

7 Lessons I Learned Traveling to Antarctica

Penguins are adorable, the bad is worth the good, and other lessons I learned about travel and life during my trip to the seventh continent.

By [Mark Jason Williams](#) February 27, 2020



Photo by Mark Jason Williams | CREDIT: PHOTO BY MARK JASON WILLIAMS

I recently took a dream vacation to the end of the Earth—Antarctica. I'd wanted to go there since I was young. One of my favorite things to do as a 5-year-old was watch PBS documentaries about the Roman Colosseum and the Great Pyramid with my dad. It's safe to say I had the travel bug. But I had leukemia growing up, so I couldn't go to any of the places I'd seen on TV. It was especially hard knowing that my friends went to Disney World and rode Space Mountain while I spent my summer vacations confined to a hospital in the Bronx. Dad however, refused to let me sulk. He brought me a globe, told me to pick any place I wanted to go, and promised to take me there. I pointed to Antarctica because it was on the bottom and I didn't have the strength to raise my arm any higher.

"Good choice," he said. "I hear there are lots of penguins hanging out down there." I perked up. Dad and I loved watching the birds at the zoo, one of the few things we did outside of the hospital. We spent hours, then years, plotting our way to the seventh continent.

After an unexpected recovery, I thought I'd get my chance to go there. I asked Dad to take me there for my eighth birthday.

"We don't have the money for a vacation like that," he said in his gruff construction-worker voice. In reality, we couldn't afford any kind of trip. Dad would never admit it, but my medical needs had nearly bankrupted us. I was disappointed, but Dad continued to encourage my dream. We kept watching those PBS documentaries, even when they competed with football. On my 16th birthday, Dad bought me a travel journal and made me promise to tell him about all of my adventures.

"I thought we were seeing the world together," I said, taken aback. Dad spouted a bunch of excuses. He couldn't take time off work, wasn't comfortable with the idea of long flights, and didn't want to go through the hassle of getting a passport. Yet once again he was withholding the truth: His health was fading and he wasn't able to travel. Knowing I'd be on my own, my wanderlust faded.

Twenty years later, I met a charming college health professor named Michael. On our first date, he told me he'd been to all seven continents. Hearing his stories reignited my youthful desire to travel. I never expected that three years later, Michael and I would be married and planning our honeymoon. When he suggested Antarctica, I was thrilled yet cautious. I'd been promised this trip before and didn't want to be disappointed again. Thankfully, we figured out how to get there.

It wasn't always smooth sailing (literally—our cruise ship traversed some sickeningly choppy waters), but my journey to the end of the world taught me some valuable lessons about travel and life. Here are seven things I learned during my long-awaited trip to Antarctica.



Getting to Antarctica is more accessible than you think

One of the biggest hurdles of getting to Antarctica is the cost. Like my parents, Michael and I lived on modest incomes—he taught at a city college, and I worked as a file clerk in a law firm—so a trip like this would have certainly broken the bank. However, with a growing number of tour companies offering voyages to the South Pole, typically through a cruise from Argentina, there are deals to be found. We scoured the internet for over a year, and when that didn't produce affordable results, we went to travel shows and talked with representatives from cruise/expedition companies. One very helpful tour guide told me to keep checking their company's social media feeds for flash deals. The tip worked, as three weeks later we found a cruise at a heavily discounted price that also included flights, meals, drinks, and gratuities. When we crunched the numbers and realized we could make the trip happen, I was so excited that I nearly swatted the calculator off the table.

It's not as cold as you'd expect

When I tell others of my journey to the end of the world, their first question is always, "How cold was it?" Although the continent is called the "least hospitable place on earth" for good reason (the lowest temperature recorded in Antarctica was an astounding -144 degrees), visiting in Antarctica's summer months between October and February brings temperatures in the 30s. In fact, during our trip in January, it was colder in New York than in the South Pole. Your ship crew will provide you with all of the creature comforts, too, including boots and a puffy coat, to help you stay warm and fight the elements.

