



## Irresistible Antarctica

A Bangladeshi woman's voyage to the icy abode of penguins, whales



**MOHUA ROUF** is a professional in the development sector and an avid traveller, expeditioner. Since the coronavirus pandemic, she has been writing travel stories regularly in various newspapers and magazines.

Mohua Rouf is one of the few Bangladeshis who have ever set foot on the world's southernmost continent, Antarctica. She spent six days in the icy abode of penguins, seals and whales which is arguably the least-trodden place on earth by humans.

There, for nearly a week, she entered an alien world and explored the pristine terrain by rowing through the eerily calm, frozen sea and sometimes hiking through the mountains covered in undisturbed snow.

Her foreign travel experiences began over a decade ago mainly for professional necessity. Her first overseas trip took her to the city of Berlin in Germany. Since then, she has travelled extensively. While studying in Europe, she explored multiple European countries, which enhanced her passion for



past when it was being exploited as a whale-hunting colony by the Western colonisers. Factories were established to butcher whales on an industrial scale to extract oil from their blubbers.

After the promulgation of the Antarctic treaty, whaling was banned and the factories were closed. However, Mohua and her tourmates visited the ruins of those factories to remember what humanity often can do to destroy nature.

"At present, the only permanent human activity allowed in the continent is scientific expeditions. Scientists stay in their tents and they also have to maintain strict rules to conserve the ecosystem. There are some other establishments to support the resident scientists, for instance, a post office," said Mohua.

"I am probably the only mother in Bangladesh who wrote two letters to her sons from Antarctica through that post office," she laughed.

Mohua said one of the most exciting parts of her Antarctica voyage was camping. However, it is not like the camping we are familiar with.

To do this activity, the campers have to climb a mountain called Portal Point whose apex is flat like a plateau. There the campers dig a trench like a grave and stay there in absolute silence under the clear Antarctic sky for a night.

"Visiting Antarctica is not like visiting a tourist destination and taking beautiful photos. It gives you a different perspective on life. In that pristine, pure surroundings, far from the civilisation, you learn to respect nature and its creator in a way that's hard to explain," said Mohua.

When asked how it feels to be one of the few Bangladeshi women to visit Antarctica Mohua said, "I feel proud. If this adventure inspires more women and girls to explore the world which many of them cannot due to just social obstacles, I will be happy."

"I also urge wealthy people and organisations to fund and sponsor such expeditions so that more Bangladeshi travellers, especially women, get the opportunity to explore the world," said Mohua.

*The interview has been taken by Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan*



treacherous southern sea, extremely unpredictable weather conditions and prolonged seasickness can foil everything," added Mohua.

She had to overcome all these difficulties soon after leaving the port of Ushuaia. The sea was unusually rough and the constant erratic motion of the ship frightened everybody on board, let alone Mohua who had no prior experience of seafaring.

"I fell so sick that I thought I would never be able to reach the destination. I also felt embarrassed because if I could not see the beauty of Antarctica after travelling to the end of the world just because of seasickness, it would

the ecosystems of Antarctica and the strict rules and regulations that every traveller has to obey to protect the ecosystems.

But all these struggles paid off when the ship gradually reached its destination and entered the Antarctic Circle after three and half days, battling an untameable sea.

As Mohua said, "When the ship entered the Antarctic Circle, the unworldly beauty of the uninhabited continent simply took our breath away. Suddenly, I totally forgot my sickness and all my weaknesses and immersed myself in the breathtaking beauty of the polar sea which was calm as a pond and filled with

"There were thousands of Penguins. Someone told me that it was probably one of the largest penguin colonies in the world. They were not at all afraid of humans. However, we maintained a safe distance so that they did not feel disturbed."

"In the following days, we explored the Orne and Mikkelsen harbours and climbed a mountain there for several hours through a massive glacier. When we reached the top, we were completely taken aback. The unearthly silent landscape, studded with black rocky outcrops covered with ice, created an aura that is more relatable with other planets, maybe Mars than the Earth," said Mohua.

"Traversing those difficult landscapes such as glaciers and ice sheets full of crevasses became easier thanks to our highly experienced expedition leader. He was extremely cooperative and guided us throughout the hiking," shared Mohua.

Meeting with the whales was one of her most exciting experiences of visiting the continent.

"We maintained strict rules not to disturb those endangered massive animals," she said, adding that the experience was thrilling as well as scary.

"The whales were huge and compared to their size, our zodiac was no bigger than a tiny toy. There were a couple of blue whales as well. Surprisingly, they were very friendly. They swam very close to our boats but they did not cause any turbulence in the water," said Mohua.

However, humans were not that friendly to these wonderful aquatic mammals in the not-so-distant past. Antarctica had a dark



be a shame. However, my fellow travellers and the ship authorities were so cordial and helpful that I managed to recover," shared Mohua.

Travelling to Antarctica is not like visiting any other place. Throughout the voyage, Mohua and her fellow shipmates had to go through a series of training sessions to learn about

icebergs floating here and there."

The travellers in groups reached different places like ports, bays, mountains, channels, and scientific stations in Antarctica by zodiacs – a kind of inflatable small boat.

The first activity Mohua did was visiting a penguin colony on Cuverville Island.

travel and skills.

Following her European adventures, Mohua shifted her focus to North and South American countries. Travelling to Peru, Chile, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Nicaragua, Mexico, Canada, and the USA left a profound impact on her.

Mohua's journey to the South Pole was not like a pre-planned expedition. While she was exploring Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost tip of South America and one of the remotest habited places on Earth, she came across an opportunity to explore Antarctica.

"At that time I did not have sufficient money and no prior plan to go for the voyage. I didn't know much about Antarctica and had no experience of sea voyages either. However, I felt an indomitable curiosity to explore Antarctica," said Mohua.

"I had to spend all my savings to book a ticket to join the voyage. But the most worrying factor was that securing a ticket did not mean you would be able to visit Antarctica. The

**"I am probably the only mother in Bangladesh who wrote two letters to her sons from Antarctica through that post office."**

Want to share your travel experiences with us? Please send your stories to [holiday@thedailystar.net](mailto:holiday@thedailystar.net)

