

JOURNEY TO THE BOTTOM OF THE WORLD

ADVENTURE AND LUXURY COMBINE WHEN THE YACHT *SURI* TAKES
ON THE PLANET'S MOST INHOSPITABLE LAND, ANTARCTICA.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM RAYCROFT

TRAVEL TO ANTARCTICA IS CERTAINLY EASIER NOW than when the first explorers risked it all on the ice for fame and glory. But as always, planning is key to a successful expedition. I had only 72 hours to prepare for the trip of a lifetime, joining the owner and his guests aboard the newly refitted expedition megayacht *SuRi*. With air travel, hotel and travel insurance secured, my attention turned to outfitting for extreme conditions. Needless to say, there's not a lot of choice when it comes to sourcing arctic ware in South Florida, and it was a scramble.

Getting there required an eight-and-a-half-hour red-eye from Miami to Santiago, Chile, then a four-hour flight into Punta Arenas. The owners' jet touched down late the next morning and the luggage carousel began shooting out an endless stream of personal gear, galley provisions, bags of skis and snowshoes, crates of spare parts, even a box of fresh flowers. Our cargo was loaded aboard a charter plane from DAP Charters, which has been flying to Antarctica for

more than 25 years and has it down to a science. With four-engine redundancy, its BAE 146-200 aircraft is well suited for the job of hauling people and things down to the bottom of the world, capable of operating from "un-improved" airfields. Un-improved is the key word—an industry term for anything resembling a dirt road.

The rest of the world may be racing into the future with the aid of technology, but in Antarctica things are pretty much as they have always been. The windiest, coldest continent on earth is also the most inhospitable. A land of rock and ice surrounded by saltwater and more ice, it remains a place where you had better plan well—if you don't haul it in with you, you won't have it. There are no stores, no phone or Internet, save satellite, and no help if you get into a jam. *SuRi* carries a seven-seat Eurocopter AStar 350 helicopter, yet flight ops regulations in Antarctica require an additional rescue helicopter, so a Robinson R44 was added to the list of toys loaded aboard *SuRi* and tied down in the hangar alongside the Triton submarine.

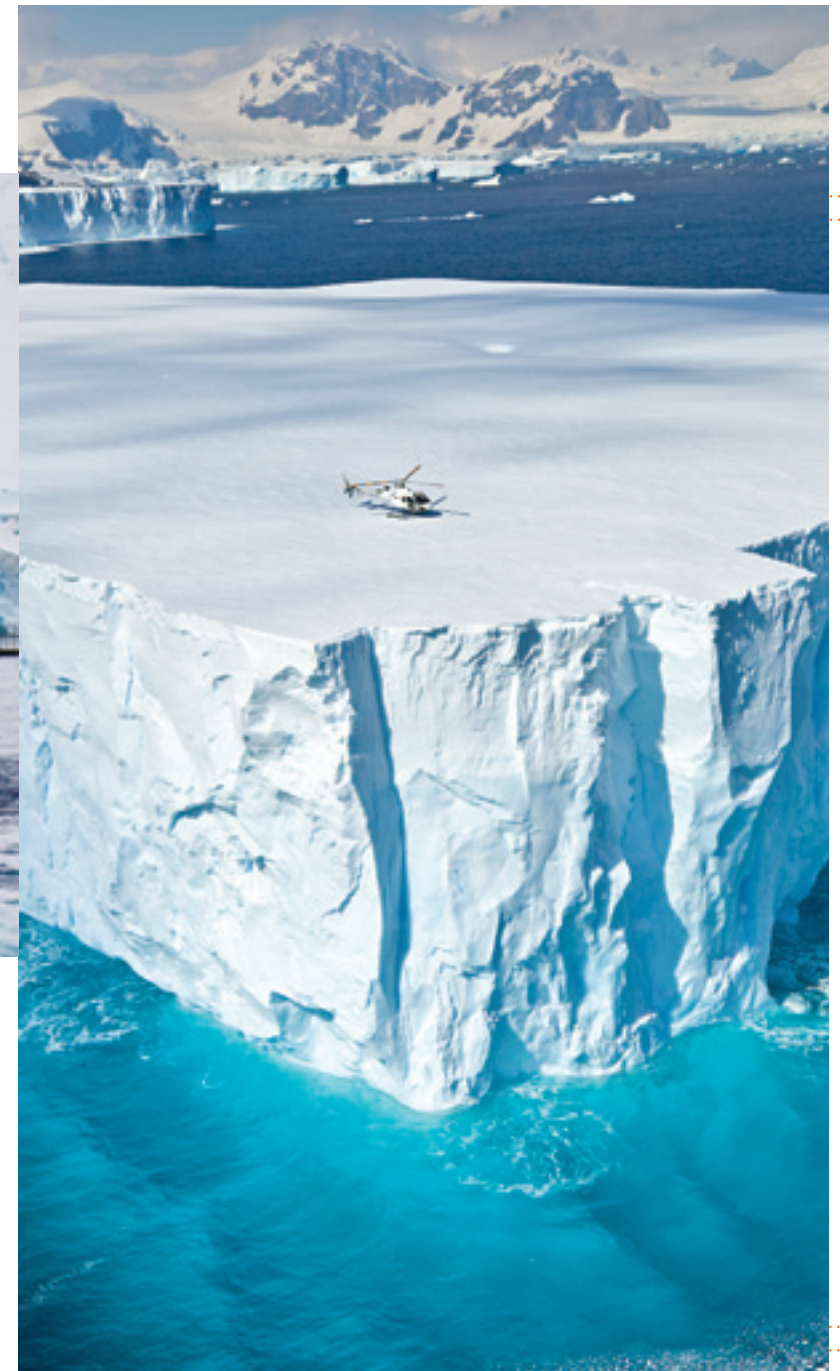
With our two tons of gear and supplies loaded on the plane we are wheels-up at 12:26 p.m. January 14, leaving the last bit of civilization in South America. At the end of the two-and-a-half-hour flight, we land at Base Frei, a Chilean research station and the only landing strip on King George Island. The primitive airstrip is only cleared of snow during the brief Antarctic summer. As our pilot executes a steep left-hand approach, I pick out *SuRi* anchored just offshore in Maxwell Bay.

