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SLEEK KILLER: a leopard seal hunts a penguin in the Antarctic



LINDA ASHMORE



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ALTERNATIVE VIEW: [from top] a leopard seal takes a different point of view; limpet (*Nacella concinna*); sea whips and anemone (*Isotealia antarctica*); Antarctic fish (*Harpagifer bispinosus*)



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With a blizzard blowing, the next morning's dive was delayed until we found a sheltered spot in Port Lockroy bay. Here, we settled into the dive at a depth of 7m and were almost immediately approached by a leopard seal. Fortunately, Göran Ehlmé, one of the staff members on board and polar cameraman for *The Blue Planet*, had given us a talk on his encounters with leopard seals, explaining that they are inquisitive and will test your nerve. So when she came within inches of our faces – with a lovely grin – and tried to spook us, we held our ground. This magical encounter was to last a full 30 minutes while she entertained us, coming at us from every direction – upside down, side on and spinning. Our dives were limited to 20m and a maximum of 45 minutes, but that

day I didn't feel so much as a shiver as we stayed for the full duration.

Our next stop was the aptly named Paradise Bay, surrounded by steep mountains and wildly crevassed glaciers. We enjoyed a wall dive where we saw giant isopods, soft corals, gorgonians, urchins and the occasional nudibranch. And despite the constant fall of snow, we spent more than an hour in the RIB after the dive to marvel at the dramatic scenery.

Now nearing the southernmost part of our journey, we visited the 'iceberg graveyard', a shallow area near Pleneau Island where beautiful icebergs become grounded and die over the years. We dived a 'safe' iceberg, which was sitting in 50m of water, and that afternoon Göran took us snorkelling with leopard seals. He knew

exactly where to look and pointed out a grey rock close to a gentoo penguin colony. In reality, the 'rock' was a leopard seal, which suddenly came to life as an unsuspecting penguin swam past. We followed the seal into deeper waters as she eventually skinned and devoured the penguin, putting on a performance for us as she leapt, dived and swam among us.

With the island providing slight shelter, we hadn't even noticed the 30-knot wind until we were back in the RIB. I suddenly realised how cold I was – we had been snorkelling for two hours – but I had an inner glow as I sat reflecting on what we had experienced. I'd done seven dives and one snorkel dive during only four full days in the Antarctic, and I would do it again for any one of those amazing experiences.





ICE COVER: under the Arctic ice at Spitsbergen [main photograph]; a diver views a sea anemone (*Urticina eques*) [below]

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ARCTIC

AFTER ANTARCTICA, the Arctic seemed so easy. Following a flight from London and an overnight stop in Oslo, we flew to the island of Spitsbergen in the Svalbard archipelago to board MV Grigoriy Mikheev at Longyearbyen, already at 78°N. The glaciers and mountains were amazing, but there was no biting wind and the sun was shining.

It was a little disconcerting that our dive guides were armed with rifles and watching for polar bears, but our initial checkout and first dive at Blomstrandhalvøya wasn't so different from my first Antarctica dive. As in the south, it went from the shore, with a gentle slope and a blenny or two, but here the water was full of slowly beating sea angels (*Clione limacina*) gracefully flying through the water column, as well as even smaller sea butterflies (*Limacina helicina*).

The next challenge was to take a photograph – peering through an SLR viewfinder while the auto focus tries to latch onto a semi-transparent object less than a centimetre in size isn't easy. Eventually, I found one that stayed in one place long enough for me to get a good shot.

At Likholmen (which translates as Corpse Island), we dived next to drift ice. This is very different to icebergs, which comprise freshwater ice that has broken away from a glacier. Drift ice is frozen seawater: it is known as fast ice where it's attached to the land and does not move, but as it breaks



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away, it becomes drift ice. Finding a place where the movement of the ice is unlikely to be affected by wind and tides is not easy, and divers and surface cover have to be constantly aware of any movements, as drift ice can travel faster than a diver can swim.

While marvelling at all the colours, shapes and patterns, I remembered my experience in Antarctica with the iceberg, and was suitably cautious – we were, after all, diving at the edge of, and slightly under, pieces of floating ice that were constantly jostling and grinding together. One pair of divers managed to surface surrounded by chunks of drift ice and had to swim under it to get back to safety.

