

# Sailing to Antarctica is child's play

When Lara Novak sailed to Antarctica with her family she visited a continent rarely reached by children, but found a world of baby penguins, icy games and rough seas



Skip Novak and Luca navigating the Gerlache Straits

We had just taken an almost two-day long trip by plane from Cape Town to Ushuaia in Argentina, the most southerly town in the world.

My dad, Skip Novak, my brother Luca and I met our boat *Pelagic* and Dave and Bertie, who both work on the boat from time to time. My mum, Elena Caputo, would meet us later in the trip because she had to stay behind to work. She is a journalist and Nelson Mandela had died the night before we left. Dave would come with us as crew until she could join us.

We spent three days buying supplies in Ushuaia, during which Amy, Daisy, Andrew and Emma arrived. Andrew is a BBC filmmaker and Emma is his wife. Amy is my age and Daisy is fourteen. Andrew and his family were going to Antarctica with us to film two things; a documentary on penguins at a former research base turned museum called Port Lockroy, and a clip on 'Children in Antarctica.'



*Pelagic* is a 54ft (16.5m) steel sloop with a lifting keel and rudder for high-latitude sailing

featuring Amy, Daisy, Luca and me.

On 10 December we went up to an office to sign out of Argentina so that we could set sail. We started sailing down and across the Beagle Channel to Chile. Amy and I spent a lot of time up in the bow. That night, when we arrived in Chile, there

was a huge luxury yacht, *Billy Budd II*, anchored in the bay and we were invited over for supper. Once we had all managed to squeeze out of the hatch of *Pelagic*, we were escorted by dinghies to 'the boat with the door', rather than having to scramble over the guardrails. After supper, one of the crew showed us where the TV is hidden – click a button and it comes out of a desk.

In the morning we took a long walk around in search of a Christmas tree for *Pelagic*. We found a Canelo tree, which is the traditional Christmas tree in Tierra del Fuego, and took turns chopping it down and then carried it back to the boat. To preserve it until Christmas we stored it in the bow, where it is very cold.

The next day we started sailing down the last of the Beagle Channel and as an early dinner we had crab that Dave had caught. We soon learnt that that was a bad idea: once we entered the Drake Passage and the waves got big, the crab started to come right back up again. All the children, including me, were vomiting into green buckets. Amy was vomiting the most, so her bucket was nicknamed 'Chucky Bucky'. Daisy was doing the best of all the kids, so she spent most of the time in the pilothouse. Eventually, I joined her, but Luca and Amy were still very sick.

I had decided to write a diary about my trip, as for most people it is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I also drew pictures. I had drawn two in Ushuaia, but my first drawing once we had crossed the Antarctic circle was of a Cape Pigeon – there were so many flying around the boat, as well as several species of albatross.

Eventually, Luca and Amy joined us. Amy started to feel better, and as she hadn't hydrated in a while, risked a drink of juice; big mistake. Almost immediately, Chucky Bucky had its work cut out again.



Amy and I jumped for joy at Cuverville Island



Pushing our way through brash ice in the Neumayer Channel

On the third day, land was finally in sight. Our first anchorage was in Whalers Bay on Deception Island. We took the dinghy ashore and sledged down a snowy hill while Andrew filmed. Instead of sand on the beaches, there is ash, as Deception Island is a water-filled semi-active volcano, which means that it could still erupt. Amy and I decided to dip our feet in the water because there are hot patches of steam near the shore. The water smelt disgusting, like rotten eggs and rubbish because of the sulphur. Just before we took the dinghy back, we saw two chinstrap penguins; the first penguins of the trip.

## Sailing through icebergs

In the morning, we started sailing south through loads of icebergs with really strange shapes, and my dad taught us the different names for the different sized ice pieces: growlers, bergy bits and icebergs.

We eventually spotted Cuverville Island, where, floating on an iceberg, we saw a Weddell seal. It was incredibly fat. We anchored and took the dinghy ashore, where we were greeted by a colony of Gentoo penguins. My dad, my brother and I watched the penguins walking up the trails they make in the snow, while Andrew filmed Amy and Daisy. Luca found the shell of a broken penguin egg that had been eaten by a skua. These predatory sea birds rely on penguin eggs and chicks for their main source of food.

