# Snow SIREN

Antarctica's icy charms are legendary. Intrepid traveller Thomas E. Muller boards an expedition ship at the bottom of New Zealand and heads south to experience them himself.

When Mother Nature was naming her seven continental daughters, she wanted each sister to have a name that began and ended with a vowel. Eldest daughter, Australasia, was followed by Africa, Asia, Europe, and twin-sisters, America (North) and America (South).

Youngest child, Antarctica, was vastly different from her older siblings. She was independent and aloof – the most isolated, coldest, driest, windiest, least inhabited and cleanest of the seven sisters. With an average continental elevation of 8,000 feet she was also the tallest.

She seemed to have a magnetic allure: south of the equator, compass needles swung around to her side of the Planet.

But Sister Antarctica had a dark side to her, and it wasn't just because the sun never rose above the horizon for six months. Like a siren that lures those who have adventure in their blood, she wooed and then killed – for she was governed, not by people, but by the cold, blind laws of physics. The wildlife she supported happily evolved to accommodate her nasty side when they came ashore to mate, nest and nurture.

But humans who got snared and trapped by her icy beauty and inhospitable climate paid the ultimate price.

Shackleton paid the price, even as he prepared to sail from South Georgia to visit his beloved Antarctica a fourth time. Scott and his companions, Wilson, Bowers, Oates and Evans, also paid with their lives, as did Sir Douglas Mawson's companions, Ninnis and Mertz. These pioneers knew only too well the prolonged suffering and isolation that Antarctica can dish out.

But those pioneers in the Age of Heroic Exploration died a century ago.

Sister Antarctica today has a kinder, gentler disposition, thanks to windproof, breathable Gore-Tex outerwear, waterproof boots, battery-heated insoles, thermal underwear, and fleece-lined gloves, socks and head gear. And thanks, too, to ice-strengthened, diesel powered ships fitted with GPS navigational equipment, satellite phones, and a fleet of Zodiacs – those indispensible, inflated-rubber dinghies, with a 50-hp outboard motor, that ferry adventurers from ship to icy shore and are piloted by sturdy drivers with squelching walkie-talkies dangling from their necks and with "Copy that!" in their vocabularies.

Given that kind of protection, my fascination with Antarctica grew until my own curiosity could no longer be suppressed by insufficient funds in my bank account. I borrowed heavily. And went to meet the elusive sister.

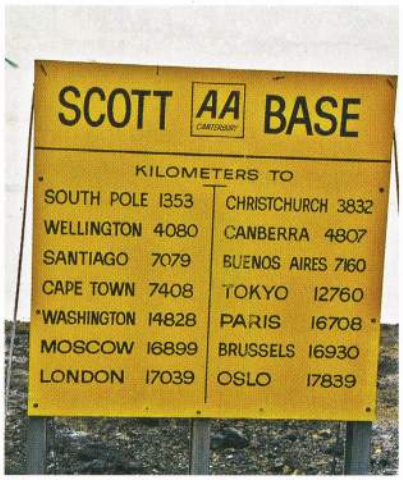
It's the 5th of January and the ice-strengthened Russian research vessel, *m.v. Akademik Shokalskiy*, is berthed at Invercargill's port of Bluff awaiting me and my 42 shipmates to sail to the Ross Sea region of East Antarctica.

This is the same ship that only last month was stuck in sea ice off the coast of Antarctica with 52 tourists and scientists on board and a Russian crew of 22. When Sister Antarctica embraces you tightly in her icy arms, she does not readily let go.

We board the *Akademik Shokalskiy* and sail south to visit New Zealand's chain of Subantarctic islands: Snares Island, Enderby Island and the Auckland Islands group. And then we arrive for a two-day visit of the jewel of Australia's Antarctic Territory – Macquarie Island, the Galapagos of the Southern Ocean, a World Heritage Area. The residents are a handful of scientists, 100,000 (mostly elephant) seals, four million penguins, of which 850,000 are breeding pairs of royal penguins and another 220,000 birds are the stately king penguins and their moulting chicks.

"Why am I here!?" I mutter to myself

We continue south through the rough Southern Ocean and arrive, on January 16, at Cape Adare on the Antarctic continent proper.




**Remote** Miles from nowhere

**Heading South** Seniors on the deck of the Akademik Shokalskiy

Leaving the relative comfort of our mother ship, we make a difficult Zodiac landing at Ridley Beach. We are at 71°20°S, deep inside the Antarctic Circle. The surf of the Ross Sea is heavy and the wind coming off the ridge above the landing site has a gale-force scream to it. A storm is gathering momentum and the wind seems to tear straight through my five layers of clothing. The air is well below zero and I labour upwind over a pebble-strewn trail to get to one of Borchgrevink's two prefabricated huts – the oldest buildings in Antarctica – erected from interlocking boards of Norwegian spruce for his 1899 Southern Cross expedition.

