



SundayTravel

CRUISES

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS
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CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

The luxurious bar and lounge on the Aqua Expeditions riverboat Nera.

Champagne, pink dolphins, and poisonous frogs

This cruise is totally wild, and completely over the top

MARANON RIVER, Peru — When the alarm went off at 5:15 a.m. I instinctively cursed at it and, for a minute or two, considered rolling over and going back to sleep. Was it really worth getting out of bed at this inhumane hour to see a few birds? I slapped my face until I was conscious and decided that since I was on the Amazon surrounded by the jungle, it was my duty to do something adventurous, even if that adventure occurred before 6 a.m.

After marinating myself in sunblock and mosquito repellent, I climbed from the luxurious riverboat that was my home base in the jungle onto a small skiff with other passengers to



CHRISTOPHER MUTHER

begin what was promised would be a morning full of amazing rain forest nature. I was skeptical. What were the chances that I would see a pink dolphin or a sloth? If those animals were smart, they'd still be sleeping, which is what I should have been doing.

As we began the morning river safari, our skiff was the only

vessel in sight. The sky turned pink and then orange. It didn't take long before our guide became animated and told us to point our binoculars and cameras toward the water. There it was — a Pepto Bismol pink dolphin!

"Did you see that?" I asked the woman sitting next to me. I thought I was hallucinating — maybe I was still sleeping, and this was a weird dream — but she also saw it. Then, there was a sloth, a black-collared hawk, and a striated heron. I can't believe I'm writing these words, but I was glad I woke up at the peep of day for this parade of rain forest creatures.

I came to the wilds of Peru to cruise on an Aqua Expeditions riverboat called Nera because the itinerary combined two very

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A look at the best- and worst-rated cruise lines

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

Considering a cruise this year? The choices can be overwhelming. CLIA (Cruise Lines International Association) recognizes 60-plus cruise lines. But in terms of quality, they can offer very different experiences. Reviews range from "a five-star floating masterpiece" to "a nightmare at sea." (These are actual guest comments.)

At the end of last year, everyone from YouTube cruise expert Gary Bembridge (www.youtube.com/tip-sfortravellers) to Travel + Leisure released their lists of best (and even more fun, worst) cruise lines. We looked at U.S. News & World Report's 2025 Best Cruise Line

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A once-in-a-lifetime Antarctic adventure

By Kari Bodnarchuk

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DOOMER ISLAND, Antarctica — As I stood on skis looking across untouched snowfields and layers of chiseled mountains — with an ocean of icebergs and sea ice behind us — a comment our guide had made shifted into focus: We are our own rescue party should anything go wrong. Our location on this mountain in Antarctica — a ski journey and Zodiac ride away from our tiny-looking ship, and 700 miles or two days of sailing from the closest continent — truly redefined the feeling of remoteness. And that's exactly what drew us here: to explore a sliver of this vast otherworldly landscape in a way that few people do.

Only a few expedition cruise companies offer trips with an opportunity to ski in Antarctica. My husband

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On a once-in-a-lifetime Antarctic adventure

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and I — both fascinated by tales of polar exploration — decided to celebrate our 20th anniversary with our own Antarctic adventure. We chose Aurora Expeditions because it had smaller ships — our vessel, the Sylvia Earle, had just 69 passengers plus the expedition team and crew — and it offered unique activities that included, besides skiing, a chance to camp on land (our camping plans eventually got derailed by the weather). It also offered a “short” 12-day trip called the Spirit of Antarctica that wouldn’t keep us away from our kids for too long.

Antarctica’s short ski season runs from roughly late October through November — early summer on the continent — when the sea ice has melted enough to safely access landing areas and before warmer temperatures melt the snow bridges covering glacial crevasses and present other hazards for skiers.

In early November, our ship was one of only two vessels on the Antarctic Peninsula. Two more ships arrived later that week, according to the Marine Traffic app (a great resource), but we never saw them. By mid-summer, dozens of cruise ships move around the region like chess pieces, relying on a master schedule to ensure their destinations don’t overlap (only a limited number of people can land at sites).

Most expedition ships first stop at the South Shetland Islands (considered part of Antarctica) and then spend their time on the Antarctic Peninsula, a narrow finger of land jutting off the continent’s northwestern tip, and on islands dotting the peninsula’s west coast. For perspective, the Antarctic Peninsula measures about the size of California, while the entire continent is as big as the United States and Mexico combined.

