



It's the end of the world

Antarctica might be the harshest continent but it will melt your heart. By **Julia Horton**

Bending down with an air of quiet determination, the penguin carefully selects a dark pebble from the snowy beach, picking it up awkwardly in his beak – and then dropping it almost immediately. He gives a small cry of apparent annoyance before preening his sleek black and white frame, looking about furtively as if checking to see whether anyone has noticed.

Spotting me watching, he fixes his beady, unblinking eyes on mine and we share a moment, silently contemplating life. His is indisputably far harder, as he strives to collect enough stones to build a suitable nest for his partner, who is waiting high up on a hill in their windswept, remote colony in Antarctica. Marching endlessly from beach to hilltop through several feet

of fresh snow, he holds his wings out for balance as he lurches laboriously from side to side in an icy wind. After overcoming his earlier setback, his beak is wedged open as far as it can go by the biggest pebble he can carry.

Perhaps he is motivated by that universal truth: size matters. These stones also serve as the penguin equivalent of flowers for the missus and, after depositing each one at her feet, he bobs his head expectantly, waiting for his partner to signal her approval by bobbing back. The courting couple are on constant guard against their pesky neighbours, who are likely to steal any pebbles they can to save going through the whole rigmarole themselves. On the bright side, the return trip to the beach tobogganing downhill on your belly must be fun.

Clockwise from above: killer whales frolicking in Pleneau Bay; whaling ship The Governor, grounded in 1916; a leopard seal and pup

PHOTOGRAPHS: CATE GILLON

Sights such as these are now drawing thousands of tourists from around the world to Antarctica every year: a journey to the planet's most inhospitable land to witness its marvels. The Antarctic Dream is among dozens of ships offering passengers the experience of setting foot on this enthralling continent. Its Chilean owner, Antarctic Shipping, is one of the founding members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), a self-regulating industry body set up in 1991 by a handful of firms to promote "safe, environmentally responsible" tourism.

While watching penguins is endlessly entertaining, there is nothing comical or cute about the wilderness they inhabit. The dangers of bringing hordes of tourists to the harshest



LATE DEALS

Stewart Travel (0141 620 4348) has seven nights in **Mauritius** from £950pp. Price includes half-board in a five-star hotel, private transfers and return flights from Glasgow, departing May 1-July 15 and August 11-September 15. Must book by February 15.

Flexibletrips (0870 160 9192) has two nights in **Paris** from £171pp. Price includes B&B in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow, departing March 16.

Sunset (0844 412 5970) has seven nights in **Benidorm** from £335pp. Price includes all-inclusive in a three-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow, departing February 7.

Onthebeach (0870 606 0708) has seven nights in **Gran Canaria** from £227pp. Price includes self-catering, three-star apartment and return flights from Glasgow, departing February 7.

Thomas Cook (0845 070 2530) has Emirates flights to **Perth, Australia**, via Dubai, from Glasgow from £672 return. Valid for departures from April 10-July 10.

Lastminute.com (0870 443 9902) has seven nights in **Tunisia** from £381pp. Price includes all-inclusive in a four-star hotel and return flights from Glasgow, departing February 22.

Flyglobespan (0871 987 1689) has direct flights to **Geneva** from Edinburgh from £79 return, departing on February 21.

Flight Centre (0870 499 0042) has KLM flights to **Orlando**, via Amsterdam, from Edinburgh from £339 return. Must book by March 31. Valid for departures until June 30.

environment on earth were dramatically highlighted just over a year ago with the loss of the MS Explorer. The first purpose-built Antarctic cruise ship, which made its inaugural voyage in 1969, became the first to sink.

Investigations suggested it had been holed by an iceberg, ironically while following a route taken by the legendary polar explorer Ernest Shackleton, whose ship the Endurance also met her end in the ice. While Shackleton was forced to embark on an epic, death-defying voyage across the perilous seas in a tiny open boat to secure the rescue of his men, the Explorer's passengers were swiftly flown back to civilisation. Fears that a deadly thick black oil slick would leak from the stricken ship and smother the beautifully pristine white wilderness appear to have been unfounded.

'Visitor numbers have risen sharply from a few hundred in the 1970s to around 50,000 during the last summer season'

Nevertheless, the incident focused the world's attention on the growth of tourism in Antarctica. Visitor numbers have risen sharply from a few hundred in the early days of the industry in the 1970s to around 50,000 during the last summer season (between November 2007 and March 2008), including about 30,000 who went ashore.

A major concern has been the temptation for operators to divert huge Caribbean cruise ships, ill-equipped for Antarctic waters, to the frozen south to cash in on the growing market. The largest vessel last season carried 2500 passengers plus another 1000-odd crew, fuelling fears about

the increased danger to people, wildlife and the environment should something go wrong.

