

These dispatches and images are my “first cut” impression of the “last frontier,” Antarctica, as I experienced it during a 10-day voyage aboard the 1970s-vintage Russian M/V *Lyubov Orlova* in February 2005.

Dispatch 1: Saturday: *People don't take trips...trips take people.*—John Steinbeck

We crossed the Antarctic Convergence, or Antarctic Polar Front, into Antarctica, about 9 p.m. This zone is where the warm air of the Atlantic meets the cold Southern Ocean, around 60 degrees south latitude, beyond the

southern tip of South America. Violent winds and depressions create some of the roughest seas in the world. After a clear, sunny day, we are now in a thick sea of fog.

I spent most of Saturday horizontal. Even with my wristbands and Mecklazine seasick tabs, I'm still ill. Did manage to get out on the deck and spot a Giant

Petrel and Wandering Albatross, with a wingspan of nearly 12 feet. We're also in whale territory. Estimated to reach the South Shetland Islands (60-plus degrees south) ahead of schedule around 5-6 p.m. Sunday. Temperatures are now 41 degrees F (chilly for summer!).

Will attempt to send...must save to floppy, then take up four flights of stairs

ANTARCTICA

Text and Photos
BY LYNN GRIGSBY FRIEDA

Dispatches from the Edge of the World



to radio control on the bridge. P.S. Only about 20,000 tourists per year visit Antarctica...we are off the path!

Dispatch 2: Sunday: How quickly things change in Antarctica! We've been in a major storm all day, with two low-pressure zones coming up from the south. This is Antarctica, and nothing is predictable, least of all the weather! The expedition staff explained that due to enormous wave swells, we can't turn south across the Drake Passage toward the Shetlands. Therefore, we continue on a northeasterly path to the South Orkney Islands and South Georgia.

Tonight couldn't have been worse. I finally went to sleep about 4 a.m. The ship kept tossing and turning in a way I'd never experienced. I wondered if the ship would stay afloat! The drawer next to my bed flew across the floor, landing at our door. At dinner plates, glasses and a few people went flying, too.

About midnight the captain made the turn, so at least we're now headed in the right direction. But, we've got 40-foot swells and 80-knot winds (a knot equals 1.15 statute miles per hour)...might as well be in a hurricane! Cruising at a mere 8 knots, we won't hit the Shetlands until 1 a.m. If we're lucky, we'll have only lost

one day and been in the Drake for 36 hours. Everyone says (except, of course, the tour agencies) this is par for the course!

Pray that we at least have three days with the wildlife. It is truly unbelievable what it takes to get here, and from Argentina, this is the easiest, quickest route. From Australia, it would be an eight-day crossing.

Dispatch 3: Monday: *It was easy to see that here, nature was at her mightiest.*—Roald Amundsen

We turned a bit further south late this afternoon, still heading for the Shetlands, cruising a bit faster at 14 knots. ETA 2 a.m. Last night was far worse than we imagined. With swells just under 60 feet, we were told we were in a horrific hurricane, which now explains the loud thuds and flying objects during the night. One of the swells took out the stern door on Deck 5.

