

Antarctica, the last Frontier! This continent remains a dream for most of us considering how far it is from Western Countries as well as the cost and sometimes the travel difficulties associated to it. After watching several wildlife documentaries on TV, I wanted to see with my own eyes some Emperor Penguins that we can find either in the Weddell Sea or Ross Sea areas but given the insane costs and travel dates to get there, we had to revisit our ambitions and we then choosed to go somewhere easier to visit: the Antarctic Peninsula. But even there, the cost remains very high and the trip options limited, especially given the constraints we personally have for vacations. Because of the season's inversion between the two earth hemispheres, we indeed need to visit Antarctica when it is summer time there, which means winter for us in France when we cannot take vacation whenever and for how long we would like. Therefore, the first challenge was to find some boat expeditions with suitable dates for us at a decent cost. After contacting several companies, we finally found a boat cruise with the right dates and that was offering what we were looking for, that is to say oriented towards wildlife watching and on a somewhat small vessel (100 passengers max) which allows us to go ashore on many different places in Antarctica and everyone at the same time. Going on a cheaper but larger boat with several hundreds of passengers means very limited options for landings and not everyone at the same time. I didn't want to take that risk given the unpredictable weather conditions in such places.

Our boat was the Sea Spirit owned by a Russian company: Poseïdon and we booked our cabin/trip through a Swiss agency called Grands Espaces. Upfront, we found that Sea Spirit was too luxurious and thought we were then paying too much for what we were looking for but finally this boat was a wonderful option: very nice cabins and amenities indeed, very nice food and most importantly, very fast and stable when one consider we had to pass through the infamous Drake Passage twice during this trip to Antarctica. The expedition team on board was also very professional, which was a real plus for our wildlife watching expectation.

Our trip started with a very long journey between France down to Ushuaia in Argentina: 3 flights and 26 hours of travel that went smoothly. Then we had to stop for 1 ½ day in Ushuaia because Poseïdon is asking all passengers to arrive there one day earlier in case there is any problem with inbound flights. We took this opportunity to visit the area: Tierra Del Fuego National Park near Ushuaia and Martillo Island where there is a large Magellanic Penguin colony, a specie that is not seen in Antarctica. Inside the park, there is possibility to see Magellanic foxes, weasels or beavers but we saw none of them. However we saw plenty of nice birds and 2 "imported" mammals: European rabbits and muskrats.

The day to get onboard Sea Spirit arrived eventually. After discovering our cabin and the main areas in the boat (conference room, restaurant, Jacuzzi on the upper deck and bar – very important ☺) we went to the main deck surrounding all the boat and that appeared to be an excellent place to stay for mammal and bird watching while sailing in Antarctica and through the drake Passage.

The Drake Passage... frightening words after reading reports from the first expeditions to Antarctica in the 1900's or watching videos on YouTube! We were expecting the worst with 10m high waves but we were very lucky with the weather during our trip and the Passage was almost flat calm for both the inbound and return trips. The tours before and after us were not so lucky as we learnt they encountered storms that forced them to cut the trip by one day to avoid sailing through the Drake Passage in too harsh conditions. I would have been very upset if this happened to us. While sailing along the Beagle Channel and the Drake Passage, we saw a lot of pelagic birds with different species of magnificent albatross and some whales: Humpback, Sei and Fin whales, sometimes quite in numbers. Although my wife and I spent most of our time on the main deck during the entire journey through the Passage, we managed to miss Hourglass and Dusky dolphins that were seen early mornings in two different days. This makes me mad !!

After 4 days of travel (2 by plane + 2 by boat), we finally reached Antarctica! Well, we actually reached the South Shetland Islands first where we stopped in various islands/places like Half Moon Island, Deception Island or Hannah Point and we saw our first icebergs there. These Islands were not the best looking place during our trip but they were the richest in wildlife with amazing amounts of penguins or seabirds like giant petrels, Antarctic Cormorants etc... We also saw huge numbers of Antarctic Fur Seals (we were lucky enough to see one "blondie" individual: a pale color variant that occurs about one in 1000 seals) as well as some Southern Elephant Seals and a few Weddell Seals.

Then we moved to the Antarctic Peninsula for 5 days where we had an average of 2 landings per day: on Islands and 3 times on the Antarctic continent per say. I was amazed by how mountainous the Peninsula is with lots of very scenic landscapes and straits between islands and the continent, the most famous being the Lemaire Channel. I was also impressed and happy to see that although being there mid-February at the end of the summer season there was still quite a lot of snow as well as lots of giant icebergs: very nice sightings! Of course, there were also many glaciers along the coast but obviously present all year long. Wildlife was less numerous compared to the South Shetland Islands but we saw many crabeater seals and two leopard seals on ice floats and of course still many penguins except for Adelie Penguins, which was the main (and only) disappointment of the trip. We also saw many Antarctic Minke whales and the highest concentration of humpback whales I've ever seen in my life (and we've been to many other places worldwide famous for humpback whales). In certain spots, they were literally all around the boat and during some zodiac cruises we could approach them really, really close: unforgettable !

Conclusion: this was a wonderful trip I won't forget before long. Having also visited the Arctic, I found Antarctic even more impressive for both the landscape and wildlife (too bad there is no polar bear ☺). Although the number of mammal species we saw during this trip is small (we knew this in advance), the quantity is on the other hand impressive with huge colonies of penguins, seals and whales. So if you can afford it, Antarctica is really worth the money.

Below is the list of mammals we saw:

Mammals with photos or well seen				
Species	Espèces	Latin Name	Where seen	Pic
Humpback whale	Baleine à bosse	Megaptera novaeangliae	Numerous in Antarctica Peninsula and Drake Passage	X
Antarctic Minke whale	Petit rorqual de l'Antarctique	Balaenoptera bonaerensis	Common in Antarctica Peninsula	X
Sei Whale	Rorqual de Rudolphi	Balaenoptera borealis	3 in Beagle Channel	X
Fin whale	Rorqual commun	Balaenoptera physalus	1 in Beagle Channel	
Southern elephant seal	Éléphant de mer du sud	Mirounga leonin	3 groups at Hanah Point – South Shetland	X
Antarctic fur seal	Otarie à fourrure antarctique	Arctocephalus gazella	Numerous and seen every where	X
Weddell seal	Phoque de Weddell	Leptonychotes weddelli	4 seen resting on rocky beaches	X
Crabeater seal	Phoque Crabier	Lobodon carcinophagus	Several seen on ice floats	X
Leopard seal	Léopard de mer	Hydrurga leptonyx	2 individuals seen on ice floats	X
South American fur seal	Otarie à fourrure australe	Arctocephalus australis	Several in Beagle Channel	X
Muskrat	Rat Musqué	Ondatra zibethicus	2 in Tierra Del Fuego NP, Ushuaia	X
European Rabbit	Lapin de garenne	Oryctolagus cuniculus	Common in Ushuaia area	X
Total Species Recorded = 12				

I'm adding to this report a few pictures of some of the iconic species we observed during that trip or that were new to me.



Humpback whale



Sei Whale



South American fur seal



Antarctic Minke whale



Antarctic Fur Seal



Antarctic fur seal ("blondie")



Leopard Seal



Crabeater seal



Weddell seal



Southern elephant seal



Muskrat



European rabbit