

Overcoming his lifelong struggle with seasickness to take the three day cruise from the Falkland Islands to South Georgia, photographer **Nick Garbutt** finds himself in the epic frozen domain of giant petrels, king penguins and elephant seals



# PENGUINS ON PARADE



Here: spot the seal among hundreds of king penguins on the shores of Salisbury Plain



There was a time, back in my childhood, when I was so prone to seasickness that the prospect of a choppy bath would fill me with dread. Around the same time I was glued to every wildlife documentary broadcast – *The World About Us*, *Survival*, etc – and have distinct memories of programmes about leviathan elephant seals and beaches full of penguins. Not for one moment did I ever think I'd see such things for myself.

Fast forward 30 years and I found myself on a ship leaving Stanley in the Falkland Islands, with three days of some of the world's most

tumultuous seas ahead. I was bound for South Georgia – an icy crescent island that is a mere speck in the immensity of the Southern Ocean. It may be only 170km long, have no trees and be half covered in a permanent blanket of snow and ice, but thanks to the sheer abundance of seals, penguins, albatross and petrels that gather annually, it is certainly one of the wildlife wonders of the world.

By the time we sailed, I'd already been popping anti-seasickness tablets for 24 hours and anticipated spending much of the time lying down below. Yet as the Falklands receded over the rear horizon I was up on

deck enjoying the bracing air and the conveyer belt of birds that came to investigate the ship. Numerous small petrels and prions skimmed the sea, lifting and falling in unison with the waves as if an invisible force field kept them at an exact distance above the surface.

There were also much larger giant petrels and black-browed albatrosses circling and wielding around in acrobatic and effortless fashion, periodically homing in towards the ship to provide dramatic eye-level fly-bys.

Before leaving, the idea of three days out of sight of land inevitably filled me with trepidation, not only because of the







omnipresent threat of feeling like death warmed up, but also because I imagined there would be little to see. I was gloriously wrong on both counts. Hours of wave and bird watching became almost hypnotic and the occasional view of a distant humpback whale made it all the more compelling. What's more, I felt absolutely fine.

I had been tingling with anticipation of my first view of South Georgia and it did not disappoint. We sailed into the Bay of Isles on the north coast, where a magnificent amphitheatre of snow-capped peaks spilled down to the shore and numerous slabs of rock formed emerald-clad islets in the bay. Improbably large wandering albatrosses (they have a wing span of up to 3.5m) rode the stiff turbulent breezes and every now and then, as the wind shifted appropriately, a pungent fishy whiff tingled my nasal passages. The odour of hundreds of thousands of king penguins on the beach was unmistakable.

Penguins often look awkward and ungainly on land, so wearing waterproofs and several layers of clothing, I felt a certain empathy as I struggled to manoeuvre myself off the inflatable dinghy and land on the beach at Salisbury Plain, before waddling ashore for the first time. The exquisite crunch of pebbles and gravel beneath my feet mixed and merged with squawks and cackles from the penguins.

Initially, I was greeted by modest columns of king penguins heading towards the waves, or others emerging from the surf and mirroring my own awkward movements as

## Everywhere there were penguins. The numbers were challenging to comprehend

they waddled up the beach. It was impossible not to just drop to my knees and instantly start clicking away with my camera as if I might never again see another penguin. After deciding that I needed to get a better grasp on the reality of the situation, I put my camera down to appreciate the scene.

### CONQUERING KINGS

Everywhere there were penguins. The numbers were challenging to comprehend.

Close by, small groups gathered near the water's edge, but further along the shore densities increased and where the main colony (or rookery) stood the birds appeared so tightly packed it was impossible to differentiate individuals from one another. After all, at its annual peak the colony may contain half a million birds.

My visit in late January coincided with the final stages of king penguins incubating their eggs, with some earlier arrivals having already hatched. There were also very large numbers of adult-sized brown downy chicks from the previous year, patiently waiting to moult into more recognisable plumage: from downy chick, the birds' first moult is to a juvenile



plumage, with full adult plumage not being attained until their third year.

I wandered along the back of the beach (a vast expanse of glacial outwash plain) and for the next couple of hours slowly picked my way through the labyrinth of birds and outflow streams from the huge glaciers at the rear. Immediately behind the densest concentration of penguins was a raised area of tussock grass that gave me a vantage point over the whole colony and the bay beyond. Below me other people from the ship, clad in a bright array of water and windproof gear, formed a distinctive thread of humanity through the penguins and back to the shore. I wondered who was looking at whom?