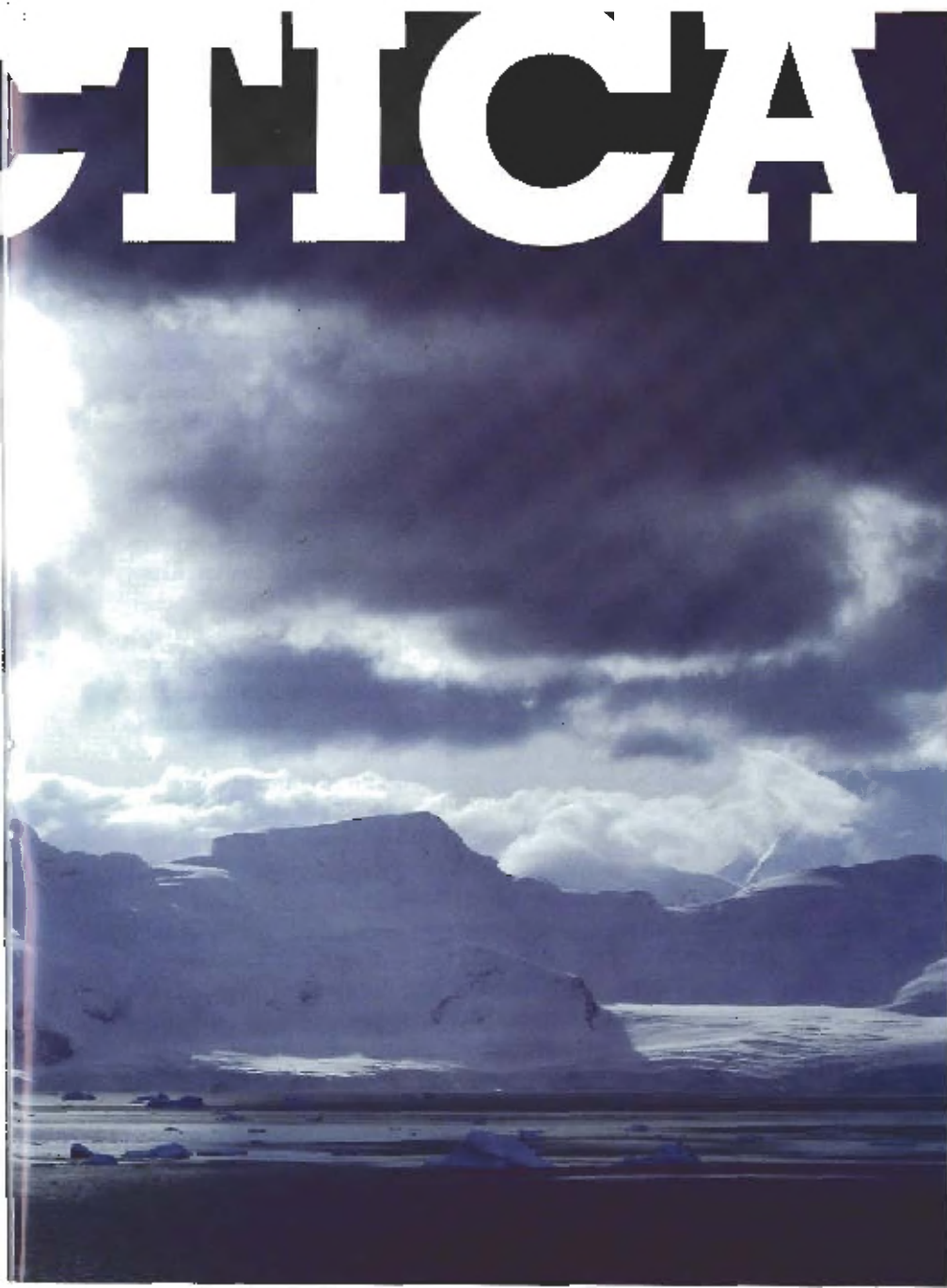
These swells were larger than the Asian tsunamis! Apparently, the captain made the tricky maneuver during the nighttime changeover, so that everyone was up there. There was absolutely *no* room for error...either they made it or they didn't!

It's incredible when I think of last night around midnight. I remember quite vividly the loud thumps and horrifying sways of the ship. Thankfully, the captain and crew, who are all Russians, are very experienced. Under these conditions, you'd want nothing less!

continued

"We were blown off path by 180 miles, and it took a very long day and a half to get back on track."

■ **Glaciers and icebergs in Paradise Harbour, Antarctica.**





■ Waves crashing against the bow of the *Lyubov Orlova* in the Bransfield Strait.

Tomorrow, as long as everything goes as planned, we've got a 5:30 a.m. wakeup with a 6:30 a.m. landing on Robert Island, part of the South Shetlands. The Zodiacs (heavy-duty, 10-passenger landing craft) will carry us from the ship to land, where, hopefully, we'll see penguin colonies with baby chicks. We've been instructed *not to disturb* the penguin highways, areas where the snow has been compacted down with penguin footprints. These little guys use them frequently. Otherwise, they could slip into snow holes.

Dispatch 4: Tuesday: *Then, just before dawn, with the snapping of the last beam of the Endurance, there was a reverberating crash, the light flickered, and went out. The Polar Ice had won.*—F. A. Worseley (excerpt from the account of Shackleton's *Endurance* Expedition, 1914-16)

We were blown off path by 180 miles, and it took a very long day and a half to get back on track. An anxious boatload was ready to go by 7 a.m., when we got the call: Landing on Robert Island a no-go, due to Force 7 surf/wind conditions. Watching the swells crash against the cliffs was enough to see what the consequences would be should we attempt something so dangerous. We continue to head south through another vast, open chunk of water—the Bransfield

Strait—to Deception Bay, home to an active volcano and a former Norwegian whaling station established in 1906. But Deception Bay can be deceiving. In order to get there, we must first navigate Neptune's Bellows.

The entrance through Deception Bay is very narrow, and the ship will hug the cliffs as it goes along. If the winds are wrong,

we will not go. Everyone hopes our luck will change. Imagine the morale of 100-plus passengers, half of whom are still seasick.

It's amazing how expectations change. I'm just happy to have made that treacherous "turn" two nights ago. While the penguins and other wildlife will be a bonus, I'm beginning to think that so much of the experience is the sheer adventure of being in this part of the world.

