

Penguin Pondering

By Kim Skilling '79

Bouvet, an early explorer of Antarctica described penguins as a duck that swims like a fish with a bill like a crow. This mixture of metaphors expresses well the uniqueness of this black and white flightless bird. Awkward as a toddler just learning to walk when on land, they are quick, sleek and graceful in water. Penguins are arguably the most memorable sight of Antarctica. They are indisputably the most endearing.

The number of penguins one encounters is overwhelming. Our first landing was a challenge. It was a wet landing on a rocky stretch of beach. Wading through the water, balancing on rocks, we made our way to shore. Once safely on dry land we were greeted by our first sight of penguins. Not just a few dozen, not even a few hundred, but tens of thousands of nesting pairs. They were spread along the beach as far as we could see. Even if we had not been told the name of our location, we would have known that we were on Penguin Island.

We learned a lot of facts about penguins in a lecture on board. We learned how to identify the penguins we were likely to encounter (Adelies with their white rimmed eye, Chinstraps with the white line under their chin, Macaronis with bushy, orange eyebrows and Gentoos with orange bills and white triangles over their eye). We understood the adaptations that allowed them to thrive in the harsh Arctic conditions. But those facts just scratched the surface.

Walking among penguins brought the knowledge to life. We watched penguins searching for the perfect rock to present to their mate to help build the nest. We watched parents feed and protect their young. We discovered that penguin species co-exist happily as a Gentoo penguin walked along with a group of Adelies. We laughed when they tried to leap onto ice only to bump into a ledge and fall back in the water. They are curious animals, waddling up to us to check out our boots. They are also fragrant critters (the smell of penguin guano is literally "breathtaking"). Heading to the water in a line, the lead penguin would hesitate at the shoreline causing all the others to bunch up until finally one penguin would be pushed in and then all the others would follow. They surprised us by suddenly appearing while we were at sea—porpoising alongside the ship or resting on an iceberg miles from shore.

The mention of Antarctica will bring to mind the vastness of the sea, the stark beauty of the ice and sightings of whales, leopard seals and albatross. It will be treasured for new friendships made and precious time with family shared. But in the end, Antarctica will always be about the penguins.