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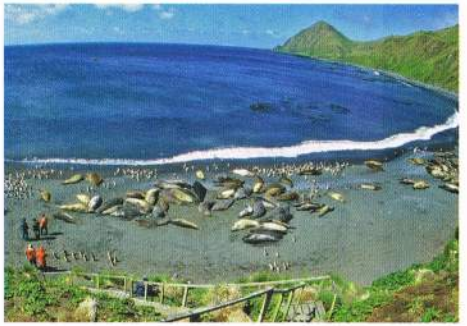
The others in my party have already queued up to enter the historic hut (only four people, at a time, are permitted inside) and assess, first hand, how Borchgrevink and his party of nine had slept, cooked and suffered during mankind's first planned wintering in Antarctica, which brought about the continent's first human death. A slab of Australian smoked ham is still sitting on the kitchen table, more than a century after the last slice had been carved out of it.

The huts are completely surrounded by Antarctica's largest Adélie penguin rookery – 500,000 noisy, nesting birds.

Outside the weather-ravaged huts, the ice has partially melted into a small pool of water saturated with the stench of penguin guano. Now, the fierce wind is whipping up the surface of this water and spraying it in my face. I no longer can stand the bitter cold, so I leave the queue and huddle behind a hut wall, my fingers stinging from the ambient chill. "Why am I here!?" I mutter to myself.

We sail south into Terra Nova Bay and make a brief tour of Italy's scientific research station where they study fish with built-in antifreeze that allows them to survive in the chilly ocean. Then we head toward Inexpressible Island. This is the island where the six men of Scott's Northern Party got stranded in March 1912 and spent seven months braving the brutal Antarctic winter, huddled in an ice cave they had dug. Their suffering was inexpressible (hence the island's name) as they endured frostbite, hunger and dysentery.

But picture our landing on Inexpressible Island when Sister Antarctica is at her kindest. You're at 75 degrees South, near the base of the Transantarctic Mountains. It is past midnight when you remember to glance at your watch; the sun is hanging in a cloudless sky, 10 degrees above the silky sea horizon. The breeze is so light that a kernel of popped corn would fall almost vertically to the ground. And the air is so clean and dry that the smell of penguin guano has been banished from your mind. This is the perfect Antarctica day.



**Surfs Up** Elephant Seals sunbake

**Macquarie Island** King Penguin colony

The drift snow, blown in on a less benevolent day, is now firm and crunchy and gives confidence to the boot sole.

Free to wander within sight of your landing site, you climb through the crystalline snow to the top of a small mountain, and the ocean, below, is like a pool of shimmering glass. Brought to this level, the eyes take in remote, white mountains that, through the crystal-clear atmosphere, have been foreshortened to within touching distance. At the edges of a bluish bay, unruffled by wind, the sheet of a thick glacier is tinted green where it has broken off to form a rough-edged cliff.

