Expedition Log

Voyage to South Georgia

18 October – 04 November, 2010

On board the

M/V Plancius

MV *Plancius* was named after the Dutch astronomer, cartographer, geologist and vicar Petrus Plancius (1552-1622). *Plancius* was built in 1976 as an oceanographic research vessel for the Royal Dutch Navy and was named *Hr. Ms. Tydeman*. The ship sailed for the Royal Dutch Navy until June 2004 when she was purchased by Oceanwide Expeditions and completely refit in 2007, being converted into a 114-passenger expedition vessel. *Plancius* is 89 m (267 feet) long, 14.5 m (43 feet) wide and has a maximum draft of 5 m, with an Ice Strength rating of 1D, top speed of 12+ knots and three diesel engines generating 1230 hp each.
With

Captain Alexander Pruss
and his International Crew of 35

and

Expedition Leader – Troels Jacobsen (Denmark)
Assistant Expedition Leader – Christopher Gilbert (Canada)
  Guide/Lecturer – Andrew Wenzel (Canada)
  Guide/Lecturer – Gérard Bodineau (France)
  Guide/Lecturer – Nathalie Thibault (France)
  Guide/Lecturer – Axel Krack (Germany)
  Guide/Lecturer – Christophe Gouraud (France)
Hotel Manager – Natascha Wisse (Netherlands)
  Restaurant Manager – Francis De Buck (Belgium)
  Head Chef – Mario Hribernik (Austria)
  Sous Chef – Juergen Benoit (Germany/Chile)
Ship’s Physician – Dr. Michelle Aleyat-Dupuis (France)

Mountaineering Team:

Mountain Guide/Lecturer – Florian Piper (Germany)
  Mountain Guide/Lecturer – Christoph Höbenreich (Austria)
    Gerhard Schumann (Austria)
    John Mills (Great Britain)
    Christopher Short (Great Britain)
    Martina Six (Germany)
    Mathilde Danzer (Austria)
    Mario Trimeri (Italy)
Day 1 – October 18  
Uruguay: Montevideo  

**GPS 07.00 Position:** 35°02’S / 55°55’W  
**Weather:** 18°C, sunny with light breeze and scattered clouds

So here we are at last, in ... Uruguay ... huh? This tiny South American country, home to the first ever Football World Cup (which they won) was, amazingly, the starting point for our intrepid voyage to South Georgia. Most of us had arrived the day before (Gérard excluded) and had taken the opportunity to visit a few corners of this city’s historic district. The architecture and atmosphere took us back 100 years, which seemed just right. We were heading for an isolated island that was made famous almost a century ago by a man named Sir Ernest Shackleton.

By late morning we were arriving at the pier to embark *Plancius*, the perfect vessel to take us deep into the Southern Ocean. After a short delay with the port authorities, we arrived at the ship, stepped onto the gangway, and were greeted by our Hotel and Restaurant Managers, Natascha and Francis. After they checked us into our cabins with the assistance of our Filipino and Russian crew, we were free to unpack and explore the ship. One thought remained on our minds – would this glorious weather accompany us to South Georgia?

A little while after boarding we convened in the lounge on deck five to meet Captain Alexander Pruss and Expedition Leader Troels Jacobsen, two Antarctic veterans, who introduced us to the expedition staff and various personnel. Natascha Wisse, our Hotel Manager, then took over the microphone and gave us a general overview of the ship. A short while later Chief Officer François led us through the required SOLAS (Safety Of Life At Sea) Safety and Lifeboat Drill, assisted by some of the crew and staff. We donned our large orange life vests and continued from the Muster Station out to the lifeboats for further safety instructions.

In fair rapid succession, Gérard arrived, the Uruguayan port authorities cleared our vessel and the local pilot came on board. It was time to throw the lines and begin
our journey! Under a wonderful sunny sky we made our way past gigantic cargo vessels and sailed out of Rio Plata towards the southeast. Prior to dinner we convened again in the lounge to join the Captain and the Expedition and Hotel teams for a toast to our voyage. Then we were invited downstairs to the dining room to enjoy our first delicious dinner prepared by chefs Mario and Juergen.

As the night sky enveloped our vessel we coursed through calm waters – the beginning of our epic 1,437 nautical mile passage to South Georgia. Tonight, as we bunked down for the first of seventeen nights onboard, the rocking of the ship sent us off into a gentle slumber, dreams of kings and mountains and elephants and whatever else our magnificent voyage might entail.
Day 2 – October 19
Argentine Basin en route to South Georgia

GPS 07.00 Position: 36°29′S / 54°10′W
Weather: 10°C, foggy and calm seas, later clearing

Our first full day at sea and the Plancius was rolling gently over a modest swell, good news for those of us just beginning to gain our ‘sea legs’. As we made for the southeast and South Georgia, a thick morning fog surrounded the ship. The good news: there was nary a breath of wind.

A major component of this Voyage to South Georgia expedition is spent at sea. Appropriately, our lecture programme focussed on the wonders of the Southern Ocean. At 10:00 we joined Gérard and Nathalie in the dining room for their English language presentation, Ecology of the Southern Ocean, which looked at the climate and biology of this vast region. At 11:00 the French duo paired up again to present their talk in French.

By noon the fog dissipated and the sun broke through scattered clouds. What a beautiful day ... T-shirt weather! Time spent on deck was rewarding in many ways. It was a thrill to smell the sea air and feel the sun on our faces and the movement of the deck under our feet.

For wildlife enthusiasts (isn’t that all of us?) we were rewarded with multiple sightings of sea lions. Or were they fur seals? There are three possible species of otariids to be seen at this latitude; southern sea lions, South American fur seals and
Antarctic fur seals. It was a challenge to confirm exactly which species we were seeing as the sightings were fleeting.

It was also an outstanding day for bird watching. Some of the most magnificent flying birds in the world soared around our ship, including five species of albatross: wandering, royal, black-browed, sooty and yellow-nosed. The birders and expedition team were particularly excited when they spotted the yellow-nosed and sooty albatrosses, as well as the sightings of spectacled petrels. Extremely cool sea birds!

After a relaxing lunch we met Axel at 15.00 for his talk, *The Global Conveyor Belt*. In this Axel explained how ocean currents operate and, more importantly, how they affect virtually every aspect of our living planet. At 16:30 we were called to deck three where the expedition team handed out rubber boots in anticipation of our wet landings in South Georgia.

In the early evening we met again in the observation lounge where we had a recap of the day and Troels briefed us on tomorrow’s activities. All in all it was a very full, relaxing and wildlife-filled day, and a great start to our southern adventure!
Day 3 – October 20
Argentine Basin en route to South Georgia

GPS 07.00 Position: 40°45’S / 50°46’W
Weather: 16°C, sunny with light breeze and distant clouds

Everyone was amazed this morning at wake up when Troels announced that it was 16°C and sunny!! Remarkably, this spectacular weather would remain with us throughout the day as we sailed further and further south.

There was a good crowd on the outer decks, many in shirt sleeves, to take in the wonderful conditions and the incredible wildlife. In the earlier hours we began with two cetacean species – a sei whale passed very near to the ship, while a distinctive, angled sperm whale blow was spotted in the distance. However, today was mostly about the birds of the Southern Ocean. There wasn’t a moment when one or another species wasn’t flapping or soaring along with our ship. Frequent guests were the albatrosses, perhaps the world’s most majestic birds. But it was the continued variety of species that was so surprising: yellow-nosed, northern royal, sooty, black-browed and wandering all accompanied us again today. We also encountered many prions, cape petrels and even more of the beautiful spectacled petrels than we saw yesterday.

Although it was difficult to leave the deck and the wildlife in this weather, many of us joined Andy for his lecture Tales of Whales I Have Known, Part I. His engaging talk took us through the basics of whale biology, but was related in large part through Andy’s personal experiences of working with whales, making it all the more entertaining. Gérard, along with Christophe and Nathalie, then introduced us to The Birds of the Southern Ocean in French. This provided us with helpful hints on how to easily identify the southern birds in flight, but also gave us the opportunity to ask questions about the species we hope to see on our voyage. Others chose to join Nicole on the foredeck to observe her painting and to glean some artistic advice.
Our afternoon lecture programme began with Axel’s *The Wings of the Albatross*. His informative talk covered many aspects of the albatross life cycle. We are all hoping to see albatrosses in South Georgia, but who would have guessed that we’d already have seen five species? Later in the afternoon we watched two episodes of the famous BBC series, *Life in the Freezer*. One focussed on the seasons of Antarctica and the other on the island of South Georgia – a perfect primer for our voyage and (as always) exquisite wildlife footage.

