

From the National Geographic Explorer at Sea



Deception Island

“Good morning, good morning the time is five twenty five” that was how we learned that we were in sight of the South Shetland Islands. A little later we were sailing through the English Strait between Robert and Greenwich Islands. We were all delighted to catch our first glimpses of Antarctica even though conditions were gloomy and windy.

The wind in the Bransfield Strait was very strong, blowing a constant 35 knots and gusting well over 40. A little after nine o'clock we were in sight of Deception Island, our destination for the day. Conditions were far from ideal and so we had to abandon Plan A, which was to be a landing at Bailey Head. The breakers on the landing beach looked impressive.

Within a little while we made our approach to Neptune's Bellows which is the narrow entrance into the caldera. Conditions inside were as bad and so we spent some time cruising inside, at one point sailing close to the Spanish Base. They are carrying out important research in vulcanology and seismology. A little further in we sighted two yachts snug inside a quiet little cove awaiting better wind conditions.

After lunch we were able to get ashore at Whaler's Bay, in good measure thanks to some expert manoeuvring from our Captain who was able to get the ship very close to the shore and so offering the zodiacs some good lee. Despite the increase to the wind velocity most of us braved the elements and went ashore.

We were able to stretch our legs on a beach walk and even get some close views of gentoo penguins and skuas. This place was littered with the remains of the only land based whaling operation in Antarctica. The whaling station became operational in 1910 and closed in 1931. During this period over 118,000 whales were captured and processed here. Later this area was used as a British Base until they had to evacuate it during the 1969 eruption.

A few valiant souls braved the chilly conditions and clothed only with swimsuits enjoyed a polar plunge. A small group lingered on wallowing in the shoreline warm water. But the screams and shouts that were common currency among the bathers confirmed to the onlookers that a good decision had been made to avoid this Antarctic experience.

We returned to the ship and enjoyed watching hundreds of cape petrels feeding off marine invertebrates churned up by the ship's propellers. A little later we had

sailed out of the caldera headed for the Antarctic Sound.

It has been an invigorating first experience on our Antarctic adventure and the wind certainly has blown any Drake cobwebs away.

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