

TRAVEL

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Sleep in a teepee

Wigwam motels aren't just retro – they're national historic places, H7



Delights in the City of Light

A first-timer discovers art, absinthe and sautéed scallops, H8

Editor: Laura Robin, 613-596-3769
travel@ottawacitizen.com

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2010

OTTAWACITIZEN.COM/TRAVEL

THE OTTAWA CITIZEN, SECTION H

ICE TIME



PHOTOS BY GLEN PETRIE

With a promise they'll be picked up the next day, passengers set up their tent for a night ashore in Antarctica.



Icebergs of fantastic shapes and sizes are commonplace in Antarctica.

Sleeping on Antarctica is a cool chance to experience extreme isolation

BY GLEN PETRIE

Roald Amundsen and Robert Falcon Scott did it. Earnest Shackleton did it more times than he wanted to. Workers at research stations have done it in the relative comfort of permanent structures. But aside from a few explorers and scientists, few travellers have actually slept on the White Continent.

Each year, more than 20,000 tourists visit Antarctica, almost all on live-aboard ships. But on some of its tours, Quark Expeditions gives a handful of volunteers the opportunity to camp on the continent itself. Passengers are put ashore with sleeping bags, tents and little more than a promise they'll be picked up the next day.

My adventure began with a tent-raising practice session on the heaving deck of a small Russian passenger ship as it crossed the Drake Passage. Two people would each share a tiny four-season tent except for a large English woman who would occupy her own. Hastily, my tent-mate and I struggled with the snap-and-fit poles, trying to turn a jumble of nylon into a comfortable abode as efficiently as possible. At least the ground wouldn't be heaving underneath like the deck of the ship, so I hoped.

"We'll choose a snow cap because it's stable," explained our guide, a young Canadian named Brandon, as the ship rocked and swayed. "An ice cap can shift at any time."

"I'll go along with that, I thought to myself, struggling with a jammed pole.

"Quickly, you don't want to waste time," Brandon urged. "The weather can turn in an instant."

This proved a prescient comment, as our first attempt to camp was scrubbed by gale-force winds. We watched from the rail as our intended site disappeared in driving snow.

"No camping tonight," Brandon announced, snow collecting on his eyelashes.

Feigning disappointment, the group scurried inside and made for the bar.



Conditions permitting, a transit of the narrow Lemaire Channel is a highlight of Antarctica cruises.

This was easily the clearest atmosphere any of us had ever breathed, and the stars were bright ornaments we felt we could reach up and pick.

See ICE TIME on page H6

TRAVEL



We whispered when we spoke, humbled by the silence. The only sound was the distant braying of penguins. After a while even they settled down, and then it was just the cracks, like rifle reports, of breaking ice.

ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS

Continued from page H1

Quark Expeditions maintains strict guidelines for camping on shore. A member of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO), it adheres to a strict code of conduct to help protect the pristine state of the Antarctic environment. The chosen campsite would not disturb animals or vegetation. (There is some moss and lichen growth on the Antarctic peninsula.) There must be no trace of our stay but footprints. No food. No litter. Not even any, um, yellow snow. Human urine is a foreign biological substance and therefore forbidden. We would be left with a port-a-potty the size of a hat box, which we would carry back to the ship, full and frozen.

Another suitable site was found at a scenic confluence of channels, mountains and glaciers called Dorian Bay. With the long day waning, we loaded tents and sleeping bags and the port-a-potty into zodiacs and set out for shore. The inflatable boat pushed delicately through a field of floating ice. The driver looked worried.

As the temperature fell, a film of shell ice formed on the surface and the zodiac cracked through it like a miniature icebreaker. "I'm not sure why I'm doing this," said the English lady with her cultured accent. "I'm really more at home in a cocktail dress and heels than camping."

Then we were unceremoniously deposited on shore and left alone. One of the campers was a German astronomer, yet even

he had difficulty identifying constellations this far south. We whispered when we spoke, humbled by the silence. The only sound was the distant braying, like donkeys, of penguins. After a while even they settled down, and then it was just the cracks, like rifle reports, of breaking ice.

I hadn't realized until that moment how intrusive the little ship had been, the constant hum of her engines, the regular chatter of passengers, the cosy clattering of dishes. The chance to leave it behind and be alone with this remote wilderness provided the most memorable experience of an already enriching trip.

At about 1 a.m., the air getting colder, I turned in. At first I felt fine, bundled into an insulated cocoon with only my nose and mouth exposed. By four a.m. I was shivering and the exterior of my sleeping bag had developed a film of frozen condensation that broke off in chips when I moved.

Better to get up, I decided, and keep warm by walking under the brightening sky. Then the sun exploded into view and recast the entire icy vista in shimmering bronze. The big English lady had her tent down first. "I couldn't sleep. It was so cold! I just sang to myself all night long and wished for a gin and tonic."

I heard the pattering of an engine and a zodiac came into the bay, carving a path through thin ice. Glen Petrie is a Toronto writer and photographer.

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IF YOU GO

Tour company: Quark Expeditions
When: Camping is offered on 12-day voyages to the Antarctic Peninsula departing from Ushuaia, Argentina, now through March.
Cost: Fares start at \$4,990 U.S., not including flights to Ushuaia. The camping excursion is an additional \$195 U.S.
Contacts: www.quarkexpeditions.com or 1-888-892-0171.



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