

Antarctic VOYAGE

Greg Karp • July 2025

Intro:

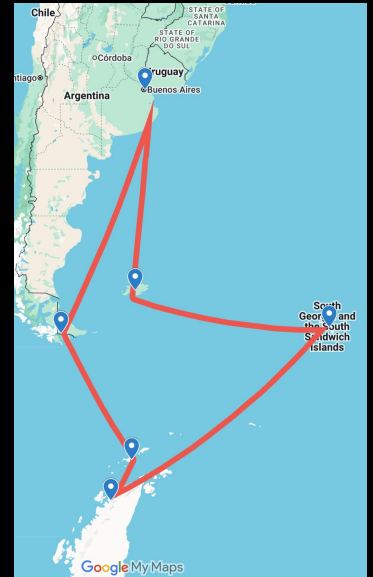
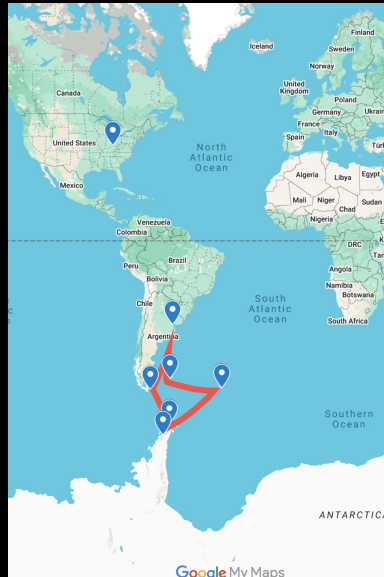
One of my favorite photos from my Antarctica trip is this one that I didn't take. This was snapped by a fellow passenger. I was resting alone on the beach against a snowbank when a curious penguin waddles up to me. It just stood there, as if it just wanted to keep me company. It was a surreal experience. I was mostly trying to stay still so I didn't scare it away. Interaction with wildlife in South Georgia and Antarctica was like being at a zoo but inside the cage. These animals have very little interaction with humans and don't know enough to be afraid.

I like this photo for another reason:

Even tho I'm holding a camera in the photo, I was mostly just taking in the experience of being in such a remote place, so far from civilization. I had to remind myself several times to just put down the camera and try to be present. Things that seem so important in everyday life – running errands, paying bills – all melted away. There's a certain quiet and stillness that's hard to experience except in very remote places, I think. And the scenery in the Antarctic is stunning.

We'll get into gear later, but that lens is my Canon 800mm f/11. It's a very long prime lens that doesn't let in much light – so it's way cheaper than most long lenses. But it worked well in the brightness of the Antarctic for two reasons: we saw almost round-the-clock daylight and the scenery was mostly very bright snow and ice. So there was generally plenty of light.

Journey to the end of the earth



I traveled in winter 2021 to early 2022. December 14 to Jan. 7. So, that included Christmas and New Year's. You have to go to Antarctica in our winter, which is summer in the southern hemisphere. Summer there is the only time ships can sail to Antarctica. Otherwise it's a frozen ice sheet.

Route: commentary

It's more usual to depart from the southern tip of Argentina, called Ushuaia.

- 24 DAYS.
- 100 HUMANS.
- 3 million PENGUINS.
- 0 SHOPPING MALLS.

By the numbers:



Ocean Explorer

The tour company I used was called Vantage. I say “was” because it went out of business. It’s kind of sad because I used that same company – and the same exact ship, called the Ocean Explorer – to take an expedition to Iceland and Greenland six months later. The ship is now owned by a company called Quark Expeditions.

As you might know, tour companies like to keep their ships running year-round. So ships like these, that have ice-breaker capability, sail in polar regions wherever it’s summer. I took this trip in December-January to Antarctica and then six months later in July-August to Greenland.

This ship only takes 138 passengers, and we didn’t have quite that many. That’s as opposed to some cruise ships that have literally thousands of passengers. Some large ships also go to Antarctica, but they sail past it. Passengers actually don’t step foot on the continent.

Internet on the ship was spotty, only texts and email when it was working; no streaming.

This was an expedition cruise, meaning we climbed into zodiacs, often twice a day, and motored to get close to land. We often did beach landings, where you hop out of the zodiac into the water and walk ashore. Zodiacs are those inflatable boats with an outboard motor on the back. We’ll see photos of them later.

An expedition cruise also means we didn’t have a strict schedule. If weather was bad,

the captain might navigate around a storm or decide to stay closer to shore, for example. Or there might be reports of interesting wildlife in a particular place, so you go there. You have to kind of go with the flow.