The next day we started sailing to Port Lockroy, but we were held back

'At Cuverville Island, we anchored the boat and took the dinghy ashore, where we were greeted by a colony of Gentoo penguins'

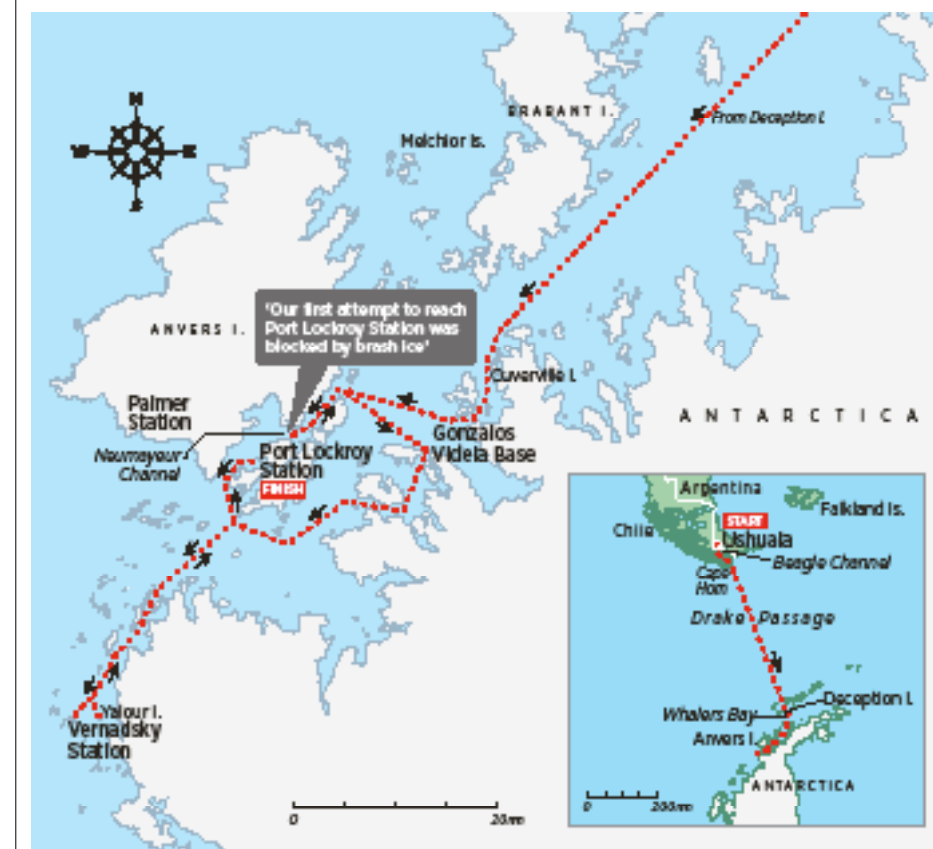


CHART: MAXINE HEATH



The Novak family (Lara, Skip, Luca and Elena), enjoy a snowy Christmas holiday with a difference



The hill above Port Lockroy made a great campsite and gave stunning views across the bay



'Bobbing' - swimming in drysuits and buoyancy aids - was one of our favourite things in harbour

by brash ice. My dad let us have turns steering through it and we kept crashing into it. We had lots of free time on the boat, so Amy and Daisy taught us some card games to pass the time. We didn't make it to our destination that day, so we had to turn back and stay at a Chilean base called Gonzalos Videla.

In the morning, we tried again to reach Port Lockroy. Close to the station, a giant wall of ice blocked our path. We tried to push through, and got stuck after about five seconds - dad's sailing at its prime. We played cards for hours and hours after that, but in the morning we had drifted forward and could take the dinghy ashore. Helen, one of the people who was working at Port Lockroy, gave us a tour of the base on the island which, as well as being a museum, has a British post office. Thousands of cruise ship tourists each year send postcards from Antarctica to their family and friends back home. There were four girls looking after the base: Helen, Sarah, Kristy and Jane.

