

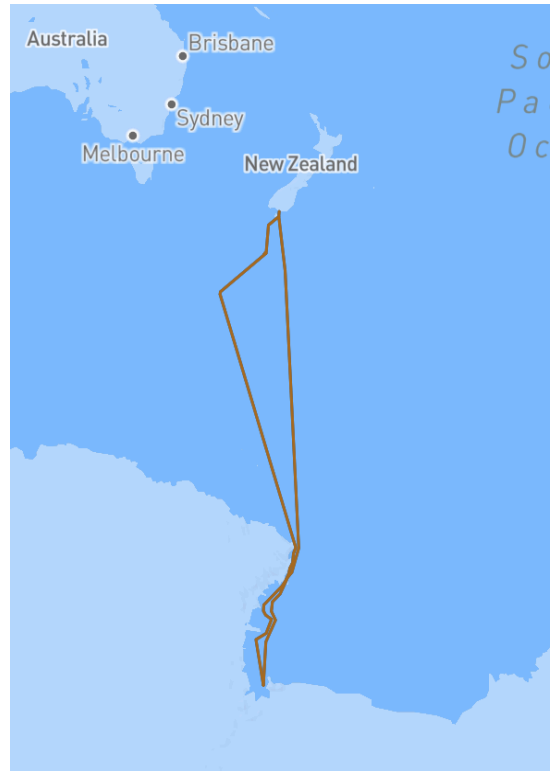
Exploring the Ross Sea and the Sub-Antarctic Islands South of New Zealand

2 February - 1 March 2025

I was fortunate enough to be granted a scholarship to travel on a crazy 28 day adventure through the New Zealand and Australian Sub-Antarctic Islands all the way down to the Ross Sea Region in Antarctica. Below I have put together a mammal-specific edition of the cruise log!

This was an amazing trip for a huge variety of pinnipeds and cetaceans. We saw cetaceans on 20 out of the 26 days on the ship including 100+ Orcas, 60+ Humpbacks, Hourglass Dolphins, Arnoux's Beaked Whales and Blue Whales.

All photos are my own.



Day 1 **Sunday 2 February 2025** **Queenstown**

Our adventure began in Queenstown, New Zealand where we checked into the hotel and met our fellow guests at dinner.

Day 2 **Monday 3 February 2025** **Queenstown to Bluff**

Today we took a scenic 3hr transfer south from Queenstown to the port of Bluff at the bottom of the South Island to board the *Heritage Adventurer*. We had approximately 110 guests on our cruise, out of a maximum of 120.

Day 3 **Tuesday 4 February 2025** **Snares Islands**

On approach to the Snares, we encounter the first mammal of the trip, a **Sei Whale** which was really exciting, especially as this was the only one of the trip.

We then anchored in Ho Ho Bay on the eastern side of Northeast Island in the Snares where we were greeted by hundreds of Snares Penguins. We then boarded a Zodiac to cruise along the east coast of Northeast Island where we viewed plenty of **NZ Fur Seals** and a couple of huge **NZ Sea Lions** lying on the rocks and playing in the water.

In the afternoon we departed along the Western Chain before heading back into the open ocean, on our way to Enderby Island. Because we would make our first landing there, we thoroughly cleaned all our outerwear before having it inspected by the expedition team. We wanted to be sure not to pack any pests or spread diseases.

Day 4

Wednesday 5 February 2025

Enderby Island

In the morning we anchored south of Sandy Bay at Enderby Island in the Auckland Island group. Once on the beach we got amazing views of more **New Zealand Sea Lions** (with pups) and even a Great White Shark cruising in the shallows 20m off the beach! Fortunately the Island is free of terrestrial mammalian pests so none were seen on the lengthy circuit walk around the Island. Here we also got amazing views of Yellow-eyed penguins, Royal Albatross, NZ Falcons and a lonely King Penguin.



NZ (Hookers) Sea Lion

Day 5

Thursday 6 February 2025

At Sea en route to Macquarie Island

Today was a day spent at sea on our way towards Macquarie Island, arguably the most impressive of Australia's Sub-Antarctic Islands. All day there was a steady stream of lectures to keep everyone entertained and a number of different seabirds following the boat, including five different species of Albatross.