*Clockwise from here: a king penguin chick; waves break over the bow of Nick Garbutt's ship; nonchalant penguins surround a tourist; a decaying whaling station and fur seal colony at Stromness; a pair of humpback whales gulp feeding*

© NICK GARBUTT, FLPA

## WHALING STATION

How South Georgia became the focus of the Antarctic whaling industry



Today, there are only a handful of nations, notably Iceland, Norway and Japan, which continue to hunt whales in any sort of commercial sense. But this has not always been the case. Indeed whaling has a long history, probably dating back as far as 3000 BC. In the 20th century whaling was a vastly profitable global industry, with South Georgia the hub of South Atlantic and Antarctic operations.

A Norwegian, Carl Anton Larsen, started whaling on South Georgia in 1904, when he arrived with three ships and 60 men. Whale oil was once widely used in oil lamps and to make soap and margarine, while the meat and bones were ground down to produce animal feed and fertiliser. The baleen has been used to make everything from buggy whips and carriage springs to corset stays.

Initially whales were so abundant that it was the capacity of the factories that limited production, so other companies were established to share in the bonanza. At the industry's peak between 1918 and 1919, six shore factories operated at full throttle, but it was not long before evidence of declining stocks

became apparent. Preservation measures were introduced, with stations being limited to the number of ships they could deploy and being forced to utilise entire carcasses, rather than merely stripping off the blubber. However, the invention of pelagic factory ships operating outside the jurisdiction of South Georgia's waters rendered these regulations ineffective.

All species began to decline, with humpbacks initially bearing the brunt, before attention shifted to both blue and fin whales. After the Second World War, demand for whale products mushroomed and stocks of all species collapsed, especially blue, fin and sei whales. Land-based operations found it impossible to compete with ocean-going factory ships that could range further afield and the stations on South Georgia began to close. The Grytviken station persisted the longest, partly because it also hunted elephant seals, but finally succumbed in December 1965. By the conclusion of operations, the industry had removed an estimated 175,000 whales from South Georgia's waters in just 60 years.



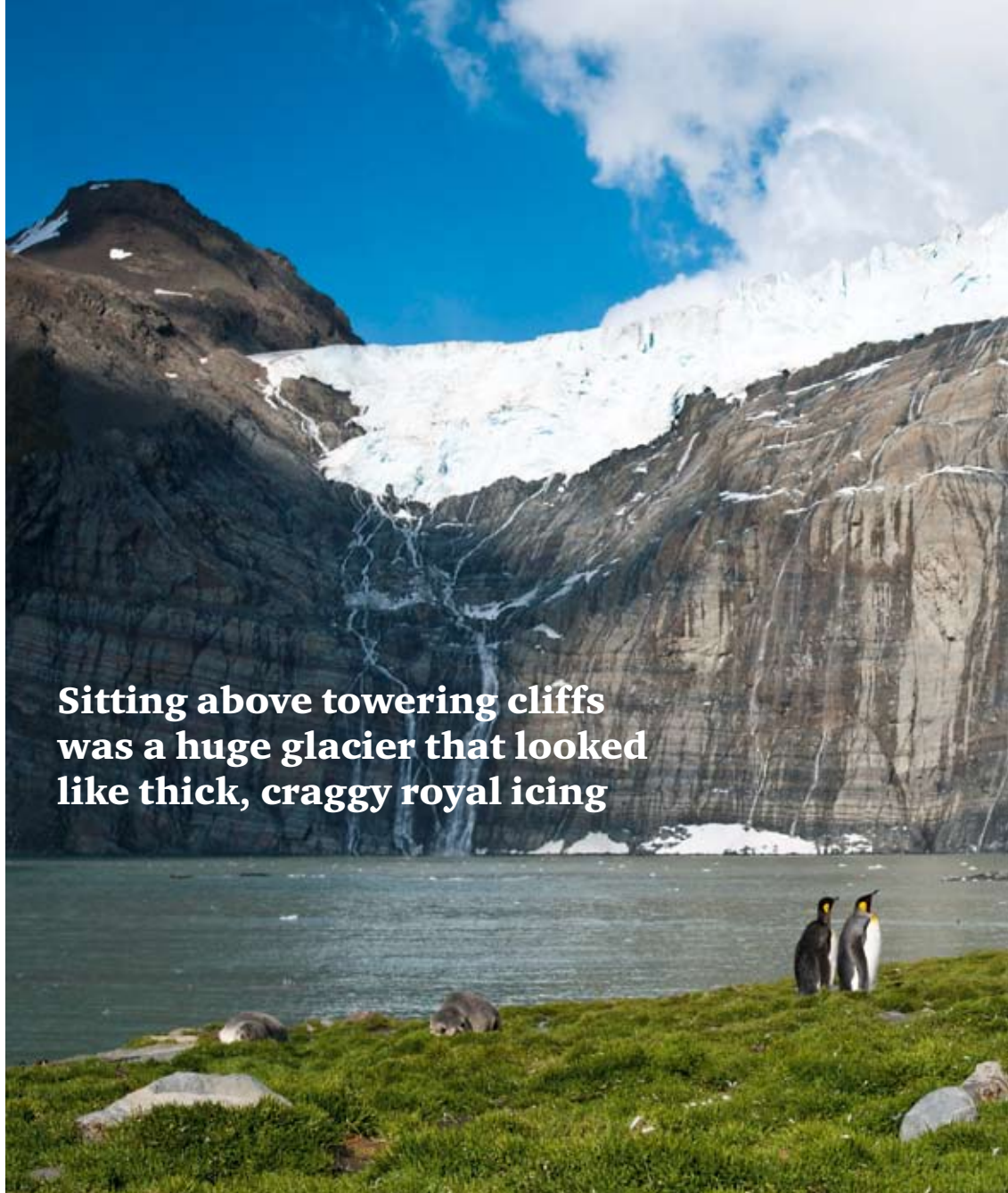
South Georgia is a British Overseas Territory and its history is almost as turbulent as the seas that surround it. Most recently, Argentine personnel set foot on it as a prelude to the invasion of the Falklands in April 1982. However it was during the 19th and 20th centuries, when it became a major base for sealing and whaling, that its reputation was forged. Whaling ceased here in 1965, but the remnants of the industry are still strewn around the island. Indeed at many of the major coastal sites visited by tourists there are the brooding, derelict and decaying remains of the industry that lie as architectural epitaphs to the havoc wreaked on the cetaceans of the South Atlantic. In total, over 175,000 whales were slaughtered.

