

Antarctica



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My friend, Ramiro Garcia, asked for my impressions of a recent trip to Antarctica with my wife Ginny and our son Jeff. To share the experience with friends and family, my game plan was to jot down at least three curious, oddball facts about each destination. So, here it is:

American Airlines personnel deserve special recognition for problem solving. Our flight from San Francisco was so late in leaving that we had only about forty minutes to make our next connection at the international terminal in Miami for the flight to Rio that would hook us up with a Holland America cruise to Antarctica. I stopped the purser, Lisa Shourds, and said, "I have a puzzle for you." She listened carefully, then returned with a map of the Miami Airport.

She said: "We are landing at the opposite end from the international terminal. Even if you sprint like Olympic gold medalists, you will not make it. Will you consider something crazy? Since there is no motorized transportation in Miami, how about if we order two wheelchairs for you and your wife? Perhaps you can make it through security faster. Think about it and let me talk with the pilot for his suggestions."

Lisa returned and said, "Good news! The captain has arranged to land in a location next to the international terminal so that you can make your next connection without any concern." Yes, I wrote a letter of commendation for the crew to American Airline executives.

Here are my notes:

Rio

At the turn of the century, apartments and houses were advertised not by the number of rooms but by the number of windows since this was the only source of "air conditioning." Rio has 80 miles of beaches and a bridge 12 miles long.

Buenos Aires

The central park is a majestic 800 acres with a 12-lane boulevard. A "must" stop for tourists is the cemetery which is an eerie, silent marble city of 1,500 mausoleums with narrow sidewalks and streetlights and feral cats. In miniature windows of the marble structures, photographs of the occupants, from infants to adults, stare at you as you walk by like a macabre scene from a Wes Craven movie.



The most colorful neighborhood is La Boca where the apartments and small homes are painted in bright primary colors of red, yellow, green, and blue. The reason: Around the turn of the century, sailors who lived in the neighborhood took surplus paint left over from their wooden sailing vessels, and used it to paint their homes.

The area is jammed with honky-tonks, antique stores and vendors selling trinkets. On the corner, attractive young men and women in black fedora hats posed in a sexy tango stance with tourists so that, for a fee, pictures could be snapped.

There was a bank crisis recently when wealthy people suddenly began removing their money from banks. The government panicked and froze all peso and US dollar accounts; then devalued the peso. The average citizen is now hiding their money at home until they can reestablish trust in the banks.

Falkland Islands

This was one of the most memorable stops, which was not on the itinerary. Here is a hidden Garden of Eden because there is no unemployment since there are 1.8 jobs for each of the 2,940 residents. Fuel is free with enough peat to heat every dwelling for 1,000 years. One important source of income is wool from sheep. A traveling gang of wool shearers come in; shear one sheep a minute for \$1.80 per head. They go to South America next and

continue traveling around the world shearing sheep until they arrive back in the Islands.

There is no wind in the winter but unpredictable gale force winds in the summer. At Christmas time, they were completely surprised when gale force winds suddenly stranded 640 tourists on the island. Every home on the island was recruited to take in tourists until the crisis was over.

If you commit a criminal offense while intoxicated, you are denied alcohol for one year. If you are jailed, you are released to work during the day and return at night.

The beaches are extremely dangerous with 20,000 to 40,000 undetectable land mines left over from the Argentina occupation during the recent war with Britain.

Antarctica

This is a larger continent than Australia with half of the territory in darkness and the other half in light. Thousands of magnificent icebergs have broken off from the ice shelf on the coast. They are exquisitely sculptured ice-- some miles long and in many colors: blue, green, red and white. As they drift into warmer waters, they slowly melt in ten or twenty years. One of the icebergs called "flat top" looks like an aircraft carrier. The Russians decided to helicopter in about a hundred people on top of the ice for a barbecue. Landings continued until someone observed that if they were unable to start the helicopter once it landed, everyone would be stranded with no one to rescue them. That ended the parties on "flat top."



Penguins can stay underwater for hours depending upon their size. They are the only bird that can swim which they accomplish in a kind of strange breaststroke that looks like they are flipping forward in the water.

Maxwell Bay

There are scientific stations from almost every country. Rogue sailboats have been known to prowl the coast as modern day pirates breaking into abandoned stations and stealing supplies.

Millions of years ago, there was a temperate climate in Antarctica with small dinosaurs and other animals. At the North Pole there are polar bears, which are brown bears that migrated there and in time turned white, but no bears have made the 600-mile journey across the equator to the South Pole. At one time, millions of years ago, there was only one super-continent of Africa, Australia, India, South America and Antarctica.



Cape Horn

150 years ago, sailors would not believe that people in the future, for entertainment, would sail the Cape, which is the most treacherous place on Earth. In the winter, there are 100 Mph winds and 50-foot waves. At one point, the bow of our ship was in the Pacific and the stern was in the Atlantic. In the 19th century, it could take three months to get around the Horn, with many false starts.

Chile

What fascinated me about Chile is that it is a long slender country several thousand miles long with natural barriers to invaders. In the north, there is a vast desert and in the south, there are glaciers. In the east, there is the Andes and in the west, the Pacific Ocean.

What surprised me most about South America is the European texture in the architecture and culture. Everywhere one sees the influence of the Germans, the Italians, the English, the Spanish and the French.

My recommendation: Don't hesitate to book a trip to Antarctica because of fear that it is too cold or too difficult or too dangerous. I was amazed to see so many handicapped people on our cruise ship. Many were on crutches, or in wheel chairs, or hooked to oxygen tanks.

Take care and have fun,

JJA

Your comments about this article can be sent to the writer at jim@tpr-world.com