Day 6

Friday 7 February 2025

Macquarie Island

The first thing you notice here is a swarm of King Penguins constantly surrounding the boat wondering what they are looking at. This island is like nowhere else I've ever been. Here we got to do a zodiac cruise and a landing at Sandy Bay.

At the landing site we were greeted by a group of 10 ginormous **Southern Elephant Seals**, followed by thousands of curious King and Royal Penguins. Further down the beach was a lonely Gentoo penguin and on the zodiac cruise we found some rockhopper penguins and a couple of **NZ Fur Seals**.



Southern Elephant Seal



Sub-Antarctic Fur Seal pups

Day 7
Saturday 8 February 2025
Macquarie Island

On our transit north to Buckles Bay we met the resident pod of **Orca**. There was a lot of activity going in the pod when we arrived and a huge oil slick in the water surrounded by a frenzy of birds - indicating that they had likely just killed an Elephant seal.

We then proceeded to land at the Isthmus, where the Australian Antarctic Program have a base. At the landing we were greeted by a few cute **Sub-Antarctic Fur Seal** pups – which were originally wiped out in the early 1820s and not seen again for 135 years. We also found a single **Antarctic Fur Seal** amongst the rocks.

Our track took us past many moulting **Southern Elephant Seals**, including a couple of big males.

Next we went past the Orcas again towards Lusitania Bay for a Zodiac cruise to view the largest King Penguin colony on the island. And on our departure we went past Hurd Point at the southernmost end of Macquarie Island to see to the world's largest Royal Penguin colony.

Day 8

Sunday 9 February 2025

At Sea en route to the Ross Sea

In the small hours of the morning we were woken from our deep sleep to see a glorious Aurora Australis – probably the coolest thing I've ever seen. The green light was visible to the naked eye as it danced around the sky. During lunch we witnessed two **Dusky Dolphins** cruising in the wake of the ship for a few short minutes too.



Aurora Australis

Day 9

Monday 10 February

At Sea en route to the Ross Sea

Today was an epic for the cetaceans as we passed over some really good sea floor topography and sea mounts to the north of the Balleny Islands. **Humpbacks** (and a few **Minke** and **Fin Whales**) were seen pretty much every time I went out on the deck or looked out the window, it was pretty staggering. We also saw two large **Sperm Whales** and a pod of **Hourglass Dolphins** cruising alongside the ship for 10 minutes as we ventured South!!



Fin Whales



Hourglass Dolphins

Day 10
Tuesday 11 February 2025
Antarctic Circle and Balleny Islands

We woke up to feeding **Humpbacks** surrounding the boat as well a few **Minkes** and two pods of **Orca that** were patrolling the up coast of the Island.

We then got the call that the crossing of the Antarctic Circle was imminent and most of the

guests and crew jumped in the pool to celebrate. It seemed that crossing the biological, political, and geographical boundaries of Antarctica had brought on Antarctic weather conditions because as *Heritage Adventurer* dropped anchor off Sabrina Island, the temperature was near freezing with heavier snow falling. Despite this, conditions allowed for a Zodiac cruise and kayak paddle. We were soon on the water observing the Adélie and Chinstrap Penguin colonies and our first sighting of some sleeping **Weddell Seals**.

Day 11

Wednesday 12 February 2025

At Sea en route to Cape Adare

Our good run with sea conditions continued overnight, with just enough light snow to leave a small accumulation on the outer decks.

As we continued to near the coast, it turned into a full-on blizzard with heavy snow powered by 40+ knots of wind. as we approached Ridley Beach and got our first look at the hut built by Carsten Borchgrevink and the Southern Cross Expedition in 1899. We were unable to land in the 60-knot gusts, but still, it was wonderful to see the place in these wild conditions. Today we saw a few more **Humpbacks**, **Weddell Seals** and we got our first sighting of a **Crabeater Seal**!

Day 12

Thursday 13 February 2025

Robertson Bay

Heritage Adventurer spent the overnight hours cruising in Robertson Bay. When we awoke, it was to dramatic views of glaciers, cliffs and mountains with the light snow serving to emphasise the folded layers in the rock. With a bit of blue sky and patchy sunlight emerging.

Later in the afternoon, we navigated back to Cape Adare to compare reality with the forecast for further planning. Unfortunately, the swell on both sides of the small beach was too big to allow a landing.