### HISTORICAL RESONANCE

One of these sites, Stromness, is entwined in another famous chapter in the island's history – the explorations of Ernest Shackleton. In April 1916, Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition became stranded on Elephant Island, 1,300km south west of South Georgia. Shackleton and five colleagues set out on an epic voyage in an open rowboat back to South Georgia. They landed at King Haakan Bay on the south coast on 10 May, then covered 35km on foot in 36 hours over the island's central mountains to reach help at Stromness whaling station. The remaining 22 members of the expedition left stranded on Elephant Island were subsequently rescued and remarkably there were no lives lost. Shackleton died in 1922 during a later expedition and is buried at Grytviken.

No journey to South Georgia is complete without visiting Stromness and Grytviken. All voyages make a point of spending time at these places of great historical interest and allow time to visit Shackleton's grave and the fascinating museum, where so much of the island's history is encapsulated.

On the final day of my time on South Georgia we arrived early in the morning at Gold Harbour, towards the island's south east corner. In advance, some of the expedition staff had told me how special and photographically inspirational the site was, but no words could do it justice. A great crescent beach was framed by imposing mountains and to the left, sitting above towering cliffs, was a huge glacier that from a distance looked like thick, craggy royal icing on top of a chunk of wedding cake. Below, another enormous colony of king penguins stood huddled together and a handful of elephant seals lay prone along the beach. Good weather is always very hit-and-miss on South Georgia, but this particular morning



**Sitting above towering cliffs  
was a huge glacier that looked  
like thick, craggy royal icing**





*Clockwise from here: the king penguin breeding colony at Gold Harbour; these amazing birds can travel 400km for food; a black-browed albatross*



© NICK GARBUTT

was near perfect with clear, blue skies, warm temperatures and a light breeze. The scene could not have been more spectacular.

The three hours I spent at Gold Harbour will forever remain with me. Much of the time I was lying prone on the large pebbles that carpeted the beach, just a couple of metres away from the lapping water. In the shallows, a couple of fur seal pups cavorted in the calm water, sliding effortlessly on and off a small rock, with one then the other holding dominance atop the rock, each alternately gaining a temporary upper hand. Their movements were almost balletic.

Periodically there was a building rumble followed by an ear-splitting crack and advancing wall of sound, as if some giant, invisible tree was splitting open. The intensifying sounds were the internal churnings within the hanging glacier that every so often reached a crescendo as a great hunk of ice tore away and plummeted down the cliff face in an ever-fragmenting cascade.

