Emperor Penguins of Antarctica Tour Report 2024

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Emperor Penguins! There are few birds on earth that elicit a more awestruck presence. Spending time with the largest penguins on earth is an experience that is so rare, expensive and often difficult that the feat of trying to see one alone is at the peak of wildlife lovers' bucket lists worldwide.

In November 2024 Wild Images ventured south to the frozen expanses of the Weddell Sea and, in a strange twist of fate and the vagaries of weather windows, we were blessed to have an extended time camped out on the ice with a colony of Emperor Penguins – surely the most elegant and photogenic penguins on earth.

There are few experiences on earth like it. We managed to be the first arrivals of the season and we were blessed to be there at a time when many Emperor chicks were really tiny. Some of them were still being shuffled around the colony on the feet of their parents.

Due to the glorious amount of time we had with them, in a variety of different weather conditions, we not only captured a stunning array of images of different situations, the extended time allowed us to simly just sit in the middle of the Happy Feet film set, (well that's how it felt), put our cameras down and just enjoy the antics of all the adorable penguin chicks and their very attentive parents.

Arriving in Southern Chile

The Gateway to our Emperor Penguin experience is the windswept yet charismatic city of Punta Arenas in southern Chile. We arrived, met our guests and over the course of the next couple of days we attended our briefing meetings, completed our gear checks, tried on our rental gear and waited for the weather.

Antarctica

We finally looked at the forecast, saw that we could fly and, excitedly we went to the airport and boarded our flight to the continent of Antarctica.

Shortly before we landed we were informed that we should start to put on our thick winter clothes and that, to make us comfortable, the temperature inside the plane would be dropped to a cooler level so that we wouldn't melt in our warm gear. What followed was a mass wardrobe change where we all prepared for the extremely cold temperatures that would greet us as we disembarked. The timing was actually fantastic as most of us had settled down in our warm gear with enough time to watch the incredible massif of Vinson unfold below the plane on our clear arrival into Antarctica.

Vinson, the highest peak of Antarctica at 4892m, lies at the edge of the Ronne Ice Shelf in the Ellsworth Mountains. Just nearby is the gigantic Union Glacier, a stretch of ice that is fed from a plateau in the Edson Hills. It is so large and the ice is so thick that a runway able to take large planes like ours is groomed on the glacier surface at the start of every Antarctic summer, when our camp is built.

Union Glacier

We landed smoothly on our runway on the ice and any fears I had of the plane skedaddling sideways quickly subsided with the expertise of the pilots to land in such an incredible place.

After disembarking we were taken to our camp by a giant snow vehicle called a "Tucker" which, thankfully, was heated. From there it was a matter of waiting for the right window of weather in order to fly further to the Weddell Sea.

Union is a fascinating base camp that is set up every year as a multi-purpose facility. It doesn't just act as a camp for Emperor Penguin tourists. It also hosts multi-disciplinary scientific research teams, Vinson Massif climbers, South Pole Skiers and throws on an occasional football match with its neighbours, the staff of a Chilean base a short distance from there.

As it turned out we had a few days in Union while we waited for the right weather conditions to get to the Weddell Sea. In such an incredible location and with so much to see and do at the camp, Union was a great introduction to life on the ice.

After we checked into our comfortable tents, a few of us were allowed to fly our drones near to the camp and while our flights were geographically restricted, it was still wonderful to get a birds-eye view of the surrounding landscapes and Ellsworth mountains.

It never really gets dark in Antarctica at this time of the year. You are so far south that a strategy is required to make sure you get some sleep and that strategy usually involves an eye mask and a warm sleeping bag to pull over your head!

Our daily routine was to have breakfast and then get a weather briefing to see if we could fly to the Emperors. On our first full day in Antarctica, we soon realised we weren't going to be leaving that day so we all enjoyed a day of alternative activities including a talk on Penguin Biology, a video of how Union Camp is set up and we also watched one of the Baslers taking off to deliver fuel to a remote Antarctic research camp.

It's lovely to spend time with other people in Antarctica. Not only are the camp crew all experienced and wonderful young people, at Union we had the blessing of sharing the camp with a young man named Freddie Fennessy, who was preparing to ski solo to the South Pole and also four-time Guiness World Record holder Harpreet Chandi, or Polar Preet, who was working this year at Union as a guide.

Elephant's Head Rock

Union also has a number of beautiful locations for side excursions and perhaps the most spectacular of these was Elephant Rock. On our first afternoon the weather gods at least smiled at us long enough to take an afternoon excursion to the spectacular Elephant's Head Rock. En-route we saw some lenticular clouds forming in the nearby hills but by the time we had all managed to get our warm clothes and get off the vehicle to take photos, they had largely dissipated.