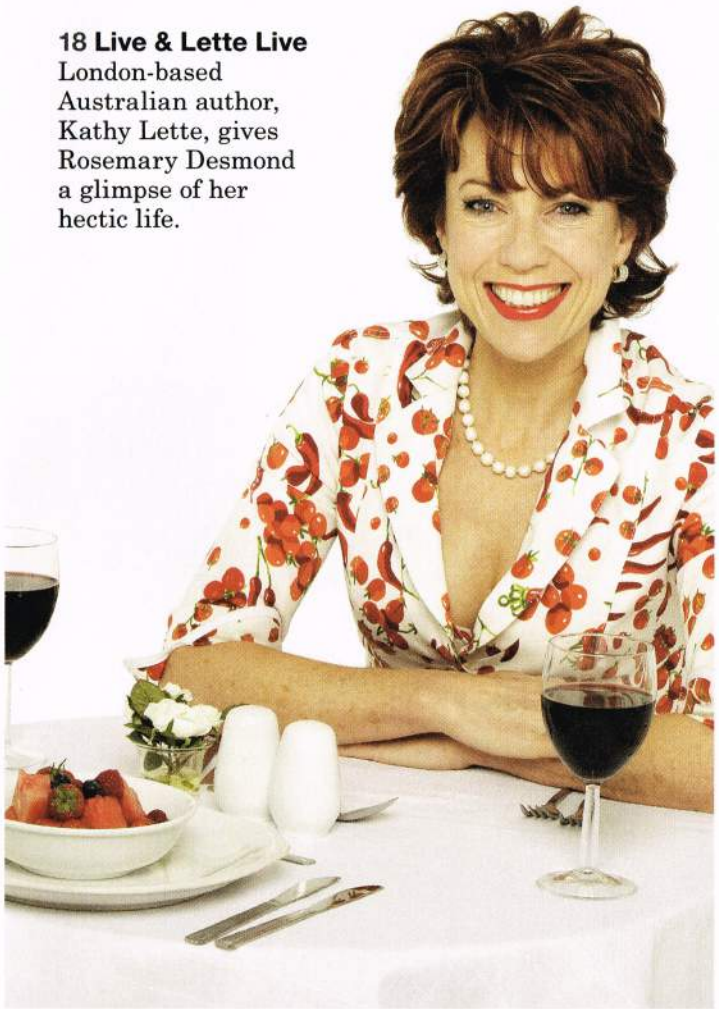
Down on the ice-covered beach, the Adélie penguins patrol the landing spot where noisy Zodiacs ply back and forth between the Republic of Penguinland and the mother ship. They are surprisingly quiet birds, today; some are tobogganing on their shiny white bellies trying to cool down in their blistering Antarctic heatwave. Others march up and down, standing still only to strut their glossy dress shirts; they look ridiculous waddling in a skin-tight tuxedo. But these penguins seem very practiced at tonight's state function, thrown for the visiting photographers. It's 2:00 a.m. now. Time to look back over the scene one last time and return to a bunk bed in comfort land after drawing the curtains to block out the sun.

We reach the southern limit of our voyage (78° South) at New Zealand's Scott Base, then head north, back into the Ross Sea, and sail home to New Zealand, via Campbell Island.

After 31 days at sea, fifteen shore landings and 8,550 km navigated, we are back in Invercargill. Someone once asked me, "You've travelled all over the world; so, if you could choose, where would you wish to die?" Without hesitation, I give the most adventurous location I can think of, "At the South Pole, cradled in the arms of Sister Antarctica."

Shackleton's polar spirit had infected me. ■

**50**something
AUSTRALIA'S WIDEST CIRCULATING OVER-50S MAGAZINE








**Cover** Kathy Lette, high on life Photo: Nicky Johnston ©

**50**something
AUSTRALIA'S WIDEST CIRCULATING OVER-50S MAGAZINE

This issue is about love.
Deep enduring love.

In "First Up", we mark 50 years since Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton first married. In the photograph, Taylor walks the Oscars red carpet wearing a gift from Burton – a 69.42 carat diamond. They met on the set of Cleopatra in 1963. She played the title role and he, her lover Mark Antony. Their marriage lasted ten years. A year after their divorce they remarried. A year later they divorced again. It was, people said, a love too big to last.

For the vivacious Kathy Lette, the love is not for actor George Clooney who she turned down while working as a Hollywood scriptwriter. It's for her son Julius. On page 18, she tells of her experience raising a son with Asperger's and of the incredible young man he is now.

On page 20, love shines through adversity. Relationship counsellor Sandra Kimble, more used to navigating other couples' lives, generously shares her own story about husband Tom's Alzheimer's diagnosis at only age 63. Suddenly, she says, they were two ordinary people facing extraordinary circumstances.

This Valentine's Day take a moment to honour your own deep enduring love. An exquisite mauve orchid (p37) and a silky chocolate mousse (p38) will inspire.

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## contributors

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Natasha Maynard, from Brisbane firm CRH Law, completed a Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Arts in 2005, and was admitted as a Barrister and Solicitor in New Zealand in 2006 and as a Solicitor in Queensland in 2008. Natasha's practice areas are commercial, property and not-for profit law.

Thomas E. Muller has spent a total of two months in Antarctica, his favourite continent. The 74-year-old retired professor and National Seniors life member explores the far reaches of the Earth, hoping to encourage others to do the same. His adventures are featured on www.KnowYourEarth.net

Ian Malin has written for the *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers for the last 30 years. He is the author of two books, *Mud, Blood and Money, English Rugby Goes Professional*; and a history of the England rugby union team. This issue he goes in search of the Winter Olympics' oldest competitor.

*50 something*'s Agony Planner scribe is ipac technical services head, Colin Lewis. Colin has over 20 years' experience in superannuation and retirement incomes and has held senior regulatory, consulting and technical roles throughout the financial services industry.

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