Though the perfect weather continued up to dinner, the gentle swell we had been enjoying increased throughout the afternoon. We were pretty certain that one of the reasons for this was the fact that we were sailing over a prolific sea mount (shallower waters), increasing the swell beneath our hull.

Shortly before dinner we joined Troels and the expedition team in the lounge for our daily recap and briefing. We talked about the most bizarre sighting of the day, a sunfish (*mola mola*) that swam right by our hull! During the recap we learned that these beasts can get up to 4 metres long. Christophe reviewed all of the bird species we had seen and then Troels spoke of tomorrow’s plans.

The dining room was abuzz with the excitement of a fine sea day and all of the wildlife we’d seen. As night fell, the sea air dropped a degree or two in temperature, and the swell continued to increase. We went to our bunks in anticipation of another great day tomorrow, well aware of the ship’s increased movement as the *Plancius* continued southwards en route to South Georgia.
Rollin’, rollin’, rollin’, the ocean is a rollin’ (sung to the tune of Rawhide). We awoke to grey skies and medium sized rollers of about 2-3 metres. So far, so good (touch wood), this has been a nice smooth ride. Those of us that traverse the Southern Ocean on a semi-regular basis know that it can be much worse. Today it’s rough enough that you know you are on the ocean, yet smooth enough where you’re not apt to spill your drink – very important.

Our education programme took a different turn this morning. We have a team of eight mountaineers on board that are going to attempt the same crossing of South Georgia that Sir Ernest Shackleton began with Tom Crean and Frank Worsley in May of 1916. At 09:30 the two leaders, Florian and Christoph introduced us to the rest of the team members and presented, In Shackleton’s Footsteps, an overview of their proposed crossing.

Ninety-four years ago Shackleton was in a desperate struggle for survival. He and his men completed their treacherous journey in 36 hours, with little more than fifty feet of rope an ice axe and a stove. For crampons, he and his men hammered nails pulled from the James Caird, through the soles of their leather boots. Our team would be going in style. All told each person would be carrying about 35 kilos of gear for their three to four day crossing. With them they would carry some of the best gear available: iridium satellite phones (x3), specialized skis and clothing, high tech sleds, crampons, piolets, high caloric dried foods, dried wine (just add water) and even chocolate mousse. Florian and Christoph spoke about their attempt in connection with past attempts of others (failed and successful), showed us a selection of their gear, and discussed the weather forecast and secondary plans lest they run into horrible conditions. It was quite a thrill to think that in just a couple of days we would bid this octet adieu, and leave them to the mercies of South Georgia’s mountainous glaciated interior.
At 11:00 we joined Christopher for his lecture *The Silent Men Who Do Things*. In this he brought to life the unbelievable accomplishments of Ernest Shackleton and his men during their nearly two year adventure on the edge of survival. Those of us onboard are familiar with the tale of the *Endurance*, recognised as one of the twentieth century’s most incredible survival stories. Nevertheless, it was good to reacquaint ourselves with the particulars of the expedition, the role that South Georgia played in it, and the hardships the men endured before their final rescue.

At 15:30 we joined Andy for his lecture: *Sitting with Seals*. Who knew seals could be so interesting? After his talk we were all pumped in anticipation of seeing thousands of magnificent bilious bags of roaring, undulating blubber: the southern elephant seals of South Georgia! A little later, at 17:00, we joined Nathalie for her introduction to the natural history of penguins. Nathalie focused on one of the most beautiful of all penguin species, the king penguin. South Georgia is the breeding site for hundreds of thousands of kings, and these creatures bring to mind all of those famous photographs and films that we have seen of South Georgia. Would we have similar sights and encounters, we wondered?

The weather had cleared briefly in the afternoon, but by early evening we were once again beset by fog. At times, visibility was reduced to less than 50 metres. The fog wouldn’t affect our appetites, and we sat down to enjoy another scrumptious meal prepared in our galley and served by our restaurant staff. It was nice to see almost everyone present – it appears that we have finally acquired our sea legs.

After dinner we watched the film *South* (English), featuring Frank Hurley’s masterful cinematography. Due to the sinking of the *Endurance* and the subsequent tribulations of survival, Hurley was unable to come up with enough footage for a full length feature film. In fact, even before Shackleton had rescued the men of the Ross Sea Party (the ‘other half’ of his expedition – more on that later), Hurley had returned to South Georgia to film the island’s wildlife, ultimately providing him with enough fodder for a feature length film that would run to packed theatre houses across Europe, the U.K. and North America for years. Our French speaking passengers enjoyed Part I of Kenneth Branagh’s brilliant docudrama, *Shackleton* (in French). All in all it was another full but relaxing day on the Southern Ocean.
Although a glorious sun was shining, we awoke to a rather different day. It was clear that we were approaching the Antarctic Convergence, also known as the South Polar Front. It was cold on deck today! We heard from Troels that during the night a stronger counter-current had slowed our vessel, and we were hoping that this scenario would reverse so that we could gain some of this lost time back. Every mile counts when you have 1,437 nautical miles to cover! But we were getting close – tantalizingly close to South Georgia – and the day’s programme reflected this fact. But first, a few words on the Convergence itself...

The Antarctic Convergence defines a region where warmer waters from the north collide with the colder, denser, and less saline waters from the south. The colder waters sink beneath the warmer waters, creating an area of ‘mixed’ waters.

Found approximately between latitudes 50°S and 60°S, the Convergence is marked by a sudden, rather than gradual, drop in water temperature. It is the biological limit of the Antarctic ecosystem and though there is often an increase in wildlife, there is no visible change in the sea. This nutrient-rich region contains an enormous amount of krill, a keystone species to life in and around Antarctica, providing an abundant food supply for birds and marine mammals alike.

After breakfast we took turns for our French and English language IAATO and Zodiac briefings. We learned that IAATO (the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators) was established in 1991 and, in conjunction with the Antarctic Treaty, it sets the protocols for how tourists behave in Antarctica. This thorough briefing informed us how to act around the wildlife (and each other!). The ensuing Zodiac briefing likewise informed us how to conduct ourselves safely in the boats, on the gangways and on shore.
As usual, when not in the briefings or lectures we took the opportunity to get out on deck and look for wildlife (albeit with a few extra clothing layers today). There was a spectacular sighting this morning – one that was later confirmed by looking at passenger photographs. This was a straptoothed whale, a rarity in any sea. For this and other reasons, straptotoothed whales are very poorly studied, and it is a real honour to see one of these mysterious creatures in the wild. Outstanding!

During the afternoon we continued our preparations for South Georgia. All bags, gear and clothes were vacuumed and cleaned to avoid the introduction of any alien plant species to South Georgia. With only five vacuums and 93 passengers, we took turns by language to clean our gear. When not vacuuming, the French language contingent joined Gérard for The Geography of South Georgia in which he introduced us to the geography of the island, in terms of climate, ice, geology, and so forth. In the opposite time slot, Troels delivered Maybe Tomorrow I Will Fly, his thorough introduction to those iconic animals of the Deep South, penguins.

At today’s Daily Recap we had the good pleasure of seeing passenger Nathalie’s photographs of the three straptoothed whales, which Troels further explained to us in some detail. How fortunate are we to have seen one of the world’s most mysterious and poorly known sea creatures?

This evening Kenneth Branagh’s Shackleton, Part II was shown in the French language, and 90° South, Herbert Ponting’s film of Scott’s fateful Terra Nova expedition to the South Pole was shown in English. The film is dated, certainly, but the original footage did not disappoint. Equally compelling was the notable difference between the photography and cinematography of Ponting and Hurley. Although both talented individuals, each artist’s style clearly reflects those of their respective leaders, Scott and Shackleton.
Wow! Four days have flown by...or should I say sailed by? Regardless, today would be the day we set foot upon South Georgia! Yippee! We wouldn’t arrive until mid-afternoon, but there was a ripple of excitement on board Plancius as we neared our first landing.

Our ETA left plenty of time in the morning for more lectures to further prepare us for our grand adventure. At 10:00 we joined guest lecturer Jonneke van den Berg for her talk on the vegetation of sub-Antarctic islands with a focus on South Georgia.

At 11:00 Nathalie gave a lecture in French entitled The Beach Master in which she discussed the natural history and biology of southern elephant seals, the largest seals in the world. Little did we know what was in store for us over the coming days... While most of us attended lectures, the mountaineering party scurried about the ship making last minute preparations for their trek across the island.

By early afternoon blue skies defeated grey clouds – the sun poked through a high cloud layer. Is it just me, or are the clouds whiter and is the blue in the sky bluer in South Georgia? It certainly seems so.