Baggage claim Antarctica style means a blue plastic tarp is laid on the ground under the wing to keep the baggage and cargo out of the rain and mud. After sorting through the pile for my personal gear, I jump into the left front pilot seat of the AStar, greeted by *SuRi* pilot Steve Zito. We take the two-minute hop out to *SuRi* while the bulk of the cargo is loaded onto the tracked vehicles and transported down to the landing craft waiting on the shoreline. In her long inventory of small boats, *SuRi* carries a 28-foot aluminum landing craft. A large-capacity wide-beam workhorse, the sturdy boat nudges up to the shore and drops its forward gate for easy



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Guests and expedition crew arrive on King George Island by way of a charter flight (left). *SuRi* could be spotted from up above anchored in Maxwell Bay (below).





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While *SuRi* lies at anchor off Enterprise Island, an intrepid guest wakeboards in full dry suit behind the crew boat, dodging pieces of ice (top). One of two Triton submarines aboard is hoisted onto the boat deck (right).



on-off access. *SuRi's* owner has found it to be the perfect tender for putting guests and gear ashore on tropical beaches, and it would prove to be the perfect vessel for dropping our bundled-up band of would-be explorers on the rocky, icy shores of the Antarctic Peninsula.

All aboard *SuRi* and settled in luxurious quarters, owners and guests meet in the salon for a welcome toast followed by the first of many magnificent dinner creations by Chef Shaun Williams. From King George Island, we would steam all night, crossing the Bransfield Strait to the Gerlache Strait and Enterprise Island in Wilhelmina Bay, some 155 nautical miles farther south.

Late morning, *SuRi* drops anchor off Enterprise Island. We bundle up and load into three heavy-duty Zodiacs heading to a cove that had been a haven for whalers to hunker down during bad weather. In 1916, the Norwegian whaling supply ship *Gouvernoren* caught

fire and was intentionally run ashore to save the crew. The rusted hulk still rises high above the surface of the sea providing a good home for a variety of sea birds.

SuRi's owner heads off to scuba dive with the expedition divemaster Douglas Allan. A man of many talents, Allan is a renowned freelance cameraman and naturalist contributing to many programs including BBC's *The Blue Planet* and *Frozen Planet* with footage shot above and below the surface. He shared his knowledge and experience with us daily in the comfort of *SuRi's* salon, presenting entertaining talks and films of his worldwide adventures. His new book, *Freeze Frame*, is on my must-have list.