The Explorer remains the only cruise ship to have sunk, but it is not the only tourist vessel to have run into problems. In December, another boat designed for polar waters, the MV Ushuaia, grounded in the Antarctic. All those on board were again rescued, with the Antarctic Dream assisting the Chilean navy, but oil was spotted leaking from the damaged boat. Early reports suggested the volume was small and winds were blowing the slick away from a vulnerable penguin colony nearby, yet the potential for ▶

TRAVEL NOTES

GETTING THERE AND WHERE TO STAY

A 10-night cruise on the Antarctic Dream next month and March starts at \$6450 (£4450) for a double cabin,

departing from Ushuaia in Argentina. Visit the Antarctic Shipping website at www.antarctic.cl for details. Iberia Airlines has return flights to Buenos Aires from Edinburgh and

Glasgow for around £650. Visit www.iberia.com/gb for details. LAN Airlines offers flights from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia for around £300 return. Visit www.lan.com.

The Tango B&B in Ushuaia offers a double room with private bathroom from 100 Argentinian pesos (around £20) per room per day. Visit www.tangobyb.com.ar.

► the tourism industry to destroy the very thing upon which it depends is obvious. Tour operators are well aware it is in their interests to protect the fragile ecosystem from harm, and the majority are members of IAATO, which has a strict code of conduct governing cruises. IAATO, though, is not independent – it is a company club, and membership is not obligatory.

The issue highlights the unique nature of Antarctica as the only continent with no resident human population, and no government. The Antarctic Treaty, signed 50 years ago, remains the key document protecting the world's largest wilderness from harm and exploitation. It now includes guidelines on tourism, which IAATO follows.

On the Antarctic Dream, the trip's expedition leader, Ignacio Rojas, believes the rules tend to be followed closely. "People ask who are the police, and we say we are the police," he explains. "There may be one or two bad apples in the barrel, but most people are very conscious of what we are doing."

That certainly seems to be the case on his ship, a converted Chilean naval vessel. All passengers must attend a mandatory talk on IAATO regulations, which include orders not to walk closer than five metres from penguins. I see only one woman ignoring that rule, and the guides are quick to make sure she backs off.

Since they have no predators on land, penguins show no fear and often come closer to their observers for a better look. The white-ringed eyes of the Adelie penguins, dubbed "little maniacs" by one of the guides, make their inquisitive gaze even funnier.

They are not the only creatures who share a mutual curiosity with us. Later in the trip, a trio of killer whales suddenly appears while we are on board one of the ship's orange Zodiac landing craft, admiring one of the many brilliant blue

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icebergs. An ominous curved black fin slicing through the sea nearby causes gasps of delight, and all eyes are glued to the water as the black and white giants dive repeatedly beneath the dinghy, so close they almost touch it. It is awe-inspiring – and slightly alarming.

Asked if she is nervous, our guide, Claudia Roedel, smiles and says: "I trust them more than I trust the ice." Later, during another trip ashore, a chunk of glacier shears off into the sea, filling the quiet with an explosive crack and sending out ripples as it crashes into the water. I remember her words. It is a dramatic reminder that the Antarctic Peninsula is the fastest-warming place on the planet.

Just off the peninsula, at Deception Island, a group of giant rusting boilers at an abandoned whaling station is a much uglier sign of the impact of mankind on nature. In the 1940s, the station became a base for scientists at the British Antarctic Survey, the body that first discovered the hole in the ozone layer which sparked worldwide concern about global warming. Today, its black volcanic sands are trodden by tourists visiting what is now a historical site.

It is also – briefly – a bathing area for the few of us too daft to resist the invitation to go for a swim. The water is apparently warmer here due to the volcanic activity, although not noticeably so. Undeterred, some Canadian passengers go one step further by skinny-dipping. Among them is Scott Robertson, 33, a nurse and travel agent, who owes his apparent immunity to the cold to living about as far north of the equator as we are now south. Summing up his Antarctic experience, he says: "It has been overwhelming to be able to come back and say you were on





Antarctic penguins might not feel the cold, above, but plucky skinny-dippers in the waters around Deception Island, left, certainly do

mainland Antarctica today. It makes seven continents for me."

He is impressed by the guides and crew, and surprised that many of the passengers are also young – something the staff admit is unusual. I, too, am surprised. I hadn't expected parties in the middle of the Antarctic with tango-mad Spaniards, ukulele-playing sailors or a rock star from Hong Kong.

Philip Chan, a retired Malaysian banker who frequently expresses his joyfulness by bursting into Pavarotti numbers without warning, is also an unexpected feature of the trip. Maybe the pills I have taken to ward off seasickness over the notoriously rough Drake Passage, which must be crossed to reach Antarctica from the Argentinian port of Ushuaia, are stronger than I realised.