“Land Ho!” McCarthy cried from the cockpit of the James Caird when the peaks of South Georgia hove into view through angry mists. Collectively, we remarked the same, though perhaps with less desperation. We had arrived at last. There she was; our destination was finally in sight. At 15:30 the Zodiaks hit the water
and we headed for the beaches! We separated into three groups. One set of boats headed off to Cave Cove, the site of the James Caird’s landing on May 10, 1916. A second group landed at Peggotty Bluff, the place from which the Shackleton trio departed on their death defying foray into the interior, leaving the other three Caird men to wait under the upturned boat. The plan was to spend an hour and a half at each site and then swap locations. The third group was comprised of our intrepid mountaineers. We wished them luck as they sped off to a landing site deeper in King Haakon Bay to begin their passage.

But the best-laid plans are often for naught if South Georgia conditions have contrary ideas. The team that went to Cave Cove experienced high winds and a dangerous surf. Troels’ scout boat was in fact the only boat to make a brief exploratory landing. Everyone in that boat received a thorough soaking in the heavy surf. Cave Cove would have to be abandoned in favour of extending the landing at Peggotty Bluff.

Historically speaking, King Haakon Bay is the most exciting of all ‘Shackleton sites’ in South Georgia. If Shackleton could cross the island and reach the whalers of Stromness from here, he could possibly rescue the three men left at Peggotty Bluff and the twenty-two left on Elephant Island in the South Shetlands. For tourists today it is the least visited Shackleton-related site, mostly due to the unreliability of the conditions.

As opposed to Cave Cove, at Peggotty the landing operations went without a hitch. It was a beautiful afternoon; the beach was teeming with wildlife. It was nearly wall-to-wall ellies, and as we approached the landing site we could see and hear hundreds of them. The first Antarctic fur seals had also arrived. A handful of fat, healthy, handsome, male furries were parked about the beach and scattered through the tussock. There were also a few young fur seals of indeterminate sex (young males??) and a very few mature females. In addition to the seals and penguins, a pair of silently subtle pintail ducks glided past the landing beach.

Since Cave Cove was cancelled we offered a Zodiac cruise deep into King Haakon Bay. The three boats had a lovely time cruising past the beautiful blue glacier at the head of the bay. Dinner was served a trifle later than usual which simply reflected the wonderfully full day we had all enjoyed. What would tomorrow bring?
Day 7 – October 24
Bay of Isles: Salisbury Plain, Rosita Harbour & Prion Island

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°03’S / 37°15’W
Weather: 5°C, scattered cloud, no wind

Our first full day in South Georgia would be enjoyed in the Bay of Isles. And yes, the threats were true...Troels awoke us at 05.30 for our intended first landing. It seems the conditions were, errr, perfect for a Salisbury Plain landing. Indeed, the rising sun imbued the horizon with a pinkish-blue hue. We rubbed the dust from our eyes, popped up to the lounge for a quick coffee and danish (Troels, note the lower case ‘d’), a bite of fruit, and then it was off to the gangway.

The beach, as always at Salisbury, was an adventure this morning – big surf. Just about everyone got wet on the way in, an unavoidable fact for many of SG’s eastern shores. However, once ashore we experienced true bliss. How could a single place on this planet serve up so many beautiful experiences, so enticing for all of the five senses? How could reach the far end of the beach when it meant leaving the other end of the beach?
A staggering array and amount of wildlife welcomed us here. The area is so large that it invites us to enjoy our solitude, whether (and I realise this goes against the OED definition) alone or with others. Places such as this are so humbling that they force us to consider our very existence on the face of the greater earth; they make us feel human. It will be a challenge when we return home to sit with friends and family to illuminate the experiences we relished this morning: having a king come and ‘explore’ you, watching the courtship of an elephant bull and cow (pinniped steamrolling), looking into the iridescent eyes of a scavenging southern giant petrel, sitting within the surf’s auditorium as wildlife come and go from their other home, the ocean. Ask me to define such an amalgam of sensations. The answer is South Georgia.

We had experienced some of our first elephant seals and king penguins and the like at Peggotty Bluff yesterday, but the magnitude this morning was overwhelming. Some chose to walk a short distance and sit, absorbing and contemplating their surroundings. Others gleefully staggered about, not sure what to look at, what to photograph, what to concentrate upon. Blissful.

At the end of our three and a half hour landing things were a little splashy at the boats, but we all managed just fine. We are certainly gaining an appreciation of the prolific South Georgian swells and the katabatic winds that whip up the sea in a flash. Back on board there were lingering smiles and many full camera cards as we settled into brunch and steamed the short distance over to the western shores of the Bay of Isles for our landing at Rosita Harbour, a virtually unknown and rarely visited place.

Again we were blessed with beautiful weather, but this time we also enjoyed calm conditions at the beach. Not quite the cacophony and frenzy of Salisbury Plain, we approached Rosita Harbour with a spirit of adventure and discovery. Some of us joined on the hike up to the snowy ridge for incredible views over and beyond the immediate area. Others remained at lower altitudes and walked amongst the fur and elephant seals on the beach and through the tussock grass. We were getting to know these beasts rather well, and could anticipate some of their behaviour –
that’s not to say that we didn’t jump a little at the sight of a snarling fur seal in our path (or at our heels). In addition to the wonderful light and scenery and wildlife at the beach, many of us ambled over to the south side of Rosita to stand beneath the cliffs where light-mantled sooty albatrosses were soaring around their nests. These birds, possibly the most beautiful of all the albatrosses, are always a treat to watch.

After Rosita we sailed for Prion Island, our third stop of the day. Prion Island is a Specially Protected Area where the wandering albatross comes to nest. Due to the delicate nature of the site, only 30 passengers are permitted to land at one time. So we split into three groups by language, each of us having a two hour expedition this afternoon. One hour was spent visiting the albatross, and the other was passed in the boats, on the lookout for the South Georgia pipit.

On the island itself, a boardwalk was completed two years ago, making the walk to the top of the island easy, clean, and perhaps even more productive than in the past, as we were allowed to be only four meters from a wandering albatross chick on the nest. The largest of all seabirds, some of us were fortunate enough to see an adult actually feeding its chick – a rare sight, indeed! As Prion Island is rat- and mouse-free, we were able to see the endemic South Georgia pipit, the southernmost songbird in the world, during our Zodiac cruising. We also managed to see several pintail ducks and more light-
mantled sootys flying near their nests. Bird enthusiasts in particular returned to the ship with a special glow of satisfaction.

Tuckered out after a long and eventful day, we joined Troels in the lounge to hear of tomorrow’s plans. We would be, ummm, rising early again for another 06.00 departure and another proposed triple-landing day. What else do you do on South Georgia? Pleasant dreams.
Day 8 – October 25
Ocean Harbour; Godthul & Cobbler’s Cove

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°20’S / 36°11’W
Weather: 2°C, sunny with scattered cloud

It’s 05:30. Ocean Harbour.
Bleary-eyed early morning adventurers blindly groped for pastries, hot drinks and fruit in the observation lounge. It was going to be a busy day with three landings planned, and so a load of caffeine and calories was a good way to kick-start the morning.

Sunbeams dodged stacks of purple lenticular clouds as dawn broke over South Georgia. From *Plancius* you could hear a dissonant chorus of yelping, belching, and snorting…the elephants. Mothers and pups called back and forth, while the large bulls let their presence be known. The wall of sound was punctuated by the plaintive cries of light-mantled sooty albatrosses both on the wing and on the nest. It was wildlife central.

At 06:00 we scuttled down the gangway, boarded the Zodiaks and zoomed off to the beach at Ocean Harbour. Prior to 1909 Ocean Harbour was known as New Fortuna Bay, but the name was changed to represent the Norwegian whaling company *Ocean*. The company’s rusty old steam locomotive remains, recalling the days when it was used to
run cargo from the jetty to the station. A small whaler’s graveyard added a tinge of melancholy to the atmosphere. Somewhere in the cemetery lies Frank Cabrail, a steward aboard the sealing vessel *Francis Allen*, who passed away on October 14th 1820. Frank has the dubious honor of occupying the earliest known grave in South Georgia.

The bay was like a giant amphitheatre, with mountains looming on three sides. We landed at the head of the bay (the west end) by the whaling station, in operation from 1909 until 1920. As we approached the landing site we could see many reindeer high up on the mountainside. In 1911 the first ever reindeer were released here for sport and food. Coincidentally, these were the first reindeer we’d see on our voyage. The three male and seven female reindeer had been transported here over the Southern Ocean, all the way from Valders in southern Norway.

Our landing area was all of 500 metres long, from drop-off to pick-up points. We strolled under the gorgeous morning light to photograph and enjoy the historical remains as well as wildlife along the beach. There was much elephant action this morning including a gory scene as southern giant petrels and skuas fought over a cow’s afterbirth.

