

“LIKE TRAVELLING TO ANOTHER PLANET”

Pathology Services Manager **Sue Alexander** wanted a holiday that would also make a good CPD opportunity, so she booked a break with a difference: a trip to Antarctica.

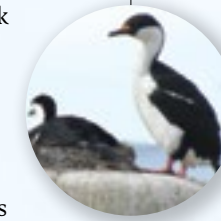
Why Antarctica as a travel choice? It's certainly not a holiday in the usual sense but I love travelling to remote and unusual places, and Antarctica has been on the list for a long time. As a child I was fascinated by pictures and stories of the early exploits, such as Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition and later by documentaries that made me think, "I want to go there". So in a year with several significant anniversaries, I quite literally decided to push the boat out: I researched cruise options and booked a trip.



IMAGES: SUE ALEXANDER

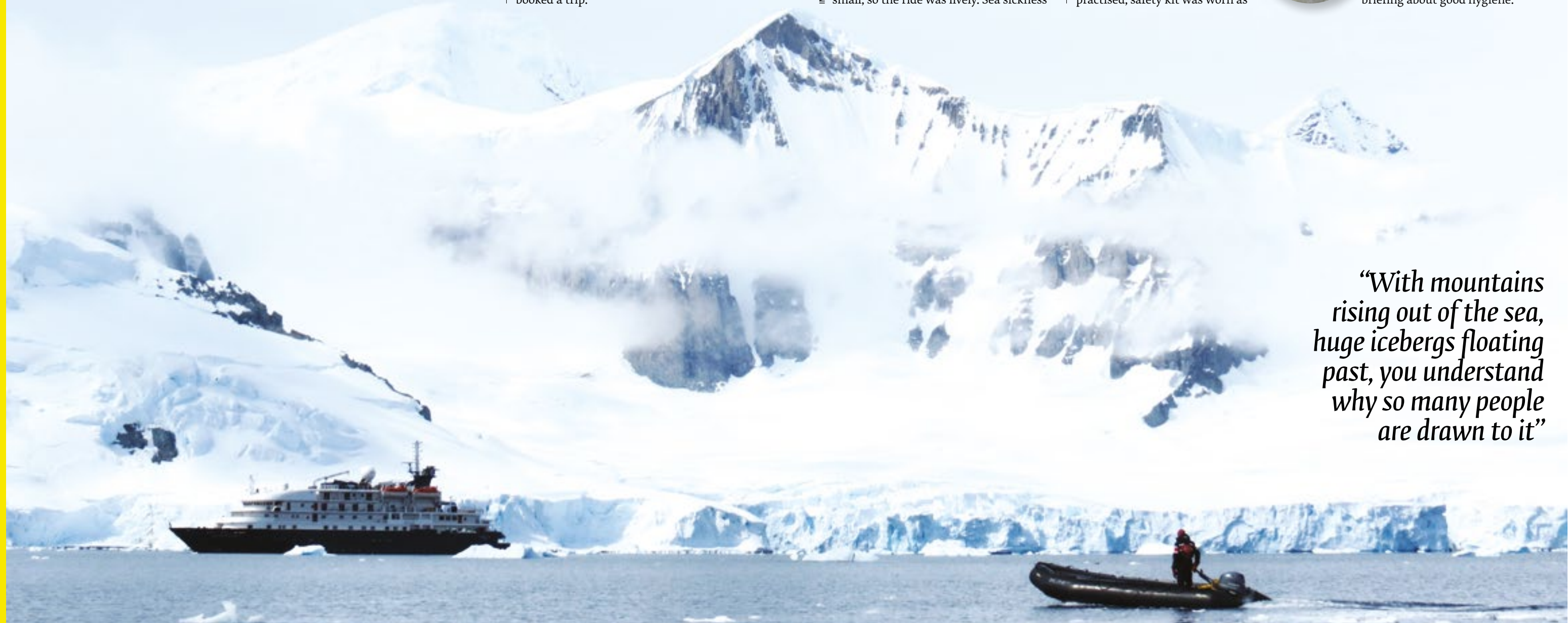
It takes a long time to reach Antarctica via Buenos Aires and Ushuaia in the south of Patagonia. The cruise starts and ends with two days each way across the Drake Passage and some of the wildest seas on the planet. Five-metre waves and 50mph winds battered us. Our ship was quite small, so the ride was lively. Sea sickness

was rife and early lectures were sparsely attended. Health, safety and risk management were taken very seriously. Ships now have to meet Safety of Life at Sea standards following the Titanic sinking so evacuation drill was practised, safety kit was worn as



ordered, and procedures for getting off the ship and into the zodiacs rigorously followed. This also included a stern lecture on the principles of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators. We had to sign a declaration agreeing to follow these principles in order to protect the environment. Boots were disinfected before and after each landing, approaches to wildlife were controlled, and the expedition crew were always on hand to ensure appropriate behaviour. Norovirus is a risk on board ships so there was also a briefing about good hygiene:

“With mountains rising out of the sea, huge icebergs floating past, you understand why so many people are drawn to it”





hand gel dispensers and warning notices were found all over the ship. The only medical aid available is via the expedition doctor and a limited supply of medicines. In the event of emergencies, there is no fast route out. It is essential to understand this and to assess the personal risks you are willing to take in terms of remoteness from hospitals.

In an isolated and hostile environment, strong leadership is an essential characteristic, and our expedition leader was a very strong, effective yet funny leader. The overall management of the cruise activities was carried out extremely smoothly. Again, just like skills used day to day in laboratories.

If this feels like being at work, it is no surprise, surrounded by standards and SOPs. The expedition team, who drove the zodiacs and supervised all landings, were experts in their fields and gave excellent presentations on a range of subjects, from glaciology to ornithology via photography. It was wall to wall CPD.


And when you get there, the last great wilderness, with towering mountains rising up out of the sea, huge

icebergs floating past, pristine snow fields and extraordinary seascapes, you understand why so many people are drawn to explore it. It is like travelling to another planet: a place unlike any other, a huge film set but for real.

Penguin colonies are noisy and smelly but real fun and the penguins don't know you aren't supposed to get close to them. Seals lie around snoozing like large cats and take no notice of tourists at all. A real highlight was an unexpected encounter with a large pod of orcas that dived repeatedly under our zodiacs and gave us a couple of hours of mesmerising up-close time. I was also lucky enough to see a number of albatrosses. I had really hoped to photograph a wandering albatross and was successful.

As well as the amazing surroundings and wildlife we had the chance to take part in the Citizen Science research, run in collaboration with the Scripps Institute, California. There is an ongoing programme of research into climate, water temperature/salinity, plastic contamination, wildlife and DNA analysis of phytoplankton. Antarctic ice is

critical to almost all of the global sea current circulations and contains 75% of the world's fresh water, so understanding if it is melting and how fast informs climate change research. Krill eat phytoplankton and most other wildlife either eat krill exclusively or as part of their diets, so the health of the phytoplankton is a critical issue for the whole food chain. All the scientific activities were carried out just as they would be in a formal laboratory setting to ensure the rigour of the results and were supervised by the expedition team: as a UKAS assessor, I was impressed.

We visited several research stations, including the historic British Port Lockroy, where there is a restored building from the 1940s, a gift shop and post office. Scientists are recruited annually to work here for a season and scientific studies are carried out at bases across the continent. All laboratory skills are transferable so for any adventurous souls looking for something different, perhaps during a career break, there could not be a more dramatic, challenging and exciting option. 



Sue Alexander is the Principal Biomedical Scientist and Pathology Services Manager at The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust.