

Antarctic trip diary, Part 4

1/2/07

Paradise Harbor lives up to its name -- towering cliffs and a glacial wall which periodically calves but did not do so while we were there. There were better "recreational facilities" than at the previous stop: an intermediate lugeless luge run for the really crazy people and a beginner run for the mildly crazy people. Based on today, Sandie and I must be mildly crazy because we both rode the bunny slope lugeless luge run. You just pop your butt in the chute, push off and slide down hoping the pile of snow at the bottom stops you. If not, well, we won't think about that now. At the start of my run I could hear the Olympic announcer in my mind counting down "three, two one, go" as I frantically dug my fingers into the snow to get a winning start. Imagination is a wonderful thing.

After lunch, we had some light snow which, as it interacted with the slipstream from the ship, appeared to be falling upward. But if snow falls downward in the northern hemisphere, maybe it really does fall upward in the southern hemisphere. Anyway, it ended just about the time we entered the Lemaire channel, also known as Kodak Gap. It is a very narrow cut maybe three or four times the width of the ship at its narrowest point and with towering cliffs and glaciers on both sides and lots of small icebergs in the middle. It was all hands on deck with cameras to watch the captain thread this needle, which he did successfully. As we entered the channel, we passed a small sailboat, about 50 feet long. I can only imagine what it must be like crossing the Drake Passage in that thing - probably takes several days. Lemaire Channel is most dramatic in calm sunny weather when the calm water mirrors the cliffs but we weren't that lucky. At least the snow stopped for the duration so it was quite dramatic nonetheless.



The snow finally ended when we reached Peterman Island; it changed to sleet. This is the southernmost point of our trip at about 100 miles north of the Antarctic Circle. Because of the geography, it would have taken another day in the Drake Passage to have reached the Circle and another day back, so very few, if any, expedition ships go that far south. There's too much to see and do up where we are. Peterman is a low island with both Gentoos and Adelie penguin rookeries. More quality time was spent sitting on a rock (in the wind-driven sleet, no less) watching the penguins bicker among themselves about who knows what. We then hiked across the island past a skua rookery to a ridge with a magnificent overlook of a cove loaded with icebergs. It was like looking into a sculptor's warehouse.

On the way back down, three Gentoos crossed our path and, according to Antarctic rules of the road, penguins always have the right of way. One with an attitude came to within three feet of us and stayed there, between us and the path in effect holding us hostage. Nice Guy also came over and tried to get Attitude to leave us alone, but Attitude ignored him, so Nice Guy waddled away leaving us at the mercy of Attitude. We still had hope for the third one rescuing us but those hopes were dashed when he just squirted, thankfully in the other direction, and then walked away. Now Attitude knew he had the upper hand so he just stayed there and taunted us for several more minutes until he apparently tired of playing stupid human games and also waddled away. Such a terrifying experience - not. The ride back to the ship in the Cirkel boats was definitely an E-ticket ride: choppy water, wind driven spray and lots of slamming as we crashed through the waves. But we learned that our waterproof outer-wear really works well.

Tomorrow, we go to Port Lockroy which is a British station, cruise the Neumayer channel (another scenic passage) and small boat trips around Enterprise Island where there is the remains of a whaling ship beached in 1915.