As we arrived at Elephant's Head Rock, we were all mesmerised by the frozen blue lake at the base of it. We had to don ice crampons to make sure none of us would slip on the ice and while the drone pilots took it in turns to make flights in the area, the land based people went off to search for ice formations in the blue lake nearby. It was incredible to see pillars of large boulders balancing on tiny lumps of ice as we walked. Between those and the frozen rocks and ice bubbles in the lake ice, it was like being in one gigantic polar sculpture park. Given the extended daylight hours and the stunning landscapes none of us really wanted to leave.

That evening we attended another wonderful lecture on the biology of jellyfish, where we learned that some jellyfish can regress two to three stages in their life cycles to survive an adverse period in their lives, amongst other fascinating facts.

Overnight the snow started to fall and in the morning we found we had to knock off the snow from our tent door to get out. Sadly the weather still wasn't good enough for us to fly out some about half our group stayed in camp while the other half decided to go on a mountain bike ride around the 10km circuit of the camp at Union.

The Wind Scoop

That afternoon we decided to visit another local sight, the odd ice formation called the Wind Scoop.

Formed around the base of Charles Peak near our camp, the wind scoop is a half tunnel of smooth ice that is kept smooth by near constant catabatic winds. We took a large Tucker out to it (which was jokingly called "The Mother Tucker" by camp staff) and again, donned crampons to hike over to the scoop.

Well as we approached the wind was so strong that gusts almost knocked some of us off our feet. Couple that with breathtaking windchill and the walk to the scoop was quite a bit more difficult than many of us anticipated. Still, it was an incredible glimpse into

Antarctic glaciology and also geology as we walked past a many layered sedimentary hillside which was really beautiful.

By the time we all climbed back on board the vehicle, we were overdue for the steaming hot chocolate that greeted us inside.

That evening we went to a lecture on Antarctic conspiracy theories, given by Preet. It was such an eye-opening talk on some of the thoughts people have about Antarctica including flat-earth theories, the Hitler bunker, the South Pole being a big hole at the bottom of the earth, aliens and one theory that divers were sent down a drilled core in the ice to a lake that held a giant octopus! I'm not sure if any of us realised, before this talk, that so many weird theories about Antarctica even existed!

The next day we found out again that we were unable to fly to the Weddell so we amused ourselves with activities including a briefing for what will happen when we do get to fly and a lecture about the most recent scientific activities in Antarctica. After lunch we all went and enjoyed the spectacle of watching the large Russian Ilyushin landing to deliver fuel to Union and then being loaded up with human waste, amongst other things, to fly back to the Chilean mainland. It was quite a spectacular sight watching this fantastic Russian aircraft land amidst swirls of ice into the polar air.

Our lecture that night was also from Preet about her three expeditions, skiing solo to the South Pole and it was truly quite eye-opening learning about how difficult such journeys can be.

We had been forewarned about a blizzard coming to the camp and at around 0130 it arrived, forcing us to try and unzip our iced tents the next morning in order just to get to breakfast.

Once again we learned that our window of weather for our flight had shifted but it was getting clearer and we all became hopeful that we would soon leave for the sea ice.

That day we joined a 'behind the scenes' tour of the camp, where we visited all the working buildings and we met many of the cooks, vehicle mechanics, aircraft quarters, fuel storage, food storage, gym, laundry and expedition outfitter staff who work in the camp over summer.

During the afternoon we finally went and disinfected all of the equipment we would be taking with us to the Weddell Sea and we had another briefing on what life would be like for us at our camp there. Other activities included a bit of souvenir shopping and a wonderful documentary was shown called "The Spectre" about a group of mountaineers who climbed the peak of the same name in Antarctica after kite-skiing to the base of it and back from Union Glacier. It looked like a fantastic adventure.

Finally we got news that we would probably fly the following day so we grabbed our luggage tags and started to pack for the Weddell. Our final lecture at Union was a presentation on the Scottish National Antarctic Research Expeditions. We also had a lot of fun at a trivia match between the guests and camp staff!

Departing for the Sea Ice

The next morning we all received the joyous news that we would finally be flying to the sea ice of the Weddell Sea at 1130am! Excited, we all got our gear ready, packed up, boarded the plane and took off.

Around 2.5 hours later we started to see the vast expanses of the Ronne Filchner ice shelf unfolding below the plane. We even started to see Emperor Penguins from the sky and shortly before we landed we actually 'buzzed' the runway to clear it of penguins so the plane could land without any incidents.

Gould Bay Emperor Penguin colony

We finally arrived and the excitement in the air between us was palpable. Joining us on the flight was Freddie Fennessy, our newfound friend, who was on his way to the start point of his South Pole expedition. We all enjoyed a warm meal to both celebrate our arrival and farewell Freddie, who then jumped on another short flight to start his expedition from Berkner Island at the edge of the Weddell Sea.

That afternoon we packed up our sleds with our camera gear and excitedly, we walked across the ice to the Emperor colony for our first visit.

It proved to be a fantastic introduction to the dynamics of the colony and I think all of us went back to camp with our mental strategy about images and possibilities for photography of different behaviours, angles and portraits.

