Gail and Martha’s Excellent Adventure

I’m sitting on an undulating magic carpet of ice chunks, which extends into oblivion, silence piercing the air. Ignoring my frozen fingers, I slowly lift up my paddle and slice through the fabric -- leaving a ribbon of midnight blue water in my wake and filling the silence with the satisfying crunch of plastic on sea ice. As I near the shoreline, I see penguins jumping like dolphins a few meters ahead of me, so I draw closer and watch them gracefully swim under my kayak through the clear, almost tropical-looking, water. The squawk of penguins from the shore, a sound that reminds me of the harshness of a crow’s call, but belongs to feces-stained birds that stumble on land like human toddlers yet swim like underwater missiles, breaks my reverie. I think, for the five-billionth time that day, “Holy crap, I’m kayaking in Antarctica!”

In November 2011, the MES Director, Martha Henderson, and Assistant Director, Gail Wootan, jumped on a plane to experience summer on the other side of the world and for one of them, snag her seventh continent. The idea of going to Antarctica was sparked by a college friend of Gail’s. It had been a lifelong dream of her friend to hit all seven continents and it took Gail putting the down payment on a trip to get her to go. Gail told Martha about the upcoming trip and the rest was history.

The trip actually started in Buenos Aires, which is an entirely different story unto itself filled with samba parades, Italian street festivals, late night feasts, an 18-meter high Jesus, a death-defying bike ride through potholed streets, and newfound friendships. To get to Antarctica from Buenos Aires, we had to fly to the small mountain town of Ushuaia, which considers itself “El Fin del Mundo,” or “The End of the World.” The town was exciting enough with its crisp, spring air and stunning views, but it was time to hit the road on the Academik Sergey Vavilov, our shipboard home for the next 10 days.

One of the things about an oceangoing trip to Antarctica is that you spend much more time onboard the ship than you do off the ship, so a good crew of people and an uneventful Drake Passage crossing are crucial. Luckily, we hit the jackpot with our ship considering that two of the staff on board, our kayak guides, were Greeners!! We knew we’d chosen the right trip from that point forward. The actual passage itself was literally smooth sailing – no seasickness for us, although the side effects of our seasickness patches were another story.

But you really want to know about Antarctica, right? Antarctica is one of those places and experiences that are hard to explain using just our common vernacular. Instead, one must hear the sounds, drink in the impossible blues, and view the never-ending glaciers, icebergs, mountains, and penguins to understand that it is best just to experience it yourself. It is difficult to portray just how exciting it is to see that first iceberg and that first penguin, and then to have each day provide a new experience until the end of the trip when the icebergs, penguins, and colors become an expected everyday spectacle outside your room’s porthole.

However, I will try to share some of our experiences with you here. For the actual Antarctic part of the trip, we had five days in the region to explore with twice-daily trips by Zodiac to the mainland or islands off the peninsula (like the South Shetlands). For a bit more (okay, a lot more) money, passengers could also sign up to kayak, cross-country ski, climb, or camp. Martha and I chose to kayak, and I also chose to ski. Every stop we made had its own special memory. My first climb up a glacier, roped up on skis with complete strangers on Livingston Island, was exhilarating, but not as exhilarating as the “polar plunge” into the gunmetal waters of the old whaling station on Deception Island.

The second day was our first step on the actual continent (Antarctica is all of the Antarctic, which includes the surrounding waters and islands). My friend, Kate, and I stepped off the Zodiac together to share the experience of “bagging” our seventh continent. That day was crystal clear – the blues of the sky and water were incredible, and the white of the snow was dotted with black chinstrap penguins waddling around with rocks in their beaks for their nests.

The rest of the trip was a whirlwind of long days of daylight, laughing with new friends from around the world; waiting for the dinner announcement; walking through the halls in just our robes to get to the shower; waking up at Oh-dark-thirty to wiggle into a drysuit for a morning paddle; encountering giant sapphire-blue icebergs; penguins, penguins, and more penguins; dealing with windburned skin; and the delicious taste of a cup of warm hot chocolate at our favorite spot: the top deck bar.

My magic carpet kayak trip was my most memorable experience, not only for the beauty and the otherworldly experience of floating in an infinite ice patch, but because it reminded me of my love for the water and mountains, for fresh air, for challenging my body, and for the epiphanies that adventure and travel bring for me. When Martha and I, regretfully, landed at SEA-TAC and jumped into her car, I felt a slight sadness, as I realized it was back to the daily grind of the “real-world.” But that feeling was soon replaced with the possibilities for my life: I could work in Antarctica if I wanted to! I can play in the snow here in Washington – there’s plenty of it! I can meet new people, join new groups, learn new things. Now that I think about it, my life has changed quite a bit since getting back to the US. Since then, I’ve become more active in local environmental issues, I’ve met new friends through various hiking and volunteer groups, and I’m excited for my adventures yet to come (Habitat for Humanity in Sri Lanka is the next one for me)! I know it sounds cheesy, but anything truly is possible – even going to Antarctica. Essentially, it can all be summed up by my new credo: “Try it! It’s not as hard as it seems.”