

Go with the floe

An expedition to Antarctica means expecting the unexpected – but how can you explain that to clients? **Samantha Mayling** gets answers from the experts

Expedition leader Jonathan Zaccaria sets out the paramount principle on day one of our Antarctica cruise as he quotes an Inuit proverb: “Weather and ice are the masters.” Though the Inuit live in the frigid reaches of the northern hemisphere rather than here at the edge of the wild White Continent, their words – born of experience at the furthest extremes of our planet – feel equally applicable. We have no set route on Atlas Ocean Voyages’ *World Navigator*; the itinerary simply reads: ‘Captain’s Choice’.

Destinations are revealed each night for the next day, but by morning, schedules might be reshuffled according to winds, currents and drifting icebergs. The unpredictability only adds to our anticipation as we sail across the Drake Passage from Ushuaia to the Antarctic peninsula.

This infamous 600-mile waterway often has the world’s roughest seas, which has earned it a nickname of the ‘Drake Shake’. Fortunately, we encounter the calm ‘Drake Lake’ instead. If you have clients who want to bypass the Drake Passage altogether, Atlas Ocean Voyages has expanded its Drake Express range, which flies passengers across the channel to King George Island, for 2027-28.

ALL AT SEA

Our first sea day enables the 17-strong expedition team to introduce us to safety measures for Zodiac boats, which ➤

PICTURE: Lindsey Oz-Watson

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | ANTARCTICA



WORLD NAVIGATOR

From the moment we board *World Navigator*, welcomed by its attentive crew and expedition experts, the atmosphere is relaxed and convivial. Its 98 cabins range from Adventure Oceanview staterooms to Veranda and Horizon categories, with three suite types covering up to 465sq ft. My cabin had one of the comfiest beds I've ever slept in, plus L'Occitane toiletries, a walk-in shower, stocked mini-fridge, kettle and Nespresso machine.

Exceptional service in the main restaurant, Porto, combined with fine dining and friendly fellow passengers, meant we often spent a very chatty three or more hours over dinner. More first-rate food and drinks were available from Paula's Pantry, the Dome, Atlas Lounge and room service.

Hot tubs, a pool, spa and gym added to the onboard offering. Come evening, the entertainment programme featured musical performances by cruise director Daniel and duo Casablanca, plus, one night, the homespun fun of a crew talent show.



Adventure Ocean Stateroom



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Writer Samantha Mayling experiences a polar plunge; expedition leader Jonathan Zaccaria; sea lion; up close with a leopard seal

PICTURES: Melanie Magnan; Keith Nyberg



would take us out exploring twice a day, plus scrupulous biosecurity systems to ensure we don't spread litter, seeds or disease-causing pathogens.

The onboard team includes historians and scientists specialising in climate change, marine biology, oceanography and the cryosphere (the ice-covered parts of our planet). Their passion and expertise during excursions and daily recaps fosters a deep understanding of its ecosystems and landscapes.

British marine biologist and guide Holly Selman says: "Every day is different, but we can [always] expect abundant wildlife. I can guarantee whales. We're very flexible thanks to working with Jonathan, who is a master of Antarctica and has encyclopaedic knowledge."

She tells me that passengers are surprised by the variety of landscapes, from the rocky South Shetland Islands to the shimmering white glaciers in Paradise Bay. "People are changed by Antarctica and feel connected to its magic," she adds.

Selman's lectures chart the history of whaling, conservation, campaign groups and citizen science initiatives. We discover the importance of whales in global ecosystems and learn about their behaviour, from songs and patterns of grief to a curious trend of whales wearing salmon as 'hats', which scientists still can't explain.

VIEW TO A KRILL

Expedition guide Fiona Johnson is an expert in krill – small, shrimp-like crustaceans – having changed tack from her management career in Australia after travelling

on an expedition cruise. "As a guest, I was inspired by the vastness and landscapes. I felt insignificant with nature at its wildest and most breathtaking," she says. "Expedition cruising to Antarctica is life-changing – it certainly changed my life."

She explains how Jonathan and the captain study the conditions and design the itinerary to see all the wildlife we can. Thus we see three types of brush-tailed penguins – Adélie, chinstrap and gentoo – and four types of seal.