Buoyed by our excitement of being on the pack ice of the Weddell Sea we enjoyed the first of many amazing dinners in the camp.

I think the thing that surprised us all was exactly how curious Emperor Penguins are. Each day our camp would be visited by groups of Emperor Penguins who decided that the camp was way more interesting than the monotony of the colony and it was often possible to unzip your tent to find one looking in at you. It was almost like they were wandering through a nesting colony of humans wondering when the 'red eggs' (our tents) would hatch a person.

But the curiosity didn't end there. Frequently on our walks between our camp and the colony, we would be joined by Emperors coming to join us from wherever they were. It was like they would see us and either skedaddle or walk over because they couldn't resist the temptation to check us out.

During our time in the camp we even saw itinerant Adelie Penguins. Although their comical appearance always makes Adelies crowd pleasers, we wondered exactly why they were there. One reason, we discovered, came at the colony. On one of the evenings we were at the colony during a plummet in the temperatures. The Emperor chicks had begun to huddle, an act they are both famous for and also a practiced one of survival in the Antarctic winters. While we sat watching them we all laughed when an Adelie Penguin, similarly sized to an Emperor chick, popped his head up in the huddle. Needless to say the Emperor chicks were singularly unimpressed by the presence of this little black and white intruder and they chased him off but really, it was so funny to watch!

We had so many wonderful encounters with tiny chicks that often acted like human kids. Amusingly we watched one older chick escape from its mother's belly pouch, much to the disappointment of its mother who ran after her baby escapee and tried to put it back under her. A game of chase broke out and finally the mother grabbed the baby by the scruff of its neck and shoved it back on her feet, with its tiny bottom protruding for all the world to see.

We would see small groups of chicks playing at knocking each other of snow rises and sometimes it looked like one chick would gaze into the eyes of its parent saying "Oh I want to go and see them" and then the parent would shuffle over to us, taking its chick on a supervised adventure to visit the humans.

During these outings we would sometimes see little groups being moved from one part of the colony to another, accompanied by a supervising adult, which was adorable.

At all times we were told to stay clear of the colony but, like so many other penguin species in Antarctica, the penguins completely ignored any rules of social distancing and just when we found a nice position and situation to photograph birds at the colony, within minutes we were surrounded by photobombing Emperors.

Having an extended period with the Emperors allowed us to have some incredibly special experiences with them. The night of the cold huddle of chicks we stayed at the colony until after midnight, the only time when the light is golden in Antarctica. It was amazing to be there in such amazing light and as we walked back to camp, we crossed paths with penguins returning from the human colony back to theirs. Being stuck in a traffic belt of Emperor Penguins surely must be one of the most wonderful traffic issues you ever have to deal with.

The extra time allowed us to make a couple of interesting side trips including traverses across the sea ice to find cracks where Weddell Seals would launch out to rest on the ice, or penguins would launch out of the sea to return to their colony. These treks were always guided by experienced mountaineering staff who check the trail ahead of us for crevasses hidden in the snow. Thank goodness they were there as, for a layman anyway, it is impossible to understand the snow well enough to know where these dangers lurk. For those of us who were brave enough to accompany them, we had one glorious afternoon with six Weddell Seals at a haul out and although our launching penguins didn't quite happen with the frequency or light that we would have liked, the walk out to where they were doing it was so beautiful it was like walking through a large wind-eroded sculpture park.

Most of our time, however, was spent at the colony, where we explored ice holes, hummocks and just enjoyed the day-to-day shenanigans of penguins.

I think I can safely say that, for all of us, the tiniest chicks were the biggest highlight of our trip and getting the perfect shot of a small chick on its parents feet, still being shuffled around to keep it warm, wasn't as easy as any of us imagined. Quite often the smallest chicks were kept closer to the centre of the colony and they were rarely 'brought out' into the open to a place where we could photograph them.

That is, until the last day we had there. Finally, after many hours spent patiently waiting, a mother Emperor finally shuffled her tiny chick out to the edge of the colony and sat right in front of us showing us her chick. What an incredible finale to our stay!

At the end of our stay, as a small celebration, our camp chefs threw on a French evening, complete with wonderful French food and "La Vie En Rose" playing in the background. Although spending time with Emperors was a bit tougher than most of us expected, with the long daily walks and the extreme cold, at that point none of us ever wanted to leave.

It was timely as we had received news that a weather window was upon us and after packing up our camp the next day, we flew back to Union Glacier where we met up with the staff for a celebratory round of drinks and dinner. As it turned out, the weather window continued and we had one night at Union before flying back to mainland Chile the following morning. Reluctantly we all boarded our 737 and took off from Union's runway on the ice.

Now, Vinson, was shrouded. A veil of cloud had covered its summit obscuring the stunning view of Antarctica's tallest peak. It was but a very tiny disappointment after a mesmerizing journey that surely would rank as one of the world's top wildlife experiences!