



# AQUA-FIRMA

Water Wilderness Wildlife

## Antarctic Peninsula Diving & Photography Expeditions

# A dip into the white continent

(From an article featured in Diver Magazine September 2008)



How best to spend the kids' inheritance? Fork out to go diving in Antarctica, of course!



Prominent marine biologist **Keith Hiscock** was quick to sign up

*Aqua-Firma expedition, 2008*

### EVER THOUGHT OF GOING DIVING IN ANTARCTICA?

It is possible and, last summer, I decided to do it. So, digging deep into my children's inheritance (aka pension lump sum), I booked and started reading up. This March, I was there.

To reach Antarctica, you first go to Tierra del Fuego - El Fin del Mundo (The End of the World) or, more precisely, to Ushuaia at the southernmost city in South America. There, the cruise vessels go back and forth to Antarctica change over daily - and some of them take divers.

For divers it's best to go on the sort of extremely well-supported expedition that I joined. The vessel was a 65m former Russian research vessel, built in Finland in 1990. The ice-strengthened ship would be dwarfed by most cruise ships, but was an ideal size to carry 48 passengers, 32 of us divers. It has a Russian crew of 19, plus three catering staff, five expedition guides and polar experts and a doctor.

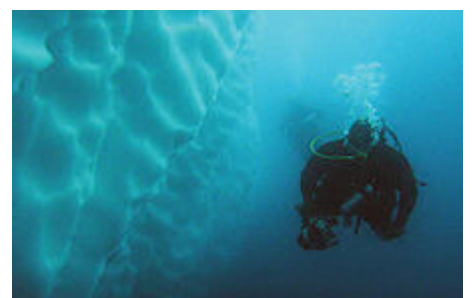
We had all left our lounge suits, DJs and cocktail dresses at home - this was, after all, **an expedition**, not a cruise

We were welcomed aboard by Göran Ehlme, a top polar underwater photographer and film-maker and Wildlife Photographer of the year, 2006. The ship was well-equipped (for its size) and everything very clean. Food was good and plentiful. We were made welcome on the bridge, where we could try to get the best picture of the biggest wave breaking over the bow.

The trip to the Antarctic Peninsula was, a long one, 11 knots being an exceptional speed, so there was plenty of time to photograph albatrosses and other birds and look out for whales.



*35-armed starfish*



*The iceberg experience*



We also had some classic Antarctic changes of weather. A Zodiac trip that started in balmy conditions could end in a full gale with driving snow.

But although the ship moved around we were always sheltered, even from occasional gales, by land or by the many grounded icebergs, which reduced wave size.

The seawater temperature was as low as 0.5°C, but reached 2°C at times. I couldn't fit dry gloves to my suit, but my 5mm five-fingered neoprene gloves were adequate and allowed me to manipulate camera buttons and dials, although I would be a bit ham-fisted after 45 minutes. Otherwise, I had increased my layers and brought the thickest undersuit possible. Unfortunately, it over-filled my suit and opened the neck seal a bit, so I was frequently damp after a dive. However, helped further by a hood with a face seal, I stayed toasty-warm throughout each dive. A half-mask is adequate, but you must have regulators that will take the cold without freezing.

Forty-five minutes in the water (our time limit) was about right, but it was frustrating being restricted to 20m depth, because I could frequently see interesting "stuff" deeper down. Another couple of days on the peninsula would have made the diving part of the trip about the right length of time. (20m rule is due to a lack of a local pressure chamber).

Everyone is conscious of protecting Antarctica's pristine environment, and you follow a code of conduct, especially when ashore. Of course, the penguins haven't read the code, and you may find that, having settled on a rock to photograph them at the advised 5m distance, you end up being inspected at close quarters. When I say "close quarters", I mean pecked and stood upon.

Some environmentalists express concern about tourism in Antarctica. The risk of ships sinking and oil being spilt are certainly relevant, but the consensus seems to be that tourism will increase our understanding of just how important it is to keep Antarctica pristine, and will do far less damage than the scientific bases and their infrastructure, vital as they are.



*Sterechinus neumayeri sea urchins*



*Time out for a leopard seal*



*Penguins turn their back*



*A wall in Paradise Bay*



*Glyptonotus antarcticus, a giant marine isopod.*

**AQUA-FIRMA**  
Water Wilderness Wildlife

**Antarctica - Dive and Photography 2009/10**

This dedicated Antarctic diving and photographic expedition offers a unique opportunity for above and below the water insights into the white continent which few have been privileged to experience. This small group exploratory voyage will be led by an expert dive team which will include some of the following:

- **Göran Ehlmé**, *BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year 2006* and polar cameraman for the *Blue Planet*
- **Charlotte Caffrey**, Marine Scientist and Director of Aqua-Firma Worldwide
- **Mathieu Meur**, the co-author for the *Essential Digital Guide to Underwater Photography* and the *Advanced Guide to Digital Underwater Photography*
- **Jamie Watts** - former *British Antarctic Survey* Marine Scientist. Published author, most recently in *BBC Wildlife Magazine* and *Ocean Geographic* magazine

[www.aqua-firma.co.uk](http://www.aqua-firma.co.uk)

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