

Whale of a tail



One's first glimpse of Antarctica can bring a tear to the eye. But on this particular cruise, it is two Australian women and a whale named 'Miguel' that have passengers misty-eyed. **By Susan Elliott**

Swimming around the world is a humpback whale named Miguel. No, he doesn't know his name. And *shhh*, he doesn't know he's adopted. Miguel's story starts in the colourful port of Ushuaia, Argentina, the world's southernmost city, nicknamed the 'End of the World', where passengers readying to board Antarctic-bound ships stroll the streets buying 'Fin del Mundo' T-shirts, scoff racks of Fuegian lamb and crack through kilos of king crab like it's the last supper. The adventurous head seven kilometres out of town to climb Glacier Martial, a heart-beating show-opener to their sojourn at sea.



Trekking to the top are Leonie Leete from Perth and Gladys Amestoy from Sydney, who met in transit in Buenos Aires. Summitting the glacier, 60-years-fit Leete puffs to keep pace with her new 70-year-old friend; Amestoy is a walker and after the death of her husband, Miguel, her heart is pumped not only for the glacier climb, but Antarctica, which they had planned to see together.

"After he passed away, I didn't feel like doing the trip," says Amestoy. "Until last year, I was watching TV and it was Antarctic; I was reading the newspaper, it was Antarctic; I was listening to the radio and it was Antarctic. And I thought, if I don't do it now, I won't be able to do it in the future."

"GOOOOD MORNING!"

Antarctic expedition leaders love their wake-up calls! Ida Olsson's crack-of-dawn greeting summons like a siren, rousing guests from snugly staterooms to icy decks, with the promise of a glorious day ahead.

The 'Mudroom' is the real wakeup call; a communal change-room where photographers, kayakers, shore explorers and citizen scientists dress to board Zodiacs, the process ticking with Patek Philippean precision. Though on the first morning, there is a scent of 'Eau de Frantic' as thermals, socks and fleeces that were a perfect fit at home, negotiate for space in ship-issued jackets and muck boots. There's also an element of 'she'll be right'. A shipload of Aussies perhaps explains that.

On this 10-day Chimu Adventures expedition, 75 per cent of passengers are Australian. Special guests are cinematographer Pieter De Vries, who filmed *Ghosts of the Abyss* with *Titanic* director James Cameron, and Deborah Conway from the '80s pop band Do-Re-Mi. She sings her hit 'Man Overboard' on a stage that's more 'rock 'n' roll', thanks to the swell. De Vries' yarns are suitably titanic and over two nights, we hear how he filmed the world's most famous shipwreck. The stories are fascinating, though I ponder if it's right as we navigate channels of icebergs.

LIFE IS WILD

Albatrosses to the left, penguins to the right, an Antarctic expedition feels like a 'Best of David Attenborough' production.



After three nights crossing the Drake Passage, the first anchor drop is at Winter Island where we're not allowed to land but lap it up in Zodiacs. We meet our first gentoo penguins, Weddell seals and humpback whales. And, oh yes, the sights come with smells. Penguins reek. I can't describe it better than US science producer Jason Orfanon, who wrote, "The best way to re-create the experience is to take some old cigarette tobacco, soak it in ammonia, mix in some rotten shrimp, and let it sit out in the sun for a few days." Yes, it's that bad.

Stepping onto Petermann Island feels historic. It's my moon landing, where gentoo penguins are the welcome party and I'm thrilled that they couldn't care less. I love the century-old graffiti; it's 116 years since French explorer Jean-Baptiste Charcot wintered here, the initials of his ship *Pourquoi-Pas*, 'PP', remain engraved on a rock. Why not?

Cuverville Island in the Errera Channel is a beauty. More gentoo penguins line the shores, the cheeky ones dashing

under, around and in front of our kayaks, putting our photography skills to the test.

In Neko Harbour there is a gentle swoosh as a humpback whale breaks the surface metres from our kayaks and swims alongside, exhaling and inhaling in bursts that pop the silence.

Leete and Amestoy treasure the moment too, as their Zodiac driver kills the engine for meditation. "All we could hear was the ice clinking on the Zodiac, it was awesome. Everybody had tears in their eyes," says Leete.

BE A SCIENTIST

There are Wilson's storm petrels off the bow, humpback whales astern and on deck, citizen scientists observing birds and photographing the flukes of whales, data that Sunshine Coast ecologist Emily Gregory uploads to various scientific sites.

"It really is the engine room of the world," she says. "We involve passengers in simple methodologies they can use to help polar scientists and make a difference.



TRAVEL FACTS

WHERE TO EXPLORE
Chimu Adventures voyage to the Antarctic Peninsula, Antarctic Circle, South Georgia, Falkland Islands, East Antarctica and the Ross Sea.

GETTING THERE
Most trips leave from Ushuaia, Argentina, but many also depart from Bluff, New Zealand and Hobart, Australia.

MORE INFORMATION
chimuadventures.com



and Amestoy play cards, drink margaritas and Amestoy talks of Miguel's death. He died at 61, of tongue cancer. Having never been a smoker, it was a cruel end.

MIGUEL'S MEMORY

Leete has a plan and buys a raffle ticket for the chance to 'Name a Whale' – donated by Happywhale, an organisation that engages citizen scientists to identify whales for fun and for science. Once the whale's fluke has been photographed and uploaded, it is on the Happywhale database for all to track.

Leete wins the prize and as we rock and roll our way back to Ushuaia, the room is a chamber of sniffles as we hear why HW-MN1306728 is now called 'Miguel'. Most travellers leave Antarctica with only photographs and memories. Amestoy leaves with an 'adopted' whale because she didn't let sadness end her dream to see Antarctica.

Swimming around the world is a humpback whale named Miguel. No, he doesn't know his name. But if you see him, know he's adopted and dearly loved. 🐋

It is precious information for scientists who can't always be in the 'Big White'.

In the Lemaire Channel there's a barbecue party on the stern. I declare it the most extraordinary dinner setting in the world. Snow-covered cliffs tower over our ship, penguins porpoise, whales arch before their deep dive and Lemaire is so flat it could be a lake. Our meal is delicious, but the visual degustation is worthy of three Michelin stars.

Next, I'm scooping a grave-length hole to lay down my bivouac for a night sleeping on Leight Island. Well, no one sleeps, it's too exciting to be camping in the Antarctic and also, it's not even dark. It's silent but for the creaking of ice and the shuffle of snow tumbling down the mountains. There is a moment of REM sleep where I dream of the ship's breakfast buffet, but it becomes a nightmare when I rouse, knowing I have to use the camp's bucket toilet. Not a bucket list item.

On the last day of the voyage, old and new friends reflect on the journey. Leete

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The magnificent scenery and wildlife of Antarctica THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Reading up; getting within sniffing distance of penguins; smaller ships carrying less than 200 passengers facilitate more immersive experiences BELOW: Ethereal scenes