Although the polar ice cap is shrinking

due to climate change, conditions to the north suggested the opposite was true. We were unable to progress further than 79° 55'N because pack ice – a large mass of drift ice – was being pushed southwards and into the fjords by the wind, making the whole area so unpredictable that conditions were too dangerous for any further ice dives. We were also unable to dive any of the known northern dive sites – so a true expedition unfolded, as we explored new dive sites further south.

At Sagaskjeret, we managed a beautifully clear dive with many opportunities to use the macro lens – anemones, sea urchins, sea stars, nudibranchs and crabs. A surreal moment came at 20m when *National*

EQUIPMENT

- Two Apeks GTX40 regulators (freeze-protected first stages) mounted on a single 12-litre steel cylinder with an 'H' or 'Y' valve – one with the drysuit hose and the other with BC hose, plus a pressure gauge on one of them
- O'Three MSF 500 Flex drysuit and PBB undersuit set with an extra thin fleece top and silk base layer
- 7mm hood and 7mm mitts. Also thin neoprene gloves for kitting up and plastic gloves (from a petrol station forecourt) to enable 7mm mitts to slide on effortlessly when I was ready to dive



Geographic photographer Paul Nicklen, who had joined our trip, came over to me – what would such a renowned and famous diver and underwater photographer need from me? It turned out he wanted to know the depth – his computer had 'died'!

A visit to Midterhuken provided some fascinating encounters. On the morning dive, we dropped onto a kelp forest and descended to 20m, where Franco Banfi, the award-winning photographer who was also a member of staff, captured a photograph of a ray and wolf-fish to include in his presentation of snaps that evening. Less than an hour later, we saw three beluga whales swimming over exactly where we had dived.

The final dive at Sterneckøya again found us in a kelp forest leading to a wall. Beneath the kelp was an amazing array of delicate anemones stretching into the distance. It was a beautiful dive on which to end.

That didn't mean the excitement was over. Diving with walrus or polar bears is a no-no for the amateur diver – it's a rare experience even for the professionals, who will spend days, weeks, months or even years in preparation for such an encounter. However, we spent a couple of hours with a herd of 50 or so walrus on land, and a few swam to within 5–10m of us to give us a display of their size and strength. The polar bears were a bit more elusive, hiding away until our very last day, when we watched a mother and her cub hunting for seals on drift ice below a glacier.

Again, I had completed seven dives, but this time over six days. On that last day, I chose to forgo a dive to search for polar bears and ended the trip with a midnight swim in the Arctic – a magical experience in a wonderful place.

There were many similarities between Antarctica and the Arctic, but they are also very different. The voyage through Drake Passage and the marked drop in temperature at the Antarctic Convergence heightens your anticipation of Antarctica. On arrival, you sail through mountain ranges, navigating passes that take you from one mindblowing experience to another. The weather adds another dimension, with the visibility dropping within minutes and the chill factor rising exponentially, making the diving different to anything I have experienced. It was exciting to see any forms of life that could survive in such a place, and witnessing the leopard seals hunting their prey at such close quarters was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

By comparison, you simply fly direct to beyond the Arctic Circle, a vast, beautiful place where you could see for miles. The sight of the pack ice and glaciers stretching into the distance takes your breath away, as does diving in the icy water. Diving at the



edge of the pack ice was the highlight of the Arctic, but the flora and fauna – though more abundant than in Antarctica – reminded me of Scotland, so, while beautiful, were not such a memorable experience. They are both magical places to visit and dive, but for me, Antarctica holds truly special memories. ■

• *Linda travelled with Aqua-Firma Worldwide on diving and photographic expeditions to the Antarctic Peninsula and to Spitsbergen in Svalbard, in the Arctic Circle. While neither is an ice-diving expedition, you will get the opportunity to dive with ice. For more details, visit www.aqua-firma.co.uk*

SURFACE INTERVAL: a pair of walrus on the Arctic ice [main photograph]; sea butterfly (*Limacina helicina*) [above right]



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