As we turned the corner around Cape Adare, we experienced these conditions for ourselves. The winds that we had missed in the 'screaming sixties' had caught up with us in the normally 'silent seventies'. *Heritage Adventurer* pressed on straight into the gale, which slowly subsided overnight, as we headed for our next destination.

Day 13

Friday 14 February 2025

Coulman Island

We made good progress and arrived at the pack ice at the north end of Coulman Island. Emperor Penguins were spotted in the distance, so our Captain sailed *Heritage Adventurer* into the pack. We made steady progress until the two birds were directly off the port bow. The bow deck was opened and we carefully descended for a great view, with a bonus of a nearby **Crabeater Seal**.

We continued south along the eastern edge of the pack ice looking for an area with room between the floes to explore. This was found off Cape Ann at the southern tip of the island. Here we launched the Zodiacs for a cruise and the kayaks for a paddle. The

ice was broken up and moving slowly in the large, long-period swells. Our first **Leopard Seal** was observed at very close range resting on the sea ice. Much of the sea was covered in pancake and brash ice, a sign that the re-freeze of the sea had already begun. The clear patches reflected the sky and landscape in an ever-shifting pattern as the swell passed under us, while the Snow Petrels passed above us.



Leopard Seal

Day 14
Saturday 15 February 2025
Franklin Island / Ross Ice Shelf

The sea conditions remained moderate as the temperatures became more Antarctic, dropping to reach -5°C with a sea temperature of -1.5°C . In the morning, *Heritage Adventurer* was just offshore from the rugged cliffs and glaciers of Franklin Island. We watched as the scout Zodiacs were launched and explored the beaches for a landing site, which were found to be unsuitable. Onward south toward the Ross Ice Shelf was the call.

Just around lunchtime the first glimpses of Ross Island, starting with Mount Terror and Mount Erebus, came into view.

As we reached the Ross Ice Shelf the temperature reached -12°C .

During the transit, we enjoyed a visit from a large pod of 20+ Ross Sea (Type C) **Orca!**

Day 15
Sunday 16 February 2025
Cape Bird / Scott Base

Having spent the night offshore from Cape Bird, we were all set for an early start. We launched our Zodiacs at 0800 hours, taking us to the pebbly beach for our first landing in Antarctica. The beach and foreshore were populated by **Weddell Seals** and Adélie Penguins.

We set course for Hut Point taking us down the west coast of Ross Island, giving superb views of Mount Erebus and allowing pass-bys of Cape Royds, Cape Evans, Discovery Hut and McMurdo Station. We rounded the corner to approach Scott Base, with our goal was to tour the TAE (Trans-Antarctic Expedition) hut, also known as Hillary's Hut. We landed at an ice foot and walked near Scott Base, which was a thrill.

From there we achieved our furthest south point of 77°54.76S before cruising along the ice edge for two hours watching in awe at the abundance of dozens of **Orca** and **Minke**. This included a couple of curious young Orca tail splashing, spy hopping and swimming right up to the ship to check us out (who knows if they have ever seen a ship before?).

Just before midnight (thanks to the endless 24 hour sunlight) we saw the highlight of the trip - a pod of **Arnoux's beaked whales!!** The pod of about 6-8 individuals was sighted about 300m off the bow amongst the numerous blows of the Minkes and Orcas. They were really tight together and furiously breathing for a couple of minutes before making their next dive.



Arnoux's Beaked Whales pod



Orca

Day 16
Monday 17 February 2025
Cape Royds / Discovery Hut

Mount Erebus greeted us as we made our way into Backdoor Bay at Cape Royds for a visit to Shackleton's Hut, which Ernest Shackleton had built for the Nimrod expedition in 1907. We landed at a small beach and walked across the sparkling black lava hills, through the bright morning sunshine, to the hut tucked into a little valley by the frozen Pony Lake.

After we finished at Cape Royds, the anchor was lifted, and we sailed to Hut Point to visit Scott's Discovery Hut. Even though the distance covered was short, the conditions we found were far different. The temperature was well below freezing with a strong wind blowing. Happy we could shelter in the lee of the hut for some time while waiting, the full effect was experienced on the walk out to Vince's Cross.

