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The day I almost didn't get on the ship

When you've paid a large chunk of your savings to go on the trip of a lifetime, you would probably be smart about it and not do anything stupid that will make you miss the trip.

Not me. A few hours before the scheduled departure to Antarctica, I was nowhere near the port in Ushuaia, the City at the End of the World, where the ship was. I was far away, in the Tierra del Fuego National Park, halfway through a five-hour hike (which had seemed like such a great idea earlier in the morning).

Making matters worse, I had just been struck by a horrible realisation: my brand-new GoPro that I had purchased just for Antarctica was missing, along with two months' worth of panoramic photos of my ongoing travels through South America. I had left it on a rock when I had stopped for a snack an hour ago in the middle of the hike.

Great. Just great. To add to that, I was running late for the last bus that would take me to Ushuaia. The bus would leave in an hour, and I had another two hours worth of trekking to do to get to the bus stop. Mathematically, my chances didn't seem very good.

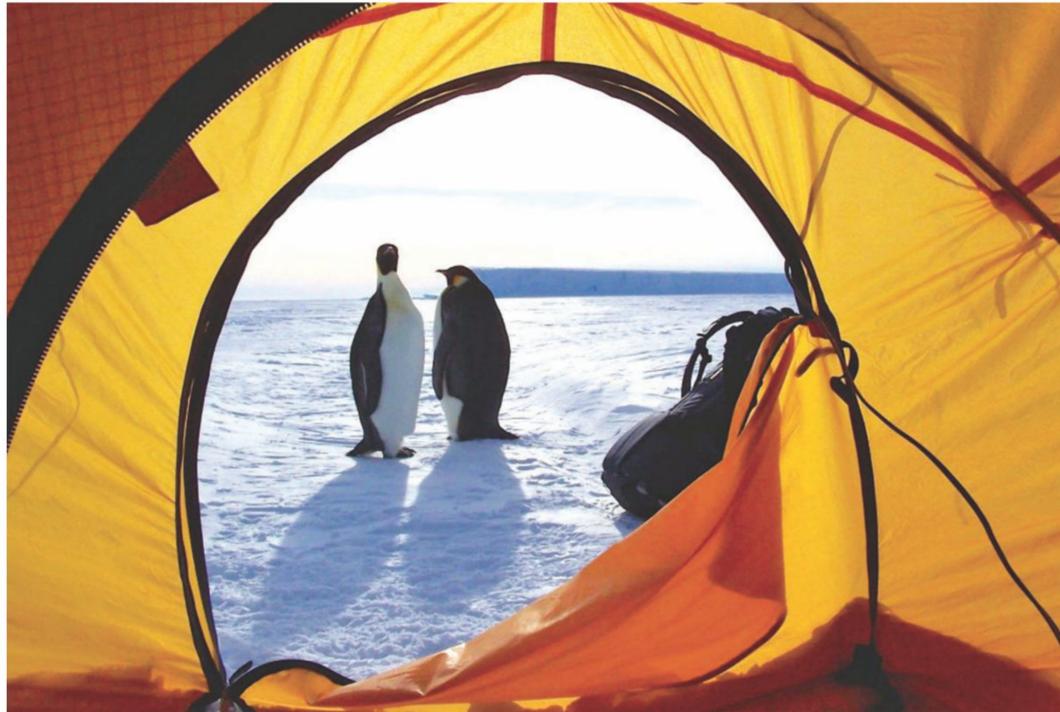


PHOTO: COURTESY

ICE CAMPING WITH PENGUINS IN ANTARCTICA

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If I fail to catch the bus, I can kiss my ship, my money plus all my hopes and dreams goodbye.

I have a history of missing flights and trains. However, on this momentous day, I miraculously made it to the port just in time (albeit with sore legs and bruises on my feet from all the panicked running I did).

The ship, Plancius, was the very last one at the far end of the port, and looked tiny next to the gigantic cruise ships and shipping vessels. It could only fit 108 passengers, which was fine with me. I wanted a small crowd on my first (and probably only) trip to Antarctica, and given how I feel about humans in general, the fewer the better.

I joined the last bit of the queue of passengers waiting to get on the ship and met Tania from Australia, who was standing behind me in line. She turned out to be my roommate, and together we walked over the plank and to our room.

The first order of business (after squealing over the room and the beds and the window) was to join everybody else at the Observation Deck for the mandatory safety briefing and emergency drill. We met the captain and the crew, got lectured on how to stay safe and were shown where the bright-orange lifeboats were located, you know, just in case.

Just as the sun was starting to sink, we set sail. Ushuaia disappeared behind us,



Setting up camp

PHOTO: COURTESY

and I stood at the front of the ship, watching the darkness settle over the water... without a GoPro to capture the moment.

The day I couldn't stop puking

The Drake Passage is no joke. Known for strong winds and large,

choppy waves, the passage is famous for tossing ships around like pieces of old socks in a washing machine. And even though I knew this and had read all about it, I happily went to sleep the first night without taking my seasickness pills.

