Heart warmer

The air, land and water are cool, but that's what makes the Subantarctic Islands the world's hottest new cold spot. You won't leave without heart burn, for the love of them. ***By Susan Elliott***

HERITAGE ADVENTURER

OPENING SPREAD: A colony of penguins looks on as *Heritage Adventurer* makes its journey © A. Russ TOP ROW, FROM LEFT: Southern royal albatrosses nest in the grass © Ewen Bell; hiking on Campbell Island; a royal penguin gets nosy © Samuel Blanc MIDDLE ROW, FROM LEFT: King penguins dive for dinner © M. Holland; Musgrave Inlet from above © Heritage Expeditions; the Subantarctica is a twitcher's dream © Heritage Expedtions BOTTOM ROW, FROM LEFT: Macquarie Island pulls a big crowd © R. Pendavingh; dramatic scenery at Carnley Harbour © T. Kraakman; Hooker's sea lions are a delight to behold © K. Osyanikova

"Is your mother a woman?"

It's the evening briefing aboard the Antarctic expedition ship *Heritage Adventurer*, and team leader Cheli Larsen sets a cheeky tone. When asked if we'll experience high seas on our voyage, her message is: don't expect a millpond and hope it's not the Drake Passage on a bad day. It's the Southern Ocean, and it's known to lose its temper. Larsen is a towering presence with a quick wit and commanding knowledge of our destinations, and you quickly learn not to ask silly questions.

Night one of a 12-day expedition and the New Zealand port of Bluff is at our stern as the bow slays a four-metre swell that is bossy enough to remind us we're taking on the Southern Ocean but not tough enough to shake glasses off dinner tables. Still, I hold mine. It's a good wine.

An expedition to the Subantarctic Islands is one of the world's most extraordinary ocean voyages. Each year, only 2,000 travellers leave Bluff to explore the remote islands south of New Zealand and Australia. On this trip, that's the Auckland Islands, Campbell Island, The Snares in New Zealand waters and Macquarie Island in Australian territory, fondly known as 'the Subs'. They are the icy equivalent of royal 'spares' – out of the main spotlight yet sparkling as brightly as their cool counterparts on the White Continent.

Passengers meet in Queenstown, unofficially New Zealand's most beautiful town snuggled along the northern edge of Lake Wakatipu in a valley sculpted by glaciers. The surrounding mountains are called The Remarkables. They should be called The Incredibles. They over-deliver on their name. It is hard to leave Queenstown, but everyone knows that more breathtaking views are ahead.

There are 137 guests onboard *Heritage Adventurer*, a 124-metre vessel built specifically for polar expeditions. There are daily shore landings except for our first stop, The Snares, a cluster of islands so precious that no landings are permitted. The view from the Zodiac is better, anyway. We skirt the shores of North East Island where massive muscovite granite cliffs, slick with green and orange lichen, plunge to a shoreline sloshing with bronze bull kelp. The rocks are flipper-to-flipper with thousands of Snares crested penguins – the only place in the world where you can see them. They descend a slippery slope dubbed 'penguin slide' into the ocean with a magical combination of trepidation and glee. Their feathered eyebrows give them the appearance of a grumpy grandfather, but the crest and red bill are definitely rock star vibes.

Around us, rafts of sooty shearwaters hug the sea, exhausted after fishing up to 2,000km away in Antarctic waters. There are thousands of them. With the penguins 'singing' ('Antarctica's Got Talent' definitely not on the cards!), the ambience isn't the serenity you may expect in one of the world's most remote places.

ALL ASHORE!

On Enderby Island, the northernmost of the Auckland Islands, approximately 500 kilometres south of Bluff, we have our first shore landing after a two-hour biosecurity process (by the end of the trip, we have reduced it to one!).

Hiking boots are scrubbed, backpacks are vacuumed, and gloves and hats undergo the 'pluck test' – if fibres come loose, they're confined to quarters, as is my cute penguin beanie, which apparently could alarm the local wildlife.

There's nothing like a group hug to make you feel good. I'm watching one on Sandy Beach where hundreds of Hooker's sea lions are nestled, nursing pups and trying to keep them safe from skuas who stalk the colony. These are the rarest and most endangered sea lions in the world, and perhaps it's the cool breeze, but my eyes are watering.

I'm happy on the beach. Others do a 10km island hike, and some patrol the shoreline in Zodiacs, spotting rockhopper penguins and the yellow-eyed hoiho, the most endangered penguin species in the world, with only 4,000 or so remaining.

WILDLIFE OVERDOSE

Macquarie Island is a heartbreaker. It's a wildlife bonanza with Southern elephant seals wrestling on the beach, a dune rookery of 40,000 royal penguins squawking, braying and honking, and king penguins on the beach sounding off like hooters at a football match.

There are more than four million gentoo, king, royal and rockhopper penguins on Macquarie Island and, after dinner, Larsen surprises everyone with an extra Zodiac trip: a dusk patrol to Lusitania Bay to see a couple of hundred thousand of them.

Orcas circle around us, and the beach is black and white, too, with penguins surrounding old, rusted digesters that once processed seals and penguins for their oil. My daughter, Evie, asks why these eyesores still litter the beach. To remind us, I answer, of what we did wrong.

A hundred years on, seeing the digesters surrounded by thousands of proud royal penguins is undoubtedly a highlight of my trip.

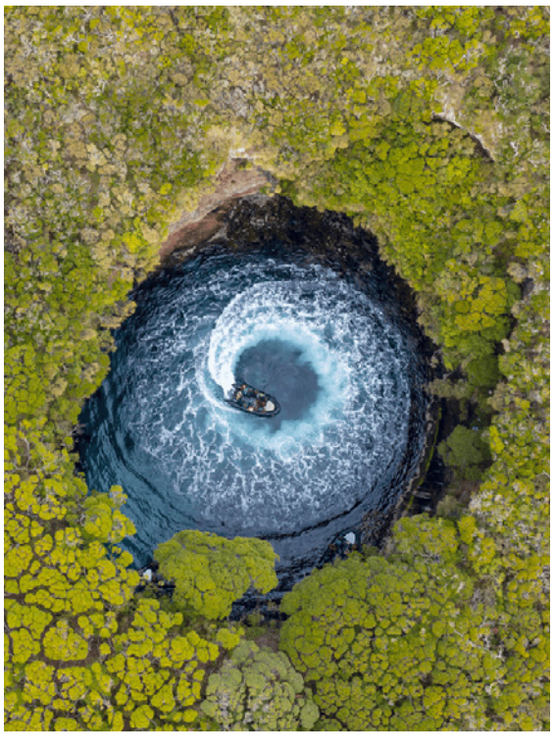
HEARTBREAKER

If florists could market Subantarctic mega herbs for Valentine's Day, Campbell Island would be stripped bare. The size of your head, many bigger, the island's giant daisies cover grassland meadows and stand tall in a bouquet of tussock grasses, forget-me-nots, ferns, mosses and orchids.

With the Roaring Forties coming through, we still manage to get ashore. For some, the boardwalk becomes a crawl-walk – the winds are fierce enough to blow lightweight walkers off the path. But, even in the wind, the perfume of flowers fills the air, and while not recommended, being blown off track into this unique garden bed is a super 'Sub' experience.

We're Bluff-bound, and the Southern Ocean has kept its temper so far. However, as one passenger comments, "Even if it loses it, the roller coaster ride is all just part of the experience."

I have a question about that for Larsen, but I *won't* be asking it at the evening briefing.

TRAVEL FACTS

INFORMATION
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