Episode 44: Antarctica

Summary

Several years ago Nick and Wendy had the great pleasure of visiting Antarctica. In this episode they talk about the white continent and their amazing experience there.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking to you about the time that we went to Antarctica, at the bottom of the world, and there's a phrase that people use a lot, which is 'once in a lifetime'. And everything's once in a lifetime, and I think it's overused, but I think this trip, for us, really was a once in a lifetime opportunity, unless we go back and do it again!

Wendy: I do have a small hope that one day we will go back and do it again, but it's a pretty expensive trip, so, yeah, for most people it probably would be just once in a lifetime.

Nick: Yeah, we're definitely what you would call budget travellers. That means that we stay in cheap hotels where we can, we don't go to resorts, we don't go to fancy[1] restaurants, we don't stay in fancy hotels, and so, for us, the price tag for Antarctica was really high. And at one stage we were kind of weighing up[2] whether we should do it or not, because it was really a lot of money. Umm, we paid just about … a little bit over four thousand dollars each, and that was a lot for us, and still would be a lot for us now. Umm, but we decided to do it, and it was one of the best decisions we've ever made, I think.

Wendy: Yeah, no regrets, for sure.

Nick: So, in order to take one of these tours to Antarctica, you go from Argentina, you go from the bottom of Argentina, a city called Ushuaia, which is on the Tierra del Fuego, it's an island that's just detached[3] from the mainland of South America, but it's part of Argentina, you can get there very easily from Argentina. And you can take these, kind of, tours to Antarctica. And so the boat that we were on was not a cruise ship, it was actually an old research boat. And so they'd transformed it into something that was habitable. So, again, it certainly wasn't a luxury experience,

---

[1] fancy: expensive, classy

[2] weighing up: deciding (usually between two options)

[3] detached: not connected, opposite of attached

that's not what you're paying for. It's not a boat that has a mini-golf course and a pool and all this stuff. That stuff wasn't there at all. So it was quite basic really, umm, but we had a little cabin to ourselves with a couple of bunk beds[4], I think, and, umm, that was our little home for the 10 or 11 days that we were there. And so it's still quite a distance to go from Argentina down to Antarctica. It's the shortest possible distance that you can do to get to Antarctica, umm, but you have to cross this, uhh, Drake Passage, which is supposed to be a very, uhh … I mean, it's open water and it's supposed to be very rough seas. Umm, apparently we had quite a good passage through that area, according to the staff. They said it was quite calm compared with usual. I don't know if they say that to everybody or not.

Wendy: I don't think so. I think it probably was calm. Although it did still rock about … the boat was rocking[5] quite a lot, so it didn't feel that calm to us.

Nick: No, I remember certainly that I had trouble right at the beginning in the open water because I've had trouble with seasickness before. Umm, and so it takes you about a day-and-a-half, I think, to get to Antarctica. And so that's … you know, you're all excited about your trip but you've kind of got to wait a little bit until you actually get there. But what they do, or what they did on our boat, which was quite good, was that they had a series of lectures about the different, uhh, things that you're likely to see in Antarctica, the wildlife, and also the … from the point of view of the volcanic activity and this kind of stuff. And so you learn about what you're going to see and that really, uhh, increases your enjoyment, I think, to really understand what's happening there.

Wendy: Yeah, I attended a lot of the lectures on … that were given on the boat. And we learned ~~from~~ (about) different things because there were several different experts in different fields who were accompanying us on the trip, so I remember we had one geologist who told us all about the rocks and, like you said, the volcanic activity and things like that. Umm, unfortunately, I think people were not as interested - unfortunately for him, I think most people were not as interested in the rocks as they were in the animals, the wildlife. Umm, so, yeah, he had maybe a harder time getting people excited about his lectures. Umm…

Nick: But I was impressed that he was there.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick. Umm, you know, we just expected it to just to be tour guides and that was it. But yeah, to have people who were experts in the different fields, yeah, that was a real bonus I think.

