

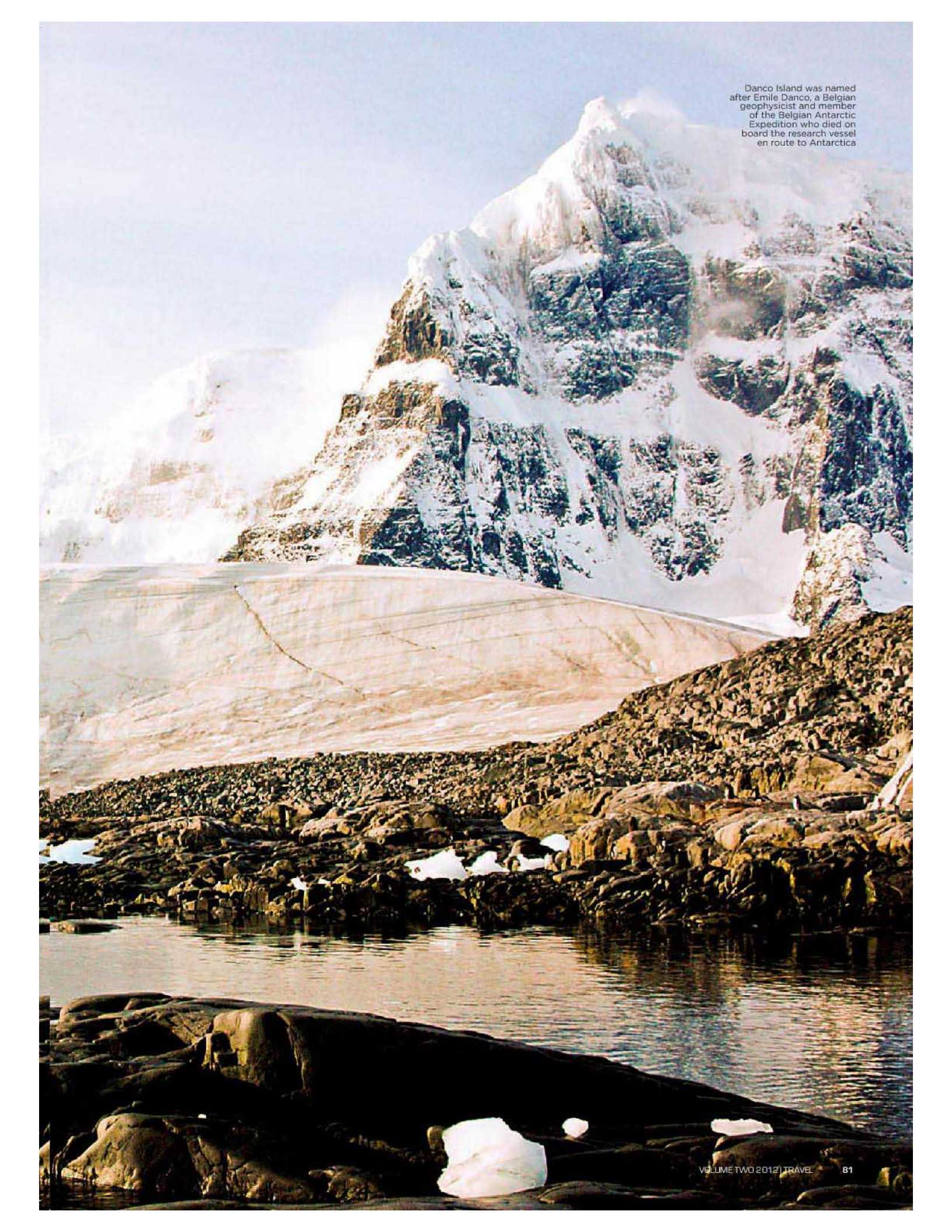
AN ADVENTURE IN ANTARCTICA

CECILY Q. MABASA BRAVES THE ROUGH SEAS TO
ANTARCTICA AND DISCOVERS A BREATHTAKING
AND UNTOUCHED FROZEN LANDSCAPE

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CECILY Q. MABASA

SAILING THROUGH DRAKE'S PASSAGE WAS A GLIMPSE OF HELL. The stretch of water between South America and Antarctica is one of the roughest in the world, but we needed to travel through Drake's Passage on a cruise ship from Ushuaia, Argentina to get to **Antarctica**. Storms regularly lash the seas in Drake's Passage, causing currents to run high and strong, and it has been known to blow ships off-course. They tell you this in the brochure but you're never really prepared for it. The waves actually go higher than the boat and at times, you can't help but think that the ship is about to capsize. When you stand up, you have to hold on to something. Walking from one place to another is an adventure in itself as you have to keep your balance; otherwise, you'll get thrown around. In the cabin, suitcases are flying around, refrigerator doors are opening and glasses inside them are shattering. Waiters try their best to maintain balance while serving meals at the table, but this does not prevent the occasional mishap of food falling or dripping on someone as a particularly big and nasty wave hits the ship.





