Having worn out the pause button, **Sarah Reid** dives back into adventure on a cruise to Antarctica.

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

"ORCAS!"

Someone yells. Cutlery clatters against porcelain and chairs screech across the floor as diners abandon their meals, grab cameras and scurry up to the eighth-floor observation deck to get a better view of the killer whales. It's only my second day in Antarctica but I've already learnt to be ready at all times for moments like this.

Cruising to the edge of the earth is an adventure under normal circumstances. And after two long years in Australia pining for international travel – and with my vaccinations up-to-date – I decide that this once-in-a-lifetime reward, a nine-night cruise to Antarctica, outweighs any risks. As fellow passenger Paula, a psychologist from Sydney, puts it, "We just couldn't face postponing for another season."

I've binged my fair share of nature documentaries but nothing prepares me for the grandeur of the White Continent. Waking up to icebergs the size of small towns bobbing past my cabin in the Antarctic Sound, it takes a minute to realise I'm not dreaming. Wisps of fairy-floss-pink clouds dance along the glacier-capped mountains of the Trinity Peninsula (the northernmost tip of mainland Antarctica) and help me forget the six-metre swells that tossed me out of bed crossing the Drake Passage. As if on cue, a raft of gentoo penguins begins porpoising beside the ship, their shiny black coats glistening in the pre-dawn glow. I wouldn't be surprised if Sir David Attenborough starts narrating.

Departing Punta Arenas in southern Chile (a 3.5-hour flight from the capital, Santiago) with 45 other intrepid souls from around the globe – less than half the usual number of passengers due to Omicron-induced cancellations – this Aurora Expeditions voyage (auroraexpeditions.com.au) on the 104-metre *Greg Mortimer* is unusually intimate. (Even when fully booked with 132 passengers there are no split landings or meal sittings.)

At the orientation briefing, Dutch-born expedition leader Florence "Flo" Kuyper warns that the itinerary we're on with the Australian-owned cruising company isn't going to be a typical holiday: "You'll be completely exhausted by the end of it." She isn't kidding.

Shari Louise Annable

A gentoo penguin on an iceberg at Brown Bluff, Antarctica

While only a handful of passengers join me on the observation deck at 5am most mornings to watch the sunrise over the icy wilderness, next to no-one sits out the twice-daily activities, such as a Zodiac cruise to admire penguins, seals and seabirds, and see huts built by early explorers and abandoned whaling stations. (Snorkelling, kayaking and even scuba diving are available when the weather allows.) Add a three-course dinner with a few glasses of Chilean wine each night and I barely have the energy to put myself to bed, let alone enjoy a soak in one of the outdoor jacuzzis with humpback whales providing the twilight entertainment.

Offered only twice per season (October to April), Aurora's Wild Antarctica voyage sails the less-visited Weddell Sea on the western side of the Antarctic Peninsula. A savagely beautiful place, this back door to the continent is known for huge tabular icebergs that calve off the vast ice shelves fringing this remote stretch of coastline.

In one of the continent's harshest and coldest corners, these are challenging seas to navigate. It was the fickle ice here that crushed the *Endurance* in 1915, turning Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition into a fight for survival. As we're cruising I receive an email alert (wi-fi is available on board for a fee) that the *Endurance22,* a British-led expedition, had arrived at the sinking site and, in March, the wreck was located there.

We don't cross paths with the icebreaker – or any other ship – as we traverse a frozen wonderland where giant glaciers slide from volcanic cliffs into sapphire seas, fur seals doze on icebergs and moulting penguins huddle on rocky beaches. Our ship might be one of the newest and most comfortable passenger vessels plying polar waters but for me, having this bit of Antarctica to ourselves is the greatest luxury.

A crew of 74 chart our safe passage, keep us (too) well fed, RAT-test us every 48 hours – just one of Aurora's health and safety protocols that help to keep the expedition COVID-19-free – and freshen our stylish, polar-hued cabins several times a day. They're joined by a 15-strong, predominantly Australian expedition team who pilot the Zodiacs and host on-and-off-ship activities, including lectures that span the palatability of penguin eggs to the origins of maritime sayings.