---

[4] bunk beds: two beds where one is on top of the other and you need to climb a small ladder to reach it

[5] rocking: moving from side to side

Wendy: Yeah. And I remember they also taught us a little bit about the history of Antarctica as well because of course it's not a country, umm, but it is kind of partially managed by a number of different countries and they have, uhh, a physical presence there in the form of[6] research stations, so they taught us a bit about how that works and also about the ozone layer as well, 'cause that was a big problem. The ozone … the hole in the ozone layer was right over Antarctica, umm, and now that's starting to close back up again, so, yeah, we learned about all kinds of things, it was very educational.

Nick: So Antarctica is very large. Uhh, the area that's closest to Argentina which we went to is actually a peninsula which sort of juts out[7] from the mainland of Antarctica. And so we spent most of our time in and around this peninsula. That's actually really interesting because then you have land on both sides. And the tourist boats, they don't go into the very interior of Antarctica. But, I mean, it was so incredible on the peninsula that we were certainly very happy just to have been there. So basically what happens is, you're sleeping on the boat all the time, of course, there's no - or certainly in the areas where we were - there's no human life, there's no inhabited[8] areas.

Wendy: And there are no hotels. There's no option for staying on the land itself, unless you're a researcher, and then you stay in the research station.

Nick: And so we stayed on the boat, and then each day you had usually two landings. And landings are where you go … where everyone goes in these smaller boats which are called zodiacs, and they have about eight to 10 people, umm, in the boat. We had about 70 people or so who were on our large boat. So you go in these small groups on the zodiacs and then you'd go to land in different areas. And in different areas, you'd see different things. So, for example, we saw quite a lot of penguins.

Wendy: Yes!

Nick: So basically every landing, you see penguins.

Wendy: Yeah, but you never get tired of them, because they're amazing.

Nick: And we saw different types of penguins and you can definitely see the difference between them. Umm, one of the ones that we liked was the chin-strap penguin.

Wendy: Yeah.

---

[6] in the form of: the way something appears or manifests itself

[7] juts out: extends, protrudes, comes out from something more fixed

[8] inhabited: having humans living there

Nick: And so it has this .. it's a penguin that has a white face and it has a little mark on its chin in black, it looks kind of like a strap, but it's actually part of the penguin, so that's the chin-strap penguin. So they were quite nice. The gentoo penguin, we saw a lot of those as well, and the adelie penguin as well. We saw lots of different penguins, we saw lots of seals, we saw whales, so you do see a lot of wildlife for sure.

Wendy: And lots of birds as well, migratory birds that fly, you know, great distances, like albatrosses and many other birds.

Nick: And so were there obviously in the summer in the southern hemisphere. Actually we were there for Christmas, so it's light more or less all the time. Umm, usually in Antarctica, or certainly our experience was that there's a very unusual light, because even though it's summer, it's still Antarctica so the weather's not usually that good. But you have this kind of magical light, and all you see around you is just white. Everything is white. You see glaciers everywhere, you see mountains that have snow on them, and it's just amazing.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah. It was absolutely incredible. Uhh, it's something I'll never forget. And it's something that you can never see anywhere else. It really is unique.

Nick: And it's interesting that in the south of Argentina, in Patagonia, we'd been to this glacier which is called Perito Moreno. It's very famous and it's an incredible glacier, but in Antarctica you just see glaciers like that all the time.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: Like dozens of them every day. Umm, and so it's very interesting to see all these people go to Perito Moreno. And of course it's far more accessible and, you know, there's no reason to say that that's not an amazing site to go to, but when you go to Antarctica, it's just a whole new level of whiteness, or winter wonderland. And we basically only had one really nice day in terms of weather and that was just so incredible that it's just indescribable how amazing that was, to see the sun shining on all of this white, to see the blue skies, the mountains, the glaciers, the bays, the icebergs…

Wendy: Mmm, yeah.