After another exciting day, *Heritage Adventurer* returned for a second cruise along the ice edge where we enjoyed the midnight sun and were again provided an absolute feast of wonderful wildlife visits.

Day 17
Tuesday 18 February 2025
Cape Evans

We enjoyed a sleep-in to prepare for the mid-morning start for our day at Cape Evans. This is the hut built for Scott's ill-fated Terra Nova expedition, where he started the journey to the South Pole from which he and 4 others never returned.

The impression made by the hut was powerful. Every corner is filled with history. The thousands of artefacts are placed to bring the story of these men, and their stay here, to life. Each of us had our favourite, from the Emperor Penguin on Scott's desk to the bicycle hanging on the stable wall.

As if this day was not enough on its own, the visit was followed by the Polar Plunge. The brave, or perhaps the foolish, prepared themselves and jumped into the below-freezing sea. No one remained in for very long!

Day 18
Wednesday 19 February 2025
Drygalski Ice Tongue / Terra Nova Bay

Our overnight voyage toward the Drygalski Ice Tongue was through gentle seas. We awoke to breakfast with this vast floating glacier on the port side. As we neared the land, in Relief Inlet, two scout Zodiacs were launched. They soon determined that the floating ice was safe and were shuttled over to walk for an hour on the ice. For company, we had both Adélie and Emperor Penguins. We also enjoyed a Zodiac cruise, observing the Emperor Penguins at the ice edge as a couple of them walked over to get a closer look at us.

As we continued north into Terra Nova Bay the conditions changed rapidly. From the total calm of our walk, we were suddenly in 50-knot winds in a sea covered in whitecaps and spray. Thankfully, we were back on the comforts of *Heritage Adventurer*. We took the opportunity to sail by the Chinese Qinling Station and Inexpressible Island.

As we passed the Italian station, Mario Zucchelli, the conditions had eased. At the

German Gondwana station and nearby South Korean Jang Bogo Station, a scout was made for a landing. The swell was too large to land, so we boarded the Zodiacs and kayaks to explore the area from the sea. Among the highlights were the large ice cliffs with jagged features and subtle colours.

Day 19

Thursday 20 February 2025

At Sea / Cape Hallett

While we slept, *Heritage Adventurer* sailed north through gentle seas and overcast skies. Then we finally we found of pair of **Blue Whales**! Their 6m blows are unmistakable, especially in the cold temperatures where the mist hangs around for a few more seconds - we spotted them over 1km away. When we arrived we had a great sighting of a mother and calf cruising up the coast. Their size is insane, it takes a few seconds from the time they break through the surface of the water to when you get to see their tiny dorsal fin, very impressive.

At Cape Hallett the push ice and swell prevented a landing, so we were again off in the Zodiacs or kayaks for time on the water in the ice. As the cape is the site of an Adélie Penguin colony, many of them were seen on the land and the ice floes, along with numerous Weddell Seals. Combined with the splendid mountain and glacier scenery, they made for a very enjoyable outing.



Blue Whale

Day 20

Friday 21 February 2025

Colbeck Inlet / Cape Adare

Overnight, we travelled north through the still gentle seas to arrive at the southern end of Robertson Bay, opposite Duke of York Island in Colbeck Inlet. We pulled up into the drifting brash ice and launched the Zodiac and kayaks for an exploration. While underway, a small pod of 4 **Orca** (potentially Type B) was sighted at the mouth of the inlet. At the end of the bay, next to the glaciers, we landed at a small rocky beach sharing it with Emperor and Adélie Penguins, **Weddell Seals**, an **Elephant Seal**, and even a moulting Royal Penguin.

In the afternoon, we attempted again to land at Cape Adare – this time successful. It was an amazing experience to spend more time in the first building erected in

Antarctica, and the home to Carsten Borchgrevink and the men of the Southern Cross Expedition.

Here we witnessed the most gruesome kill I've ever seen. The entire time we were on shore, two leopard seals were stealthily patrolling up and down the beach, waiting for some Adélie penguins to return. And sure enough, after about an hour, they spotted a group of Adélies porpoising in at speed. One of the penguins caught on and managed to jump on a small iceberg floating just off the beach, another jumped into one of the zodiacs, but the third was not so lucky and was violently shook in the **Leopard Seals** mouth and thrown across the water for 5 minutes until it was deskinning and eaten. What a crazy thing to witness.