In the Chilean fjords, naturalist John Kirkwood, who first worked in the region with the Australian Antarctic Division in the 1980s, leads a seabird survey on the observation deck that's among the five citizen-science projects that passengers can get involved with on this itinerary.

Documenting the types and numbers of birds we spot during a set period of time, which aids a seabird biologist's research, is a small way to give back and as I quickly discover, a great way to familiarise myself with the various bird species we're likely to see on the expedition. "Giant petrel numbers are rebounding now that longline fishery technology has been improved, which is a positive conservation story," says Kirkwood as one of the huge seabirds sails past the bow. That Aurora became certified carbon-neutral in 2021 reflects the company's commitment to minimising its environmental impact. We're also briefed on the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators' guidelines for visiting landing sites responsibly before we even set foot in a Zodiac.

As an added precaution, we wear face masks outdoors for the benefit of the locals. "We don't know enough yet about the potential risk to penguins and other animals so we need to be extra careful," explains Kuyper. With approximately 74,000 travellers coming to Antarctica each season, it makes sense. Surprisingly, temperatures rarely dip below 0°C on the trip but I'm still grateful my cloth mask doubles as a face warmer.

At our journey's southernmost stop – 64.24S – it's time for the "polar plunge" and I'm impressed when more than half of my shipmates (most are aged over 50, including several fearless American women in their 70s) join me to jump into the frigid water. With music pumping, teeth chattering and vodka shots on hand to fortify us, it's a riot. Even the ship's doctor is in his trunks, having finally worked up the courage to take his first plunge once all the passengers are safely back on board. In the cocktail hour that follows, there's a sense of camaraderie as we laugh over photos of us hauling ourselves out of the water with the grace of elephant seals.

The plunge is so electrifying that when Polish-born Sydneysider "Scuba Pete" Szyszka announces a snorkelling excursion the next day, I can't pull on a dry suit fast enough. It's snowing as we head out on the Zodiac, a surreal scene in which I struggle to decipher where the icefields end and the sky begins. In the water, I'm mesmerised by the aquamarine hue of an iceberg as I snorkel around its girth. Having already seen a leopard seal's razor-sharp teeth up close, I'm relieved that transparent jelly-like creatures called ctenophores seem to be my only companions. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I see a flipper. Fortunately, it's a (relatively) harmless juvenile fur seal and it wants to play, twisting and weaving between our group for about 10 minutes before darting off into the abyss.

As I wriggle back into the Zodiac, Szyszka looks at me and asks, "So was it worth it?" Even with my face concealed by a snorkel mask and a thick neoprene hood, he knows my answer. ●

Santiago stopover

In the heart of the historic city centre, in a Spanish-colonial mansion, Hotel Magnolia (hotel magnolia.cl) is a sophisticated and welcoming boutique stay with 40 rooms and suites over six levels, topped with a sunny rooftop bar.

Santiago is gaining global kudos for its dynamic culinary scene that celebrates the city's proximity to the sea. In the upscale Vitacura neighbourhood, dégustation-centred Boragó (borago.cl) is the undisputed top table, while park-side Mestizo (mestizorestaurant.cl) is the spot for a mod-Chilean lunch (tip: start with the crab buns). At lauded wine bar and restaurant Bocanáriz (bocanariz.cl) you can tailor your wine flight to organic drops before tucking into a plate of pulpo a la parrilla (grilled octopus), while next door Chipe Libre (chipe-libre.cl) serves one of the city's best pisco sours. Two blocks east, old-school diner Antigua Fuente (antiguafuente.cl) serves lomito de cerdo (pork tenderloin) sandwiches so huge you'll need cutlery.

If you only have time to go to one winery in the nearby Maipo Valley, make it Viña Santa Rita (santarita.com), to taste top-shelf cabernet sauvignon and carménère and visit the on-site Andean Museum's pre-Colombian art collection. The 40-hectare estate also has the boutique Hotel Casa Real tucked within its sprawling gardens.