a good book or drink. The hardiest hung out on the bridge or the rear decks bracing against the rolls and pitches. They made the best of the situation by focusing on bird watching and photography. As a result, an exciting list of sightings added up, as prolific birdlife soared on the airwaves off the *Professor Molchanov's* bow. Among them were several wandering albatrosses, black-browed albatrosses, sooty shearwaters and numerous massive giant petrels. With a wingspan of over three metres and a weight of up to 11 kg, the 'Wanderers' outsized them all, all the while performing elegant aerobatics at phenomenal speeds that have been measured at over 85 km/h. These majestic birds –not unlike humans- have slow reproduction rates and can live to an age of 60 years. Many fall prey though at a much younger age to longline fishing practices across the Southern oceans. In fact, albatross populations have been declining in excess of over 20% as fisheries' bycatch over most of their range within recent generations.

Whale populations, in contrast, seem to be faring better these days, as whaling has largely been stopped and populations are slowly recovering after centuries of intense pursuit. It didn't come as a surprise, that before long a few blows were spotted in the distance although a definite species identification was impossible given the rough conditions at sea.

With only a few passengers daring to stay up on two legs and moving around the ship, the intended lecture program was postponed to the next day. Instead, a couple of film documentaries on Antarctic exploration at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were offered to provide at least some distraction in the afternoon. Much to our surprise, the seas started calming after our first dinner at high sea affording better sleep to most.



*Light-mantled Sooty Albatross and Southern Giant Petrels accompanied us across the Drake Passage.*

### **5<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Crossing the Antarctic Convergence and 60°S latitude**

*Position at 08:00 AM: 59°19'S, 62°58'W. Air Temperature at 12:00 PM: -1°C*

*Weather: Mainly overcast with good visibility, southwesterly Force 5 winds.*

Shortly after midnight, largely unnoticed by those still up and about, we had slipped into the Antarctic. The change had been subtle – just a slight adjustment in the salinity and temperature of the seawater – but the new day would offer entirely new wildlife species for viewing. Countless Cape Petrels (Pintados), Southern Fulmars and several species of Prions indicated that we had entered a nutrient-rich ocean providing abundant food supplies, namely

enormous amounts of krill (*Euphausia* spp.) – a keystone species to life in and around Antarctica.

If the number of patrons at the breakfast buffet was any indication, most of us had gained sea legs over night. Wind and waves had calmed significantly allowing us to increase speed of 12 knots. After all, we wanted to make up time in a hurry.

With stomachs settled, a morning lecture was called in which Jan informed us on the life history of the penguin species we could expect to see on the Antarctic Peninsula. His presentation was followed by an invitation from Rolf to a tour of the bridge that provided much technical detail on the *Professor Molchanov*, its crew and the ways she's operated in both Polar Regions.

Following a light lunch under bright skies a second tour of the bridge was offered while interest peaked among the outdoorsy to resume whale watching and birding out on deck. The sightings of several groups of humpback whales nearby and an entourage of five chocolate-colour sooty albatrosses – among several other bird species amply rewarded both interests. By mid-afternoon it was time for yet another lecture – this time by Christoph on sea ice and icebergs. As it turned out, the topic had been an apt choice as a sizeable iceberg was spotted on our course soon after – a first for many of us! After all, we had crossed 60° Latitude a few hours ago and were now within the Antarctic Region as defined by the Antarctic Treaty.

In the late afternoon our expedition program continued with two mandatory briefings by our Expedition Leader Rolf Stange. His first presentation focused on IAATO (International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators), their Code of Conduct and Environmental Etiquette. The membership-based organisation has developed and keeps refining a set of sustainability guidelines and regulations governing the operation of expedition cruises and the behaviour of visitors in the Antarctic. The regulations are meant to help minimise the impacts of tourist operations in Antarctica while permitting tourists to experience this unique ecosystem. One specific hope behind the efforts to facilitate modern adventurers a visit of the Antarctic is that some will develop a sense of stewardship and civic responsibility to maintain the Seventh continent and its seas as a wilderness park for future generations.

The second point of business was a briefing on Zodiac operations, an introduction on how to safely move in and around the motorized rubber boats that we would soon be using several times a day for landings.

A delectable dinner followed soon after and signalled the end to a long but most interesting day out at sea. Only a few resolute souls had not had enough and were in turn treated to a couple of episodes of the nature documentary 'Life in the Freezer', a harbinger of things to come. After all, we were scheduled to enter Antarctic Sound en route to the Weddell Sea by the next morning. The excitement was obvious and quite a few passengers stayed up late paying a visit to the ship's bar for a celebratory nightcap.

## **6<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Antarctic Sound and Brown Bluff**

*Position at 07:00 AM: 63°05'S, 57°09'W . Air Temperature at 12:00 PM: 1°C*

*Weather: Snowfall overnight, overcast with sunny spells and a gentle breeze.*

Nothing could have prepared us for the spectacular landscapes we rose to this morning. The *Professor Molchanov* was on a southerly course just off the northwestern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, surrounded by huge tabular icebergs and extensive belts of drifting brash. Cape petrels, snow petrels, fulmars and Wilson's petrels accompanied us and had it not been for these reminders of life, the scene would have seemed completely out of this world. Most of us were out on deck to appreciate the ever-changing colours and shapes of icebergs at sea with heavily glaciated mountains as a backdrop and dramatic cloud formations in the sky.

Our destination in this otherworldly setting was Brown Bluff on the Tabarin Peninsula, a towering rust-coloured rock outcrop that dominates this landscape from a far distance away. This was not just going to be our first landing on this voyage but also landfall on the continent





*Antarctic welcome at Brown Bluff.*

proper as the Tabarin Peninsula represents the most easterly part of the Antarctic Peninsula. The striking 745-meter (2,225 ft) tall bluff is the remnant of a subglacial volcano whose eruptions issued string lava first then blasted ash and rock during the Early Pleistocene. Today, the reddish-brown hues of the cliffs and scree slopes offer a

stark contrast to the largely ice-dominated landscape.