Dispatch 5: Tuesday evening: Have you heard the saying that "getting there is half the fun"? We are all

trying to keep our spirits up, wondering if we will *ever* get to something other than this *seriously* rocking ship—not to mention that we have three days back across the Drake.

We made it through Neptune's Bellows today, one of only two ships that were successful. Deception Island (we landed at Telefon Bay, named for a whaling supply vessel that ran aground



■ Weddell seal snoozing on the ice in Neko Harbour, Antarctica.

in 1908...imagine that!) is a dormant volcano that last erupted in 1970. The surrounding glacier is covered in ashes, with occasional bits of ice.

We walked up to the desolate, incredibly dramatic crater. There was one scruffy Gentoo penguin that sat moulting alone under a cove, a misplaced soul from his colony. At this time, we were *only* being pounded with 30–40 knot winds. Soon the rain/sleet and wind picked up even more. On the Zodiac ride back to the ship, we were hit yet again with multiple waves. I, of course, was thinking of my camera under my waterproof parka, inside a Ziploc bag, in my backpack. Thankfully, it survived, but I had to use the hairdryer once I was back in my cabin.

Our next landing was Pendulum Cove, where about 20 of the brave-hearted planned to dip in the “thermal” waters (why not!). As the weather deteriorated, we were pushed back in the Zodiacs and consequently never made that dip. So now we are back again in the Bransfield Strait with 40-knot winds, gusting to 50. Seems we were mistakenly led to believe that the Drake would be our only rough crossing. One of the scientists said we’d been very unlucky. Normally, everyone gets a storm, but this many in a row is rare. *Really!* I keep reminding myself this is Antarctica, where anything and everything is possible. Now I must assume the horizontal position.

Dispatch 6: Wednesday: *Antarctica is a continent that continually humbles man.*—HRH Prince Edward

Last night proved horrendously rough yet again; I was awake at 3 a.m., when the ship finally quit swaying. Got up at 6 a.m. to the “whale call” and saw our first humpback whale. We were cruising through the Gerlache Strait down to the Lemaire Channel—what a spectacular sight—52 feet wide, running for roughly 7 miles. The passageway is only visible once you’re inside. The last two cruises didn’t make it due to icebergs. Today our luck changed, and the captain went for it. Despite clouds and blowing snow, the steep-sided channel and blue-colored icebergs were mind-boggling. As we cruised, there were whales and a few leopard seals “ice bathing.” The scene is indescribable. How the mood on the ship has changed!

It looked like our second landing on Petermann Island wasn’t going to happen after an iceberg took out the unloading ramp. Repairs set us back at least an hour. The island was full of Adélie and Gentoo penguins, *lots* of “pink snow” (penguin *poo*), and a few skuas. By the time we arrived, the snow had changed to rain, so conditions once again deteriorated.

Back to the ship, I quickly blow dry my camera, recharge batteries and download images. Then we’re off again for the third landing on Jougla Point and Port Lockroy (the old British Base A—site of a WWII secret naval mission code-named Operation Tabarin). Today there’s a real post office, where passports are stamped. The British Antarctic Survey guys who live there during the Antarctic summer (actually the penguins go inside too, much more upmarket than their *poo*-covered rocks) have no electricity, no running water, only solar power and not much of that. When the ships arrive, they get a hot shower.

There were a few blue-eyed shags, whalebones and loads of Gentoos. Despite the weather, I was determined to keep



■ Adélie penguin on Petermann Island, Antarctica.

shooting. Have *never* been as cold and wet as I was this afternoon!

At 7 a.m. tomorrow we head to Neko Harbour. We have seen numerous Gentoos and a huge glacier face, and even walked along a snow-capped shelf; now we will at last set foot on Antarctica itself, the tip of the peninsula. This will be our last day for landings before heading back to Ushuaia, across that dreadful Drake Passage.

Dispatch 7 (Finale): *The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only one page.*—St. Augustine

Current Drake Conditions: The ocean is a powerful force, and the Drake must be the most agitated sea in the world. Good news: We’re no longer in a hurricane, though we’re experiencing 30–40-knot winds. The Drake is having a “good” day; we have sunshine. The outer decks have been closed for obvious safety reasons. More people seem sicker now than before. Our guides continue to tell us this is the roughest they’ve seen the Passage.

Physical: I, like most, have bruises covering my body, and my hamstrings ache mainly from navigating my “sea legs” (or lack of) throughout the ship. Taking a shower has been especially challenging, even with the rubber grip on the bathroom floor. My back aches from carrying heavy camera equipment; my knuckles hurt from having my fingers exposed to the intense Antarctic air; and there is, of course, fatigue from a total lack of sleep. But I did have the funniest dream last night: I was with two friends in a restaurant, and I just kept falling down. I kept explaining how I’d only had one glass of wine, but that it must have been the seasick tabs I took prior to the wine. I just couldn’t keep my balance. Coupled with this, I was trying



■ TOP: Gentoos on the island of Port Lockroy, the old WWII British navy base.

