

CRUISING

The ultimate polar dip

Snorkelling in Antarctica offers an exhilarating experience — and the chance to swim with wildlife



SUZANNE MORPHET
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Lowering my masked face into the icy waters of Antarctica, I'm struck by two things: the intense blueness of the water, and the searing pain in my exposed lips.

I let go of our inflatable Zodiac boat and try to absorb the immensity of it all — the colour, the cold, the complicated preparation to get here — and the supreme thrill of snorkelling in the Southern Ocean, home to species ranging from tiny krill to enormous killer whales.

Looking up, I see my group bobbing about in their dry suits — a dozen of us altogether — some face down, others floating on their backs, everyone wide-eyed with wonder.

We're here with Aurora Expeditions, a company that specializes in activities that take a cruise from ordinary to extraordinary. On this trip, aboard the Sylvia Earle, a new ship named after the pioneering marine biologist and oceanographer, snorkelling and kayaking are the optional extras.

I chose to snorkel because I've enjoyed it since I was a kid looking for fossils in the relatively brisk water of Georgian Bay near Collingwood. But polar snorkelling gives new meaning to "cold."

"The biggest danger is hypothermia," says Edwin Sargeant, one of our three snorkelling guides. "Last year, I had a doctor who had his dry suit half full of water to his waist and then became non-responsive." All it takes is a leak and about 12 minutes of exposure, he adds grimly.

The water hovers around 1 C. Even on the day we snorkel in the caldera of an active volcano, it creeps no higher than four.

Most days, we snorkel morning and afternoon for 30 to 40 minutes each time. I'm actually cosy, wearing three pairs of thermal underwear on my bottom half, and four layers of wool and fleece on my top. But keeping my fingers warm is nearly impossible, even with 7mm-thick neoprene gloves.

My biggest fear, however, isn't the cold but the leopard seals. With reptilian heads, powerful jaws and

sharp teeth, they look — and are — potentially dangerous.

"I've had them chew on the back of the Zodiac," Sargeant tells me.

"They get curious and will come up and sort of play, but they have teeth and then the snorkellers panic."

"We're always on the lookout," Ana Poulalion, another guide, assures the group during our briefing. "So, if we see a leopard seal ... we'll remove you from the water. Just remain calm."

This is when we also learn that none of our guides will be in the water with us.

"If we are impaired with the cold water, we won't be able to make a rescue," Poulalion explains.

Perhaps it's just as well that I wear hearing aids and need to take them out before going in the water. It means I don't hear the scream of a fellow snorkeller on our first outing when several fur seals suddenly appear beside us. The seals are simply curious, but I'm clearly not the only one on edge.

Our underwater excursions are as varied as those we have on land. One day we jump into what looks like an enormous blue Slurpee. Moments earlier, we watched as a wall of ice sheared off a glacier and exploded in the water. A safe distance away, we push our way through the giant clinking ice cubes.

On day three, I'm granted my biggest wish. We're snorkelling near a snow-covered island when I see a Gentoo penguin tottering awkwardly over rocks towards the water. Seconds later it torpedoes past me. More penguins "fly" by in tight formation, like fighter pilots on a mission.

Yet as exhilarating as all this is, we're also slightly mystified. "There's nothing to see," says 71-year-old Alannah from Colorado, airing our thoughts one day when we're removing our many layers in the ship's mud room. No colourful fish or coral reefs, she means, things we usually associate with snorkelling.

"Everything here is small," our guide Eddie Hauzer reminds us later. "Train your eyes and you will see in one square inch more than you can imagine."

It's true. When I slow down, cloudy patches of water transform into millions of tiny fish. A gelatinous blob the size of a walnut is a comb jelly, a kind of ctenophore with trailing red tentacles. The long, thin tube drifting past me one day with 13 bright orange spots is a chain of sea salps, translucent except for their stomachs.

Our final day feels bittersweet. Our otherworldly experiences are almost over.

"Remember the signals, OK?" says Poulalion as we pull on our

hoods one last time. "Hand up if you need a pickup, and a big wave with both hands if you're in immediate danger."

Long strands of yellow and purple kelp wave in the current. A half-dozen fur seals twist and turn as elegantly as dancers on a stage. I could watch for hours, but when my fingers go numb, it's time to get out of the water.

WRITER SUZANNE MORPHET TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF AURORA EXPEDITIONS, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.

Snorkellers approach an iceberg where blue-eyed shags (a.k.a. imperial cormorants) are resting.

EDWIN SARGEANT PHOTOS



A leopard seal shows off its sharp set of teeth while on an ice floe.

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