Brown Bluff is also a favorite nesting colony for over 20,000 pairs of Adelie penguins and a smaller number of gentoos. Along with this colony come brown skuas, kelp gulls, snowy sheathbills that are eagerly patrolling the nesting areas for any opportunity to grab a morsel food. We spent over two hours on site keenly observing the comings and goings, the intense smells and the cacophony of barring penguins. Our first visit to a penguin colony left little to be desired as the sun had come out and picturesque icebergs framed the seaside background of the colony. We returned to the *Professor Molchanov* for a quick lunch as it was our intention to reposition to Petrel Cove on nearby Dundee Island for an extended afternoon walk. Few would have guessed at that time how difficult it would be to negotiate the ice-strewn Northern Weddell Sea with 5-mile long tabular icebergs and extensive belts of drift ice that blocked our way en route. The officers on duty spent hour after hour picking their way through the ice – to no avail! At a position of  $63^{\circ}28'S$  and  $56^{\circ}21'W$  the *Professor Molchanov* faced an impenetrable ice barrier and we had to accept defeat – there was no safe way to continue farther into the ice-choked Weddell Sea.

It was clearly time to retreat north and for the expedition team to work out suitable alternatives in safer waters. Our foray into the drift ice had at least afforded opportunities to observe Weddell seals and crabeater seals up close although the elusive Emperor penguin had stayed out of sight. After all, it would have been a long shot anyway spotting the largest of all penguins given that the resident colonies had long been abandoned and only a few forlorn stragglers were still hanging around the ice floes somewhere deep in the Weddell Sea.

Flexibility in the face of the unexpected is ultimately what an expedition cruise exacts of its staff and passengers. As the ship turned north and sailed through the eerie iceberg alley of Antarctic Sound we knew that different but no lesser adventures awaited us on the west side of the Antarctic Peninsula. For now, expedition leader Rolf Stange and Captain Nikolay Parfenyuk had decided on the South Shetland Islands as our next destination, a chain of islands that truly offers the best of two worlds: namely an interface between subantarctic and Antarctic environments. By the next morning we would know that this unforeseen change in plans would be a fair trade for having to pass on the Weddell Sea.



*Cruising the Antarctic Sound – refuelling*

7<sup>th</sup> December 2009

**Bellingshausen Station, Yankee Harbor and Half Moon Island**

*Position at 07:00 AM: 62°14'S, 58°57'W. Air Temperature at 06:30 AM: 1°C*

*Weather: Overcast, good visibility, gentle breeze from the NW*



*Maxwell Bay.*

*Ele-fantastic welcome to  
"Bellingshausen, Russia".*

*Snowshoe-hiking  
across Fildes Peninsula.*



Rolf's wakeup call rose us half an hour earlier than usual as the *Professor Molchanov* turned the corner into Maxwell Bay. After all, we had ambitious plans for today. Our morning program revolved around an impromptu visit of Bellingshausen, a Russian research station on the Fildes Peninsula of Southwestern King George Island. For the afternoon we were hoping to drop in on two penguin colonies on the shores of McFarlane Strait. By the time we convened for breakfast, the *Professor Molchanov* dropped anchor in Maxwell Bay, an amphitheatre-shaped cove where no fewer than eight nations maintain research stations that are inhabited year-round. From up close, one would have guessed this amalgamation of colourful buildings to be an ordinary settlement had it not been for the different national flags by which the bases tried to set themselves apart. A Russian-orthodox church built from logs graced a small hill behind the many live-in trailers, while a Chilean school hall and gym caught the eye in the centre of the hamlet. Much heavy, tracked equipment was moved about on the town's still snow-covered dirt roads but the natural harbour did not seem to have witnessed a great deal of activity lately. Our arrival by zodiac at the landing beach did not



*Blind passenger en route to Yankee Harbor. Lazy Elephant seal on the beach of Greenwich Island.*

exactly work up the town folk a couple of sleepy juvenile elephant seals nearby. Life around the research stations made a rather lethargic impression on us.

By comparison, we were motivated to stretch our legs and desperate to try out the snowshoes we had brought ashore. After fitting the new footwear, our guide Jan Naumann took us on a fabulous hike across the narrow isthmus of the Fildes Peninsula. On its Northwestern shore several brown skuas, elephant seals (some moulting) and a solitary Antarctic fur seal provided an unexpected spectacle. We spent an hour observing the wildlife before heading back into town hoping the locals would have gotten up by now to open their requisite souvenir shops. On the return hike, a tenant of the German summer base, Matthias Kopp, a Ph.D. student in ornithology, caught up with us to bring us up to date on his skua research, predatory birds that nest in prolific numbers on the island. Before returning to the *Professor Molchanov*, we visited the pretty landmark log church, moseyed on to Bellingshausen base to have passports stamped and checked out the souvenirs at the shop of the Chilean Eduardo Frei station.



*Chinstrap penguin stealing a pebble and the show at Half Moon Island.*



*Evening light on Livingston Island.*



By the time we got back in the zodiacs, our galley team was already busy simmering a delicious soup for lunch, which we enjoyed en route to Yankee Harbor, a favorite anchorage in the area since 1820 and equally sought after by nesting gentoo penguins. By the time we got around the southern coast of spectacular Greenwich Island, the sun had started breaking through the cloud layer. Perfect conditions for a cruise around the recurving spit that marks the entrance to Yankee Harbor and also a popular hangout for female elephant seals and their pups on this particular afternoon! Half of the group, in turn, decided to explore the tip of the spit, whereas the penguin aficionados among us spent more up close time with 4,000 of our new-found feathered friends.

