

The COLDEST place on earth



Courtesy Holmes Rolston III

ICE AGE: Top photo, Gentoo penguins congregate in Paradise Harbour on the Antarctic Peninsula. Above, large icebergs rise from the water.

Forbidding, foreboding Antarctica shrouded in ice and mystery

By **HOLMES ROLSTON III**

For the Coloradoan

“A large and spectacular iceberg is coming up starboard. The ship’s helicopter is taking off to scout the ice and see if we can get through.”

So came the captain’s voice from the bridge. I was unsure whether to marvel at the weird shape or to worry

about ice ahead.

Traveler’s notebook

So I did both. The iceberg was the size of a golf course, recently broken off the

Ross Ice Shelf, a floating ice sheet the size of France, joined by glaciers to the Antarctic mainland. The bright, white ice against deep-blue sea was riddled with split lines. Crashing waves had hollowed out caves. The fractures and recesses glowed with subtle, luminescent blues.

Worries returned. We were passing broken patches of pack ice, a mile or more across. Yesterday’s largest iceberg was a mile and a half long.

We got through that day. But not the next. We had arrived at the Shelf. I was awestruck by a 150-foot ice cliff on port side running for hundreds of miles. Starboard, again close in, there



Courtesy Holmes Rolston III

SERIOUS RAFTING: A Zodiac raft pushes through packed ice near Antarctica.

appeared a huge iceberg. Or so we thought.

Groups of Adelie penguins and Weddell seals had climbed out on low shelves to rest, fearing killer whales.

We saw the orcas’ distinctive, triangular dorsal fins. Later, we watched a dozen “spyhopping.” They propel themselves up out of the water and through the pack ice, searching for prey. Snow

petrels, solid white, skimmed the waters.

I spotted a dozen emperor penguins, each standing tall on an ice floe. They breed on sea ice, in the coldest conditions endured by any bird, and are the only bird that never needs to touch-land.

“This will be our biggest iceberg, about 15 miles long,” the bridge announced. But no. The channel began to narrow, and it proved not an iceberg — at least not yet — but a long peninsula still attached to the Shelf. We had to turn abruptly around, retrace our route and find another.



About the author

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Antarctica

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Antarctica is the coldest, windiest, loneliest place on Earth — nature in her wildest and most relentless moods. This is the uninhabited continent, not just by humans, but too forbidding for land animals. Only two species of higher plants, beyond lichens, algae, and mosses, grow here. Life is mostly submerged, or, like the penguins and seals, only marginally on land.

This extreme wildness proved Antarctica's deepest attraction. This is Earth's last great wilderness; and we can now travel where, a century ago, humans could go only with almost superhuman efforts. The Peninsula is visited today by 10,000 people a year, though coming around to the Ross Ice Shelf is more difficult.

That required days of sailing and of saturating myself with how remote and immense the Southern Ocean is. Visitors on the McMurdo Sound side annually number in the hundreds on two or three ships.

Roald Amundson had his camp on this Shelf, as were all five of Richard E. Byrd's Little Americas. But these historic places have long since calved off and floated out to sink into the sea.

Reaching Ross Island, we were lucky. An icebreaker had been through, and winds had further opened the channel. Those winds were against us, however, as we attempted landing at McMurdo Station, the U.S. installation, and supply



Courtesy Rolston Holmes

HEADING ASHORE: A Zodiac raft comes ashore as a large ship sails in the background.

base for our South Pole station. It was too windy for safe landing in our Zodiacs, open inflatable rafts.

Besides, it was too cold from wind and splash to be long exposed. Waiting a day, winds subsided, and we managed to go ashore in tenders, the lifeboats. The ship has made it only once in four previous attempts.

At McMurdo, latitude 78 degrees south, every one was busy packing up. Only a few will remain. Most (as do we!) need to be out of here before the austral winter. The sea ice will cover an area twice as large as the United States, making Antarctica even more

remote and immense. The midnight sun we enjoy will soon descend beneath the horizon, plunging the continent into midnight at noon — total darkness for half the year.

Next day we landed at the Robert E. Scott hut. His tragic 1910-1912 expedition wintered here. With great hardship, Scott and four others reached the Pole, alas, to find that the Norwegian Amundson had beaten them.

With still greater misfortune, all five died in their heroic attempt to return, their diaries found with their frozen bodies. I recalled these hoary legends before the bunks they slept in, the chairs they sat on, the cups

they drank from, the stove they cooked on, even tins of food they left behind. But a six-foot wall of ice kept us from landing at Shackleton's hut.

Antarctica was, until my lifetime, the greatest geographical mystery on Earth. It remains the least known continent. Much of its complexity is hidden beneath the surface. The underwater ecosystem is prolific in comparison with the barren ice-covered land. In this land of extremes, covered with up to two miles of ice, surprises abound — such as microscopic life deep in the ice, or buried, unfrozen fresh-water lakes.

Across the Drake Passage, and as we headed north to New Zealand, we watched albatrosses — superb aerial beings. The wandering albatross can stay at sea seven years, coming to land only to nest. Albatrosses catch these winds and spend hours aloft with hardly a wing-beat. They follow the Antarctic circumpolar current, the world's biggest, a thousand times the flow of the Amazon.

My most lasting memory of this alien bottom of the world is of penguins swimming below enormous icebergs, a half dozen propelling themselves out of water "porpoising" like small dolphins, catching breath and plunging back under.

Penguins are at home where, unprotected, I would perish in minutes. A penguin on land may amuse us as cute and comic, but a penguin in the sea is grace and power on this frigid but magnificent, seventh Continent.