You don't have to be super adventurous to enjoy the trip

I worried that I wouldn't be cool enough for Antarctica (pun totally intended). I wasn't much of an outdoorsy kind of guy, preferring museums and theater to nature walks. Thankfully, I wasn't the only one. One of the nicest things about my voyage was there were people of all ages, fitness levels, and interests. The adventurous ones went stand-up paddleboarding, hiked ice-covered mountains, and even camped at certain spots while I hung with the non-adventure folks, observing wildlife and taking in the scenery in a leisurely fashion. In the end, everyone had a great time and was able to go at their own pace.

You have to let the journey guide you, not the other way around

I'll admit it: I like to plan every part of a trip. The night before we left, I stayed up late making a PowerPoint presentation about what we should do on our expedition.

Michael urged me to allow room for error, but I didn't listen. A tightly wound New Yorker who'd never really learned how to go with the flow, I had a meltdown when we arrived in Argentina and found out our cruise was delayed by hours, possibly days. Michael's relaxed attitude caused me to stew even more. "I had this all planned out," I said, reminding him that we were supposed to get to the South Pole on December 31 to toast a new year at the end of the world. "Now everything is ruined."

"The point was simply to get you there," said Michael. "You've gone too far to let a clock determine a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And you've never been closer to your dream happening than right now." I knew he was right, even if I didn't admit it. I needed to relinquish control and stop expecting things to be perfect all the time, especially on a trip like this one.



Sometimes, you really do have to go through hell to get to heaven

Sailing to Antarctica from South America means going through the infamous Drake Passage, one of Earth's roughest waters. If you're lucky, you'll experience a calmer version, jokingly called the "Drake Lake." Michael and I had the more common, and much-less forgiving, "Drake Shake"

It turned our stomachs, and my sea-sickness pills made me hallucinate to the point where I saw flying rainbow dolphins. In the middle of nowhere and confined to our tiny cabin, without the internet or television to occupy us, Michael and I passed the time by sleeping, fighting nausea, and bickering. It was far from the dream vacation or romantic honeymoon I'd imagined. But then, from out of nowhere, I saw it: a gleaming white landmass. It was a sight to behold! I had trouble smiling with a chilling wind in my face, but my first glimpse of Antarctica made me swell bigger than the waves that had made my last few days miserable. It was a life-changing moment as we sailed next to striking icebergs and got closer to the seventh continent. Some passengers clapped in unison while I had a moment of quiet reflection, grateful I'd ridden the waves and finally made it here.





Penguins are adorable, but they smell awful

Let's take a break from the self-reflection and focus on one of Antarctica's biggest selling points: penguins! Several types of the beloved flightless bird call this region home, and many people come here just to catch a glimpse of a Chinstrap, Gentoo, or Adélie. Yes, they are freakin' adorable, especially when they waddle along their "penguin highways" or slide down icy hills on their bellies. However, what no one really prepares you for is how much they smell. Seriously, you will get a whiff of them long before you see them and just might have to hold your nose when you get close. The aroma will get in your hair, on your clothes, basically everywhere. Of course, it's worth it to observe the lovable black and white birds in their natural habitat. I awed at the site of a chick and gasped when a bird tried to swoop in and steal it! To my relief, the penguins banded together and fought it away as we all cheered them on.

It's important to be grateful in the moment

One word kept going through my mind in Antarctica: gratitude. I was grateful to marvel at icebergs that looked like they'd been carved by a master sculptor. I felt lucky to get so close to a humpback whale that we could feel her mist and hear her breathe. Michael and I walked on an active volcano and rang in the New Year by dancing next to glaciers until 3 a.m., the sun still bright. I stood in awe of seals and orcas and even spotted the ever-elusive albatross. Here at the end of the world, I learned to pause, get my head out of my phone, and enjoy the moments, the quiet and the calm. I stopped looking so far ahead and started appreciating where I was and the people I was with. I thanked Michael for making my dream come true. Then, I thanked my father. I thought of him standing beside my hospital bed with his dusty globe. Although we never traveled together, he'll always play a big part in how far I go.



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