It was dinnertime when we returned to the ship and, still, the day was far from over. A third landing right after supper was yet on the books and with nearly 24 hours of daylight there was little excuse not to check out nearby Half Moon Island with its colony of nesting Chinstrap penguins, a species we hadn't seen in appreciable numbers yet. The small, crescent-shaped island was known already to the sealers in 1820 who left their mark on the land as anywhere across the Southern oceans, nearly eradicating the fur seal population. A deteriorating waterboat on the snowy shores provided another reminder that whalers also had used the area intensively – although nearly an entire century later.

It was nearing 10 pm as we boarded the zodiacs to call it a night. Back at the ship's bar news trickled down that it had been Luciana's birthday and it wasn't too late yet to celebrate that in style. Eventually, quiet settled around the *Professor Molchanov*. We laid at anchor with the glaciers of Livingston Island as a stunning backdrop since it was only a short distance to tomorrow's destination.

## **8<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Telefon Bay, Deception Island and Mikkelson Harbour, Trinity Island**

*Position at 07:00 AM: 62°59'S, 60°34'W. Air Temperature at 06:30 AM: 3°C*

*Weather: Sunny, strong to gusty westerly winds, intermittent cloud cover*

We woke to sunny skies for a change and already had our morning destination, Deception Island - a dormant volcano - off to our starboard. As we finished breakfast, Captain Parfenyuk sailed the *Professor Molchanov* into the caldera of Deception Island, passing the treacherous chasm of so-called Neptune's Bellows. This narrow isthmus with a perilous sub-surface rock stuck in the middle, is the only break in the island's caldera wall allowing access to Port Foster. Despite the strong winds that blow through the 'bellows', the crater is one of the safest natural harbours in the South Shetlands. It has been a sought-after anchorage since 1820, when sealers thoroughly explored the region and a young sailor, Nathaniel Palmer, spotted hitherto unfamiliar land farther to the southwest. What Palmer sighted would later turn out to be the Antarctic Peninsula. Unbeknownst to him at the time, however, a scientist and explorer sailing for the Russian Czar had made a similar observation a few months earlier from a location further north. The name of that person had been Thaddeus von Bellingshausen, after whom the Soviet Union named their new research base on King George Island 141 years later, which we had visited the day before.



*Entering the caldera of Deception Island through Neptune's Bellows.*

Deception Island today is considered a significant Antarctic landmark with several recognized historic and natural history sites. There are historic remains of 19<sup>th</sup> century sealers, early geophysical scientists, adventurers of all sorts, early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial whaling operations and several national science and aviation programs. Occasional eruptions with concomitant ash falls and mudflows would repeatedly damage or even destroy various human installations eventually leading to the abandonment of permanent bases on the island. We were soon to see evidence of such recent volcanic activity at Telefon Bay, our morning destination where eruptions had occurred as recently as 1970.



*Exploring Telefon Bay, Deception Island.*

A short zodiac ride got us to shore near a small 162 m high cinder cone, the focal point of our morning trek. While the great majority took on the ridge hike to the summit or at least a part of it, the more contemplative among us explored the tide line. The antics of cavorting penguins and the odd seal that would swing by occasionally for a curious look at the visitors didn't allow for any boredom. Had it not been for growling stomachs, we would have stayed on as the winds had all but died down and the views were stunning across Telefon Bay and Port Foster. However, our expedition schedule promised more adventure across the Bransfield Strait, the body of water that divides the South Shetland Islands from the Antarctic Peninsula.



*Enjoying scenery and wildlife at Mikkelsen Harbor, Trinity Island.*

A few hours of sailing and a deserved afternoon nap later, we were already anchored at Mikkelsen Harbour, a tiny islet off the heavily glaciated south coast of Trinity Island. Nordenskjöld's famous Swedish Antarctic Expedition (1901-04) had discovered the protected anchorage, which shortly after must have served whaling vessels as evidenced by a decrepit waterboat and many whale bones onshore. A dilapidated Argentinian shelter and a collapsed navigation mast provided proof of much more recent occupancy, although the island has clearly been taken over by breeding Gentoo penguins since. The colony does not receive a lot of visitors in any given year due to poorly charted offshore waters. Yet, the serene backdrop of ice-covered Trinity Island made going the extra mile to get here well worth the effort. We stayed on for dinner and convened afterwards for a recap of the day's impressions in the ship's bar. After Rolf had shared his plans for the following day, Jan delivered a short synopsis on penguin ecology. Chris followed up with a summary of whaling activities in Antarctic waters during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, providing much food for thought on humankind's track record even at the most remote of all places.

The anchor was pulled well after the pastel lights off to the west had dimmed after midnight. Most had just retreated to their cabins following Dee's spirited birthday celebration, drifting off into deep sleep with remarkable impressions of a long, exciting day.

**9<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Zodiac Cruising the Melchior Islands,  
Wilhelmina Bay and Shipwreck at the Enterprise Islands**

*Position at 07:00 AM: 64°33'S, 62°33'W. Air Temperature at 07:00 AM: -1°C*

*Weather: Snowfall, reduced visibility, strong northerly breeze*

The *Professor Molchanov* was sailing through Dallmann Bay between Brabant and Anvers Island when Rolf announced the official 'day break' over the PA system. A quick glance out of our portholes offered lots of sizeable icebergs with a fresh dusting of snow. We were just north of the Melchior Islands, our morning destination where we were planning on zodiac cruising among the many islets, shoals and reefs. The famed French explorer Charcot had named the larger islets of this micro archipelago in 1903-04 after the Greek alphabet – with



*Curious Humpback whale,  
Dallmann Bay.*

*Friendly Weddell Seal and cold,  
but happy visitors, Melchior Islands.*





Eta and Omega Islands being big enough to be marked on most modern maps. However, the actual discovery of the Melchior Islands had been thirty years prior when the German Captain E. Dallmann had simply failed to act on the privilege of assigning them his choice of names. We chose to pay a visit to the islands mainly because of the many icebergs that get trapped by the shoals in the area forming a veritable maze to navigate through – a perfect location for a first zodiac cruise. While there weren't any penguin colonies close by, seals have a habit of hauling out on the islands and it wasn't before long that we came across an ice floe with a half dozen resting Weddell seals. Other wildlife sightings included primarily blue-eyed shags, an Antarctic cormorant species that is found on the Antarctic Peninsula year-round, except for short foraging flights to open water.