Also, this wasn't a photography expedition specifically. It was a general expedition cruise. While there were some passengers who concentrated on photography, and some of the expedition leaders did, it wasn't the main focus of the trip for most people.



Packing for the pole

Photography gear

Canon R6

iPhone 13 Pro

Lenses (photos in this presentation):

- Canon 800mm f/11 - 30%
- Canon 24-105mm f/4 - 40%
- iPhone - 30%

3,000 photos, after culling

As far as packing: I took two bags: a large rolling duffel and my camera bag. That's it.

You all don't need advice on travel packing, but here's a little show-and-tell about what I brought.

Show camera bag,
show Vantage parka, gloves, hat, my similar rubber boots, waterproof pants, seasick wristbands

1 walking boots, 1 sneakers

800mm lens, r6, shower caps

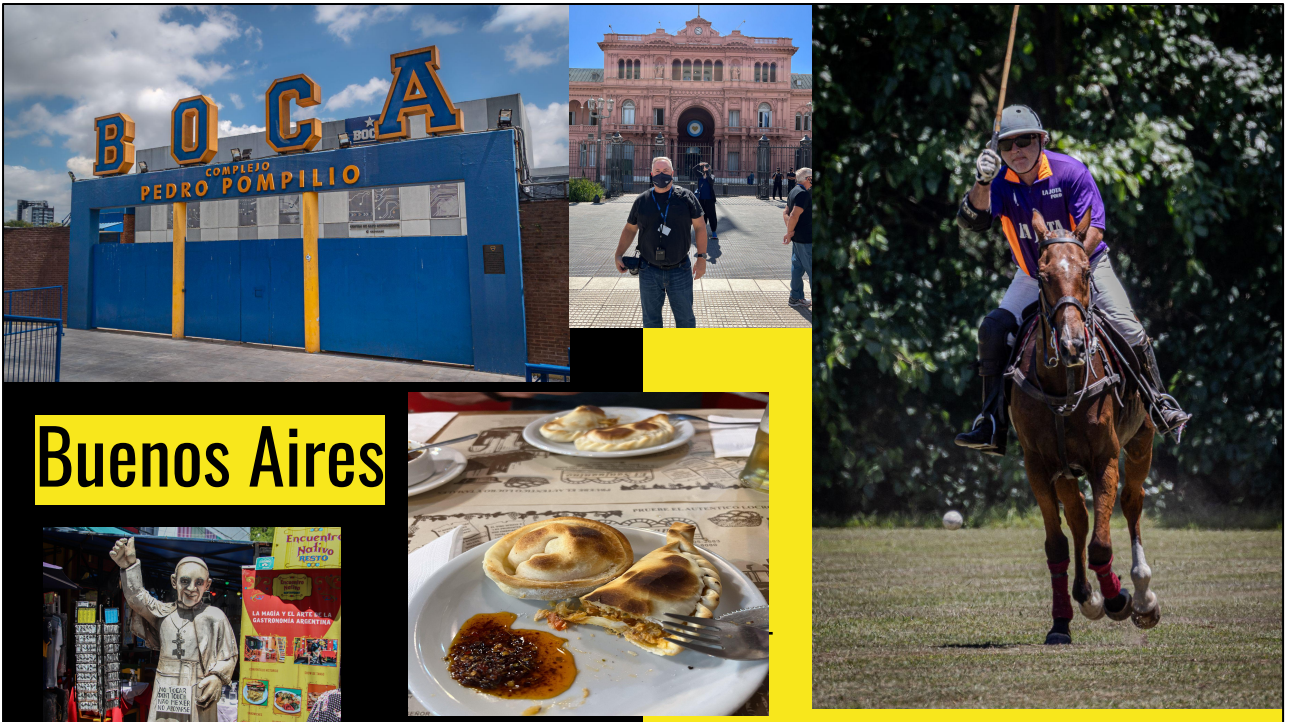
Portable drive, laptop for offloading photos

binoculars

Clothes line, eye mask,

Seasickness: scopolamine transdermal patches Rx, OTC dramamine, wrist bands, ginger chews. Cruise director swore by coca cola as helping seasickness.

Lens usage



Buenos Aires

If you've taken a cruise package before, you probably know the tour company likes to have you in the departure city a day or two before you get on the ship. So we spent a few days in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. We had several excursions that led to photo opportunities, including historical architecture and a polo demonstration and a tango dance demonstration.

