

2

View from the stern of *Le Commandant Charcot* and (opposite) the ship navigating ice and its dining room.



# CHAMPAGNE ON ICE

DISCOVER A DELIGHTFULLY FRENCH TAKE ON EXPEDITION CRUISING.

BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO

I'M ALONE ON THE SHIP'S FORWARD DECK, WHICH MAKES IT EASIER TO HEAR THE cracking. I peer over the railing to see the source: square slabs of Land Rover-size ice pushing away from the metal bow. It's the first sound I've heard 20 minutes into my preferred activity du jour – watching snow-covered peaks and sculptured icebergs slip by.

What resonates isn't this unfamiliar noise, but rather the booming silence into which it expands. Against the backdrop of Antarctica's untamed vastness, the *whoosh* of whales breathing, the *plouf* of penguins porpoising through the water, and the flap of bird wings on frigid air amplify and form the soundtrack of my expedition aboard Ponant's newest ship, the eco-friendly, 245-passenger *Commandant Charcot*.

Sprawling almost entirely within the Antarctic Circle, the southernmost continent is a place of extremes trod by more penguin feet than human. The word "otherworldly" gets thrown around a lot in travel writing, but Antarctica comes by it honestly. It *is* another world that, not so long ago, was reserved exclusively for brave explorers, sailors, and scientists, such as our ship's namesake, Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Charcot. In the early 1900s, he carried out two lengthy expeditions around the Antarctic Peninsula, where our 14-day odyssey concentrates.

These days, travelers can't get here fast enough. According to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators, 74,401 visitors traveled to Antarctica during the 2019-2020 season, compared to 56,168 the previous year. Now that pandemic travel restrictions are lifting,



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pent-up wanderlust has been unleashed, and big-ticket trips are on trend, says Noosa, Australia-based Virtuoso travel advisor Natalie Cherry, who chose this cruise for *Le Commandant Charcot's* ice-breaking capabilities and luxury, private-yacht feel.

“During the pandemic, people had time to reevaluate their lives, and they developed a thirst to see remote places,” she says. “They feel like more is possible now.” Over her 26 years in the industry, she’s never had more clients set sail for Antarctica.

MOST ANTARCTIC CRUISES EMBARK from Punta Arenas, Chile, or Ushuaia, Argentina, before making the nearly 600-mile crossing of the Drake Passage, a much-feared strait of converging oceans pinched between the tip of South America and the South Shetland Islands. Admittedly, I was nervous and packed a drugstore’s worth of patches, pills, and wristbands to ward off seasickness, none of which I used. While *Charcot* and explorers like him roughed it in drafty wooden boats, the 492-foot *Commandant Charcot's* stabilizers handle squally seas like a dream – it helped that we encountered the “Drake Lake” (a fairly smooth crossing) instead of the “Drake Shake.” The most challenging part as a passenger was keeping the free-flowing *Veuve Clicquot* from splashing out of my flute, and not rolling off the spa’s massage table.

As the only luxury cruise line flying under the *tricolore*, Ponant doubles down on French *joie de vivre*, from the vessel’s captain, Patrick Marchesseau, to much of



(DECK) OLIVIER BLAUD, (SHIP) MORGANE MONNERET, (DINING ROOM) GILLES TRILLARD



A gentoo penguin strikes a pose. Opposite: A whale prepares to dive off Deception Island, and a balcony suite on *Le Commandant Charcort*.



the 215-person crew to daily homemade desserts and croissants. Pastry chef Julien Arnaud uses roughly 26 pounds of sugar and more than eight pounds of chocolate a day to whip up cream puffs, éclairs, macarons, and the flakiest tarts this side of Paris. At Nuna by Alain Ducasse, multicourse and à la carte menus change daily and are paired with fine French and Chilean wines.

Dining sets the daily clock on board, but it's an explorer ethos that sets the tone – one embraced wholeheartedly by Marchesseau, who has spent 12 years sailing the polar regions. Minding Antarctica's mercurial weather, Marchesseau deviates off our planned course to Peter I Island, a few hundred miles away, and opts to push down the peninsula. We squeeze through rugged, narrow channels and tuck into ice-filled blue lagoons, ultimately landing at Carroll Inlet – 73 degrees, 15 minutes south – the farthest Marchesseau and *Le Commandant Charcot* have gone to date.

En route, the captain maneuvers so passengers get a good gander at a pod of humpback whales on the starboard side, and the turquoise hues of older icebergs off the stern. Another afternoon, he announces a plan to assist the *Sir David Attenborough*, a British research ship in the area. For several hours, we gather on deck to watch our ship open a three-nautical-mile path through sheets of ice eight feet thick, a task that would have taken the other vessel six days.

“I think passengers like going where no one has been before,” Marchesseau says. “It’s exciting and the true idea of being an explorer. In Antarctica, you never know what to expect each day.”

WHETHER SEATED NEXT TO A WINDOW in the dining room or on a heated bench by the outdoor pool, I keep tabs on passing ice, looking for dark smudges on the white topography that might be a lounging crabeater seal, nesting birds, or



(PENGUIN) KORENA BOLDING SINNETT. (WHALE) LORRAINE TURCI. (INTERIOR) GILLES TRILLARD



Hiking in Hanusse Bay.

penguins. While many passengers aim paparazzi-length camera lenses, I find it hard to take in Antarctica through a screen or viewfinder – my eyes capture wide, golden sunrises and dapper penguin tuxedos with 100 percent precision.

The ship's expedition team consists of guides and scientists from around the globe who orchestrate our daily landings in this surreal world. (*Le Commandant Charcot* is also the only expedition ship that hosts researchers on board in a dedicated scientific laboratory.) Given the volatile weather, they have their work cut out for them and set out early each morning to scout locations. Eventually, we zip from ship to shore in inflatable Zodiacs for polar hikes and walks; the braver among us even take plunges into the Antarctic water in our swimsuits. One morning, we wiggle into dry suits and kayak amid floating ice, catching sight of an ice rainbow against the

cerulean sky. In the ship's 270-seat theater, team members give afternoon presentations on local geology, history, and wildlife, as well as on the area's delicate ecosystem.

Expedition leader John Frick says climate change remains the biggest threat to the region, and Ponant takes sustainability seriously: *Le Commandant Charcot* is the first luxury hybrid-electric polar vessel powered by liquified natural gas. But increased visitors imperil Antarctica too, which is why guides keep passengers an appropriate distance from sensitive areas such as rookeries and attempt to prevent the introduction of invasive species by insisting we vacuum our clothing and pockets and disinfect our boots.

"A lot of people think of Antarctica as this desolate place," Frick says. "But it's actually full of life and is a wilderness that needs our protection."

Always a back-seat driver, I visit the ship's bridge, where screens blink green

compass headings, wind direction, and the outline of our ship between latitude and longitude lines. Nearby, a crew member charts our position on a paper map with calipers, "in case all electronics fail," he says. His numbered markings remind me of how the original seafarers and scientists voyaged into Antarctica – with maps and mathematics, instinct, and a robust spirit of exploration.

Through the front window, white clouds fall into the white horizon, and towering basalt cliffs drop straight into inky water. I imagine this remote tableau of white, blue, and gray to be almost as it was when Charcot first saw it, and goose bumps rise on my skin. It's a big ask to take in every last illuminated inch. In reverence to the exquisite expanse and those who came before us, I study Antarctica piece by piece, joining her in utter silence.