As we cruised among icebergs of every imaginable hue of blue, snowfall increased and some fog settled. Just in time, we reached Lambda Island with the first Antarctic lighthouse, 'Primero de Mayo' built by Argentina in 1942, a historic site now protected by the Antarctic Treaty. While four of the zodiacs returned to the *Professor Molchanov* on account of diminishing visibility, the fifth group of passengers decided to investigate the historic landmark just a couple of minutes longer. But two minutes can make all the difference in Antarctica, as this zodiac now faced the difficulty of having lost visual contact with the ship. While this situation was nowhere close to being dangerous, as the *Professor Molchanov* could have used its foghorn and a GPS receiver was onboard, it went to show how treacherous navigation could be in these waters. After a few of minutes of poking around the fog, the stragglers were also back onboard and the ship set its course for Wilhelmina Bay, on the Peninsula's Danco Coast.

The seas were exceptionally calm as we crossed the Gerlache Strait en route to our afternoon destination – perfect conditions for whale watching! As most of us kept their eyes peeled on



*Passage through Wilhelmina Bay.*

*The Professor Molchanov was beautifully parked, as we cruised with the Zodiacs, watched by a suspicious tern, while the chefs prepared an Antarctic BBQ for us!*



the upper decks and bridge it wasn't before long that the trademark dorsal fins of three humpback whales were spotted off our starboard. The Captain slowed our speed immediately and sailed towards what seemed like a small pod of two adult whales with a cub. Luckily, the animals seemed as interested in us as we were in them and our encounter for the next hour proved absolutely exceptional. The whales displayed much curiosity towards the *Professor Molchanov* as evidenced by repeated spy-hopping right off our side. As the animals frolicked right next to the ship we caught sight of their long, white fins, and occasionally their enormous tail flukes. At some point, the animals seemed to tire of us and both of us went our way.

Wilhelmina Bay rightly deserves its reputation as one of the most serene settings with much open space all around and dramatic mountain scenery at a pleasant distance. As we sailed into the bay, the bow of our ship silently cut through an endless expanse of freshly formed nilas, an incipient form of sea ice that had broken up into countless small floes. As such, the water surface had a chequered appearance with the odd bergy bit sporting a fresh pillow of snow on top.

Wilhelmina Bay is also an area that seems attractive to whales, if only for other reasons. As the water surface was flat like a mirror it didn't take long before another group of cetaceans were spotted, this time around three minke whales. Whereas the humpback earlier in the day had been quite approachable, these small rorquals seemed skittish and kept at a distance before at some point taking off with speed. Naturally, we did not pursue them but continued on our cruise with the rugged glaciers of South Nansen Island off our portside. A second zodiac cruise through at Enterprise Island had been scheduled for the late afternoon and, while the sky was still overcast, the conditions were still inviting to do so.

The island's name commemorates the whalers' enterprise in these waters between 1916-30, with many waterboats, mooring posts and even a shipwrecked steel vessel paying tribute to this industry. The wreck, formerly the *Gouvernøren I*, a Norwegian whaling supply ship, serves as a convenient nesting site for noisy Antarctic terns these days. We circumnavigated the wreck several times imagining the horrid disaster when 16,000 barrels of whale oil caught on fire aboard and the captain of the vessel had to make the tough decision to sail her into this glacial alcove, abandoning her and watching her burn up.

A couple of hours of zodiac cruising during cold conditions greatly improve one's appetite, regardless of just having had a three-course lunch a few hours prior. Little did we know that during our absence the galley team and Russian crew had prepared an outdoor BBQ on the aft decks of the *Professor Molchanov*. The whiff of BBQ'd meats and fish dishes greeted us from far away and the zodiac drivers didn't waste much time getting us back onboard. There, an enormous spread of salads, side dishes, meats and fish invited us to feast. Drinks were on the house and soon after deserts had been enjoyed, the deck served as a dance floor. A good time was had and the party did not end until after midnight – we were tired although it was still light outside.



*Professor Molchanov anchored near Foyen Harbor, Enterprise Island.*

## 10<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Cuverville Island, Spigot Peak, Errera Channel, Danco Island

Position at 07:30 AM: 64°33'S, 62°33'W. Air Temperature at 07:00 AM: 0°C

Weather: Snowfall, reduced visibility, strong northerly breeze

Sleeping in definitely has its perks but if you're granted a longer nap on an expedition cruise be prepared to put in some extra hours after dinner! That sums up our day in the Errera Channel, which started out with dense snowfall and ended with a clearing skies and a most memorable sunset. Our morning landing at Cuverville Island treated us to more Gentoo antics of pebble stealing, belly-sliding, napping, neighbourly bickering and ecstatic displays to boot. If it were not for the stench that comes with any nesting colony, one could easily be entertained for the better part of a day. But eventually either the batteries of the camera give out or one ends up chilled to the bones and it is time to retreat for yet another delicious lunch on the ship.