For the non-divers, expedition leader Kieran Lawton runs us over to a small island for a short introduction to ice hiking up to a 150-foot elevation and an impressive view of the bay. Lawton brings more than two decades

of experience leading expeditions at both Poles and leading research teams in the Antarctic. We start our climb near a couple of old wooden boats poking up through the snow. Abandoned long ago with the demise of commercial whaling industry, they are relics of Antarctica's more recent past and, like the wildlife, these historic sites are protected by the Antarctic Treaty.

Returning to the Zodiacs, we join our expedition ice pilot Captain Roger Wallis. His local knowledge was invaluable in complementing *SuRi* captain Neil Anderson's expertise for the vessel's safe operation in an area devoid of aides to navigation. With clear, sunny weather, flat calm seas and temperatures well above freezing, Wallis runs the Zodiac outside Enterprise Island to give us an up close view of icebergs. The shapes and color are startling—the natural vibrance of the blue ice has to be seen to be believed.

We come across a large leopard seal dozing on a small piece of ice. He shows no fear as we slowly approach. Back at *SuRi*, six humpback whales and a few minke are circling the yacht, feeding on the abundant krill, oblivious to us. They swim within 20 feet of the yacht, passing directly beneath the Zodiacs several times.

Later that day, we continue south down the Gerlache Strait in search of a colony of chinstrap penguins, with the helicopter making the perfect platform for penguin recon. By 8 p.m. with the sun still high, *SuRi* eases into Orne Harbor, lingering in 300 feet of water while we made a 600-foot ice climb up Spigot Peak to view a chinstrap penguin colony—fuzzy young chicks and all—perched high on the windswept ridge.

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SuRi's Eurocopter takes a scenic run over icebergs and lands on a huge flat-top berg drifting near the Argentine Islands (above). A crab-eater seal takes a break from gorging on krill (not crab as its name suggests) near Iceberg Alley at Pleneau Island (right).





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Relics of Antarctica's recent past are seen in abandoned whaling boats (left) and deposits of whale bones (bottom left). The Antarctic Treaty now protects wildlife, such as the gentoo penguins (bottom right). After a long, cold day of exploring, dinner prepared by *SuRi's* chef Shaun Williams was a welcome treat (right).



It takes awhile for an East Coast kid to get used to the scale of the terrain here—the massive stone mountains holding ice thousands of years old, hundreds of feet deep, slowly moving down to the sea.

Back aboard *SuRi* at 10:30 p.m., dinner is a special time. Owners and guests come together and share their experiences of the day—scuba diving, ice climbing, wildlife watching, wakeboarding, helicoptering or simply taking in the majestic vistas through the salon windows—over a welcome glass of fine wine.

SuRi runs south all night through the Penola Strait, aided by a pair of intense spotlights sweeping constantly across her forward route while the captain and crew kept a very watchful eye to avoid a collision with any one of thousands of icebergs.

Waking up in the shadow of Mt. Shackleton, our third day dawns bright and clear, presenting an unobstructed view to mile-high mountains draped with centuries-old glaciers rising straight out of the sea. The morning air is startling fresh and clear, and we are soon in the tenders. The ride to the Yalour Islands is like picking our way through a colossal white maze. Dwarfed by the sheer scale of the icebergs, we lose sight of *SuRi* in minutes. While most of our group heads to a small island to get our first glimpse of Adélie penguins, the two youngest set off to climb the steep 1,500-foot slope of Mt. Demaria led by Lawton. Later in the morning several of the more sane among us make the same climb via helicopter to see these three adventurous souls perched on the ice-covered summit with a shear drop down the back side. We nicknamed it Mt. *SuRi* in honor of their challenging effort. Flying low over icebergs offers a stunning perspective to these

chunks of ancient drifting ice—some the size of a playground, others the size of Central Park or bigger. Our pilot finds a suitably sized flat-top berg and adds one more unique landing experience to his logbook.