BOTTOM: Leopard seals “ice bathing” in Paradise Harbour, Antarctica.

to arrange toothpicks in a small container, but they, too, kept falling out. I’m sure this has had nothing to do with the fact that we’ve been rocking for nearly 12 days!

Science: Antarctica is a complex environment—too big and too important to be governed by one nation, which is why we have the Antarctic Treaty. Among other things, the research here looks at increasing air temperatures and decreasing winter ice around the continent, and how this affects sea levels worldwide.

walk single file and leap into the water, watching them moult and huddle in the blizzard with their backsides covered in snow and frozen penguin poo, and listening to the gentle hum of conversation. Be still, be patient; they will come to you.

Biggest Question from Friends: Will I come back? Is it worth it?

Short answer: *Without a doubt!* But—and I stress the *but*—a trip to the continent is something to be earned by a very long,

Sea Ice/Glaciars: Sea ice is formed from the frozen seawater; it is flat and white. Glaciars are formed from snow that is compacted down and is constantly moving; icebergs are broken chunks of glaciars that make their way to the sea. We saw a 200-foot berg/ice shelf yesterday as we left Paradise Harbour. Bergs are two-to-three times the size underneath the water as they are on top. Glacier ice creates an array of beautiful blue colors, resulting from a lack of oxygen/air bubbles.

Wildlife: The Antarctic wildlife is *phenomenal!* My favorites were the ubiquitous penguins and their baby chicks (ah, to be the resident penguin specialist). I loved seeing them

“You will laugh, cry, feel sick—but it is worth every minute to see Antarctica, the last continent.”



■ Arriving back in Ushuaia on the southern tip of Argentina, having crossed the Drake Passage for the second time.

intense, uncomfy sea voyage (or a steep \$27,000-plus private plane ride). The schedule in this part of the world is governed by weather and ice, and these alone. One must be prepared for the continent's constantly changing mood swings—as we have certainly experienced on this trip!

Nothing puts things into perspective better than the Shackleton expedition of 1914-16. Absolutely incredible what he and his 27 men went through. After the ice entrapped and finally crushed their wooden ship, *Endurance*, they lived on pack ice for five months, then escaped to the uninhabited Elephant Island. Shackleton and five others crossed the Bransfield Strait (one of our roughest crossings), heading 800 miles to South Georgia in an open wooden boat in hurricane weather. It took them 17 days.

How they even found their way is unimaginable! Having survived this, they crossed the interior of South Georgia from west to east over virtually impassable mountains, ice cliffs and glaciers—in winter with no equipment. Then, on his fourth try, Shackleton rescued the men left behind on Elephant Island, and all 28 returned to England. Shackleton died in South Georgia in 1922 at age 47.

Shackleton's story will live forever, and it certainly puts into perspective our measly crossing. The courage, endurance and inspiration these men showed when faced with such adversity is unmatched.

So, to have the chance to encounter this part of the world is a huge privilege and a soul-searching experience. I say, *go, go, go!* You will laugh, cry, feel sick—but it is worth *every minute* to see Antarctica, the last continent.

Fast forward to July 2005: After going through hell to reach Antarctica, I'm off to the Arctic (Greenland/Baffin Island/Nunavut, Canada) to get the polar bear shots. The purpose of the trip is to raise awareness globally about the impacts of climate change and other issues facing the region. I'll be on an expedition with 70 students aged 14-19 from around the world and a team of world-class scientists. I'll be photographing and writing about the indigenous communities, scenery and wildlife.

I am praying for calmer seas.



Have Camera, Will Travel

Lynn Grigsby Frieda began her sporadic freelance association with *Sooner Magazine* as an OU senior in 1985, fittingly enough with a travel article, recounting her summer as a Cortez A. M. Ewing Congressional Intern in Washington, D.C. Then she took *SM* readers along on a tour of Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, a sojourn in Australia as a Rotary International scholar, a year of teaching high school English in Japan and pursuit of a degree (with three other OU graduates including her future husband, Gene Frieda) at the London School of Economics. In 1999, when the couple took a six-month hiatus to across Russia, Siberia, Mongolia, China, Nepal and India, Lynn's future was set as travel photographer and writer. She has been a winner or finalist in travel photo contests in *Wanderlust Magazine*, The UK Travel Photographer of the Year, Ritz Camera and United Airlines. Some of her clients include *Conde Nast Traveler* and *BBC Good Food* magazines, Royal Bank of Scotland, Chevron, Bank of England and various U.S. newspapers and magazines. After a brief stint in Singapore, the Friedas returned to London in 2002. Lynn's photo Web site is www.havecamelwilltravel.com.