After we had replenished some calories we set out again in the early afternoon for what we hoped to be a quick dash up 280m-high Spigot Peak, a panoramic sentinel on the tip of the Arctowski Peninsula – and the second time we'd set foot on the continent. Upon close inspection from our anchorage in Orne Harbour, the climb seemed steep, a continuous 30-degree ramp in rock and snow. However, we also noticed countless chinstrap penguins that had chosen the upper slopes as nesting sites and, thus, had little excuse not to try the ascent ourselves. In the end, after much huffing and puffing we got two-thirds up before a threatening snow front forced us to retreat. After picking our way down to the shore again, we had gained much appreciation for the determination of the 'chinnies' for who this climb couldn't be a walk in the park either.

It's hard to accept defeat but Rolf promised us a second chance for an extended hike later in the day. For now, it was snowing hard again and we would have to wait for better visibility. As it happened, Jan offered to give an impromptu lecture on the 15-month work stint he had spent at the Russian research station Bellingshausen 20 years ago. Rolf followed these fascinating insights with a run-down of our plans for the immediate future, starting with a late

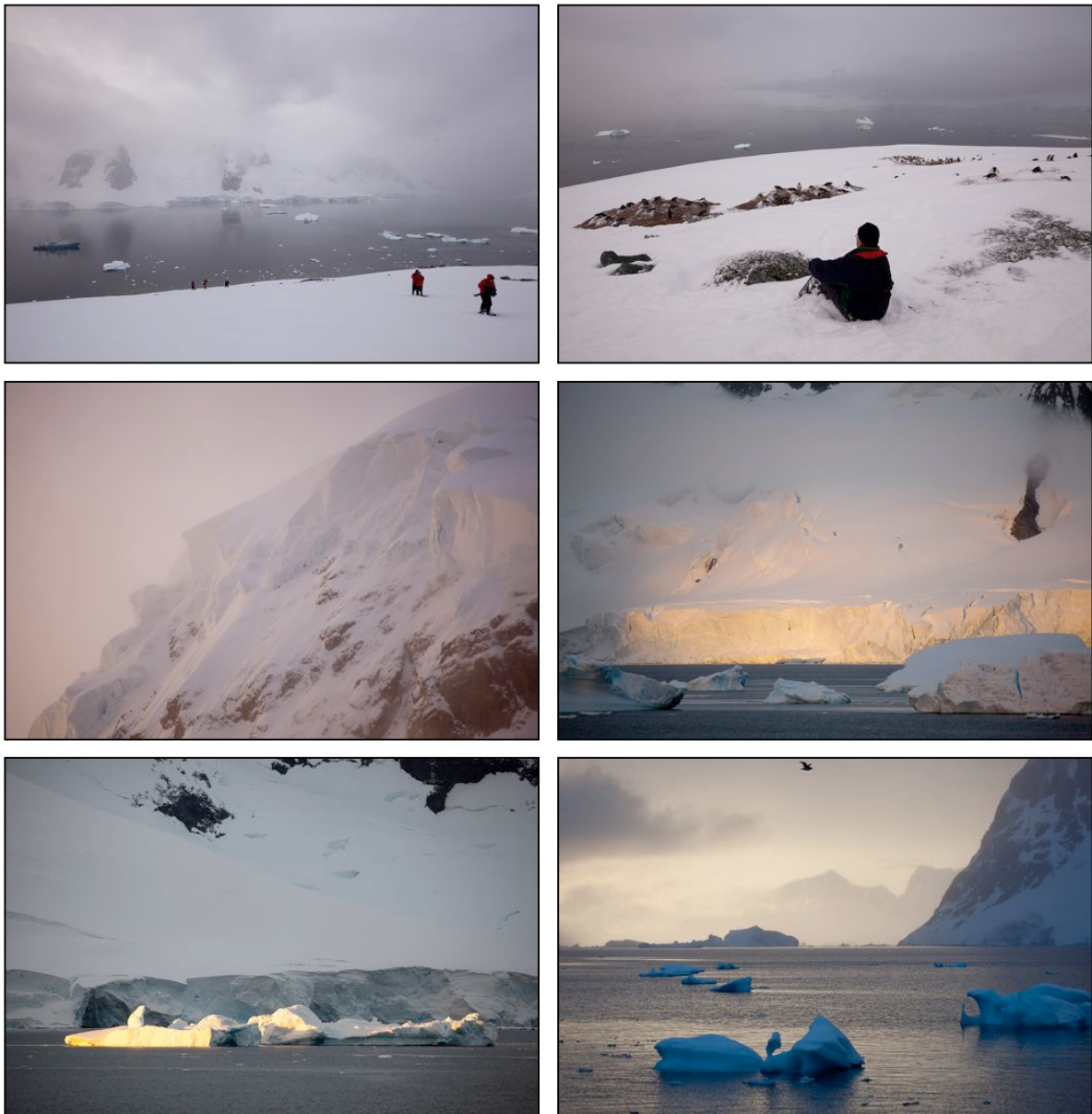


*Our semi-ascent of Pigot Speak was an excellently timed hit-and-run operation, well coordinated with the weather that closed in as soon as we had got down again.*

night hike up the summit of Danco Island. As dinnertime was imminent though we had another chance to carbo-load as the *Professor Molchanov* repositioned in Errera Channel.

With just enough time to let dinner sit, we boarded the zodiacs one more time, slipped on the snowshoes and trudged up the snowy slopes of Danco Island. As the weather had settled the views improved by the minute and a glacial wonderland opened up all around us once we got to the summit. We could have guessed from down below that penguins would have a firm grip even on this peak and as it were dozens of Gentoos occupied every available rock at the apex. Penguin highways lead from the shores straight up the mountain without wasting time on switchbacks the way we preferred our ascent.

