Photos by Christian Thiele

holiday on ice antarctica

"If someone goes over board, throw something after them. Preferably a lifebelt." Boarding a German cruise ship for the very first time, we were reassured to hear the pale northern accents of the blond officers, thinking: "These people were raised by the sea-side. They know what they're talking about." Before we knew it, the security exercise was over, the last line had been let go and already, Ushuaia, the little town at the southern tip of Tierra del Fuego, had become just a tiny bright spot behind the stern. The MS Hanseatic was heading south, towards Antarctica, towards the cold. In the coming three weeks, she would steer us through the icy waters that surround the Antarctic Peninsula, on to South Georgia, and finally the Falkland Islands.

Apart from a wandering albatross gliding around the ship, seemingly without any effort at all, there is nothing – only water. The first day is spent at sea, the Hanseatic steadily pressing its path through the Drake passage. Although one of the world's most violent seas, thankfully today Neptune appears to be having a slow day, bar the occasional tender swing that reminds us of who is really in charge. Owing to its southerly latitude, they call this part of the ocean the 'roaring fifties'. Today though, you would hardly notice why.

At last, and just in time to accompany the evening's main course, the captain serves up a decent-sized tabular iceberg. Portside, almost close enough to touch, and high, towering high as… well, a Buenos Aires skyscraper, its rough cliffs, shimmering somehow surreptitiously, eerily remind us of images from 'Titanic'. Like smaller escorts, broken pieces of ice float around it, jagged parts of a crumbling, giant three-dimensional puzzle that will never be put together again. The whales too have provided a welcome committee of their own: two fin-whales lie ahead in the water, breathing through little water fountains in the air.

'Paradise Bay' and the anchor chain rattles as it plunges into the milky green water. Red, thick parkas so as not to freeze, black rubberboots so we don't get wet and life-saving vests to keep us from drowning. Clambering aboard the zodiacs, our rubber-rib boats, we are fully geared-up as if to conquer the hostile territory that awaits us. The ice breathes coolly on our faces.

Faithful to its name, the bay is a magnificent display of greyish rock and blue-white ice, home to several majestically gleaming glaciers. Every cloud alters the sea's colour, one minute it's a Caribbean green, and the next it's black as a blind mirror. Fresh snow falls like feathers on to the ice. A billion transparent fragments float around us in the water. The zodiac's motor swirls through the ice like soup in a blender.

We're surrounded by mountains of frozen water, that have all exploded off from much bigger glaciers, and that now shimmer in blue as if possessing some kind of magic power. But actually it's just physics: the pressure of the years and ice have sucked oxygen molecules out of the ice so that now only hydrogen blue is the colour reflected. A huge gate of icy arches is about to carve – here's a crack, there's a rip. Finally, surrendering to the weak but steady polar sun's rays, everything collapses. White thunder, a small tsunami rolls through the bay.

So empty of men, so hostile to man. Our toes start to freeze, we long for the cups of hot tea that await us back on the ship. Late into the night, all wrapped up in our cosy beds but with chills in our spines, we read about tragic adventures, about Shackleton, about Scott, about Amundsen. Back then, the ships were made of wood and the men, steel. For us, this is Antarctica 'light', safely as we are aboard our temporary home, the Hanseatic. She keeps us warm, serves us food five times a day and even shines our shoes… if we put them out by the cabin door at night. Stories of hunger and need, of scurvy and frostbite? Stories, it seems, from a different planet.

This season, some 30,000 tourists have gone to Antarctica. On ex-Soviet icebreakers; on US monster-cruisers crammed with 2,500 passengers, slot machines and night-time Broadway shows; or on smaller 'expedition' vessels such as the Hanseatic. Dietrich Fritzsche, a glaciologist at the German polar institute has spent several winters on the South Pole and occasionally lectures aboard the Hanseatic, says: "I used to have this arrogant scientists' attitude against tourism. But over the years, I've realised that it creates a lot of awareness and interest for the continent."

The Hanseatic, chartered on a long-term contract by Hapag-Lloyd, has been rated five-stars by the renowned Berlitz Cruise Guide. The ship is said to be the best of its kind. Carrying at most 184 passengers and 14 zodiacs, the Hanseatic is able to land in relatively small bays and reinforced outside walls allow the captain to manoeuvre through up to one metre of packed ice. At night, you eat seven-course dinners, dressed in suit and tie, from silver cutlery. Afterwards, you can prop-up the bar and listen to the on-board pianist, or go one deck further down and dance. You can even go to the cabin and watch 'Casablanca' from the on-board video system.

The average age is over 60 and despite passengers this time from 13 countries and a bilingual English-German crew, the Hanseatic is unmistakably a German ship, as you can read from the vessel's passenger manual: "Since we provide a sufficient quantity of deck chairs, we kindly ask you to abstain from reserving them – in the interest of everyone…"

Usually, life at the pole is rather more spartan than ours, we learn when visiting a former British research station on Peterman Island on the west coast of the Antarctic Peninsula. A wooden shack, the ceiling just above our eyebrows and a couple of crooked chairs. Here, scientists used to record the wind, the temperature, the daily hours and minutes of sunshine, in groups of two, for two and a half years, or at least until someone came to take their turn. So this is how polar research was done!

The Hanseatic passes the LeMaire and Neumayer channels. Scenes of panoramic porn in the simply stunning evening light. The glaciers appear in sharp focus, as if cut out of the blue sky; iceflows vast enough to build a ballpark on; a Mozart symphony in major…

The next morning the ship rolls and pitches, passing pale icebergs as it zigzags through the mist. Going on a cruise for the first time, we thought that the pharmaceutical industry had passed seasickness to the medical history books – how wrong we were. Despite anti-vomiting plasters stuck behind our ears, the food just won't stay where it's supposed to.