The Zodiaks were repositioned to pick everyone up on the opposite side of the bay near the rusting shipwreck *The Bayard*. The three-masted barque was built in 1864 in Liverpool. At the end of her ephemeral spell as a cargo vessel here she was blown from her moorings in 1911, coming to rest where she lies today, despite the efforts of two whaling boats to pull her off shore. She is now a dilapidated condominium for about eighty pairs of blue-eyed shags.

Leaving shore we paused in the Zodiaks by *The Bayard* – a great opportunity to photograph the shipwreck and its avian occupants. A small sailing yacht lay anchored nearby. Perhaps they were all out trekking, as we saw neither hide nor hair of anyone on board.
Back on the ship the dining room was noisier than usual, with everyone excited from the morning’s perfect landing. Along with all the chat, we heaped tasty warm nourishment onto our plates...a full morning done and it wasn’t even 09.00!

Meanwhile Captain Pruss was repositioning the ship for our second morning landing, and by 10:30 we were back in the boats. The beautiful weather held with light westerly winds and only a few clouds.

Godthul means “Good Hole” in Norwegian, and I think we could all agree that the place is aptly named. We gathered onshore for a quick briefing by Troels. We had a lot of freedom to explore here but we were reminded not to go anywhere inside the whaling station ruins. The historic rubble consists of old barrels, water boats and various and sundry debris. Godthul was never a major shore station, but was the site of a floating factory ship that operated here on and off from 1908 to 1929.

Reindeer were abundant and roamed the hillsides above the bay, and a gentoo rookery lay up the hill from the landing site. Those who ventured to the colony passed scattered molting penguins along a trickling glacial brook. It was a marvelous opportunity to get to know another penguin species.

Some people chose to venture on a short climb through the tussock on the south west side of the bay to see and photograph light-mantled sooty albatrosses. For
many people, light-mantled sootys are the most beautiful of all albatross. They are the only albatross that has a graceful courtship tandem flight, their flight pattern is unique among all albatrosses, their wings are more slender and their subtle colouration more beautiful. Perhaps also it is the beautiful crescent flick of white that adorns their eyes. Whatever your reason, it was brilliant to see them up close today.

Our third landing of the day (was that lunch or dinner we just ate?) was around the corner at Cobbler’s Cove. \textit{Plancius} remained at the same anchorage and we were to Zodiac past Long Point to reach our destination. However, by 15:30 the wind had picked up considerably, and everyone in the Zodiacs braved a two-metre swell and thirty knot winds as they swung past the point and westwards into Cobbler’s Cove which itself was completely sheltered from the wind.

The buzz about this landing was our first opportunity to see macaroni penguins, but we were going to have to work for it – there was a respectable round trip hike of four kilometers to the macaroni rookery. The hike snaked up a steep partly snow-covered scree slope from the landing site. At the top of the hill, 150 metres above the landing beach, the strong thirty knot wind blasted us in the face. Still, we stood in awe looking at the dramatic, rugged, wind-swept coastline.

We paused to catch our breath and then made our way down a gentle slope to the macaronis. We are very early in the season and, at first glance, it seemed too early. The colony looked barren, but we soon discovered crested penguins lurking behind clumps of tussock that clung to the rocky terrain. In total we found ten macaroni penguins. These are the early birds; the first arrivals. Everyone gathered quietly around and photographed these very funky-looking birds to their heart’s content.
Soon it was time to hike back to the ship. Remember the snow I mentioned earlier? It was a little slippery on the way up, right? Also a little slippery on the way down! Who could resist a chance to slide most of the way down the hill to the landing site? Just sit on your bottom, lift your feet and away you go! Judicious planting of your feet controlled one’s speed and trajectory.

Well...three landings in a single day for the second day running! Each of the sites was very different, and each location offered up an experience of a lifetime. After our ‘brisk’ return boat ride to the Plancius, we were greeted by Natascha and Francis offering up a tasty hot libation at the top of the gangway. Most of us turned in early this evening, tired from the day’s events, and wanting to be well rested for all of tomorrow’s possibilities.
Day 9 – October 26  
Fortuna/Shackleton Hike; Stromness & Grytviken  
**GPS 07.00 Position:** 54°07’S / 36°48’W  
**Weather:** 8°C, sunny with scattered cloud and a fresh westerly breeze

Last night we received some great news – our mountaineering team had contacted us again by iridium telephone and informed us that they would be down in Fortuna Bay this morning, an amazingly swift crossing of South Georgia. We awoke at anchor in Fortuna, and just before 08.00 we could actually see the climbers as they were making their way down to the beach. A couple of Zodiacs went ashore and after handshakes and greetings, most of their gear was brought back to the ship. The climbers themselves would continue on in Shackleton’s footsteps, all the way to Stromness Harbour whaling station, where Shackleton, Crean and Worsley stumbled upon the outside world for the first time in more than 500 days.

Our climbers would not be alone on the final leg of their crossing, as thirteen passengers and a few staff and crew would join them on the trek from Fortuna across to Stromness. The trek was difficult in places with the scree slopes and snow cover, but the views made it all worth the while. It was quite the experience, passing by Crean Lake (where its namesake fell through the ice) and eventually having Stromness come into view. It was hard to imagine how those three men must have felt when treading along this very route after all of their tribulations ninety-four years ago.

By the time everyone was down on the plain or at the Stromness station, we were suddenly made aware that weather conditions had changed quickly. The winds were gusting to over 50 knots per hour (almost 100 km/hr!), raging down from the high glaciers through the mountain valleys to thrash the sea surface. Twisters were blowing along near the ship as Captain Pruss and Troels called for a cancellation of
our landing (already near its end) and an immediate evacuation of all passengers and staff from shore. This was done in a safe manner and again, besides some spray, everyone arrived back on board no worse for wear. This certainly gave us an idea of how rapidly conditions change in South Georgia.

Undaunted we set sail for Grytviken, site of the first whaling station here, erected by Carl Anton Larsen in November 1904 (the first barrels of oil left for Argentina on Christmas Eve that year). Once we were cleared by the British Government Officials we made for shore. We began our landing in the small cemetery for a toast to ‘The Boss’, Sir Ernest Shackleton. Troels paid tribute to the exceptional explorer who died here aboard his last expedition ship, the *Quest*, January 5, 1922 at 47 years of age.

We took our time to wander through Larsen’s old whaling station and to get a feel, however gruesome, for what it might have been like to live and work at one of these dreadful places. Most of us explored the church and the fine museum (and popular gift shop!). Some sent postcards from the South Georgia Post Office, complete with souvenir stamps. There was also time to visit administrative King Edward Point (KEP) to see the memorial cross erected by the crew of the *Quest* in Sir Ernest’s honour.

As darkness fell we returned to the *Plancius* for a special chilly barbeque prepared by chefs Mario and Juergen on the aft deck. Seven of the KEP staff joined us. This was a great pleasure for them as we are indeed the first tourist vessel to visit Grytviken this season (it’s always a long winter!).
Perhaps this was even more of a pleasure for us to meet these fine folk and to discover what it’s like to live a portion of your life on South Georgia.

Eventually we made our way to our cabins to settle into our beds after a most eventful and unforgettable day. Those who peered skyward this evening were treated to an incredible starry night.
Day 10 – October 27  
Gold Harbour; Drygalski Fjord & Larsen Harbour  
GPS 07.00 Position: 54°25’S / 36°06’W  
Weather: 2°C, mostly clear and sunny with a stiff southerly breeze

Once again, the best laid plans are for naught if South Georgia has a contrary notion. Our goal was to make an early morning landing in St. Andrews Bay, the single most impressive landing site in South Georgia with the largest king penguin colony (150,000 pairs) and well over 4,400 southern elephant seals. Without a doubt, it is one of the ultimate wildlife destinations on planet earth.

The 3 km beach at St. Andrews faces due east and is completely exposed to the full power of the Southern Ocean. This is why we were primed for another early landing – the early morning hours often offer less wind and less swell, and consequently less surf on the beach.

But it was not to be. At 05:30 we awoke to Troels’ cheery voice informing us that there was far too much wind to make a safe landing here. Drat! However, with a comfortably long 8-day landing schedule such as ours, Troels informed us that we would have other opportunities to see the spectacle of St. Andrews.

It has been said that when in South Georgia you make a plan in order that you have something from which to deviate. So, undaunted we proceeded to Gold Harbour. Many people consider Gold to be the most beautiful landing site in all of South Georgia. The Salveson mountain range provides an impressive backdrop to the 1-kilometer beach. Cliffs shelter the landing site at the north end near Gold Head, where light-mantled sooty albatrosses soar on the strong sea gales. Those sheltering cliffs treated us with ideal landing conditions (except someone forgot to inform the male southern elephant seals that we were coming).
From the Zodiaks we could see at least 2,000 ellies stretched along the beach. It was a thrilling introduction to Gold Harbour. Once on shore we had to tread our way carefully through the elephant seals that ringed the landing site and then proceed carefully through the tussock grass. We had to be very aware that there could be an Antarctic fur seal lurking behind each clump.