It had gotten late by the time we got back to shore and boarded the zodiacs. The skies had cleared to the Northwest and the landscape around us was doused in light pastel colours. Most of us would spend another hour taking in the sublime sunset before retreating to their bunks – some exhausted from all that rewarding physical activity.



*Our little night walk on Danco Island got nicer and nicer towards the later evening,  
as the colours changed from minute to minute.*



## 11<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Neko Harbour, Skontorp Cove & Almirante Brown Station/ Paradise Bay – Lemaire Channel

Position at 07:30 AM: 64°50'S, 62°32'W. Air Temperature at 07:00 AM: 3°C

Weather: Partly sunny, excellent visibility, calm air

There are probably a few places on Earth where one wakes up and is convinced to have died and gone to heaven – Neko Harbour certainly being one of them. It is a small, generally ice-choked bay bounded by an amphitheatre of icefalls that opens up towards a gentle snow dome, an obligatory Gentoo colony and magnificent Andvord Bay and Anvers Island for a backdrop. If you add balmy temperatures and sunshine – as we did- you have all the ingredients for a fun landing. Our guides broke trail through the fresh snow high up the slopes of the snow dome, which opened up the view to a breath-taking 360°-degree-panorama and the sightings of three minke whales.

The climb had certainly intensified the perceived midday 'heat' but who would have guessed that upon returning to the shore this would call some to consider a polar swim? After dry towels had been shuttled over from the *Professor Molchanov*, no fewer than nine intrepid souls decided to dunk their bodies into the icy water. All onlookers were full of awe in face of such bravery - with the exception of a Weddell seal and numerous penguins onshore that could not be impressed that easily. A massive glacial calving across the small bay – announced by a thunderous rumbling - certainly excited the animals much more as they leaped onto the snowy bench above the high tide line in a hurry. Our passengers followed suit as not to get wet feet – after all the expedition team had briefed us for this exact event.

Other than that, life at the resident penguin colony appeared to take place within accepted convention. Much bickering about stolen pebbles, a lot of posturing as newcomers arrived from shore, but most of all resigned toleration of the ruckus all around with both eyes shut – a prime example of high density community living a its best! The neighbourhood had even seen an enlargement for this breeding season as an Argentine refuge on the site had been destroyed during the previous year in a violent late-summer storm. The penguins had readily set up shop between the wreckage and debris.

Had it not been the temptation of yet another delicious lunch, we wouldn't have left Neko Harbour. However, the galley team managed to lure us back once again and before long we were on our way to Paradise Bay – an apt name for yet another spectacular setting. The *Professor Molchanov* dropped anchor at the Argentine Station Almirante Brown, which was boarded up and appeared uninhabited yet sported a hoisted flag. In turn, we took off on a zodiac cruise amongst the many icebergs in the bay and penetrated deeply into Skorntop Cove with its dramatic tidewater glaciers. After an hour's cruise we decided that it was time to warm up on a short hike up a snowy hill behind Almirante Brown Station. After posing for a



*The spectacular scenery of Andvord Bay surrounded us, as we enjoyed a morning at Neko Harbor.*





*Impressions from Skontorp Cove and Almirante Brown Station, Paradise Bay.*

group photograph most of us were off for the summit hike and enjoyed a lovely view from up top. The descent was likely the most enjoyable part of the outing for some as it offered a long-awaited opportunity for sliding back down to the station.

Upon our return to the ship, the Captain had the anchor pulled and set course for famed Lemaire Channel, or ‘Kodak Gap’ as it used to be called by the initiated. Towering glaciated mountains on either side hem in this mile-wide channel over a distance of 11 kilometers, with two rock sentinels guarding its northern entrance at Cape Renard. Given the strait’s scenic splendour in near perfect weather conditions, we decided that one passage just wasn’t good enough. At the Channel’s southern exit we turned the ship around and sailed right back on a northerly course. Ultimately, this was to be our southernmost position at  $65^{\circ}07'S$ , 150 kilometers shy of the ice-choked Antarctic Circle. We would begin the return part of our voyage at this point and as luck would have it a leopard seal – our first and only - had hauled out on one of the close-by ice floes we had passed just a while ago. Having come such a long ways, many retired to the ship’s bar later to celebrate our good fortune of incredible impressions so far.

## **12<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Port Lockroy & Jougla Point/Wiencke Island, Neumayer Channel, Dallmann Bay**

*Position at 07:30 AM:  $64^{\circ}49'S$ ,  $63^{\circ}30'W$ . Air Temperature at 07:00 AM:  $-1^{\circ}C$*

*Weather: Snowfall, poor visibility, strong northwesterly winds*

New faces on deck! We received visitors this morning as the entire staff of the Port Lockroy base on Goudier Island had come aboard to share breakfast and a site briefing with us. Our anchorage had always been a sought-after harbour - first for early 20<sup>th</sup> century whalers before gaining strategic significance when British and Argentine interests developed in the area during WW II. The site of clandestine, pseudo-scientific British ‘Operation Tabarind’, a dramatic decade-long squabble over Port Lockroy eventually resolved in favour of its British claimants. After the installation subsequently fell into disrepair, the British Antarctic Heritage

Trust took on the task some years ago to lovingly restore the buildings on site. This continues to be an ongoing process as the world's southernmost official post office and its well-stocked souvenir shop in recent years has developed into one of the top attractions to expedition cruises with up to three different vessels visiting in any single day.

In the face of our first shopping opportunity in days, the nesting gentoo penguins on site would likely have gone all but unnoticed, had it not been for the season's first hatching of chicks near the base's boatshed. It was indeed a heart-rending sight as the parent birds seemingly smothered the newly hatched chicks protecting them from the fierce wind and driving snow. Indeed, the weather seemed to deteriorate by the minute and many of us were eager to get back on board. However, there was one last visit to be paid to Jougla Point on Wiencke Island, the site of an extensive whale bone yard and grim testimony to the days of 'enterprise' in these waters.

