

PENGUIN PASSAGE

Photographer **Ewen Bell** became enamoured with penguins while cruising to Australia's Antarctic Territories. It's a totally new world down there, and the true final frontier for adventure tourism.



Adélie penguins congregate on the ice as storm clouds roll in across Commonwealth Bay.

Wind pushes waves of ocean spray across the bow of our Zodiac and we brace ourselves against the salty water. Swinging our gumboots over one side of the craft, we land on the black sand of Macquarie Island among nearly 100,000 penguins. Millions of penguins live on the island, and there are even more waiting further south when we sail to East Antarctica.

Fewer than 1000 people a year visit Macquarie Island, a remote geological oddity that has been pushed up from beneath the ocean floor. For albatrosses, seals and penguins this small landmass is an oasis from the relentless churn of the Southern Ocean.

Royal penguins come ashore at Macquarie Island in a casual manner, surfing up to the beach, shaking their crest feathers dry and waddling off to the colony. Herd Point has more than 450,000 breeding pairs of royals. On a sunny day the penguins overheat, so the path between ocean and rookery is a traffic jam of bickering beaks. As I stand in the surf, the royals make a path around my gumboots.

These dynamic penguins should perhaps have been named jesters instead of royals: they possess as much character as any clown. Their lack of fear is endearing, and if you sit down and wait the penguins will come and say hello to you. Some are braver than others, of course. After a few minutes observing the royals in action, you quickly appreciate the personality differences among their ranks. While one penguin is busy chasing pebbles, another might be vying for the attention of

a female, or avoiding aggression from that female's mating partner.

Royals do not have Macquarie Island to themselves. A small number of rockhopper penguins claim some hard-to-reach rocks, and the adaptable gentoo penguins have dozens of colonies across the island. King penguins are the glamour birds, however; tall and smooth characters draped in dapper shades of black, white and orange. They are the best-dressed penguins on Macquarie, breeding prolifically and raising chicks all year round.

One colony alone at Lusitania Bay has more than 100,000 breeding pairs of kings, and while the adults are dressed for the occasion, the chicks look like they're attending a pyjama

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party. Instead of the formal diving suit made of oily plumage, which forms salt-water beads like jewels, the king penguin chicks are disguised beneath a layer of fluffy brown feathers to keep out the cold winds.

In summer the daily temperature at Macquarie Island averages 7°C, but we depart this relatively balmy oasis to head further south.

Five days later we enter the calm and icy waters of East Antarctica, and our ship passes

a series of massive iceberg fragments of what was once the Mertz Glacier. Snow petrels cruise above the bergy bits and orcas patrol below. The ice keeps coming for hours on end as we sail a careful course that avoids being enclosed by the bergs. Our icebreaker bumps a few chunks out of the way as necessary.

I'm amazed at the ability of penguins to survive in this environment. It's cold to the point of freezing, the unpredictable katabatic winds which blow down from higher ground can be strong enough to displace glacial slabs the size of a city, and every time the penguins take a swim they risk becoming food for sea lions. Our ship passes a flat deck of sea ice and we spot a lone adélie penguin resting on the surface, seemingly surprised by our sudden appearance.

The closer we get to the coastline of Antarctica, the more penguins are gathered on each berg. Just offshore from the nesting colonies of Cape Denison it's not uncommon to find hundreds of adélies on a flat bit of sea ice, milling about in a semi-social huddle. When we land onshore to visit Mawson's Hut, the penguins outnumber us by a thousand to one, busily making progress to the shore or coming home from a swim. We just have to point a camera in their direction and they halt for a moment, pose for the shot and continue on their way.

Adélies lack the manic urgency of the royals from Macquarie Island. They seem calmer and more focused on their environment, above and below the water. Some decide to investigate us humans more closely, others do not.

The historic outline of Mawson's Hut emerges from the winter snow every summer, but for me the view out to sea is even more inspiring. Adélie penguins travel in packs just offshore, keeping watch for leopard seals and planning their exit from the water. They porpoise through the air at high speed, gulping a mouth full of air before diving back beneath the surface.

I can watch this for hours while the sun falls low to the horizon. Suddenly the pack turns towards the shore and the penguins launch themselves into the air. Not just one or two, but often ten at a time. It's raining penguins. We've seen them on beaches, swimming beneath our Zodiacs, chatting on icebergs and squabbling over pebbles. But on the frozen shoreline of Cape Denison we're watching them fly, and the days spent at sea tossed about in the Southern Ocean are absolutely worth this reward. ■

Ewen Bell travelled on the Spirit of Enderby with Heritage Expeditions as its onboard photographer and workshop instructor. For more information on its cruises, go to www.heritage-expeditions.com.

LEFT: King Penguins prepare for a swim at Macquarie Island. OPPOSITE PAGE: A royal penguin (top left) gives its characteristic wave; the king penguin colony at Sandy Bay, Macquarie Island, has thousands of chicks year round (top right) and plenty of territorial disputes on the crowded shores (bottom).





CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PAGE: Physical contact strengthens the bond between mating pairs of king penguins; after moulting, king penguins are confined to shore at Macquarie Island to await their new plumage; an adélie penguin assesses the ice edge; adélies have strong claws to help them climb ice and rocks; adélies fly out of the water at high speed before crash-landing on the ice.