

Antarctic trip diary, Part 1

12/30/2006

So here I am in the infamous Drake Passage, trying to type while the keyboard keeps moving under my hands. But I get ahead of myself. This is the first of what will hopefully be several logs about my dream trip - a voyage to the bottom of the earth. After two long days of travel, airport waits and red-eye flights, we ended up in Buenos Aires for an overnight stay before continuing on. BA is quite attractive, at least around the government buildings which are all old French architecture (Beaux Arts?). They resemble the Providence RI city hall on steroids. The old port area is being redeveloped into office and entertainment area. That evening, we took in a Tango show which is a must-do if you visit BA. The tango is best described as a cross between ballroom dancing and foreplay performed by dancers best described as eye-candy. Add to that an excellent steak dinner and good local red wine and you have a good start to a trip.

The next morning, 12/29, we flew to Ushuaia. This flight, like the others, was on LAN whose service was better than we expected - more like air lines used to be. An hour before landing, they offered Champaign or wine to all. I normally do not drink that early in the day but as Sandie pointed out, we've both crossed the equator for the first time on this trip and are starting the trip of a lifetime, so some things are worth celebrating. And so we celebrated.

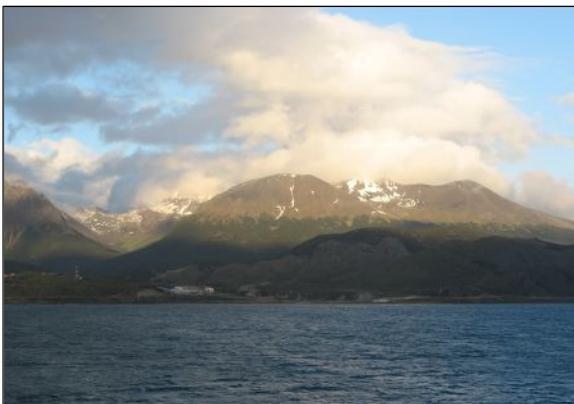
Ushuaia is billed as the Switzerland of South America which I thought was a lot of PR. It's not. It's nestled between alpine peaks and the Beagle Channel, very charming. We spent the afternoon at Tierra del Fuego national park which was another unexpected surprise. In the course of three hours, we had rain, fog, snow and finally sunshine. The park itself was wonderful, the kind of place you want to spend lots more time. We saw rabbits, a fox, rabbits, a hawk, rabbits, a beaver dam, rabbits, and some incredible scenery. Did I mention that we also saw some rabbits? Somebody introduced them a long time ago (seemed like a good idea at the time) and since they have no natural enemies they started reproducing, well, like rabbits.



We headed back to Ushuaia to board our ship, the MS Nordnorge. Several other Antarctic expedition ships were also tied up at the pier including the Lindblad ship. There's no doubt we made the right choice with the Nordnorge. It's much larger than the others and as I type this on a moving keyboard, I wonder how the travelers on the other smaller ships are faring.



Our departure was another breathtaking event. It was at 9PM and the sun was low in the sky, early twilight. This threw a rose glow on the mountains east of Ushuaia. All the mountains rise above the tree line and still have snow on the tops. We called one the Matterhorn because of its close resemblance to the one in Switzerland. Many many photos were taken, especially of the Matterhorn, as the light and pattern of the clouds was continually changing. While congratulating myself on the excellent photos I had taken, I realized a chimpanzee could have done as well. It was so beautiful that all you had to do was point and shoot to get an outstanding photo.



We hit the Drake Passage at 3AM. I know because the moving bed woke me up; Sandie slept right through it all. With her Viking heritage, when you felt this kind of movement it meant you were enroute to a "shopping" trip in Britain. With my Italian heritage, that kind of movement meant either an earthquake or too much chianti. It was not natural but once I got used to it, it's a marvelous sleep aid. This was a moderate passage according to the crew. Convenience bags were conveniently located throughout the ship but neither of us needed them. This passage is considered to be among the roughest waters on earth because it is the

convergence of the Atlantic, Pacific and Southern Oceans (aka Antarctic Sea). This all occurs in a gap of a couple hundred miles which results in large swells. The ship heaves (nautical term) and then the passengers and crew heave (slang term). Even the expedition guides are affected and sometimes have to take a break in the middle of the lecture to take care of more urgent matters. One lecturer hustled out the door so quickly she forgot to turn off her wireless microphone; her distress was broadcast to the entire lecture hall.

On the morning of 12/31, it calmed down a bit. We should be making landfall about mid-day and have our first landing on Deception Island this afternoon. By the way, sunset last night was at 10:45 and sunrise a few hours later. As we continue heading south, days will get even longer. More to follow ...