Two sailing yachts that were tied up in a small bay behind the bone yard raised some further interest but the elements were anything but inviting to hang out at Jougla Point any longer. A quick glance at some nesting Blue-eyed shags and we were off by zodiac back to the *Professor Molchanov*. Shortly after lunch she sailed through Neumayer Channel, usually another scenic highlight of an Antarctic cruise but the visibility left much to be desired. Most of us were busy anyway to get our cabins shipshape for what was likely to be another rough crossing of the Drake Passage. Later that night, when gale-force winds began to rock the boat we convened in the restaurant for a showing of 'The March of the Penguins' – a masterpiece of recent nature cinematography. We hadn't seen the 'Emperors' of the Ice with our own eyes but had seen some of their frigid habitat, experienced some of the forces of nature they have to contend with and, as such, gained much appreciation for their unusual life history.



*At Port Lockroy, we found not only the museum in the old station, but also this season's first Gentoo chicks and a composite skeleton of a large baleen whale at Jougla Point.*

## **13<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Southern Drake Passage**

*Position at 07:30 AM: 61°37'S, 64°07'W. Air Temperature at 07:00 AM: -1°C*

*Weather: Snowfall, poor visibility, strong northwesterly winds*

The weather forecast for the Drake Passage had promised reasonable conditions for our crossing but what's tolerable and even enjoyable to some certainly feels like an insult to others. Suffice it to say, that those showing up for breakfast benefited from lots of elbowroom this morning. Frigid force 7 winds prevented even the hardiest from hanging out on deck and visits to the bridge didn't delight either as light snowfall obscured the visibility. Perfect time to continue with the lecture series!

While in Antarctica, our days had been packed with landings or (zodiac) cruising, leaving little time or desire to attend talks by our guides but the Drake Passage seemed the right place to catch up on our lecture series.

A presentation on life at the Bellingshausen research station - as experienced first hand by Jan over a period of 15 months - started the presentations. Later that morning, Rolf brought us up to speed on plate tectonics, before Chris shed some light on the history and status of glaciers and ice sheets of Antarctica. Just before dinner we were summoned to the lecture hall one more time for the day's last talk on modern-day adventurers to Antarctica during the past 80 years. This lecture suggested that exploration and adventure continue to evolve on the seventh continent, building on the knowledge gained by those who came before while taking advantage of up-to-date technical advancements.

After dinner, some of us retreated to their cabins because bracing the waves is still best accomplished with a good read. in a horizontal position. The majority though was keen on watching the last part of the feature on Scott's and Amundsen's race to the Pole a century ago.

When the last patrons of the ship's bar eventually left to retire to their bunks, the seas had calmed. It also had gotten dark – the first time in over a week and very helpful to get back in synch with our circadian rhythm.

## **14<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Drake Passage – Cape Horn – Beagle Channel**

*Position at 07:30 AM: 56°56'S, 66°47'W. Air Temperature at 07:30 AM: 6°C*

*Weather: overcast, calm seas with light swells, no wind*

What a difference one single day can make! With only 58 nautical miles to Cape Horn and ambient air temperatures well above freezing, the austral summer in Tierra del Fuego was already palpable. Given the calm seas, the Drake Passage had lost its edge; the woes and nausea of the previous day were already forgotten.

Shortly after what was a most enjoyable breakfast for those who had fasted the previous day, Chris opened the day's lecture series with a talk on the geology of Antarctica that also rendered some interesting annotations on Antarctic fossils of Triassic to Cretaceous age, meteorites and various industrial resources.

Immediately after the presentation we headed up to the decks for a first glimpse of Cape Horn. We enjoyed sunny skies by now and balmy temperatures of 11° C - conditions that made bird watching a most pleasant pastime. Although still in the realm of the Drake Passage, our focus was shifting to the South American mainland, which we approached to a distance of 3 miles just before lunch.

What used to be a rigorous test for ships and crew alike – the rounding of the 'Horn' turned out to be a piece of cake for us today. However, we would learn more about how dangerous these waters can be later that afternoon in a motion picture documentary of a tallship's rounding the Cape in 1929.

The first passage of Cape Horn had been accomplished in 1616 by a Flemish expedition under the command of Willem Schouten. As such, the Drake Passage may be considered a misnomer, given that the famous 16<sup>th</sup> century English seaman and explorer whose name these waters bear, passed instead through the Straits of Magellan to the north of Tierra del Fuego rather than negotiating Cape Horn.

Later that day, we settled our ship accounts with Jan, the purser. Later that afternoon, Rolf gave us an insight on disembarkation logistics for the following morning. After dinner, we were off to the lecture hall one last time. Jan, the lecturer, shared some impressions of Arctic Greenland and Svalbard, whetting our appetite for more expedition cruise adventure. Meanwhile the captain had dropped the anchor in the eastern entrance of the Beagle Channel where we were to wait for an Argentine pilot who would oversee the short sail back to Ushuaia. It was to be our last night aboard the Professor Molchanov. While we would begin the return leg of our travels, our ship would take on water, food and fuel for the next adventure – the Falkland Island, South Georgia, the South Orkneys, South Shetland Islands and ultimately a visit to the Antarctic Peninsula. More adventure some of us probably would consider for a future occasion.

## **15<sup>th</sup> December 2009 – Ushuaia**

*Position at 07:30: 54°49'S 68°17' W. Weather: warmer than in Antarctica.*

In the morning, the *Professor Molchanov* reached the pier in Ushuaia and our journey to Antarctica came to an end. We left our luggage outside our cabins ready for collection and had our final breakfast together, then went down the gangway for the last time, saying farewell to our fellow travellers and our hotel and expedition team who had been looking after us for the past days. Some of us left directly for the airport and further connections home, while others headed for hotels and tours in South America.