The south end of the beach is hemmed in by Bertrab Glacier, a large moraine lagoon and a king penguin colony of about 25,000 pairs. In 1985 the glacier reached all the way down to the beach, but it has since retreated about 1 km inland.

For the albatross keeners, Gérard led a hike up through the tussock to the cliffs just above the landing site. They had excellent views of more light-mantled sooty albatrosses both on the nest and flying in tandem close by the cliffs.

There is so much wildlife at Gold that it is difficult to absorb it in one visit – but you need to make sure that you have your wits about you when in the vicinity of the alpha bull ellies. These males were ever-vigilant, preventing satellite bulls from copulating with the females in their domain, while the satellites were constantly trying to pass along their genes. When “the big guy” was mating or engaged in chasing off an amorous satellite, the other males in the area would seize their chance and move in on the closest female (sounds like some bars I have visited). Sometimes the females were receptive to the interlopers’ advances, sometimes they would complain vociferously, and raise the alpha bull’s attention. Either way, it was fascinating and great fun to watch and listen!
Another element to this courtship sparring was the charging of the dominant bull after would-be suitors. When this happened, every bull in the immediate area would scatter. It was amazing how quickly they could move. Try to imagine a four tonne freight-train-of-a-caterpillar rapidly (and fairly silently) undulating over the sand, whilst looking over its shoulder to see if “the big guy” is in pursuit. Five words: get out of the way!

Life and death walked hand in hand. Everywhere there were newborn elephant pups, each new birth attracting throngs of southern giant petrels and skuas, eager for the placenta and afterbirth. Here and there lay the carcasses of pups, often trampled by fighting bulls (pup mortality is high). On occasion, when a pup gets separated from its mother, skuas and petrels swiftly swoop in for the kill. It is all part of the delicate balance as these birds will soon have their own young to feed.

Separate from the main seal colony and higher up the beach away from the centre of activity we saw the first weaners, pups that have been weaned from their mothers. Some of the weaners were huge (upwards of 200 pounds!), and all of them, at this stage, are on their own. The mothers, who have experienced a tremendous loss of weight during a month on shore, birthing and raising their pups, have returned to sea to feed.

Further south along the beach we began to hear the trumpeting calls of the king adults and the piping cries of the wooly chicks. The calling of the displaying birds was so intense that it was a near sensory overload for some. One passenger commented, “I have been filled up. I can’t take in anymore!”

It was true. Our senses had been blasted by this bestial wall of incessant sound. Our olfactory senses were also overwhelmed by the combined odours of fur seals, elephant seals, penguins, kelp and the sea. But wasn’t it exhilarating!? The wind and sun caressed our faces as we walked and paused over cobble-stone and sandy beaches through this magnificent display of life and death, violence and peace, beauty and horror. Gold Harbour is intense.

Back at the landing site the elephant seals had nearly closed off access to the Zodiacs. To make it even more complicated one aggressive bull was creating havoc chasing other bulls near the landing site while at the same time looking to mate with a willing female. We really had to keep a 360° lookout to avoid being squashed. Eventually the trouble maker moved off a ways down the beach and relative peace reigned again. We exited Gold Harbour without incident.

We sailed on towards our next scheduled stop at Cooper Bay where we planned to Zodiac cruise in search of more macaronis and a chance to see a new penguin species, the chinstrap.
Yet the 35 knot winds we had experienced at St. Andrews continued to buffet the *Plancius*, forcing us to adapt our schedule once again. This is truly what an expedition voyage to South Georgia is all about, human vs. nature and ship vs. sea. As always, in the end Mother Nature makes the call and we bend to her will.

As Cooper Bay would be impossible in these winds, we shifted further south to Drygalski Fjord, and area better protected from wind and swell. Plan D: Zodiac cruise in Larsen Harbour (which runs off from the greater fjord), followed by scenic ship’s cruising in Drygalski Fjord.

And then Plan D was close to being cancelled! Drygalski Fjord is not completely protected, and as we entered, winds of 25 knots blasted our ship. It was a bit of a bumpy ride to the mouth of Larsen Harbour, and from there we could see that the waters were calmer inside.

Larsen Harbour is one of the most beautiful fjords in all of South Georgia. It is a narrow channel 4 km long and 500 metres wide, over which impressive 1,000 metre peaks range. Hanging glaciers and massive icicles cling to its austere walls.

Larsen is an important breeding location for snow petrels and is the most northerly breeding site for Weddell seals. There is a brief window of opportunity in October to see the Weddells with their pups, as their weaning time is a quick 6 to 7 weeks.
In another few days they would be gone. In fact it is one of the very few places in the world where a ship-based operation such as ours would have such a chance.

We hugged the coast admiring the dramatic landscape while keeping an eye out for the seals. Before long we spotted four females lying on the snow with their very fat pups. We carefully wove our way through a large bed of kelp until our boats were at the beach. We turned our engines off to better enjoy the peace and solitude – it was a very special moment. Here we were in one of the remotest corners on earth, surrounded by beautiful mountains and glaciers, under sunny blue skies, and listening to nothing but the wind and the strident calls of Antarctic terns. The seals slept peacefully, taking an occasional peek in our direction, but completely undisturbed by our presence. This was a pretty unforgettable experience.

Continuing deeper into Larsen we found several more Weddells before reaching the head of this narrow bay where a small glacier tumbled down to the water’s edge. A snow petrel zoomed around the Zodis and then disappeared under a large rock lying in the snow. Fantastic! We had found a snow petrel’s nest. This is a truly rare event as these brilliant white birds commonly breed far inland.

After all were safely back on board we heaved anchor and headed deep into Drygalski Fjord for more scenic cruising. The 14 km fjord is lined with glaciers and as the Captain paused near some of these, we rushed outside to photograph the impressive landscape. Meanwhile a cold wind was still blowing a solid 20 knots, but we didn’t care. We were back within the comfy confines of Plancius.
Day 11 – October 28
St. Andrews Bay & Cooper Bay

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°25’S / 36°05’W
Weather: 1°C, sunny with virtually no wind

With another unbelievably fine weather forecast, Troels decided that everyone might enjoy an extra (and needed?) hour of sleep. We still had an early breakfast and managed to get off the ship by 08.00, giving us a remarkable five hours ashore at St. Andrews Bay.

The weather was indeed glorious, and the scenery crushingly beautiful, but the focus this morning would be upon the kings and the elephants. This is South Georgia’s largest king penguin colony, and second largest in the world to Crozet Island. An estimated 150,000 pairs breed here; add in the chicks and you have over 400,000 animals either on the beach or feeding in nearby waters.

From the landing beach, which was eerily calm, we made our way to the heart of St. Andrews – the king rookery. However, it took most of us a couple of hours to get there because there was so much to see and do en route.

Just inland from the fast flowing run-off river the fresh waters formed an egg-shaped oval, the banks of which were lined with kings standing tall. When nature presents us with geometric delights such as this it is amazingly pleasing. Add in the fauna and the backdrop and it was tough to drag oneself away. Wow!
In the same area there were some still water pools which reflected seals and penguins and snowy sheathbills and more in the astonishing light. A wildlife lover’s and photographer’s dream come true.

Where do I go from here with this? We’ve already had a spectacular Gold Harbour, a mindboggling Salisbury Plain, and a dozen other incredible landings in superb weather with a-one wildlife encounters and on and on and on and...see what I mean?

Who will ever forget the fluffy fat king chicks here, chirping and whistling away and coming up close to check out these colourful first-of-the-season bipedal curiosities? Beyond everything, St. Andrews is such an expansive place that it beckons you to go on and find your own niche, to sit or lie down, and to absorb the surroundings. Yet you now realise that it doesn’t end there, of course. St. Andrews compels you to go further. At St. Andrews you leave your tangible life behind, you become immersed in both past and present and future. You lose sense of the present because it is like nowhere you have come from nor anywhere that you are going to. It is one of those rare places that, even after we have experienced it, will forever reside beyond the temporal perimeters of our lived experience.

We hauled anchor and made for, yes, Cooper Bay. The weather was so amenable today that we were going to be able to explore this difficult to reach place. But wait. As we were pulling out of St. Andrews and sitting down to lunch, Troels came over the tannoy – there were two humpback whales dead ahead! Everyone dropped their spoons and rushed from their settings to grab cameras and a position out on deck. The experience was idyllic under the brilliant blue sky. Two whales swimming near the ship, and a picture perfect fluke or two thrown in. Our patient hotel and restaurant staff waited as we took pleasure in the sights from the outer decks. There was even an extension to the lunch hour to accommodate our time with the humpbacks.
Cooper Bay was a wonderful compliment to our awesome morning experience. Our plan was to spend part of the time small boat cruising and looking for macaronis, and then go ashore to see if the chinstrap penguins had arrived yet.