Following lunch, we return to the tenders for a run across the bay and a visit with the Ukrainian researchers at Vernadsky Station. A former British base established in 1947 as Station F on Winter Island, the operation was relocated in 1954 to the present site on nearby Galindez Island and renamed Faraday Station in 1977. It was data collected at Faraday Station that led British scientists to discover a hole in the ozone layer in 1985. Ukraine took over the operation in 1996. Though we could not take part in any scientific work, we did partake of a libation at the southernmost pub on the planet, aptly named “The Southernmost Public Bar” when built by the British. Our Ukrainian hosts distill their own vodka with the pure water from centuries-old glacier ice. We raise our glasses in a toast to friendship then depart for Pleneau Island 10 nautical miles to the north.

We wake to the sound of ice bouncing off *SuRi's* hull as she moves slowly through a sea of chunks that had been ground off the bottom of icebergs when they were pushed aground by wind and current. The day is heavy gray, overcast with a cold light rain. We drop anchor at the edge of Iceberg Alley and pile into the Zodiac tenders in search of wildlife.

Iceberg Alley is so called because of the icebergs that drift into the channel with wind and current. The logjam

effect creates a tight cluster of ice with turning space between them nearly too tight even for the tenders. Within minutes we are closing in on a large leopard seal lounging on a low floating piece of ice. He's soon joined by a younger, more active male determined to harass his older friend by bobbing up on the ice and sliding past him into the water. The young seal entertains us with his antics, zooming close around and under the Zodiac for 10 minutes—then he's gone. We find another photo op with a smaller colony of gentoo penguins nesting barely above sea level. Observing the nests, our guide remarks that chicks that have not grown sufficiently by now stand a slim chance of surviving the coming winter.

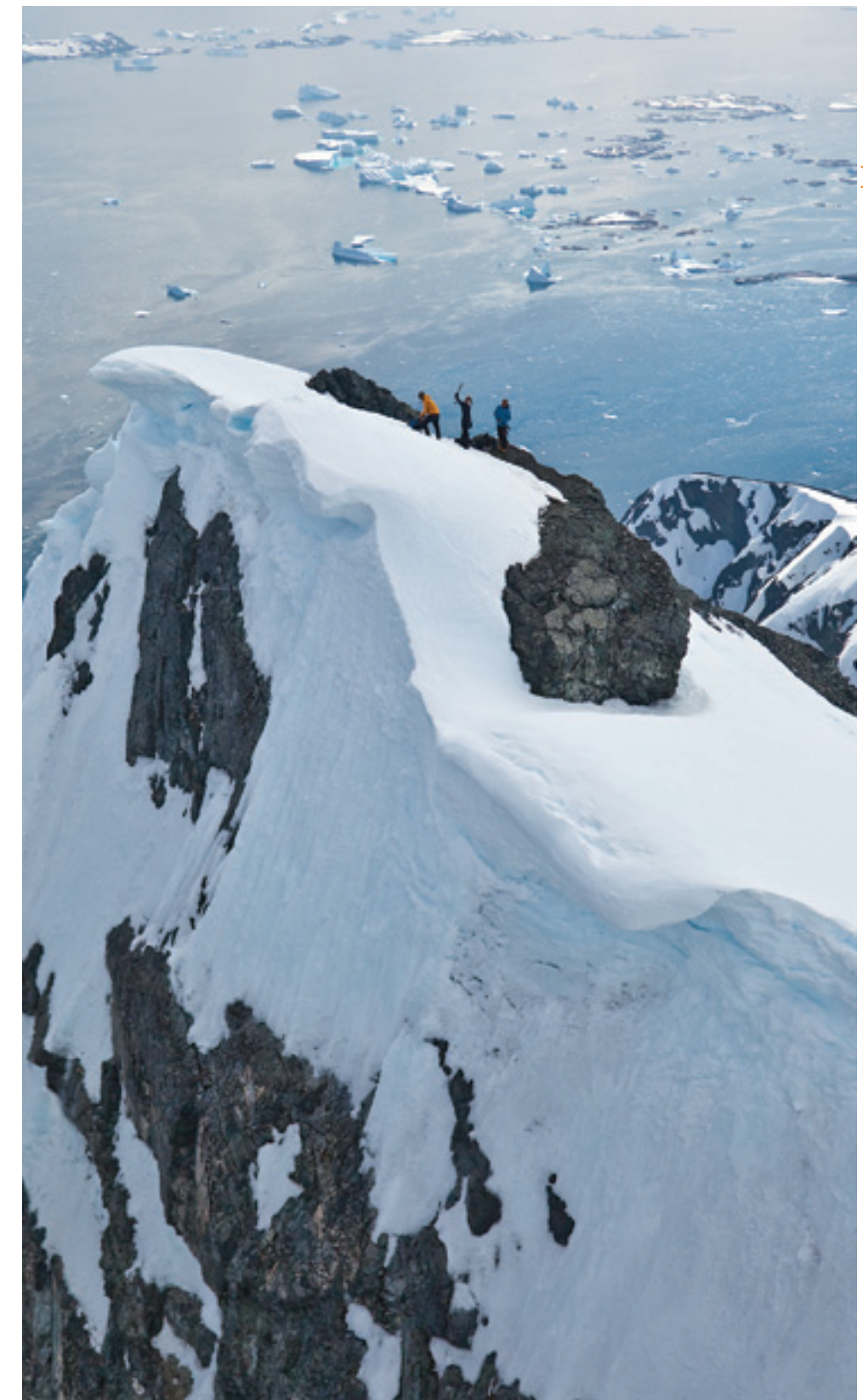
Departing at 1 p.m. through the Lemaire Channel, we squeeze through a narrow channel edged with soaring mountains and ice. The going is slow, and at times the crew boat muscles a large chunk of ice out of our way. Augmenting the scenery, Doug Allan talks about filming orcas on the peninsula. We exit the channel and approach Port Lockroy by 5 p.m. Towered over by a glacier on three sides, it offers a well-protected overnight anchorage boasting good diving and scenery.