It was one of those stupid decisions that I made on a frequent basis throughout life.

I woke up sick and rushed into the toilet for the first of many puking sessions that day. It's not easy trying to aim your vomit into the toilet bowl when the entire room is shaking and rolling like a giant hamster ball, but somehow I managed it.

I lurched and stumbled back into bed, only to run back into the toilet a minute later. This would be repeated over and over, like an awful movie scene caught in an endless loop.

A voice over the speakers cheerfully greeted us good morning, and asked if we would please come to the Observation Deck for the first lecture on Antarctica of the day.

I never made it to any of the lectures, and neither did 80 percent of the other passengers on the ship. We were all united in our seasickness and inability to do anything else but vomit.

I also never made it to any of the meals, which was a shame, because in one of my non-vommit moments, I noticed, while miserably sprawled on the bed and staring blearily at the screen in our room, that Nasi Goreng was on the lunch menu.

That they were offering a Malaysian/Indonesian meal on a Dutch ship was weird, but that they offered it on the first day when I was not fit to consume food and could barely get out of bed was just pure evil.

Nasi Goreng was never seen on the menu again thereafter.

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The day we saw our first iceberg

The ocean was a lot calmer on this day—we had passed the worst parts of the Drake Passage. I was feeling much better and was finally able to consume food.

I was also finally able to walk out of the room without crashing into walls and attend the lectures scheduled for the day. We learned a lot of information about ice caps and Antarctic animals, with an entire session dedicated to penguins, because why not?

The lectures were followed by a demonstration of the equipment we would use. There were a variety of "adventure" activities planned for this trip, including ice camping, kayaking, snowshoeing and mountain climbing—each had specific equipment that required a bit of a learning curve.

After that, it was just a lot of waiting as the ship continued to sail southward. Now that I could eat, I did so with a vengeance, munching on the endless supply of cookies in the observatory while staring over the endless expanse of ocean and wondering how there can be so much salty water on this planet.

In the late afternoon, things got a bit more exciting. We started to see other living things in the form of albatrosses up in the gloomy sky.

Somebody reported the presence of a whale at starboard, which caused a flurry of activities as everybody jumped to their feet and hurried over to one side of the boat. I thought I saw something, but I was never sure if the grey lump I saw in the distance was an actual whale or just a particularly dark crest of a wave.

Even more exciting was the sighting of our first iceberg!

We were getting close!

The day I went camping in Antarctica

I woke up early the next morning and found myself in Antarctica.

The ship was sailing through the very tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, and in contrast to the flat, endless ocean the day before, we were now surrounded by

peaks of ice on both sides.

People were out on the deck taking pictures and enjoying the fabulous view, and someone had even gotten around to building a snowman.

We made our first stop after lunch at Cuverville—a permanent ice cap with a population of Gentoo penguins. I got back to my room and put on five layers of clothing and approximately two million layers of socks.

I then realised that I had somehow forgotten to bring any waterproof outer layer, so I added on a few more layers in the vain hope that if I somehow fell off the Zodiac boat, it will slow down the icy water from freezing me to death.

We got to land without me falling overboard, and I stepped foot for the first time ever in my life on Antarctica...



PHOTO: COURTESY



The ship Plancius goes from Ushuaia, Argentina to Antarctica.

PHOTO: COURTESY

The ship set sail again to another location.

Later that evening, after dinner, a group of us headed ashore again on a Zodiac to spend the night camping out on the ice. Not that there was such a thing as "night" down here—it was 10pm, but the sun was still up as we set up our tents and ooh-ed over the toilet fort that the crew had dug into the ground.

A Weddell seal also decided to join the slumber party and took up residence on the far-end of our temporary campsite. We spent a considerable amount of time staring at it, like dorks seeing an alien thing for the first time. We waited for it to move its bulk, but it didn't even twitch.

Around 1am, we got tired of staring at a big lump of blubber, and decided to try get some sleep. It was still bright as day as my tentmates and I shoved ourselves into thick sleeping bags and squeezed into the tiny tent.

I don't know if it was the cold, the bright sky or the discomfort of being lumped practically on top of each other, but my first night in (and literally on) Antarctica was spent without any sleep.

Still, I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else in the world.

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ABOUT TOWN

MYSTERY OF INNOCENCE
NASIR AHMED'S SOLO ART EXHIBITION

Organiser: Gallery Chitrak
November 24 - December 8, 10 am - 8 pm, Gallery Chitrak, House- 4, Road- 6, Dhanmondi

HUMACHINITIES
ROUND-TABLE & WORKSHOP ON DIGITAL HUMANITIES

Organiser: Mamun Rashid
December 5-6, 4-6 pm, Jahangirnagar University

THE UNCAGED
ZAHANGIR ALOM'S SOLO ART EXHIBITION

Organiser: Alliance Française de Dhaka
December 1- 14, 6-9 pm, Alliance Française de Dhaka, Dhanmondi