After a wild two-day sail from Ushuaia across the Drake Passage — with 30-foot rolling seas — we entered the Antarctic Convergence, a marine zone encircling the continent that’s marked by a dramatic drop in temperature and signals official entry into Antarctica and the Southern Ocean. The ship steered us to Deception Island, a still-active volcanic island with a horseshoe-shaped bay and the remnants of old whaling stations and present-day research stations (nothing more than a couple of small buildings in a vast landscape).

Ten of us had come from Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and France to ski on this expedition, and we ranged in age from 20s to mid-70s — mostly intermediate skiers with a few expert skiers and snowboarders in the mix. Our internationally certified mountain guides — all from New Zealand — had more than 80 years of combined guiding experience and included Jane Morris, a pioneering female mountaineer who’s led trips in interior Antarctica and worldwide (and even worked at Hidden Valley Camp in Maine years ago).

“Our motto is ‘first off, back last’ — you can sleep when you get home,” Tarn Pilkington, our lead guide, said to us on the first day — and we all agreed.

Our plan at Deception Island: to ski a gentle slope inside this windswept cauldron overlooking Whalers Bay. (The island was reportedly first visited in 1820 by Nathaniel Palmer as part of an American sealing fleet from Stonington, Conn.)

As we prepared to disembark, I couldn’t help but think of early polar explorers such as Douglas Mawson (who wintered over in Antarctica for two years in a row, in unimaginable conditions, having missed his ship by just a few hours after the first winter) and more modern-day adventurers such as Felicity Aston (the first and only woman to ski solo across Antarctica, in 2012, covering more than 1,000 miles). Unlike them, we had handwarmers, expert guides, and a cozy ship to return to each day with movies on demand, a sauna, two restaurant choices, and free WiFi that let us video chat with our kids back home. Still, even for travelers like us, Antarctica proved an adventure.

Our guides had urged us to bring our own backcountry ski or snowboard gear — items we would be familiar with and that would fit comfortably — but the ship had a stash of high-end equipment to fill any gaps or in case luggage didn’t make it. For each excursion, we needed to bring backcountry skis or a splitboard, climbing skins, poles, a backpack, ice axes, crampons, avalanche gear (including a beacon, shovel, and probe), and a climbing harness so we could rope up together, if needed, in case of crevasses.

Before landing at Deception Island, we had to go through a rigorous process of cleaning and decontaminating our gear, as all incoming visitors must do — strict guidelines established by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), a voluntary organization that Aurora Expeditions and many other cruise operators have joined. The goal: to prevent the transfer of outside critters and disease to Antarctica.

We vacuumed all pockets of our outer



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK



From top: Backcountry skiers skin 1,500 feet up a mountain on Hovgaard Island along the Antarctic Peninsula. Skiers and snowboarders set off for an early morning run one morning, on their way to Doumer Island. Polar scientist Jean-Baptiste Charcot named the island after Paul Doumer, who later became president of France. Visitors to Antarctica shouldn’t sit, kneel, or put backpacks on the ground, per guidelines released by the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators. Here, skiers organize gear on top of a disinfected tarp. The views from Doumer Island on the Antarctic Peninsula’s northwestern coast, in the Palmer Archipelago.

clothing and backpacks, scrubbed boot soles with stiff brushes, and used tweezers, bent paper clips, and magnifying glasses to remove dirt and debris from mesh and Velcro areas. We also had to dip our boots in a disinfectant solution right before stepping off the ship, and again when we climbed back onboard.

After getting dropped off on the black-sand beach (steaming due to the volcanic activity deep underground), we kept our distance from the dozens of gentoo penguins that waddled around the area and prepared for our climb. We needed to be strategic, putting our gear on a disinfected tarp while adjusting clothing layers since we weren’t allowed to kneel, sit down, or place a backpack on the ground (we couldn’t eat a snack onshore either — such is the commitment to protecting the local ecosystem).

We ran through a quick safety talk and avalanche beacon test next to several massive and rusting metal boiling tanks — a stark reminder of the area’s whaling history — and then skinned about 1,200 vertical feet up the open and windswept side of Mount Pond. As we followed each other single file, we could see areas with exposed black and brown volcanic rock and windblown patterns across the hardpacked snow. We removed our climbing skins at the top and took turns zigzagging down the mountain while admiring the snow-dappled cliffs, our ship sitting in the middle of the flooded caldera, and the



steaming beach dotted with penguins.