With that our time in the Ross Sea came to an end, but what a time it has been. *Heritage Adventurer* set a course for Campbell Island, and we looked forward to a few days at sea.



Leopard seal shaking and throwing an Adélie penguin



Leopard seal searching for the Adélie penguin that escaped onto the zodiac

Days 21-23

Saturday 22 – Monday 24 February 2025

At Sea en route to Campbell Island

We continued sailing north in calm seas and light winds with the occasional **Humpback Whale** sighting.

Day 24

Tuesday 25 February 2025

Campbell Island

Our morning destination at Campbell Island was a ship cruise to North Cape and Bull Rock to marvel at Campbell Albatross nesting high on rugged cliffs. *Heritage Adventurer* sailed back down the coast and turned into Perseverance Harbour.

Along the way, we observed an assortment of wildlife including **New Zealand Sea Lions** and their playful pups, Campbell Island Flightless Teal, Antarctic Terns and Campbell Island Shags.

Day 25

Wednesday 26 February 2025

Campbell Island

With conditions picking up overnight, our Captain relocated *Heritage Adventurer* around a bend and closer to the opening of the harbour. Gale force winds continued throughout the morning, blowing over 50 knots and whipping up the harbour into spindrift.

Over lunch, *Heritage Adventurer* returned to its anchorage close to the Beeman Hill base. From there we waited patiently in the hope of improvement, to no avail. At mid-afternoon, the decision was taken to leave our sheltered harbour and enter the Southern Ocean. We were warned that swells of 5+ metres were expected and therefore to secure our cabins, take whatever medications we needed, and keep “one hand for the ship”. To emphasise the message, those on Deck 3 had their porthole covers fitted.

Day 26
Thursday 27 February 2025
Auckland Islands

The rough conditions improved through the night until we entered the sheltered waters of Carnley Harbour at breakfast time where *Heritage Adventurer* found sufficient lee from predator-free Adams Island to undertake a Zodiac cruise.

During lunch, and the ship cruise out of the harbour and north to Musgrave Inlet, we were entertained by a fluking **Southern Right Whale**. By then the sky had cleared, the sun was out, and the sea was flat and calm. What a setting for the final operation of our expedition - Zodiac cruising and kayak paddling in the wild rugged beauty of the Subantarctic disguised as the Sub-Tropical – with a feeding **New Zealand Sea Lion**, Rockhopper Penguins and Light-mantled Sooty Albatross for company.



NZ (Hookers) Sea Lion shaking and killing a fish



Southern Right Whale

Day 27
Friday 28 February 2025
At Sea en route to Bluff

We continued our homeward journey through smooth seas, sunny skies and an absolute feast of seabirds trailing *Heritage Adventurer*.

Day 28
Saturday 1 March 2025
Bluff

Sadly it was time for the trip to come to an end.

In total we thoroughly enjoyed these 28 days; 26 of these at sea; 11 landings; 12 Zodiac cruises; 11 ship cruises; the furthest south of 77°54.76S; 4,915 nautical miles travelled; 5 historic huts visited; a walk on the sea ice; 10 penguin species; 9 albatross species; 48 other bird species; **11 cetacean species; 8 pinniped species**; superb weather, sea and ice conditions; exceptional companionship; and uncountable smiles, laughs, and gasps of amazement.

19 Mammals Species Observed:

- Arnoux's Beaked Whale (1 pod)
- Blue Whale (8)
- Sei Whale (1)
- Southern Right Whale (1)
- Sperm Whale (2)
- Fin Whale (15+)
- Antarctic Minke Whale (30+)
- Humpback Whale (60+)
- Orca (10+ pods/100+ individuals)
- Hourglass Dolphin (1 pod)
- Dusky Dolphin (1 pod)
- New Zealand (Hookers) Sea Lion (a lot)
- Southern Elephant Seal (a lot)
- Leopard Seal (4)
- Crabeater Seal (10+)
- Weddell's Seal (a lot)
- Antarctic Fur Seal (1)
- Sub-Antarctic Fur Seal (3)
- New Zealand Fur Seal (a lot)