In many ways, the bustling city was the opposite of the remoteness we would experience for the next three weeks.

Photographically, these are mostly snapshots. Except the polo player. Obviously, I had to have a fast enough shutter speed to stop the motion of the polo ball and the action of the horse and rider. I shot this with my 800mm prime lense which is only f/11. So, I couldn't make the shutter speed too fast because I needed to let in enough light because the lens is only f/11. I froze action at 1/640 sec. In this case, I needed the white ball to be in front of the dark-green foliage in the background. Otherwise, you wouldn't see the ball against the lighter-colored turf.

Casa Rosada, the Argentine presidential palace in Buenos Aires. It is particularly well-known for the appearances of Eva Perón (Evita) during the late 1940s and early 1950s, where she addressed crowds in Plaza de Mayo. The iconic song "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" from the musical "Evita" depicts Perón's address from this balcony.

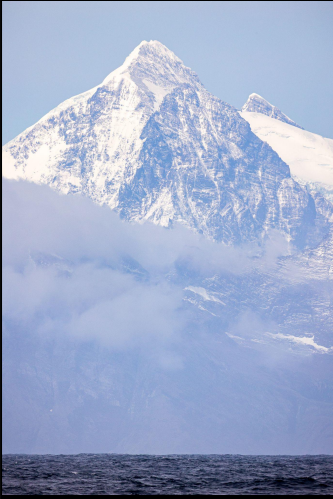
90 degrees: Again, December is summer in Buenos Aires, so that's why you see me in a T-shirt.

Soccer stadium isn't that unusual except it's the home stadium of Lionel Messi, one of the most famous athletes in the world and among the greatest soccer players of all time. Argentina went on to win the World Cup later that year, in 2022.

Pope Francis, the one who recently died, was from Argentina. At the time Argentinians were very proud the pope was from their country – not unlike Chicagoans are proud of current Pope Leo for the same reason.

Empanadas and drank Malbec wine. Argentina's currency was very depressed at the time. Two of us ate empanadas and drank beer for dinner, and the bill was the equivalent of about \$11. Inflation and currency devaluation has gotten even worse since I was there. Also something we learned, restaurants don't even open for dinner until 7 p.m. Argentinians eat very late, usually 9 or 10 p.m.

Ship life



I've been on three different cruises to near-arctic and antarctic regions. Just last month, I returned from a cruise to Alaska. And as I mentioned, I've also taken expeditions to Iceland and Greenland.

All three trips had sailing days, which are a little boring sometimes. It's just open sea in every direction. Although, when you pass a landmass it can be pretty dramatic scenery. Some sea days are a time to find something to do onboard, besides eat. This Antarctica trip was the very first commercial voyage for this ship, so the cruise company made the decision to have open bar the whole time, maybe to get good reviews. So, sea days sometimes included adult beverages and the mantra that it's 5 o'clock somewhere. On at least one day, they cut a piece of glacier ice and used it in the bar drinks.

As far as other activities: Some people played cards.

Sometimes we passed time attending educational lectures on icebergs or krill.

Other times, it's laundry day to replenish the supply of socks and underwear, which I just washed in my cabin sink and hung to dry.



Dining and entertainment

Like most cruises, this one emphasized good food. Lots of fish options. One photo here is a dinner menu. On this day, they were featuring main courses of lamb, barramundi, mussels and a vegetarian option. Wine was included with every dinner.

The dining room was nice. I never got tired of eating lunch or dinner as we sailed by beautiful icebergs. It was a little bizarre.

A few times it was warm enough to dine outside, which probably means it was near 50 degrees.

In the cabin on the television was the day's agenda, including excursions and onboard activities.



South Georgia



Our first main stop was South Georgia. The full name is South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

South Georgia has about as many penguins as Chicago has people. But unlike Chicago, it doesn't have a single road under construction – because there's not a single road on the island. No roads, no towns, no people. The island of South Georgia is about double the size of Chicago and Lake County combined.

The top photo is one of my favorites. I really need to get it printed. I went with the unusual dimensions for a couple reasons. First, I cropped out some boring sea and sky that didn't add to the photo. Second, the extreme horizontal crop adds to the feeling that this stretch of beach littered with penguins just goes on and on, which is what it seemed like. It was shot from a zodiac at 26mm and only 1/125 sec, which was probably too slow. I believe the zodiac driver cut the engine here, so we probably weren't moving that much, which is probably why 1/125 was fast enough to avoid motion blur. I probably also shot a burst of photos. In my experience, shots from the middle of the burst are usually sharpest.