Before boarding the inflatable boats, we had to run through one more routine: sitting on the edge of the Zodiac, with legs dangling overboard, while a crew member scrubbed our boots with a big brush to remove pebbles, dirt, seaweed, and penguin poop, to make sure we didn’t transfer anything from one landing site to the next.

That turned out to be our only beach landing of the trip. The rest went something like this: Once our guides had determined a good landing point (conditions vary from year to year), we would take turns climbing out of the Zodiac onto a rock, if available, and then form a human chain to help unload all the gear. Or, as often happened, our Zodiac driver would nose the inflatable boat up to a snow wall — anywhere up to 6 feet

tall — and a guide would boot-kick steps into the wall that we would climb to get ashore. No easy task.

Our goal was to ski twice a day in different locations, but we soon understood what our expedition leader Florence Kuyper gently reminded us: “In my experience, Plan A rarely happens on these trips — we usually end up going with Plan B or C.”

Sure enough, we had to scrap plans to ski on Nansen Island due to high winds and instead headed to Enterprise Island, which we could access from a more protected cove in Foyn Harbour. Here, we skied up a narrow snow ridge that had a hanging glacier on each side and offered views down into two different harbors, both full of bobbing chunks of sea ice. On the ride back to the ship, the Zodiacs wound around ice-

bergs as big as houses and took us by the partially submerged and rusting Governoren shipwreck. Back in 1915, this Norwegian whaling ship intentionally ran aground after a fire broke out onboard, managing to save the entire crew. It provided a stark contrast of color in a landscape dominated by snow, glaciers, icebergs, and sea ice — and our ship’s snorkeling group apparently loved exploring all the marine life now clinging to the wreck.

Another day, we had to abort our landing at Selvick Cove, where we had planned to ski up to a snow bowl to see a chinstrap penguin colony. The full-on blizzard conditions and a super tricky landing spot made it too dangerous for us to disembark.

“It’s been a great spot in the past,” Kuyper said to us when we returned to the ship. “The weather changes, ice changes. It’s never the same trip twice.”

The next day, however, rewarded us with fresh snow, clear skies, and everlasting views — and a green light for Plan A. Our ski crew landed on Hovgaard Island and skinned 1,500 feet up a wide mountainside that offered views in almost all directions — of dark mountains plunging down to the ocean, an expansive ocean full of hundreds of icebergs, and mountainous islands down the Penola Strait. We took turns skiing or snowboarding down the buttery slopes and then did a short second lap, not wanting the day to end.

Just when I started to think we were a hardy bunch, we got to know the Port Lockroy crew, a group of UK volunteers our ship was transporting to an old British base on Goudier Island. This crew of five planned to spend the summer at Port Lockroy running the southernmost post office in the world, overseeing a museum, and conducting research on a patch of land the size of a soccer pitch that was mostly populated — and therefore controlled — by a local penguin colony. After the ship dropped off the crew, they had to dig out the buildings from under the snow, find the coffee maker, get settled in, and begin their work. With no running water or flush toilets, they would rely on the generosity of passing ships for occasional showers and resupplies. We gave the grateful crew all of our spare coffee and chocolate for their first few days ashore.

My favorite ski day took us to Doumer Island where we crossed a gentle glacial plateau for what seemed like hours, each lost in his or her own thoughts (it was too windy to communicate). Billowing snow swirled across the landscape and created a haziness at ground level, while the dramatic peaks of Mount Luigi and the Seven Sisters — sheer mountains on an island in front of us — rose up from the Gerlache Strait. We skinned up toward a massive cornice and then skied back down to the water’s edge — careful not to overshoot the final steep drop at the end and plunge into the ocean.

We all paused on our trip’s final run that afternoon and stood, spell-bound, looking at an otherworldly view in the sky — a halo of light around the sun and accompanying sundogs (or mock suns) created by sunlight hitting ice crystals in the atmosphere and refracting the light into different colors. For me, little could be more thrilling than standing on a mountainside in the coldest, driest, and windiest place on Earth with views of glacial mountains, iceberg-filled seas, and little frozen rainbows in the sky, plus soft snow underfoot, ready to be skied.

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