A former British base from 1944 through the mid '60s, Port Lockroy is now a museum outpost promoting Arctic heritage. *SuRi's* landing craft transports the entire contingent of owners and guests plus several crew to a rocky landing spot. A few gentoo penguins have taken up residence around the bright red buildings. Port Lockroy is a delightful distraction from the natural scene we have become accustomed to. The store and museum are small but sufficient, and passports are stamped with the official Port Lockroy penguin mark complete with lat and long. The base is manned by four delightful and adventurous young Brits who competed for the four-month summer posting. *SuRi's* owner invites them all back to the yacht for dinner and a special treat—laundry and showers with endless hot water.

As another heavy overcast day begins, the owner plus five hardy souls depart early to make a four- to five-hour snowshoe hike up the glacier across the bay from the outpost. I later hop a Zodiac to shore with Wallis to see a deposit of massive whalebones.

We depart mid afternoon to go up the Neumayer Channel toward Cuverville Island and go ashore for observation of more gentoo penguins entering and exiting the water. They're amazing to watch—clumsy on land almost tripping into the water—but they swim with amazing speed and agility, rocketing out of the water to instantly upright and walking in the blink of an eye.

At dinnertime, *SuRi* carefully picks her way through the narrow Errera Channel. Two humpback whales, feeding close enough to hear them spout, swim along with us for 30 minutes. Zito spools up the AStar for a photo op of *SuRi* in the company of icebergs at dusk. Dwarfed by the massive ice, *SuRi* easily hides. In this



above
Guests with expedition leader Kieran Lawton at the steep summit of 1,500-foot Mt. Demaria on Argentine Island



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Rope climbing into a crevasse shows the ice's intense blue color (above). While they waddle awkwardly on land, Adélie penguins can swim up to 45 mph (left). Sasha, who hosted *SuRi*'s guests at Vernadsky research base, tends bar at the world's southernmost pub (right).



Penguins are amazing to watch—clumsy on land almost tripping into the water, but they swim with amazing speed and agility, rocketing out of the water to instantly upright and walking in the blink of an eye.

part of the world, anchor watch includes having the landing craft standing by to nudge aside any large pieces of ice drifting down on *SuRi*.

Morning delivers heavy overcast and light snow. The sea is dead calm, the world is dead silent. It takes awhile for an East Coast kid to get used to the scale of the terrain here—the massive stone mountains holding ice thousands of years old, hundreds of feet deep, slowly moving down to the sea. It splits (calves), revealing crevasses of ancient, bright blue ice.

