



POLE TO POLE

For BSAC instructor **Linda Ashmore**, the opportunity to dive two of the most extreme places in the world was too good to miss. On two fascinating expeditions to the polar regions of Antarctica and the Arctic, she dived in waters that few people ever get to visit

WITH RETIREMENT fast approaching, I considered the activities that were still on my diving 'wishlist'. At the top was ice diving. So, when I heard about a diving expedition to Antarctica, I signed up immediately, never having considered that diving there would be possible or even allowed for 'amateurs'. Ice diving suddenly became a minor consideration – I was now on an expedition to the world's most remote and inhospitable continent.

My experience was so fulfilling that once I realised the same vessel and a similar team would be in the Arctic just a few months later, I knew that I just had to go. It was my chance to complete my very own 'pole to pole' adventure – but underwater.



LINDA ASHMORE



COLD FRONT: preparing for the icy Antarctic waters [left]; the ice-strengthened MV Grigoriy Mikheev heads south [opposite page bottom]; gentoo penguin (*Pygoscelis papua*) in the Antarctic [above]; sea stars (*Odontaster validus*) [right]



ANTARCTIC

THE EXPEDITION to the Antarctic started in Ushuaia on the southernmost tip of Argentina, where I boarded MV Grigoriy Mikheev, an ice-strengthened Russian research vessel, with 31 other divers. The 600-mile journey south from Cape Horn in Chile to the Antarctic South Shetland Islands was an experience in itself, with big seas and majestic albatrosses circling the ship. Both air and sea temperatures dropped significantly, and at 63°S, we had our first glimpse of land at Smith Island. Nothing can prepare you for that first sight of the Antarctic Peninsula: it has a serenity and mystique that I have experienced nowhere else in the world.

Our first dive was off Cuverville Island (the weather prevented us from diving the Melchior Islands). I felt nervous as I kitted up in a gentle blizzard while trying to

remember all the correct procedures to ensure I didn't get a freeflow due to a freezing regulator – the key is to allow as little moisture to enter your regulators as possible.

The extra layers of an undersuit, a tight 7mm hood and 7mm mitts made every task more demanding than usual, but eventually I was ready to hit the icy water for the first time. I wasn't expecting much, as the seabed is constantly being scoured by icebergs, so was delighted to find a 35-arm starfish, a small fish and limpets living on the fronds of kelp. On our second dive, just east of the island, we stayed shallow to watch a penguin whizz past at a phenomenal speed.

The afternoon dive was next to an iceberg in 20–25m. It was small enough to swim around and marvel at the ice formation and beautiful light patterns. Although tempted, I remembered not to swim under any overhangs or go into any crevices – but I forgot everything when I spotted a penguin carcass left by a leopard seal that was covered in nematode worms. I was intent on taking the perfect photograph when my buddy, Stacy, indicated that the iceberg was moving towards us. It had been a couple of metres away, but by now was almost on top of me – I quickly moved off! ➤➤