Penguin poop. It smells and it ruins photos because a lot of the pretty white snow is discolored wherever penguins gather. Sometimes, it looks like penguins are sitting on a muddy mound because the snow is so soiled.

Elephant seal photo. For me, the mean looks and the red in the mouth makes this photo. With this photo and many others, I got low to the ground. Many of you probably

know, wildlife photos are usually more compelling when you shoot at eye level and you have eye contact from the animal. That becomes easier with the longer lens, because it gives the illusion that you're lower. A long lens also compresses the background, which is why the water looks like it's right behind the seals, even tho it was probably 100 yards away. Even at f/11, I'm able to blur the background here because the background was far behind the subject.



Tips for shooting wildlife in Antarctica aren't much different than anywhere else. It's nice to get a portrait of a bird or animal because it's so cool to be close. But if you can capture a story-telling moment or detail you might not normally see, I think it makes a better photo.

So whether you see a seal roaring or a penguin feeding its young or a group of penguins walking in a triangle formation, it's more interesting to the viewer when it seems like they're acting like humans.

Wildlife plus landscape



What I've learned is that polar region weather is usually overcast – gray and cloudy. That helps for shooting in the middle of the day for photos like this.

You have the bright white of the snow-capped mountains, glacier and penguin bellies, along with darker elements, like the mountains and black of the penguins. That contrast would call for high dynamic range on a sunny day, to expose the shadows and prevent blowing out the highlights. Without jargon, that just means maintaining detail in very bright and dark areas of the photo. But cloud cover tones down that difference – literally, the difference in tones is less severe.

Wildlife and landscapes were the obvious subjects in so many photos, so I really looked for opportunities to get both in the same shot. Again, instead of a portrait of a penguin, you can offer the viewer a sense of place.



For some reason, I really liked the simplicity of a single penguin on a piece of snow or ice. I think it conveys the vastness on the antarctic region. How quiet, still and alone it can feel.

The tall King penguins photo struck me because they really stood out. I got low enough so I could show the average height of all the surrounding penguins, and how these two were so much taller.

The elongated stream photo was shot with the panorama mode of my iPhone 13 Pro, which was the latest iPhone at the time. The panorama distorts the photo. This was a mostly straight stream, but I thought the result looked pretty good, even if it wasn't an accurate depiction and was shot with "only" a phone camera.

Tangent on iPhone photos: I don't know if this will help anyone, but when I'm out shooting photos, I often duplicate the photo on my Canon camera by taking one with my iPhone. That way, I have the location of where I was shooting, even the latitude and longitude. (My Canon camera doesn't have GPS.)

Of course, that didn't work great in Antarctica because there was no cell reception. So, the phone didn't know where I was. But it still gave me a general location, so I knew whether that location was in South Georgia or on the Antarctic peninsula.

As some of you know, in Lightroom classic you can view your photos on a map if they're tagged with geolocation coordinates.



Layers: As with many landscape photos, I often tried to get a distinct foreground, midground and background in the shot to make it more visually interesting.



Link to view video:

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Here are a couple of video clips that give you a completely different sense than still photos do.



Link to view video:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dkzAYeyv3vijsn06MKhElio6O2TMhpF_/view?usp=drive_link

Shooting from the ship



Because you're on the ship most of the time, it's inevitable you'll shoot some landscapes and occasionally wildlife from the ship deck.

All these were shot from the ship.

The orcas, or killer whales, were one of the highlights. I believe this is an adult with two calves.

This was the only Emperor penguin we saw the whole time. I took a burst and was able to get it just as its beak touched the water. The Emperor is the largest and tallest of all the penguins. They nest almost exclusively on Antarctic sea ice. I'm told that makes them the only bird species that never sets foot on land.



Zodiacs



Zodiacs

Apparently, Zodiac is actually a brand name for a French-made boat. These are RIBs “rigid inflatable boats.” But everybody just called them Zodiacs. They might look flimsy, but I found them easy to ride in.

Shooting from a zodiac.

- Get low. I was often sitting or laying on the floor of the boat with the lens resting on the inflatable wall of the boat.
- Raise shutter speed because of camera shake as the boat is moving.
- Burst mode. I used burst mode for almost all shots unless I was on solid ground and shooting a landscape only. It meant going thru lots of photos later, but I didn’t want to take a chance on not getting a sharp shot, so I figured I take lots and increase my chances.