Until now we have been ashore on islands, but today we are standing on the Antarctic continent at Neko Harbour, preparing for some rope climbing into a crevasse that Lawton has checked out. There are many crevasses in the area, many hidden with snow bridges, so attention has to be paid to where you step. Lawton sets the snow anchors that will take the weight of the climber as he is lowered down. Lying in the snow with a safety line, looking over the edge, I see the crevasse glow bright blue even on this gray day. The long view of weather slowly rolling across the bay goes from clear to cloudy to snow to rain to snow to clear, and *SuRi* evaporates into white as clouds envelope our position on the

mountain. I'm enjoying the challenge of photography as the climbers work their way down 30 to 40 feet, hanging on a thin line. There's no telling how deep the crevasse goes, but it's certainly deep enough to take you away.

We had hiked up together but go down separately. Our two young adventurers take the sleds for a faster descent, and the steep hill falls away in front of the speeding craft. With no wind and alone on the trail, the only sounds are my own footsteps in the snow and my breathing. The now familiar smell—eau de penguin—gets stronger with each step closer to the shoreline colony. Then, a crack and rumble: a piece of the glacier gives in to gravity, splashing into the sea.

SuRi departs Neko Harbour for the run back to Enterprise Island, dropping anchor at 10 p.m. Both helicopters are up the next day for some photo work and glacier recon. Some guests go kayaking with humpback whales while one young man chooses to wakeboard in full dry suit. It's a day playing aboard one sort of craft or another.

That evening, we depart for an all-night crossing to Half Moon Island, just east of Livingston Island. We are welcomed by a large colony of chinstrap penguins going through their daily routine—greeting their mates,

fact file

OCCUPATION: 29 nations currently operate research facilities. The 1959 Antarctic Treaty makes the continent available exclusively for peaceful purposes and ensures freedom of scientific investigation.

POPULATION: No native population. Research workers/tourists number approximately 4,400 in summer/1,100 in winter.

GETTING THERE: Aerovias DAP, based in Punta Arenas, Chile, operates charter flights to Antarctica; www.aeroviasdap.cl

CLIMATE: It's the coldest, windiest, driest, highest (on average) continent on earth. The average summer temperature is 20°F.

CURRENCY: There is no official currency; but that's okay, there are no stores either.

TIME ZONE: GMT/UTC -4

WHEN TO GO: Southern Hemisphere summer

VISITORS' GUIDELINES: At the 2011 Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting, new general guidelines for visitors to the Antarctic were adopted. <http://iaato.org/visitor-guidelines>



CHARTERING SURI: Contact Allan Jouning, Thirty Seven South; Tel: +64 9 302 0178; Email: charter@37south.co.nz; www.37southcharter.com

YACHTS: U.S. citizens organizing a private/charter journey should file "DS-4131 Advance Notification Form – Tourist and Other Non-Governmental

Activities in The Antarctic Treaty Area" at least three months prior.

EXPEDITION LOGISTICS: Henry Cookson Adventures organized the Antarctic expedition aboard *SuRi* and supplied six professional expedition crew, which included an expedition leader, a dive master, a helicopter pilot and engineer, an ice pilot and

a HCA logistics coordinator. Tel: +44 (0) 207 736 0452; www.henrycookson.com

WILDLIFE SEEN: Birds: Southern giant petrel, Cape petrel, Wilson's storm petrel, Antarctic shag, brown skua, kelp gull, Antarctic tern; **Penguins:** chinstrap, Adélie, gentoo; **Whales:** humpback, minke, orca; **Seals:** leopard, crabeater, elephant

feeding the chicks, changing of the guard. Then we are back on board *SuRi* for an 11 a.m. departure to King George Island and our charter flight back to the world.

As the packing nears an end, we get word that the charter flight to Punta Arenas has been cancelled due to weather. The ceiling had dropped below the 860-foot minimum—no plane today, no plane tomorrow and who knows about the next day. Minimal conditions that would cause little concern in the States bring flight operations to a standstill.

The adverse weather continues until the plane is able to collect us near the end of the third day. Being held captive by the weather is yet another reminder of the formidable nature of this continent—a faint echo of a century ago when those intrepid explorers had to wait for their ships to be free of the ice. ■



left
Kayaking guests shadow a humpback whale near Enterprise Island.