

From the National Geographic Explorer in Antarctica



Gentoo penguin with chicks

Petermann Island & Vernadsky Station

Families gathered from far and wide to celebrate the day. On board our hearts reached out to those we'd left behind and greetings were sent their way. On sea and shore families of another sort went about their day as well, oblivious to human holidays.

Frosty sapphire sculptures were scattered about on the rumpled pewter seas like a newly emerging cityscape. Towers and turrets decorated some while others were faced with arching dark blue portals. Like carolers venturing from door-to-door, humpback whales in twos and threes wove from one to another. To the east sharp peaked mountains rose seemingly attempting to scratch the sky. Between each crag, cracked and crevassed glaciers flowed. Where land appeared on our port side it was rounded, smoothed into fascinating mounds of

varying altitudes.

Petermann Island overflowed with life. If one sat by the shore the pat-pat-pat of hundreds of penguin feet could be heard as they strutted from the water's edge to wide-spread colonies. There on the heights the sounds were different. Greetings in two dialects pierced the air and echoed above tiny peeping cries of chicks begging to be fed. Side-by-side Adélie penguins and gentoos built their homes of flattened pebbles carried from far and wide or maybe only as far as a step away as they stole from their neighbor's foundations.

The Adélies were apartment dwellers, nests close together and rather plain. Fluffy grey chicks peeked from beneath a parent's muddy tummy or squirmed and wiggled trying to fit where space was clearly becoming limited. The gentoo chicks were smaller on the whole, having appeared a week or so later but their folks had busily decorated while waiting for their arrival. Tail feathers appeared to be the favored ornament, tucked neatly upright between the stones like flowers in a garden. Here too, another counter-shaded species sat on nests like chimney pots. To get their meal these long-necked chicks thrust their heads so far into their parent's throats it seemed they would be swallowed.

Slightly further south, the Argentine Islands were a maze of winding channels further complicated by irregular platters of sea ice occasionally bearing slug-like crabeater seals. These shallower corridors seemed to be a trap for aging tabular bergs, tilted this way and that as the ocean ate away at their roots or gravity snatched an unstable projection or overhang. A long chinstrap penguin paced about on one of these massive icebergs, calling forlornly, or so it seemed, possibly looking to find another of its kind. Mankind was here too and Vernadsky Base, the Ukrainian station, opened its doors for us to share not just the holiday but knowledge of their scientific endeavors. Nearby the Union Jack fluttered in the breeze dancing to the sound of hammers as volunteers renovated and stabilized historic Wordie Hut, a former British research station.

Traditionally, consumption of the holiday turkey dinner is said to cause somnolence but tonight we might also claim exhaustion after day full of exploration and activity.

Karen Copeland, Natural History Staff