We began in the Zodias with a dozen or so cape petrels feeding and cleaning themselves on the surface, our first up-close encounter with these beautiful painted birds (known also as pintado, or painted, petrels for obvious reasons). From the petrels we moved in close to the coast and had some lovely encounters with swimming fur seals, ropey kelp and then a trio of macaronis. This was great for those who had missed them at Cobbler’s Cove the other day. Such remarkable looking birds with their bright golden crests are always a treat to see. We also spent time with several adolescent Antarctic terns perched upon some striking rocky spires, and another snow petrel in flight.

Going ashore, most of the group walked over the tussock to have an amazing view of the chinstrap rookery over to the south. Those who were not in favour of a tussock hike jumped into a Zodiac to view the chinies from the sea. There were others who preferred to remain on the beach with the elephant seals. And I gotta tell you, lying down on the beach near some very curious weaners can be an absolutely FUN experience (mind the nibbling)!

So we returned to the Plancius only to be treated once again by Natascha and Francis to a cup o’ hot chocolatey goodness (hey, the wind had picked up and we were a little chilly). We turned our bow to the north to sail into position for tomorrow’s morning landing, had our daily briefing with Troels in the lounge, and convened in the dining room for another delicious dinner prepared by our great galley. And then, here we go again...
For the second time today a meal was interrupted by cetaceans (aren’t they aware of our schedules?). Our Chief Mate made the call from the bridge – killer whales! Seven individuals, possibly a single family, were near the ship and approaching fast. Again we dashed out of the dining room to get a prime look from the outer decks. Incredibly for these beasts, they took a keen curiosity in our vessel and came for a closer inspection. We rushed from port to starboard and forward to aft as the orcae swam beneath and all around the Plancius. Holy @#!*%# moly!

Killer whales are the second most widely distributed mammals on earth. The only mammal with a greater distribution is homo sapiens. Killer whales are found in every ocean and are distributed from the tropics to both Polar Regions. They are very long-lived animals: females can live more than 80 years and males up to 60 years. While to the casual observer different populations of killer whales look very much the same, their habits can be extremely different. For example, some groups are exclusively fish eaters and other groups may specialize on seals, sea lions, dolphins and even other large whale species. Hunting techniques are extremely varied and are adapted to their prey species. Some killer whale groups have a matriarchal society where offspring live with their mothers their entire lives. Other killer whale societies are much more fluid. Others love exploring ship’s hulls...
Day 12 – October 29
Fortuna Bay & Brown Point, Possession Bay

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°04′S / 36°44′W
Weather: 7°C, sunny (yawn) with light westerly breeze

Who would have thought that it would be possible to have such a long stretch of good weather in South Georgia, in October no less? Once again the sun was shining and there was barely a whisper of wind.

This morning we revisited Fortuna Bay, where we had met the mountaineering octet on their way to Stromness whaling station. On that same morning we landed on the southeast side of the bay near Hodson Point to join the climbers on the last leg of Shackleton’s epic crossing.

Now we were here to soak up the wild wonders of Fortuna Bay’s southwest coast. The beach is 2 km long and, as we have now come to expect, it was packed with elephant seals. Many fat weaners lay sleeping peacefully in small scattered groups. Was this beach more advanced in the season than others we had visited, or was it simply that the South Georgia biological clock was ticking inexorably along? 7,000 pairs of king penguins were ensconced on the flat gravel moraine just below König Glacier, a pleasant 1 km walk from the landing site. As we came ashore we could also see large herds of reindeer grazing on the plain, and light-mantled sooty albatrosses soaring over the bay in their beautiful paired flight. It’s hard to keep a climber down...as we landed here at the wildlife, our eight climbers took off to scale a nearby 500 metre peak.

As we walked down the beach it was obvious that the number of Antarctic fur seals was increasing. In particular, large healthy bulls were now claiming prime beach locations in anticipation of the arrival of hundreds of pregnant, ready-to-pup
females. The males were in top condition, having packed on the beef and blubber. There were no discernable marks on any of them because the violent aggressive competition for females had not yet begun. This will change over the coming weeks in an open display of ‘survival of the fittest’. The more dominant the bull, the more females he mates with. The male with the most progeny wins. It’s not complicated.

We were also witnessing more and more mating amongst the elephant seals and consequently more fighting amongst the bulls. This also made perfect sense. Female southern elephant seals are most receptive in the three days before their pups are weaned. Already numerous females had mated and gone back to sea as was evidenced by the growing number of motherless weaners on the beach. Things happen fast during the South Georgia spring. This naturally leads to an increase in fighting between bulls and we are lucky to be here, one of the few places on the planet that one is able to witness such amazing behavior.

The herd of reindeer that we first saw as we had landed seemed to grow accustomed to our presence. An hour or two into the landing they circled back slowly across the inner plain, approaching us to within 100 metres. For many of us, this was our most peaceful meeting with these creatures that are celebrating their centennial on South Georgia this year, and the photo ops were great! This must be a fertile place for the reindeer – strolling about the beach we noticed more shed antlers lying about than we had at any previous landing.
exuberant burst of energy, as if it had been wound up tight and then suddenly let go – hysterical! It was difficult not to laugh out loud.

Several people chose to visit the sootys to the north of the landing site. An easy climb led us to perches where we had exceptional views of their nests. Slowly and quietly we settled in for a short viewing and the photographic opportunities.

In the afternoon we set out for Possession Bay, where Captain James Cook landed in 1775 to take possession for King George III of England (hence ‘Possession’ Bay). This was to be our most expedition-like, adventurous landing. None of the expedition team had even been into the bay before, let alone the landing site. But every one of us on Plancius shares a spirit of adventure; that’s why we visit South Georgia in the first place. It is one of the most remote, pristine wildernesses on earth.

Our good weather continued to hold as we steamed into the glaciated bay. To reach our landing at Brown Point the Zodias wove their way around large thick beds of kelp. Often this trip our Zodias have become mired in kelp beds, the
drivers pausing to liberate their engines. But the kelp provides many benefits for South Georgia and other coastal areas. It shelters the shore by breaking down violent wave energy and in so doing helps lessen erosion (and adds some protection for our landing operations!). Even more importantly, kelp forests are an extremely important habitat for all sorts of wildlife. Many animals, including numerous species of fish, lay their eggs on kelp fronds.

Brown Point was covered in life. Just above and to the right of the landing site was a low-lying cliff. Here there were roosting and nesting southern giant petrels. The petrels were uneasy with our presence, and the suggested 10 metre limit of approach was obviously not working. Soon a greater limit was established so that we could continue to photograph and observe these wonderful creatures taking off and landing and hovering above the tussock, but from a distance with which they too were comfortable.

Two separate groups of hikers set out on truly adventurous hikes. The terrain was new for everyone. The goal was for group “A” to go on a longer more adventurous hike and for Group “B” to take a more leisurely route. As it turned out both groups did the same hike, one clockwise and the other counterclockwise. It was spectacular for all. At the mid-point there was a great view of a beautiful blue and white glacier, a lower extension of the Murray Snowfield. Some of us arrived in time to witness a massive calving of ice into the bay.

Perhaps the most spectacular event this afternoon was the feeding frenzy that was going on at the far end of the beach. Sadly, the fodder was a dead elephant seal pup, but the feeding itself was a fascinating (if grisly) sight to behold. There were plenty of skuas darting in and out of the action, yet it was the southern giant petrels that dominated centre stage. It was extraordinary to observe these birds which, up until now, we have mostly seen in flight, resting on the tussock, or drifting on the sea. While devouring the corpse they were continuously fighting with each and jostling for prime feeding position. They looked like prehistoric raptors as they strutted about, cawing and cackling, feathers erect and wings outstretched, charging one another. Their bloodied heads made the scene all the more gruesome. Raw nature at its best!
By the time the hikers returned to the beach the wind had picked up considerably. It was so strong in fact that the drivers were forced to carry an extra staff or crew member when they were bringing the empty boats from ship to shore. Despite the high winds our drivers managed to get us back to the ship safely and relatively dry. Looks like we escaped Possession Bay in the nick of time!

After dinner we settled in for the evening wondering what South Georgia’s weather would hold in store for us tomorrow, our final day of landings before we head to open seas and Ushuaia. We would need cooperation from the wind, at least. One of our landings in particular (Elsehul) is highly exposed – would luck be on our side yet again?
What would our last day of excursions here in South Georgia – day number eight in a row – hold in store for us? This was only the second day (in October!) without much sun. But, as luck would have it, this benefited our morning landing. There was an incredible metallic grey sky that backed the frosted peaks surrounding Right Whale Bay. Snowy swirls passed over the summits as our mountaineers looked on.

