

KINGS OF THE ICE

Over the past three decades Ron Naveen has spent more time than any other living person in Antarctica – a total of six years – counting penguins and documenting 40 islands along the way.

Alex Marshall travels to the South Pole to meet him.

Photography by **Jeff Topham**



Bird watching
From left: an Antarctic
iceberg can last for
decades; a lone
gentoo penguin





In the five days I've been in Antarctica, there is one thing I have noticed more than anything else. It has not been the icebergs, even though they have loomed over our ship, dozens at a time, looking like everything from Disney castles to Easter Island heads.

It has not been the stars either, which I spent a night staring at while camping on the continent. By 'camping', I actually mean that I dug myself a shallow grave in the snow, got into a bivy sack and laid there for six hours, my head too numbed by cold to sleep. But those stars – clusters, universes, so bright it might as well have been midday – made every moment worthwhile.

It's not even been the wildlife, and I have seen enough wildlife to fill countless nature documentaries. One day I was in a Zodiac – the rigid dinghies everyone

uses to get around – and a humpback whale came straight for us, nearer and nearer until we could see the individual hairs sticking out of its back, the skin raised in a pimple beneath each one. Another time, I stood yards from dozens of fur seals, all barking at each other and feigning bites, like children in a playground pretending to fight. And then there was the afternoon I stood in the middle of a colony of 12,000 gentoo penguins, on snow that was stained red with krill, and just struggled to take it in.

No, none of these things are what I've noticed most – instead it's been the look on everyone's faces. On each of the 90-odd tourists on board. On all the crew. Everyone is smiling – a dumb grin so large it must hurt. And their eyes are open so wide it is as if they have glued back their lids. ➔

Marching on
Gentoo penguins get to grips with an iceberg



End of the Earth

From above: a sign of the past on Winter Island; a crew member on the deck of One Ocean Expeditions' vessel, the *Akademik Ioffe*



I have seen that look before. It's the face of the convert, the fanatic – someone who has felt something so magical they know nothing will be the same again. Antarctica forces that look upon you, and I write from experience; I've been seeing it in the mirror for the past five days.

I've only met one person who is able to describe it in anything but religious terms: my 60-something South African roommate, a scientist. 'It's like you've eaten too much chocolate and you're sweating from your eyeballs.'

Obviously, it is not the only look I've seen. For the first two days, as we crossed the Drake Passage to get here, a lot of people wore the expression of someone who had just vomited into a sink and did not want to talk about it.

At mealtimes, people also regularly carried looks of disbelief as they learned each other's stories. There is a man who used to do lighting for heavy metal bands and has tales of rock'n'roll excess to make anyone wince. There is also a parasite expert who seems to get a perverse joy telling people about the ins and outs of tapeworms. And there is a former head of the USA's Antarctic Treaty secretariat (the Treaty is the document that governs the continent) who after a drink happily tells stories about how the Soviet Union spied on him. Once, in a Russian hotel, he unscrewed a light fitting while searching for listening devices and sent a chandelier crashing to the ground.

But for most of the trip, there has only been that one look – and there's one man who has had it more than anyone else. He's 70, with thinning hair and a tendency to wear high-vis jackets that make him look like a traffic warden. But he is easily the most important person here – ship's captain, be damned.

He is someone who has apparently spent more nights in the Antarctic than anyone else alive – more than six years – and has become so associated with the continent a cove here is named after him. His name is Ron Naveen and he is the world's leading penguin counter.

Naveen grew up in small-town Pennsylvania, coal country. He was the son of strict Jewish immigrants and started birdwatching as a way of 'getting out of the house and not dealing with their rules.' But he soon became so captivated by his hobby that when his parents told him to go to college to study law, he wrote to his favourite ornithologist and asked if he should ignore them and study birds instead ('Go into birds?' came the reply. 'Are you kidding? There's no money. Listen to your parents!').

Naveen reluctantly took the advice, but only managed a few years as a corporate lawyer before his original passion practically pushed him out. He took over a friend's whale and seabird watching business, until one day, in the early 1980s, he was invited to lecture on an Antarctic cruise ship. It was there on Deception Island – a former whaling base in a volcanic caldera, where the land's black as ash – that he saw his first penguin.