Danco Island was named after Emile Danco, a Belgian geophysicist and member of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition who died on board the research vessel en route to Antarctica

feature ANTARCTICA

After about 36 hours of rough and shaky waters, we spotted the first iceberg, which unofficially meant we were in the Antarctic Circle. Waters were a lot calmer, and the excitement of approaching Antarctica was palpable. It was surreal getting on land the next morning. After breakfast, we immediately had our first Zodiac landing at Hannah's Point (A Zodiac is a small, inflatable rubber boat used to navigate the rocky, shallow waters in areas that regular boats cannot access). We were greeted by penguins and seals of all kinds, but the place still felt desolate. It reminded me somewhat of Batanes without the greenery: very wild and untamed. I liked the pure isolation that one felt knowing that very few people ever go here. After lunch, we went to Whaler's Bay,

where old abandoned whaling stations once stood. It's uninhabited now, except for a few unfriendly seals, and reminded me of the moon's rocky surface.

We went back to the boat and I had planned to take a bath in the thermal spa in Pendleton Bay—that is, until I found out that Pendleton Bay was actually a cove, with a hot seashore because of volcanic activity. The “spa” turned out to be small holes dug on the ground by the crew, and you had to get half-naked, run to sea and jump into the hole. I did not dare partake in this but some of the younger tourists did. Surprisingly, some of the old folks jumped into it too, seemingly without any regard for their health!

The next day was fantastic. According to the Ukrainian weather geeks we were with,

it was the first time in months that they had sunny weather with no precipitation. We took two Zodiac landings that day, starting with a visit to Port Lockroy, a British Trust base manned by just three people. Sadly, their living quarters were so poor, but they did have a post office where you could send mail from. After lunch, we went to the Ukrainian weather station. In stark contrast to the first one, this place had everything: a bar, rental skis, a gym area, laundry room, and even a pool table. There were a dozen men living in that dock, and we hung out with them for drinks at the bar (vodka, of course!).

At night, as the ship sailed through Antarctica, we got to know the other travelers on the cruise. One of the interesting pairs in our group was Greg and his 12-year-old grandson John, who did everything together. Greg, an American, was a former nuclear missile jockey but is now a lawyer. There was also Mike, another American, who had motorcycled all the way down to Ushuaia from Colorado, USA. It was his second trip (his first was Alaska) using the famous Trans-American Highway. There was also this Dutch woman who turned out to be Korean by birth. Adopted by a Dutch family, she returned to Korea a couple of years back to meet her biological parents. It struck me as odd yet astonishing to encounter so many like-minded individuals on this trip—free spirits, who strive to see and experience as much of the world as they can in the limited time we are given.

GETTING THERE

Argentina is the jump-off point to Antarctica. Fly to Buenos Aires from Manila via Qatar Airways, then take a non-stop flight from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia via LAN Airlines. Cruise ships to Antarctica depart from the port of Ushuaia.

The first expedition to the Antarctic region was made in 1897 to 1899

A sea elephant ready for his siesta

Cruising in air Zodiacs through glaciers in Neko Bay

Seven states have laid territorial claims to land in Antarctica. These states include Chile, Argentina, Norway and France

Even mail gets to Antarctica through the post office in Port Lockroy

WHEN TO GO

It's best to go between November and March when the weather is warmer and it is the sunniest time of the year. However, expect daily drizzles for short periods of time. Late December through January is considered high season, so expect more crowds.

A colony of penguins in Danco Harbor—chin straps, king penguins... they were all here!

A penguin's moment of solitude

MY UPPER BODY AND FEET WERE DEAD FROM THE COLD, YET IT WAS SUCH SWEET BLISS TO BE RIDING THE ZODIACS

The next day, we made our first Antarctic Continental landing. Everyone was psyched as we took the first Zodiac out to Paradise Bay. We climbed a hill and slid face down all the way to the bottom to cruise the bay. My upper body and feet were dead from the cold, yet it was such sweet bliss to be riding the Zodiacs. So quiet and magical, it's like you're transported to another world surrounded by all these wonderful ice formations that you see in the movies. There was one moment when we heard a loud "bang!" It turned out to be a glacier calving and falling into the water.

We then headed to Danco Harbor, a typical landing with the only highlight being the arduous climb to the top of the cliff with a snowfield on top. It was pretty nice, with a panoramic view of the entire harbor. Foyt Harbor was next on our itinerary, where we saw a couple of sea wrecks and whales. Every time the humpback whale flipped its gigantic tail, everyone would cheer and clap. The experience somehow brought everyone

closer together.

The rain was pouring on the morning of our last day, as we headed into Half-Moon Island. It was very dark, with a lot of penguins and seals. The sky remained gray the entire day, even as we went to our second and final landing. However, that was Antarctica at its purest.

Antarctica is an adventure more than anything else. The essence of the place can never be perfectly captured in pictures and words. The serenity, the below zero-degree weather, the rocky surface and the rare Antarctic sunset—these are the things that make Antarctica what it is. One cannot experience it just by looking at the photos or reading these words. You really have to go find out for yourself. ■

Sea to Summit Explorations, a luxury adventure group, offers a 15-day exploration of Antarctica. Phone (+63 2) 815 8233 or (+63 917) 8687971, email <ces@seatosummitadv.net> or visit <seatosummitadv.net>

There are at least 17 living species of penguins, all of whom live in the Southern Hemisphere except for the Galapagos penguin