The usual suspects gathered along the beaches – the furries and the elephants – and a large king penguin colony spread up from the beach and into the run-off plain. Some of us chose to take the moderate hike around and up onto the tussock slopes above the kings for a terrific overview of the colony itself and of the greater Right Whale Bay. Others chose to remain on the beach with the seals and penguins, watching them come and go from the sea. There was also the opportunity to climb the more solitary tussock mounds for the views and some solitude. Within these panoramic views we focussed upon the waterfall at the far end of the beach. Strewn all about were whale bones – vertebrae, mandibles, ribs and the like – a sign of the whaling that took place on South Georgia’s shores from 1904-1965.

We were aware that our ultimate landing this afternoon was going to be a landing/cruising event. For this reason, many of us took the opportunity this
morning at Right Whale Bay to amble and absorb as much of this fantasy world as we could – this evening we’d be heading out to open sea and leaving this paradise behind.

We paid our visits to the seals and kings, taking the time to also notice the wonderful landscape. It was difficult to leave the beach, and we slowly made our way back to the landing site. But it was then that one of the more spectacular incidents on our journey occurred right before our eyes. Some saw an elephant cow giving birth to a pup, and then attendant avian battle over the afterbirth and umbilical cord. But this time a couple of massive bulls joined into the fray – not with the birds but with themselves. The confrontation began with the usual snorting and grunting but then, when one charged the other, the one being chased took off in our direction. This sent a chorus of yells and squeals through our group as we ran to avoid the blubbery bulldozer! It was quite the jolt of excitement for all. And we thought the furries were a terror...

During lunch we sailed for Elsehul at the extreme northwest tip of South Georgia. Elsehul, a small inner bay nestled within an only slightly larger outer bay, is noted for its populations of breeding light-mantle sooty, black-browed and grey-headed albatrosses. As luck would have it, we managed to see all three.

The winds were blustery at the ship, even though Captain Pruss brought her right into the outer bay. From the anchorage site we went straight to one of the inner bay beaches to begin our hike through the tussock grass to see if we could get a close look at the nesting albatrosses.

On the beach itself we found three try-pots and the remains of others. These artefacts are remains from the sealing era. Not nearly as
sophisticated as the later whaling remains, these were the rudimentary pots used to ‘try out’ seal oil from the blubber. Captain James Cook’s report of South Georgian beaches teeming with fur seals set off a virtual gold rush for pelts and oil, beginning in 1786. The sealers, mostly English and American, were so efficient that three times the Antarctic fur seal was thought to be extinct. Today they have rebounded tremendously (more krill available due to the ensuing whaling era perhaps?), and the census today is anywhere from 3-5 million furs in South Georgia’s waters (that’s a lot of teeth!).

The hike to the albatross began, and in fact it wasn’t that difficult. When we reached the nesting site, there was a perfect viewpoint from where we could see four grey-headed and three light-mantled sooty. There was not much room up there at the top of these verdant cliffs, and so we split into smaller groups to take turns viewing these remarkable birds.

The grey-headed albatross belongs to the group of small to medium sized albatrosses also known as mollymawks. They weigh about 2.5 – 4 kg and have a wingspan of approximately 220 cm. More than 50% of the world breeding population is supported by South Georgia. The latest estimate from the 1990’s suggests 600,000 individuals worldwide. They breed every two-three years and lay only one egg as do all albatrosses. Egg incubation takes 70+ days and the chick will fledge in just less than five months. Once they have left the nest they will not return to their breeding colony, or shore, for at least 2-3 years (breeding begins no earlier than 8 years of age). Until recently it was believed that only the great albatrosses (wandering and royal) circumnavigated the world on a regular basis. However, satellite telemetry data have revealed that grey-headed do exactly the same – a true traveler! The time at sea is spent looking for food such as krill, squid, fish and carrion. Although resting and feeding on the surface of the sea, they will spend most of their time on the wing.

Some of us chose to avoid the tussock and return to the boats for a leisurely cruise along Elsehul’s shores, and again we found a few more elusive macaroni penguins. We took our time to admire the albatrosses from sea level, sighting both the grey-headed and the light-mantled sooty. Best of all, we saw a great many black-browed
not too far up a slope. These were showing full-on courtship display with concomitant calls. How beautiful this was! We’ve had a pretty incredible albatross trip during our time on South Georgia, in addition to everything else. We carried on to have a closer look at some pretty little blue water inlets with young fur seals before heading back to the ship. When the hikers had come back to sea level they too cruised over to see the black-browed on the nest. Our albatross estimate for Elsehul alone came to about 100 grey-headed, a dozen light-mantled sooty, and perhaps fifty black-browed birds, all on their nests (thanks Debbie!).

Well, back on board the *Plancius* we joined Troels in the lounge for our daily recap and to hear about tomorrow’s plans and the weather forecast for the upcoming sea days. There were also some kind words of thanks and praise for the Captain, his crew and the hotel and expedition departments.

What a blur! 05.30 wake up calls, triple-landing days, glorious weather, changing meal times, hundreds of thousands of animals and camera cards, dozens of species, mountain climbing, hiking, rough beaches and 18 excursions over eight days in South Georgia! Some would take in the films playing on board tonight, while others would take the time to begin to let events and experiences percolate, to organise thoughts, impressions and photographs. The *Plancius* began to roll gently as we left the lee of South Georgia and headed out into the Scotia Sea.
Day 14 – October 31
Scotia Sea en route to Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego

**GPS 07.00 Position:** 54°08’S / 42°31’W
**Weather:** 3°C, overcast with northwest breeze

The Scotia Sea is named for William Speirs Bruce’s ship. The Scotsman first sailed to Antarctic in the early 1890s aboard a whaling vessel, but as a scientist, not a whaler. His led his own expedition a decade later on the *Scotia*. It was during this highly successful voyage that he performed much bathymetric research in this area, and established Antarctica’s first scientific station in the South Orkneys. The base, which was handed over to Argentina in 1903 and is now known as *Orcadas*, is the longest running base in Antarctica. Bruce led many more polar expeditions, but all to the Arctic, mainly the Spitsbergen archipelago.

The final leg of our grand South Georgia adventure begins. We are heading almost due west, aiming for the Beagle Channel (named for another famous ship…). This morning we woke to grey skies and a nice gently rolling sea. We have talked about the weather often on this voyage, but for good reason. To have so many calm days in the Southern Ocean, especially at this time of year, is unusual. For those of us who work on ships, the single most important thing is calm seas. We have experienced many storms, even hurricanes at sea – they aren’t much fun. There isn’t an ‘off’ switch. A storm can last for hours and hours, days and days. Everything moment becomes a major effort and an element of danger is introduced to the simplest of tasks. For example: imagine working in the galley during a storm. All of a sudden carrying a pot of boiling soup becomes a hazardous occupation. Nope. Not a lot fun. If you ever remark to a crew or staff member, “Oh, I hope we go through a storm. I really want that experience,” don’t be surprised if the response is an icy stare. Cross your fingers for continued smooth sailing.

With four days at sea ahead of us we have plenty of time for lectures. Axel kicked off today’s programme with his talk *Gentleman of the Poles*. We learned all about Jean-Baptiste Charcot and his tremendous two scientific expeditions to the Antarctic Peninsula on the ships *Français* and *Pourquoi Pas?*. Charcot’s expeditions concentrated on charting and science at a time when many others were seeking new land claims and the glory of discovery.

Axel’s excellent lecture was followed by Gérard, who presented *Jewel of the Deep South* in French. Gérard explained how the exploration of South Georgia went hand-in-hand with the exploitation of seals and whales. His talk provided an interesting historical overview of a place that has now become very special to us all.

By lunch time a light fog had settled around the ship, reducing visibility to less than a kilometer. Throughout the day we still managed to see many of prions skimming
over the waves as well as southern giant petrels, white-chinned petrels, diving petrels and cape petrels. It was a petrel fest! It seemed unlikely that we’d run out of petrels before Ushuaia.

In the afternoon we joined Andy for his talk on killer whales entitled, *The Demons from Hell*. We were amazed to learn that different groups of killer whales have different habits. They may look the same but they sure don’t act the same. Andy also explained why he preferred the name “killer whale” vs. orca. We were surprised to find out that the scientific appellation *Orcinus orca* can be loosely translated as ‘demon from hell’.

At 16:30 Nicole displayed the beautiful art work she has been produced during our voyage. Amongst many lovely pieces there was a striking sketch of Sir Ernest Shackleton.