'Another lecturer took me to a chinstrap penguin colony above a rotting whaling boat,' he says. The chinstraps are easy to distinguish from other penguins because they have, unsurprisingly, a black strap across their chin. 'I'd read about penguins – I knew how they behaved – but these were just noisier than hell. They ran right up to me, squawking, shaking their heads like, "Who the hell are you? Show me your passport!" Such bluster. Such vigour. Just, wow!' ➡

Naveen had caught the Antarctic disease and after the trip he realised he had to get back. He first became a tour guide – a stint that included chasing a Frenchwoman who disembarked with her two suitcases and announced she was going to live on an Antarctic island. But he only worked out a permanent solution when he set up a nonprofit organisation, Oceanities, and decided to count penguins.

There was reasoning behind this move. Naveen had discovered there was a huge gap in everyone’s understanding about the peninsula. No one had accurate data on what was there – not just in terms of penguins, but in terms of botany and geology, too.

Ever since, he has spent each Antarctic summer travelling to the continent armed with a range of scientific equipment, but most importantly a simple ‘1, 2, 3...’ clicker you can buy from a stationery shop. He gets to Antarctica by taking advantage of tourist ships, hopping on to one in Argentina, spending a week or two counting in appalling weather, a pocketful of M&Ms his main comfort, then hopping on to another to get back.

It sounds simple, but Naveen has essentially become his own shoestring scientific programme, one constantly in need of money but somehow covering an area 200 miles north to south, 120 miles east to west. His work rivals that of entire countries. (During the trip, the manager of the USA’s Palmer scientific base tells us ‘counting penguins in person is expensive, difficult and sometimes hazardous.’ The US scientists rely on satellite images instead, which are not as accurate.) Naveen’s organisation sometimes uses satellites, even networks of cameras, but he insists nothing beats a clicker.

Naveen’s learned a lot over the years: that you only count penguins when they are nesting; that you do not annoy a king as it will ‘flipper whack’ you; that it is possible to count even when waist deep in guano.

But most of all he has learned that climate change is affecting these birds and something needs to be done. His data shows that chinstrap and adélie penguin numbers on the peninsula have plummeted as the temperature’s risen (by an average 3°C over the last 60 years). Those penguins have been forced to move south in search of colder weather. In contrast, gentoos, the bullies of the penguin world, are thriving. ➔

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Counter measures

Ron Naveen with some of his gentoo penguin friends





HOW TO PICK A CRUISE

Call of the wild
A gentoo penguin at Vernadsky Research Base (a Ukrainian Antarctic Station on Galindez Island in the Argentine Islands)

| → | Check the vessel's size and make sure it carries no more than 100 passengers. The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (iaato.org) allows ships to have only that many people on land at a time. Getting a small ship means you will maximise the number of landings you do each day.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT ON BOARD

| → | Depending on the weather, you should get to walk through penguin colonies, see dramatic, deserted whaling stations, visit working scientific bases and a 'polar plunge'. Tour guide One Ocean Expeditions provides tours on the *Akademik Ioffe* – offering top-quality lecturers and guides, as well as kayaking among icebergs.

To Naveen, these changes make penguins the 'canaries in the coalmine for climate change' – a horrific analogy perhaps, but still true – and it explains why he has become an evangelist for the subject. It's the one topic always on his lips. You can ask him anything – his favourite moment counting, for instance (it was a day when, standing beneath a snow ledge, penguins started jumping over him into the ocean) – but he always brings it back to climate change.

'Seeing the changes happening to individual colonies is what really makes me care. Eventually we'll see such changes elsewhere – when Miami is under water or Las Vegas is shorefront property. But this is the frontline.'

I ask him what *High Life* readers should do about it then, fully expecting him to start pontificating, to say people fundamentally need to change their everyday lives. But instead he says this: 'My message would be to come here. Come to be made humble and be inspired to think about the world differently.'

This is where I should end the interview. But I have a final question: how would he feel if he could never return to Antarctica? 'Would it feel like...' I start. 'Someone's stabbed me?' he interrupts, startled.

'I'd be unhappy if I couldn't keep coming, of course,' he says. 'I have a gazillion pictures, but that's not the same. I'd still have the Antarctic sensibility, the humility this place gives you, and that's important, but... I think I could cope,' he says, finally.

I look at his face and he isn't smiling. It's the first time I've seen anyone on this trip without that beatific look and it makes me realise something – that Antarctica gets into you so much, that it's impossible to let it go. And I start to worry how everyone else will cope, in three days, when we arrive back in Argentina. ■

🐦 @alexmarshall81

For details on Antarctica excursions, visit oneoceanexpeditions.com. Prices start from £5,400.

To learn more about Ron Naveen, visit oceanities.org Alex Marshall's Republic or Death! Travels in Search of National Anthems (£8.99, Random House) is out now.

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