#### Eggs hatching everywhere

Port Lockroy was really cool. We were there for about two weeks, so we did a bunch of stuff, like collecting glacier ice with Sarah so that the girls at the base could have fresh water. We saw the first egg on the island hatch and the chick was so cute. Suddenly eggs were hatching everywhere! There were always raided eggs around as well, but I never saw them actually being taken by the skuas.

Luca and I were doing a survey on penguins. He observed 17 penguin nests but I focused on four, examining each nest more closely. Each day we had to note the temperature, the wind, the barometer reading, the penguin's behaviour, how many eggs they each had and whether any had hatched. I named my penguins after my best friends, Saskia, Jaime and Emmaline, and the last one was a combination of my pet cats' names: Rotch (Rose and Scotch).

I sent postcards to my friends and teachers from the penguin post office at Port Lockroy. It took forever to write them all. We were invited over by the girls on the base for supper. They gave us icing to make tiny penguins and other animals. They have their own house by the base in a Nissen hut. While in Port Lockroy, my dad and I went kayaking quite a bit, and we saw lots of penguins and icebergs. We landed on a frozen ice shelf where there were four crab-eater seals lounging around.

On 24 December, Mum arrived on a cruise ship called *Ushuaia*, and Dave took her cabin on the ship and left. It was great that she managed to arrive before Christmas. Next morning we all opened our presents, and I got some really nice things, including an iPad Mini. Amy and I then went in the kayak by ourselves, with my dad and brother following us in the Zodiac. We put on dry suits and went swimming in



Yalour Island was the southernmost point of the trip, with a colony of Adelle penguins

the shallow water. It was an awesome Christmas.

A few days later, we went to the top of Damoy Point with sleds full of camping equipment, including our tent. We set the tent up at the top of the glacier hill and Amy and I built snowmen. My family and I went camping that night, and the next day Andrew and his family went. The day we got back from our night camping, my godfather, Jerome Poncet met us on his boat, *Golden Fleece*. He gave me a penguin carving made out of a fur seal tooth, which he carved himself. He is really funny.

Amy, Daisy and I decided to take the Polar Plunge, which, as the name suggests, is when you jump into the water in just a swimming costume. I screamed the whole time because it was so cold! Luckily, Mum had warmed up water for showers.

Eventually it was time to say goodbye to the women at Port Lockroy base and sail even further south, to Yalour Island, which has a colony of Adelle penguins. These are really funny creatures because they have a kind of afro hairdo. My dad's friend from Oxford University is doing a research project on penguins, and he has a camera



The Antarctic's top predator, a leopard seal

trap set up on the island. We changed the battery and memory chip for him.

We left Yalour Island and sailed on to Vernadsky Station, which is an Antarctic research base run by Ukrainians. It has the southernmost gift shop in the world, and we bought some presents for friends. The people there gave us a tour of the station, and we got to see the machine that monitors the Ozone layer.

We then sailed back to Port Lockroy, and there were plenty of icebergs to take pictures. While we were sailing, we went up the mast and I used the Go-Pro camera to film some video. We saw a leopard seal and I got a picture of it yawning.

We reached Port Lockroy before our return trip, but got a shock: the weather forecast for the passage back to Ushuaia was terrible. We had to be back for school, so when the next cruise ship arrived, we abandoned my dad and Andrew to take care of *Pelagic* and jumped ship. The cruise ship was really nice, but I missed *Pelagic*. We spent one night in Ushuaia, said goodbye to Emma, Amy and Daisy and then flew back home to normality. ▲



Taking a dip at Deception Island

#### Lara Novak

Lara, 13, went sailing to Antarctica in December 2013 when she was 11 years old. Her first sailing experience was when she was two and her family sailed from Brazil to Tierra del Fuego. She lives in South Africa and sails an Optimist at the Zeekovlei Yacht Club. She also enjoys art, languages and debating and hopes to be a lawyer. This year, she will be sailing from the Falklands and through the Straits of Magellan to Cape Horn.