At 17:30 we settled in to watch the absolutely incredible film *With Norwegian Whalers to South Georgia*. It was truly fascinating to look back 80 years in time to the expanses of St. Andrews Bay (where much of the film was shot). We could see many changes: glacial retreat, an enormous rise in the number of king penguins, the absence (then) of fur seals, and so on. We also noted the difference in how we perceive of wildlife. The film’s final twenty minutes focused on whaling – vivid scenes that were difficult to watch.

We rounded out the full day with a briefing of tomorrow’s activities, attended by a rather grim looking fellow. After dinner, a viewing of the wonderful docudrama *Shackleton* (Part I) starring Kenneth Branagh, was shown in the dining room. And, oh yeah…boo!
Day 15 – November 1
At Sea en route to Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°27’S / 50°27’W
Weather: 3°C, fog, with a light westerly breeze

Here we are once again in...the Southern Ocean? Our terrifically fine weather continues to accompany us, even on sea days. These calm waters are a gift for sleeping, eating, attending lectures, and well, just about everything. The visibility wasn’t so great to begin the day, but that wouldn’t deter us from enjoying our ongoing lecture series.

After our morning feed, Nathalie, along with Christophe and Gérard opened the day’s lectures with Colonial Communities in French. We have seen so many king and elephant colonies, it was very informative to hear the particulars of how life operates in these breeding conglomerations. Christopher followed with Hell Served for Breakfast, the tale of the Ross Sea Party. Most of us know the Endurance side of the Shackleton epic well – this was our chance to hear about the tragic events from the Aurora’s side of the continent.

After a computeruruther thingamagig change around, Troels presented his engaging talk, Did You Hear That? He presented audio recordings of whale calls and discussed cetacean communication, a truly fascinating topic. And then the moment we were all waiting for (drum roll)...Christoph and Florian gave an overview of their expedition, Skiing Across South Georgia, 2010. Introduced by Christoph, Florian
then gave a running commentary through a slide show of the team’s South Georgia crossing.

We heard of their ascent from King Haakon Bay up to the Murray Snowfield, camping at the Nunatak atop of South Georgia, awkward and difficult descents, the Fortuna Glacier, and finally their arrival in Fortuna Bay before setting off towards Stromness. As could be expected, many questions followed. I think that most of us were looking at those stunningly cool photographs and thinking, hmmm, I would have loved to have done that! Really, this seldom attempted and even more seldom accomplished feat is the expedition of a lifetime, linking a brilliant team and personal effort to such an incredible historical event. We were all glad to have been a part of this complete voyage, as much as our mountaineering team was so very happy to complete their endeavour and then join us with all that wildlife on the beaches and in the boats!

The questions continued to come in our daily recap and briefing. But eventually, in an effort to keep Natascha and Francis sane, we made our way down to the dining room for another beautiful dinner prepared by Mario, Juergen and the rest of the
galley. As a surprise after-dinner treat the Filipino dining and galley crew performed a traditional Philippines song, accompanied by Rolando’s rhythmic strums on the acoustic guitar – a delightful closure to a very serene, engaging and informative sea day. The evening finished off with Part II of Branagh’s modern masterpiece Shackleton. Befittingly, it included the crossing of South Georgia episode. Perfect.
Day 16 – November 2
Drake Passage en route to Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°48’S / 58°43’W
Weather: 4°C, fog with a light westerly breeze

This morning seemed like a repeat of yesterday with the early grey haze, but it was even calmer today. The grey sky and the ship’s gentle roll cast a somnambulant spell over Plancius. It was precisely what we needed after such an intense week in South Georgia. This was a time to sit with a good book, do a little bird watching, and attend a lecture or two. In other words: succumb to the spell; catch up on sleep.

This morning at 10:00 Gérard gave an interesting talk in French on the big, dynamic ice of South Georgia and the Polar Regions. Gérard was just getting started when dolphins were spotted near the ship. Everyone rushed outside but unfortunately the fleet finned cetaceans were not in the mood to follow us. While we didn’t get a positive species identification, it was certainly a lovely sighting.

Immediately following Gérard’s talk Andy presented his lecture Living In Polar Seas. We learned about the adaptations that permit both warm and cold-blooded animals to live comfortably in polar seas and adaptations that allow marine mammals to dive to extraordinary depths for extraordinarily long periods of time. The highlight was Andy demonstrating the dive response by holding his breath for as long as he could while his face was immersed in a pan of ice water. B-R-R-R-R-R!!! Cor volunteered to read aloud Andy’s pulse from a heart monitor that Andy was wearing. In just a few short seconds we watched his pulse plummet to a steady 45 bpm. Don’t try this at home, folks!

As much as we had grown attached to our beautiful green rubber boots that were all issued at the beginning of the trip, before lunch we plodded down to the boot room to turn them back in.
In the afternoon we joined Christoph for his fascinating stories of when he was leading climbing expeditions to the highest peak in Antarctica, Vinson Massif. The video and photographs were stunning. Not only is Christoph a member of a small elite group of people who have climbed to Vinson’s summit...he has managed it five times! After a short break we rejoined Christoph for the second part of his talk. This time he focused on his expedition to Queen Maud Land. It was clear to all in attendance that Christoph is a truly modern polar expedition adventurer!

After our musical chairs dinner we wrapped up our relaxing day with a very enjoyable film entitled Around Cape Horn, an all-time staff favourite. The incredible footage was shot in 1929 aboard the Peking, but only narrated by Captain Johnson fifty years later. We were thankful to be turning in tonight aboard the stable, warm and dry Plancius.
Day 17 – November 3
Drake Passage en route to Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°55’S / 64°41’W
Weather: 6°C, low cloud and fog with a strong northerly wind

Our final day at sea was yet another calm one. Prior to Troels’ wake-up call Staten Island was within sight...had there been any visibility. A low cloud cover enshrouded our vessel as we steamed from Staten, across the Le Maire Strait, and towards the Beagle Channel. Le Maire gets its name from Jacob Le Maire the Dutchman who, along with Wilhelm Schouten, was the first to round Cape Horn in 1616. Their feat corroborated Sir Francis Drake’s discovery that there was open ocean south of the Americas, and that Tierra del Fuego was not the northern tip of the mysterious southern continent Terra Australis Incognita, but rather a desolate archipelago.

Later this morning Gérard delivered his lecture on the big ice, the glaciers of South Georgia and the Polar Regions, in French. Another engaging talk, those who were not in attendance were out on deck or in the lounge watching as we sailed along the coast of Tierra del Fuego. As always, we were keeping our eyes open for wildlife. The regions around the southern end of the Beagle Channel and into the channel itself are often great for spotting dusky or Peale’s dolphins. There was also the chance that we might see some Magellanic penguins, bringing our penguin species count to five for the voyage.

After lunch we joined Axel for his talk Tall Ships off the Horn in which he described some of the famous sailing that vessels that made this daring voyage. We also heard that many of the ships failed in their attempts, making Cape Horn the most notorious cape on the planet. Following Axel’s talk, we joined Christophe for a brief five minute film on the displaying behaviour of the wandering albatross. This film is incredible not merely for the video, but equally for the audio – very cool.

We met Natascha and Francis at Reception to settle our ship account in the later afternoon, during which time the Plancius dropped anchor in the Beagle Channel (named for Fitzroy and Darwin’s famous vessel) to await the arrival of our Argentine pilot.

Everyone put on something nice for our Captain’s Cocktail. Captain Pruss gave a farewell toast to our voyage, and Troels said a few final words of thanks. We then enjoyed our final lovely dinner of the trip, and had a relaxing and social evening in the lounge, then packing last minute articles before drifting off to sleep.
Day 18 – November 4  
Ushuaia, Tierra del Fuego  

GPS 07.00 Position: 54°15’S / 68°19’W  
Weather: 11°C, sunny with scattered clouds (?)  

Today is disembarkation day. Coming alongside at 07.00, we were boarded by the Argentine officials who cleared our vessel. On the pier we bade farewell to many of the friends we have come to know over the past 18 days, and had one last look at the *Plancius*, the ship that took us on such an incredible voyage to South Georgia. This trip will last us a lifetime – in our memories, our imaginations, and in our dreams. Not a few of us were wondering when we might return.

For those of you who would like to see Jaap’s photographs from our voyage, he invites you to take a look on his website: www.pbase.com/jaap_vink.

Thanks you all for such a wonderful voyage, for your company and enthusiasm. We hope to see you again in the future, wherever that might be!

Total distance sailed on this voyage:  
2983 nautical miles / 5524 kilometres

On behalf of Oceanwide Expeditions, Captain Pruss, Expedition Leader Troels and all the crew and staff, it has been a pleasure travelling with you.