Nick: Umm, and it was just amazing.

Wendy: Yes, like you said, that was only one day. Most of the other days it was quite cloudy and overcast[9] and a bit grey, but what we remember is that, that one day of beautiful weather. And that was enough to, you know, to have those memories for a lifetime.

---

[9] overcast: when the sky is completely covered with clouds

Nick: Right, and I took so many photos that day so it looks like, if you look through my, kind of, top photos of the trip, that we had amazing weather all the time. But really, you know, three-quarters of my best photos come from that one day. Umm, but, it was just amazing. We went into this bay and we were right at the bottom of the glacier. You know, we were in the zodiac boats and the glacier was just right in front of us. It just rises up, it's just indescribable how incredible it was. Umm, another thing that we did, I think the following day, it wasn't one of the … it wasn't the sunny day, but we went to a place called Iceberg Alley. And that was really, really interesting. And so, you're in your zodiacs, and you're just in this section of the ocean where there's just all sorts of icebergs, different shapes, different sizes, even different … they make the water different colours around them. And you're just, kind of, going in and out, through this alley of icebergs, and that was really something special as well.

Wendy: Yeah, and the icebergs are huge. I mean, many of them are much larger than the boats that we were in, the zodiac boat.

Nick: Some of them were larger than the actual boat, than our main boat, as well. Umm, yeah, they're just an enormous size and you just can't really contemplate or imagine, umm, the size and the scenery and the nature. It's just something like we've never seen before.

Wendy: Umm-hmm.

Nick: And then in the end, I think one of the last days, we went inside a volcano which was in the water, and it was black. There was black sand.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: And there was black all around and there was some red as well, but that was just a completely different landscape from anything we'd seen before. Everything was white until this one day where we suddenly saw this volcanic black ash, umm, and that was another interesting thing as well.

Wendy: Yeah, Antarctica was full of surprises.

Nick: And so then finally we had to go back, we of course had to go through the, uhh, Drake Passage again, and it everybody was really sad that it was over. We spent 10 or 11 days there and it was really just so incredible. And so, you never know. There's a longer trip of about 23 days that you can do, so maybe one day if we, umm, if we find a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow[10], we can go and do that as well.

[10] a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: imaginary way to find money without earning it

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Nick and Wendy hesitate about going to Antarctica?

2. What was the weather like in Antarctica while they were there?

3. What was different about visiting the volcano at the end of the trip?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. I didn't like staying at the youth hostel. I find it hard to sleep in _____.

2. Australia is a large country but most of the interior is not _____. The vast majority of people live in coastal areas.

3. If it's your birthday or if you're celebrating something, it can be nice to go to a _____ restaurant.

4. Another birthday option is to hire a party bus. If you have the right crowd, by the end of the night the bus would be _____!

5. In the UK, the weather is often grey and _____. So when the sun comes out, everyone likes to take advantage of it.

6. The people have shown their displeasure with the new government _____ protests and demonstrations throughout the country.

7. She received offers from two very good universities and now she is _____ which one to accept.

8. I left my hometown a long time ago so I'm quite _____ from what's going on there. I don't know many people there anymore.

9. We can't afford to buy a house unless we find _____.

10. The Italian peninsula _____ from the Alps to the south in the form of a boot.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook:

1. Are you interested in visiting Antarctica? Why or why not?

2. Do you ever have problems with seasickness or motion sickness like Nick does, or do you know anyone else who does?

3. What would you most like to see in Antarctica - penguins, glaciers, icebergs, or something else? And why?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They hesitated because it was very expensive, but in the end they're very glad that they decided to go.

2. It was mostly cloudy but they had one day of beautiful weather.

3. The volcano was different because it was black and not white, which is the colour of practically everything else in Antarctica.

Exercises

1. bunk beds
2. inhabited
3. fancy
4. rocking
5. overcast
6. in the form of
7. weighing up
8. detached
9. a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow
10. juts out