Ice, ice baby



I was struck by how many times the scenery and horizon seemed to just drop off the end of the earth. Considering where we were, that even seemed possible. Photographically, there was very little difference sometimes on the horizon where the sea met the sky.

With ice photos, I had to be careful with landscapes not to blow out the whites. That means shoot dark enough that I retained detail in the bright sections of the photo. For me, that usually meant dialing down my exposure compensation. I just know on my Canon camera, that's a dial control on the back of the camera. If I take a photo and see the preview in the viewfinder or back flipscreen, if the white areas are blinking, it means I blew out the whites. And I should try again with dimmer exposure.

The rectangular iceberg here would not look as good if you couldn't see all the ridges in the white ice.



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Antarctica, the 7th continent



It's likely that about .02% of humans alive today have stepped foot on the continent of Antarctica. That's 2 people out of every 10,000. And it's possible that just 1 million people have ever stepped foot on Antarctica in the history of the world.

It felt like that: so remote and sometimes eerily quiet, like a quiet and stillness I haven't experienced anywhere else.

It was also a big deal for my traveling partner, my father-in-law. Now 80 years old, he's an avid traveler, and visiting Antarctica was his last continent to visit. So, it was a bucket-list thing for him.

Here, you see my first steps on the Antarctic Peninsula, although it looks like I could have been in Bryce Canyon in Utah or something. The snapshot on the right is the little locker room where we put on our gear, including rubber boots and life preservers, and exited the ship onto the Zodiacs.

But before we boarded the Zodiac in Antarctica, we had to step into a tub of disinfectant solution to clean our boots.

Expedition cruises to Antarctica are subject to strict environmental precautions, especially during landings, to protect one of the world's most fragile ecosystems. The boot-washing requirement is part of a broader protocol to prevent biological contamination and introducing invasive species.

Sample of rules:

- You're not allowed to bring food ashore — even crumbs can attract scavenging birds or introduce bacteria.
- Collecting anything (rocks, feathers, bones, etc.) is prohibited under the Antarctic Treaty.
- You cannot leave anything behind either — even biodegradable waste like fruit peels.
- Penguins have right of way — always. You stop and let the penguin waddle past you.

Why the precautions? Antarctica's ecosystems are:

- Isolated and extremely slow to recover from disruption.
- Vulnerable to invasive species (e.g., grasses, mites, pathogens)
- Penguins, seals, seabirds are especially sensitive to disease and human disturbance.

Trivia: No one country owns Antarctica.

Instead, it's governed by an international agreement called the Antarctic Treaty, which was signed in 1959 by 12 countries and now has more than 50 members. The treaty says:

- Antarctica is for peaceful purposes only (no military activity).
- It is used mainly for scientific research.
- No new claims of ownership are allowed



Link to view video:

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This is my father-in-law, Chet, seconds after he stepped onto Antarctica, his 7th continent. And, as he describes it, the end of his bucket list.

Drake Passage



A rite of passage – I guess literally a passage – for many travelers going to Antarctica is crossing the Drake Passage.

It's located between Antarctica and the southern tip of Argentina.

You can have two different experiences, nicknamed “The Drake Shake” (when rough) and “The Drake Lake” (when calm).

I don't have much in the way of photographs from the Drake Passage. I get motion sickness more than average, so I was mostly in survival mode in my cabin.

There were times on the rough open seas when waves would crash over the bow.

You needed to hold handrails in the hallways. One night was so rough I had to lay on my back in bed with my arms and feet spread wide, so I didn't fall out of bed.

So, the photo on the right isn't mine, but that's what it could look like.



Link to view video:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pHCwd4ZNuLIPmfSo86goKfTBNmM4ad6E/view?usp=drive_link

Photo lessons learned

- Shoot more video!
- Mid-range lenses rule.
- Put down the camera.
- Snow/ice exposure:
underexpose by $\frac{2}{3}$ stop
- Animal eye contact makes the
image
- Use burst mode on Zodiacs,
then delete 95%

So you've seen a lot of still photos from the trip. But I'll play a few video clips. I think you'll agree you get a whole new understanding for what it was like to experience Antarctica.

I'm not good at videography, but I think it's about time I started to learn more...

Antony & Pops

Link to view video:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aMn2nNcd4fiFeH6jIJR7jIKexFqwBEU0/view?usp=drive_link

This is a compilation video of the trip. It's about 5 minutes long.



Questions?

Final slide: Questions?