### **Total distance of this cruise (from Ushuaia to Ushuaia):**

**1966 nautical miles = 3641 km = 2263 statute Miles**

#### **On behalf of Oceanwide Expeditions,**

**We thank you very much for travelling with us on board MV *Professor Molchanov*!**

**We wish you a safe journey home**

**and hope to see you again sometimes, anywhere between the poles.**

For more information on polar voyages, please see [www.oceanwide-expeditions.com](http://www.oceanwide-expeditions.com)

This log and the group photo can be downloaded from [www.spitzbergen.de](http://www.spitzbergen.de)





**List of Lectures, Briefings, Recaps, Video Presentations**

03 <sup>rd</sup> Dec.	Welcome aboard	Rolf	Briefing
	Emergency lifeboat drill	Rolf	Briefing
04 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	Early explorers of Antarctica	-	Video
05 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	Birds of Antarctica	Jan	Lecture
	Bridge tour	Rolf	Tour
	Ice Afloat: Glacial + marine origin	Chris	Lecture
	IAATO, Environ. code of conduct	Rolf	Lecture
	Zodiac operations, safety ashore	Rolf	Lecture
	Life in the cold	-	Video
06 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	The Coldest Place on Earth (Part 1)	-	Video
07 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	The Coldest Place on Earth (Part 2)	-	Video
08 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	Penguins: life history and ecology	Jan	Recap
	History of whaling in the S. Ocean	Chris	Recap
10 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	Life at an Antarctic research base	Jan	Lecture
11 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	Bridge tour	Rolf	Tour
12 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	March of the Penguins	-	Video
13 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	Research at Bellingshausen Base	Jan	Lecture
	Plate tectonics	Rolf	Lecture
	Continental drift of Antarctica	Rolf	Lecture
	Glaciers + ice sheets of Antarctica	Chris	Lecture
	Modern-day Antarctic adventurers	Chris	Lecture
	The Coldest Place on Earth (Part 3)	-	Video
	14 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	Geology of Antarctica	Chris
Engine Room excursions		Crew	Tours
Disembarkation			Briefing
Around Cape Horn		-	Video
Impressions from the High North		Jan	Lecture

## LIST OF OBSERVED SPECIES (03-15 December 2009)

### BIRDS

<i>Aptenodytes forsteri</i>	Emperor Penguin
<i>Pygoscelis papua</i>	Gentoo Penguin
<i>Pygoscelis adeliae</i>	Adelie Penguin
<i>Pygoscelis antarctica</i>	Chinstrap Penguin
<i>Spheniscus megallanicus</i>	Magellanic Penguin
<i>Diomedea exulans</i>	Wandering Albatross
<i>Diomedea epomophora</i>	Royal Albatross
<i>Diomedea melanophris</i>	Black-browed Albatross
<i>Diomedea chrysostoma</i>	Grey-headed Albatross
<i>Phoebastria palpebrata</i>	Light-mantled Sooty Albatross
<i>Macronectes giganteus</i>	Southern Giant Petrel
<i>Macronectes halli</i>	Northern Giant Petrel
<i>Fulmarus glacialisoides</i>	Southern Fulmar
<i>Daption capense</i>	Cape Petrel
<i>Pagodroma nivea</i>	Snow Petrel
<i>Thalassoica antarctica</i>	Antarctic Petrel
<i>Pachyptila vittata</i>	Antarctic Prion
<i>Pachyptila belcheri</i>	Thin-billed Prion
<i>Halobaena caerulea</i>	Blue Petrel
<i>Procellaria aequinoctialis</i>	White-chinned Petrel
<i>Puffinus griseus</i>	Sooty Shearwater
<i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>	Wilson's Storm-petrel
<i>Fregetta tropica</i>	Black-bellied Storm-petrel
<i>Pelecanoides magellani</i>	Magellanic Diving-petrel
<i>Phalacrocorax atriceps</i>	Antarctic Shag
<i>Phalacrocorax</i>	Imperial Shag
<i>Chionis alba</i>	Pale-faced Sheathbill
<i>Catharacta chilensis</i>	Chilean Skua
<i>Catharacta maccormicki</i>	South Polar Skua
<i>Catharacta antarctica</i>	Sub-Antarctic Skua
<i>Larus scoresbii</i>	Dolphin Gull
<i>Larus dominicanus</i>	Kelp Gull
<i>Sterna vittata</i>	Antarctic Tern
<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	Arctic Tern
<i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>	South American Tern

### MARINE MAMMALS

<i>Balaenoptera bonaerensis</i>	Antarctic Minke Whale
<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Humpback Whale
<i>Mirounga leonina</i>	Southern Elephant Seal
<i>Arctocephalus gazella</i>	Antarctic Fur Seal
<i>Hydrurga leptonyx</i>	Leopard Seal
<i>Leptonychotes weddellii</i>	Weddell Seal
<i>Lobodon carcinophaga</i>	Crabeater Seal
	Dolphins near Beagle Channel (Species =?)

## Route of the Expedition Cruise



- 1 Brown Bluff, Tabarin Peninsula (continental landing)
- 2 Bellingshausen, Fieldes Peninsula, King George Island
- 3 Yankee Harbour, Greenwich Island
- 4 Half Moon Island
- 5 Telefon Bay, Deception Island
- 6 Trinity Harbour
- 7 Melchior Islands
- 8 Enterprise Islands
- 9 Cuverville Island, Spigot Peak (continental landing), Danco Island
- 10 Neko Harbour (continental landing)
- 11 Skontorp Cove Almirante Brown (continental landing), Paradise Bay
- 12 Lemaire Channel
- 13 Port Lockroy, Jougla Point