With up to 180 passengers on Atlas Ocean Voyages ships in the Antarctic, I ask how guests deal with the dilemma of tourism's carbon footprint amid such a pristine environment. "We hope that those clients who come to Antarctica are inspired to protect it and make changes back home: lobby government, get involved with organisations. People don't care about what they don't understand. Being preachy won't work – but if people talk when they get home, that gets the message out," Johnson says.

She urges passengers to boycott products containing krill, such as supplements, and has joined other expedition guides in campaigning to protect this vital marine species.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

With a focus on getting guests off the ship to experience this unique environment, Atlas Ocean Voyages offers two Zodiac wildlife-spotting excursions per day, and for an extra fee, kayaking and even a chance to camp overnight in Antarctica.

"We can tailor-make [trips] to make the most





ABOVE: Sightings of penguins on Antarctic voyages are common, but always exhilarating **PICTURE:** Nacho Canepa

of conditions in different seasons,” says assistant expedition leader Chris Garwood, who has been exploring polar regions with passengers since 2015. “No two trips are the same, but each offers the best cross-section of wildlife and landscapes. Most people visit once during their lifetime, so we want to give them the best experience – but we also have loyal customers who return again and again.”

He adds: “Photographs never do Antarctica justice: the variety and intensity of the wildlife, the enormity and silence, especially when kayaking. It’s a place without people – which is one thing to imagine, quite another to experience. It’s almost spiritual, not just a holiday. For something special, post-retirement or a big birthday, Antarctica delivers.”

DYNAMIC FLEXIBILITY

Back on board, I meet cruise director Daniel Turner, who jumped ship from larger cruise lines in favour of a smaller, newer operator – and Atlas, which began operations in 2021, fitted the bill.

“It’s not as corporate, so I have more influence on guests’ experience, sorting daily programmes and music,” he says. “I connect with guests and make friendships as the face and voice of the ship. We have an ultra-attentive team; you remember not just the place but also the people.”

There is plenty of planning and preparation behind the scenes, says Captain Augusto Neto, but navigating the polar regions means having to be ready for anything.

“On small ships, there’s flexibility in the itinerary,” he says. “Each cruise is different – last year we got the ship next to the ice shelf, so people disembarked directly onto the ice. That was thrilling and unexpected.”

Staff captain Tomás Rito adds that when orcas and humpbacks are spotted from the bridge, they announce the sighting to passengers, often prompting a mass exodus from the restaurant. “Dynamic is a very good word for Antarctica – it’s always moving,” he says. “People see whales breaching and leopard seals eating a penguin, close up, then they go back to enjoy their fine dining and amazing views.”

TRADE TALK

Atlas Ocean Voyages sells exclusively via agents in the British market and saw its UK revenue rise 37% year on year in 2025. Kathryn Waites, cruise connoisseur for Panache Cruises, is on the ship to learn more. She says: “It’s mind-blowing. You see photographs and watch programmes, but in real life it’s something else.

“My highlights were humpback whales breaching close to our Zodiac and seeing orcas from the ship. The polar plunge is exhilarating too, and kayaking through icebergs was a wow moment.

“I’ve been impressed with the service, food, crew and expedition team. Atlas is so informal and relaxed; people even wear slippers around the ship.”

She agrees that the Antarctic is worth the travelling time and costs, because it’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience. “It’s everything I hoped for and more.” **TW**

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

I don’t know which direction to look next. Humpback whales have been spotted up ahead, with their sleek, black backs like the Loch Ness Monster as they slowly surface with a puff from their blowholes – so close that we can feel the warmth of their breath.

As they descend to the icy depths, we wait for the classic tail fin, or fluke, to emerge. Then our Zodiac guide spots more humpbacks behind us and minke whales to our right.

As fellow passengers capture the memories on camera, I pause to absorb the pristine majesty of the towering glaciers, mountains and icebergs and the sheer diversity of wildlife around me – from penguins to petrels, sturdy seals to tiny krill. It’s like being in a David Attenborough documentary, only it’s real, close-up and all the more magnificent.



BOOK IT

Atlas Ocean Voyages’ 10-day Ushuaia Roundtrip itinerary starts from £10,264 per person, based on two sharing. Includes domestic flights from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia, transfers, excursions and all food and drinks, based on a November 8 sailing. Excludes international flights. atlasoceanvoyagesuk.com