But again it was the king penguins that stole the show. For the first 20 minutes or so they wandered in and out of the water around me, but always keeping three or four metres away. They soon became accustomed and then began passing by much closer, probably coming to regard me as a rather misshapen seal. I then began taking photos. Looking through the distorted perspective of a wide-angle lens made the birds appear more distant, but they were happy to wander by me, barely touching distance away. It was as if I didn't exist. A constant stream of penguins emerged from the sea in front and walked past. Sometimes it was a group of four or five that appeared in unison, their movements seemingly choreographed with photography in mind. Each time I pressed the shutter and a volley of shots ran off, I imagined the results were better than those that preceded them. In the end I simply had to tear myself away, hanging on till the very last minute, when the final inflatable was →





Here: king penguins can distinguish their chick's call among the masses. Below: fur seal mothers can recognise pups like these after years of separation

returning to the ship. Inevitably I felt I'd barely scratched the surface and, given a free reign, would have spent several days there.

Back on board there was an excited buzz as everyone recounted their own personal highlights of our spellbinding morning. The anchor was quickly raised and we continued on our way, heading south east to South Georgia's southern tip. Dusk approached as we rounded Cooper Island and the swell of the sea began to increase when we emerged from the lee of South Georgia and faced the prevailing southwesterly winds. Several wandering and black-browed albatross plied the intensifying breeze, rising and falling with enviable freedom above the waves and gathering white horses. As we set off toward the Antarctic Peninsula, the captain announced a weather warning. We were heading into a force nine gale with three days of sailing across the Southern Ocean before sight of land. But that's another story. **WT**



## TRIP ADVISER

**COST RATING** ★★★★★

**SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR:** Wildlife Worldwide offers a 17-day package to South Georgia and the South Shetland Islands aboard the expedition ship *Ushuaia* sailing from Stanley, spending 5 days around South Georgia and taking in sites such as Bay of Isles (Salisbury Plain), Prion Island, Fortuna Bay, Stromness, Gold Harbour and Cooper Bay. Prices start from £5,705 per person (category C cabin), including a flight from Santiago to Stanley, and the cruise from Stanley to Ushuaia on Tierra del Fuego.

**GETTING THERE:** Ships leave from Ushuaia on Tierra del Fuego in Argentina or from Stanley in the Falkland Islands. Flights to Ushuaia are via Buenos Aires. Flights to the Falklands are via Santiago in Chile. Most itineraries offered visit South Georgia as part of a longer voyage that also takes in the Falklands Islands and the Antarctic Peninsula. These are generally around 21 days in length, with 5 or 6 days spent visiting sites on South Georgia. Some more specialist voyages visit just the Falklands and South Georgia, offering more time on the island and visiting more sites on South Georgia.

**VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK:** Before travelling to the British Antarctic Territory, and the wider continent of Antarctica, you will need a valid permit which your travel company may obtain from the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in London.

**TIPS & WARNINGS:** There are over 40 visitor and tourist sites around the island. Permit applications list the sites being visited in advance. At some sites

like Prion Island, Cape Rosa and Larsen Harbour, special codes of conduct apply to prevent the introduction of rats and to minimize disturbance to any nesting birds. For safety reasons, with the exception of Grytviken, all whaling stations are closed to visitors.

Protection while viewing wildlife is based on the principle that all visitors must give wildlife the right of way. If an animal chooses to approach, the onus is on visitors to back away if their presence is likely to cause alteration in behavior.

**WHEN TO GO:** The tourist and cruise ship season coincides with the austral summer. Trips normally begin from mid-October and continue through until late March.

In October and November landing sites are at their most pristine and remain largely covered in snow. Pack ice begins to melt and break up. Snowfall and blizzards are still common. Penguins and other sea birds are at the height of their courtship and wild flowers begin to bloom. Elephant seals also establish their breeding territories: this is the time large bulls or 'beach masters' battle for supremacy and control of their harems.

December and January provide the warmest, most stable weather (often above freezing) and the longest days. Penguin chicks hatch and seal pups are visible.

February and March is the end of summer. Adult penguins are moulting and chicks leave their colony. Elephant seals begin to haul out to moult.

## TOUR OPERATORS

- WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE, Tel: 0845 130 6982; [www.wildlifeworldwide.com](http://www.wildlifeworldwide.com)
- STEPPES TRAVEL, Tel: 01285 880 980; [www.steppestravel.co.uk](http://www.steppestravel.co.uk)
- EXODUS, Tel: 0845 527 9414; [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)