We are pretty lucky, as it turns out, encountering the relatively calm conditions known as Drake Lake rather than Drake Shake. Having seen what awaits on the other side, I would happily brave the crossing again any day. ■

THE WALK

by Tom Prentice

CAIRNSMORE OF CARSPHAIRN

Location: south-east of Dalmellington, East Ayrshire

Map: OS Landranger 77 (GR 594 979)

Distance: 8 miles (13.5km)

Time: 3 hours 45minutes

Terrain: tracks and paths

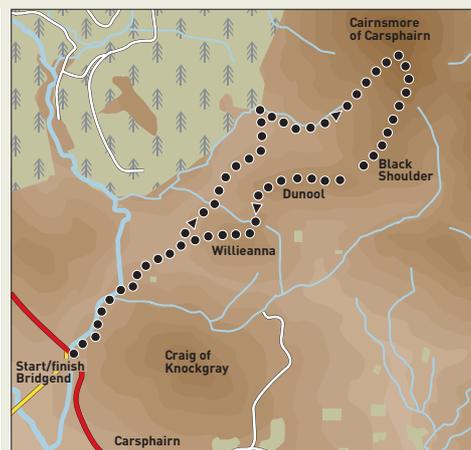
Cairnsmore of Carsphairn occupies a solitary position on the north-eastern border of the Galloway Hills and is a prominent landmark in the view south across Ayrshire to these western summits.

It's the biggest hill hereabouts and offers an excellent and straightforward ascent with fine views. Cairnsmore of Carsphairn is also relatively easy to reach from Ayr and the M77, making it a good all-round choice for a short day, unsettled weather or a day in the snow without excessive commitment.

The route starts at the bridge over the Water of Deugh, near the Green Well of Scotland on the A713 south of Dalmellington. There is limited parking on the east side of the road at the track leading to Bridgend (though be careful not to obstruct vehicle access to the farm).

Follow the track past the bungalow and on to a ford, which can be crossed at the gates on the right at high water. Beyond this an area of level pasture is occupied by two large animal barns and both the track and surrounding ground can be churned up and muddy.

The track then ascends round



the flanks of Willieanna and Dunool, passing through various gates to end at a wall rising from the Polsue Burn.

Follow the path alongside the wall, then cross rightwards over the lower part of the corrie and straight up the hillside to the trig point and cairn (797m/2615ft). The view gradually opens up west to Corserine and the Rhinns of Kells, with Shalloch on Minnoch and The Merrick beyond.

A fine open vista awaits you on the summit, with Windy Standard and its wind generators dominating the view to the north. Lowther Hill with its radar station is prominent to the east and Cairnsmore of Fleet, Criffell and the Lake District to the south. Like many of the

Galloway hills, and certainly its two siblings Cairnsmore of Dee and Cairnsmore of Fleet, the granite underlying Cairnsmore of Carsphairn gives the hill its characteristically bare, rounded summit.

From the top, follow the broad ridge south and west as it curves round to Black Shoulder and on to reach a wall. Anyone wanting more exercise can drop down east to take in Beninner before returning to Black Shoulder. A path and vehicle track follow the wall to Dunool, from where a steep descent leads to the col below Willieanna.

After a short ascent, head west away from the wall to pass over Willieanna's rounded top and down to meet the track at the upper gate.

THE CYCLE

by Fergal MacErlean

ABERFOYLE

Location: Stirlingshire

Map: OS Landranger 57

Distance: 2.5 miles (4km)

Time: 45 minutes

Terrain: flat; cyclepath, quiet road

This is a great cycle for children as it is short, flat and varied – and has the intriguing prospect of spotting fairies. The little people in question are said to inhabit Doon Hill. In 1691 the local clergyman, Reverend Kirk, published his book *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves and Faeries*, in which, the respected academic detailed the lives, social mores, homes and even the sex lives of the fairies.

To research his material, the minister travelled widely and took constitutionals up Doon Hill. One day he never returned, leading people to believe he had been taken captive by the fairies



and trapped in a tree atop the hill. It's food for thought as you set off from the town's car park. Cycle past the Scottish Wool Centre and bear left to join NCN Route 7, along the route of an old railway line. After approximately half a mile, turn right to cross the River Forth on a wooden bridge. Cycle on by woods and, at a cross tracks, turn right.

The wooded Doon Hill, also known as the Fairy Hill, lies ahead on the right. It's worth leaving the bikes to follow the signed walking route to the top, where you'll find fluttering ribbons inscribed with wishes.

Back on the main track, cycle straight on to return to Aberfoyle, passing the ill-fated clergyman's Old Kirk en route.

The Holiday & Travel Show
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www.holidayshows.com/glasgow.htm



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