

Plane Sailing

Planning a visit to Antarctica? A fly-cruise expedition skips the time—and anxiety—of traversing the dreaded Drake Passage.

STRATEGIES In late 1928, on what must have been a fine summer day in the southern hemisphere, polar explorer Sir George Hubert Wilkins made history by leading the first aerial expedition in Antarctica, taking off from Deception Island in a trusty Lockheed Vega monoplane — an aircraft favored by another fearless aviator of the era, Amelia Earhart.

Nearly a century later, I flew to Antarctica, though in admittedly more comfortable and less challenging conditions. My conveyance was a high-wing jetliner operated by Aerovías DAP, a Chilean carrier chartering for Antarctica21, the cruise company I had chosen for my much-anticipated first trip to the white continent. Unlike Wilkins, who ushered in the aerial age of Antarctic exploration, I was here as a mere tourist. Yet when the flight touched down at the gravel airstrip on King George Island, home to over a dozen research stations from different parts of the world, I could finally boast of having visited all seven continents.

Whereas most Antarctica-bound cruises depart from Ushuaia, Argentina, I'd traveled almost half-way around the world from my home in Kuala Lumpur to southern Chile's Punta Arenas. Overlooking the Strait of Magellan, this Patagonian port town has in recent decades emerged as a hub for Antarctic fly-cruises, which typically begin and end with brief flights over the notorious Drake Passage — a



WINGING IT
From top: One of the Aerovías DAP aircraft used by Antarctica21 for its flights to King George Island; the *Magellan Explorer*.

crossing that otherwise takes two days through some of the planet's roughest waters.

Antarctica21 pioneered this format more than 20 years ago — Quark Expeditions and Silversea have since followed suit — and has recently upped its game with a shiny new expedition center in Punta Arenas' historic heart. Dubbed Explorers House, it's repurposed from a century-old wool warehouse. We gathered there prior to boarding for a detailed briefing on safety and sustainability. Then it was time to take off.

With zero turbulence, a snack box, and even an inflight magazine, the two-hour hop was surprisingly restful. I had my nose pressed to the window the whole time, gazing down at the sparkling Southern Ocean far below, deceptively calm and alluring.

After landing at King George, the largest of the South Shetland Islands, a five-minute Zodiac ride brought us to the *Magellan Explorer*. With room for only 76 passengers, this intimate, custom-built ship would be our floating home for the next few days. From the comfort of my cabin, I watched the shoreline slip from view as we set course for the Antarctic Peninsula. I could scarcely believe we had arrived in Punta Arenas just that morning. Nor did I truly appreciate my fortune in bypassing the Drake Passage until Instagram messages started pouring in from friends recounting their own miserable crossings.

What seasickness? Which Drake Shake? I was in Antarctica, and ready to hit the ground running. Bring on the penguins! —Charukesi Ramadurai

Seven-night Classic Antarctica Air-Cruises on the Magellan Explorer start from US\$13,595 per person (antarctica21.com).



ANTARCTICA21/RODRIGO MORAGA (TOP) AND KAREN PARADA DEWETAK