

Antarctica – Not a Trip for the Faint-Hearted

Last month when I was telling people LuAnn and I were going to Antarctica, almost without exception they would ask with surprise, “Why?” My response usually was, “Because it’s at the top of LuAnn’s bucket list,” but that doesn’t really answer the question.

Now that we’re back, I can truthfully say that it’s the best trip we ever took. It’s also the most expensive; I believe we wrote a check for it that exceeds the annual Gross National Product of some small third-world countries.

Not surprisingly, our 146 shipmates aboard the National Geographic Explorer were mostly people of means. We succeeded in sitting with a different couple or group at almost every meal and met a lot of professional people, business owners and those recently retired from similar occupations. One man - a proctologist - answered my presumably common question about how he got into that line of work by responding, “There was an opening.” Another man who said, “I fix broken hearts,” turned out to be a cardiac surgeon. Spouses of either gender were most often equally accomplished.

One evening we were seated with a couple we had just met. I was frowning at a wine list that contained mostly Chilean and Argentinian wines unfamiliar to me, and our new friends recommended a wine they enjoyed the previous night but couldn’t find on the list. The sommelier remembered what it was, and - not wanting to appear miserly – I didn’t inquire about the price. LuAnn and I would probably have enjoyed it more if we had known it would add \$94 to our tab.

The trip itself is not for the faint-hearted. The journey from Cedar Rapids to Ushuaia, Argentina (the southernmost city in the world) involved three plane rides and almost 24 hours of travel including layovers. Next came 18 hours of cruising to the Antarctic Peninsula via the Drake Passage, widely known for having the roughest seas in the world. Even though the captain said our trip down was the calmest so far this season, dozens of people didn’t feel well enough (seasick) to leave their staterooms.

Contrast this with our return trip eight days later – which the captain termed “about average.” The ship pitched so much that passengers caromed off the walls

in the passageways, and ropes were rigged in the common areas to grab for stability. Every now and then a particularly large swell would clear all untethered items from flat surfaces and deposit them on the floor. Our previous cruises had been on ships at least 10 times larger, so we felt like corks bobbing in a washing machine.

After all that travel we were all impatiently lined up for our first Zodiac excursion to a penguin colony, causing someone to remark, "I've never seen so many tourists so anxious to get cold and wet." Since it is currently summer in the southern hemisphere, it was often warmer in Antarctica (highs in the low 30's) than in Iowa City.

We visited one colony that contained an estimated 60,000 penguins, who viewed us with curiosity. Since they didn't associate humans with food (none is allowed off any ship without medical waiver), we were just these large, benign creatures who came and went unpredictably. We were all instructed to not approach or impede wildlife, but that didn't prevent them from closely checking us out in return.

Now that we're back, the question we most often get is, "What was the best thing you saw there?" I decided it wasn't the scenery or the penguins, whales and seals, but more of a feeling of reverence almost tangible enough to smell and taste. There are few places on the globe that are seemingly untouched by humans, so relentlessly vast and grand to the point that one is constantly overwhelmed with awe.

Fewer than 50,000 people will visit Antarctica this season - about a third of them American - compared with more than 300 million who will visit the Great Smoky Mountains National Park this year. It's almost impossible for the relatively few who make the trip not to become physically and mentally immersed in the uniqueness of the continent, whether by boating, hiking, kayaking or even swimming.

The National Geographic naturalists gave numerous informational talks that were passionate and pointed. Their message – borrowing from then president-elect Trump's - was "Let's make the earth great again."

You may view Writers Group Member Dave Parsons' public Facebook photos and videos of his trip at www.facebook.com/davecparsons.