

Happy Feet 3: Meeting the Humans

By Samuel Ravi Choudhury



She was the first one I saw.

In a skintight classic black and white suit, she stood out from the vast whiteness around her. There was desolation in her eyes, and despite not understanding her language, I could sense longing and despair in her voice. She sat there, perched high on the rockeries; alone in the crowd, purposeless and forsaken. She opened her mouth but no words came out. Only cries that were drowned out by the hustle and bustle of the “city” around her.

“Her baby was taken away! There, he took it!” All eyes focused on the culprit, a skua (a type of seabird), but he was gone in a flash...

Silence ensued. A group of us looked at each other, guilty that we were helpless.

In Medicine, we have been taught that there is always something you could do, as the aphorism goes, “to cure sometimes, to treat often, to comfort always”. But here I was, completely at a loss.

“She’ll have another one next year!” someone from the back exclaimed.

I shot my biologist a disgusted look, but she was right! In this ice-cold continent of Antarctica, where penguins are a dime a dozen, at least she will live to breed another day.

What I found disturbing was that her neighbours simply laboured on unfazed, as though nothing had happened. No consolation. No sympathy. Some males even capitalised on this opportunity to steal stones from her nest.

“Such animals!” I thought, only to realise that it was the literal truth.

This landing was part of a nine-night cruise, which included five days in Antarctica. Each day had two landings of three hours each, when we could visit the “locals”. Interestingly, the only species that does not ever leave Antarctica during winter is the emperor penguin, which you typically would not see unless you fork out a lot more money to venture deeper into the continent.

Most Antarctic expeditions are confined to the

Antarctic Peninsula (northernmost part of the Antarctic mainland) and the surrounding islands, with the only human residents being those living in research stations. Before the era of Antarctic tourism, researchers (all male) would be confined to their cabins during the winter months, keeping themselves sane by staring at paintings of Elizabeth Taylor, et al. Even now, some off-the-route bases we visited still had only men, who welcomed us with champagne, music and cheer, as we brought a break in their routine monotony, and... girls. At these stations, most visitors buy memorabilia and send postcards home. At US\$1 (S\$1.30) for postage, the postcards are a steal, especially after taking into account their origin.

What did we do with the rest of our time in Antarctica? We usually spent them in lectures, on the deck trying to get a glimpse of the great wandering albatross (the bird with the largest wingspan in the world), and getting to know shipmates. With a demographic of mainly couples or solo backpackers from all over the world, conversations can certainly be eye-opening. Who knew that Singapore still has the “no motorhome” law stemming from the 1970s antihippie movement? Or that Florida does not make it mandatory for motorcyclists to wear helmets? (Hence, it has gained popularity for immigration, not only due to the good weather for retirement but also the unspoken increased odds of getting a live donor organ.)

If you’re a whale lover, you “whale” (will) certainly love Antarctica. However, I soon learnt that my obsession with killer “whales” was ill-informed. They are in fact whale-killers and the world’s largest dolphins!

Did you also know that you can tell a sea lion and seal apart just by the way they scratch? Or that polar bears and penguins are exclusively found in the North and South Poles, respectively? Or that only male penguins bring rocks to the nest? (Even in the animal world, females love rocks of any kind!) Or that just 100 years ago, we hardly knew anything about Antarctica?

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It was only in the early 20th century that explorers successfully reached the South Pole. Together with them came the whaling industry, remnants of which now speckle the shores of Antarctica. Whaling was all the rage. Every part of the whale was valuable – baleen plates, which functioned like sieves in whales' mouths were used to make corsets, while their blubber was stripped down to make fuel and, get this, margarine. With some species of whales named right whales, apparently because they were the "right" whales to hunt (as they float after being killed), it was no surprise that by 1960, whales had become an endangered species. Thankfully, international law banned commercial whaling in 1986, limiting sustainable whaling to Japan, Norway and some other countries. This, and the slow restoration of ozone over Antarctica, is testament to the human tenacity to unite and stand up for what is right.

"The killer is back!"

Heads turned as we focused on the skua, which was black as death. With malicious intent in his eyes, he went for the kill again. Expecting the worst, we were shocked when the entire rockery of penguins banded together, heads held

high, jugular veins distended, eyes filled with vengeance, and beaks open and shrieking in unison. The deafening cacophony was a commendable attempt to frighten off the lone marauder.

And it was successful.

With relief and my faith in the penguin community restored, I got up to leave as they no longer needed a watchdog.

"Bam!"

I slipped and landed on my back. Penguins around me screeched and beat their wings, as if in ecstatic mockery of my clumsiness.

I sniggered to myself in realisation that we really aren't that different after all. **SMA**



Samuel has recently completed a Master of Public Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. He is an avid traveller who craves adventure when time permits.

Photos

1. Penny for your thoughts?
2. Death (a skua) descends upon the penguin colony
3. The remains of vertebrae from different species of whales, a sad reminder of the gruesome whaling history in Antarctica
4. A colony of chinstrap penguins surrounds a lonesome macaroni penguin (which has yellow plumes on its head)



Photos

5. Untouched beauty and landscape in Antarctica
6. The motley crew at Deception Island, where we went for a polar plunge – swimming in Antarctic waters with shirts off!
7. Unfazed by human traffic, a colony of gentoo penguins rest directly outside the Chilean station
8. A Weddell seal looking curiously at a chinstrap penguin while sunbathing in the background