The course is now set for Elephant Island, whose ice once placed Ernest Shackleton's 'Endurance' into a headlock. We have to skip the planned landing on the southern shore – too much swell. Instead we get a little zodiac ride to Point Wild, where 'Shack's' deputy and his men had to wait until being saved. 182 days they spent here, sheltered beneath boats turned upside down, alone except for the company of seals, rocks and ice. We, however, after barely an hour of dinghy cruising, long for a our hot showers and dry clothes.

A regular cruise liner would normally try to avoid icebergs. Captain Ulf Wolter, however, seems eager to pass as many of these bizarre monoliths as possible on our way to South Georgia. To pass them, to go round them – or even, as we suppose, to pack them in, have them wrapped and take them home. At least that's what it seems when Wolter, his voice pitching high like a boy unwrapping his Christmas presents, announces the icebergs through the ship's communication system. Now, to the right, it's a pure white tabular iceberg, with a smooth top, polished by the wind, like a giant gemstone. Then, to the left, there's one with a dark top, black as a bruise. As if frost, sea and sun were competing for the most bizarre twists and turns. This is just all too big, too beautiful, for the human brain.

We land in Grytviken Bay. Steep, black rocks rise from the waters and are either green with moss or sugar-coated by snow.

Here, there's an old Norwegian whaling and sealing station, they even brought an entire little church from home. The graveyard is fenced by white bars. Some Scandinavian names, some British, some Argentine. Few passed their forties before dying. All the tombs lie east-west, only one is looking south, towards the pole: Sir Ernest Shackleton. This is where he died in 1922, trying – this time aboard the 'Quest' – to reach the pole for the fourth time.

The captain has come along with us, wearing his wetsuit, with a bottle of rum. He gives a toast through the snow, a toast to the old hero. "Here's to the boss," Wolter says, pouring a good slug on to the grave, an old sailors' custom. The next one is for the captain. We get the one after that; and the one after that; and the one after that.

Sea elephants groan on the beach while fur seals play with old whale teeth. "Savage and horrible," James Cook once wrote about the island. "Not a tree or shrub was to be seen, no, not one even big enough to make a tooth pick."

Thousands of croaking king penguins inhabit the island. Even though they sound rather like Italian *mofas*, they're incredibly beautiful. With their distinguished, grey bodies and golden-orange marked chests, they are well within their rights to look as arrogant as they do, heads stuck up high into the air. Fur seals play about with bits of old whale teeth while the young ones whimper around, waiting to take swimming classes from the older ones. A pile of grey-brown bodies, burping, belching and groaning: sea elephants. We're in Gold Harbour next, still on South Georgia. A feast for the fauna fan.

Finally, the passage to the Falklands. Three times a day we rush down to 'Darwin Hall' to get a seat for the lectures – the Hanseatic also acts as some kind of floating classroom. We learn about the breeding season of the *Phalacrocorax Atriceps* (for the ignorant: the blue-eyed cormorant) and about the way *Chionis Alba* (the snowy sheathbill) builds its nest. We try to figure out the difference between shelf-ice, packed-ice and pancake-ice. (After all, Antarctica is not around the corner, you just don't get here that often.)

We land on a new island. Albatrosses are spiralling up and down in the winds, rockhopper penguins are quarrelling about, it seems over the best stands with the most decent cliff views from which to spend the next few weeks moulting.

Whereas South Georgia was wild and ferocious, the Falklands seem a lot milder, much more gentle. Green, yellow and brown; these are the colours of the season. Little islands covered with tussock grass look as if they had put on green-fur hats. Usually, you find a handful of people living here, and thousands of sheep.

In the afternoon, the anchor chain rattles down for the last time. Our stylish rubber boots get their last outing for what is our last landing on Carcass Island. The McGills have prepared tea with cookies – very British all this, even if we have missed tea-time by a bit.

Then, it's three days more at sea. The Hanseatic is steering a course northwards, towards the warmth. The sun is heating up the deck chairs and now iced drinks are being served. At night, the crew gives us, swinging and swaying, a few 'shanties' – old sailors' songs telling tales of homesickness and wanderlust. After everything, after three weeks in the wilderness, we see land ahead. Buenos Aires, it appears, has turned on all its lights for us. We walk down the gangway and are welcomed back into civilisation – blue icebergs and cawing penguins now replaced by bright-red traffic lights and honking taxis.

By CHRISTIAN THIELE

Hapag-Lloyd offers Antarctica bilingual (German-English) cruises on two expedition vessels, the 'MS Hanseatic' and the 'MS Bremen'. The season usually lasts from December through to March, with 21 days on the 'MS Hanseatic' starting from Ushuaia costs 9,740 EUR, including meals, excursions etc. Hapag-Lloyd Cruises, www.hl-cruises.com, Ballindamm 25, D-20095 Hamburg, telephone +49(0)40 / 3001-4600, Fax +49(0)40 / 3001-4601.

Antarctica facts: A continent of extremes

90% of the world's ice reserves and 70% of its freshwater reserves are found in Antarctica, a land of superlatives.

Unlike the Arctic, Antarctica is a continent surrounded by water and 98% of it is covered by a mighty coat of ice, on average 2km high.

One-and-a-half times the size of the US, Antarctica is the fifth-biggest continent, larger than Europe.

During the polar winter, the ice growth doubles its surface.

Averaging 2,160 metres above sea-level, it is also the highest continent.

And, obviously, the coldest: even in polar summer, only a couple of places get temperatures exceeding -5 centigrade. A record low of -89 centigrade was measured in 1983 on a Soviet research base in Eastern Antarctica.