



# Thrall of *the wild*

Vast, inhospitable yet utterly inspiring,  
Antarctica is like visiting another world.  
**Catherine Marshall** is awestruck.



**A**ntarctica doesn't come easy. Two days by ship across the Drake Passage, an ocean so vast it seems to exist in perpetuity.

There's not a soul out here except for the albatrosses, dipping and swaying above the ocean's draught.

The voyage of the mind is more confounding. In two days my world has been turned upside down: temperateness has been replaced by frigidity, and we visitors have been relegated to mere bit-players in an evolutionary play.

This sense of insignificance is reinforced by the scale of the continent: icebergs gliding by like ice-bound apartment blocks; snow-smearred mountains piercing a deceptively blue sky; an infinite stillness.

But the silence is swiftly shattered. Approaching landfall in a Zodiac boat, we're assailed by the collective call of Antarctica's most prolific residents, Gentoo, Adélie and chinstrap penguins.

Belying their tiny stature, torrents of squawking, babbling and screeching spill from their beaks. The clamour continues even as the penguins slide down icy hillsides on their stomachs, vigilantly guard their eggs as skuas try to snatch them, and waddle to the water's edge before diving in.

It's springtime, and the penguins have returned to their colonies' nesting sites to incubate their eggs. In around a month's time the cacophony will swell when the chicks hatch and begin to loudly solicit their parents' attention.

"The chick that begs the best gets fed the most," says expedition leader Dr Peter Carey. "That's the chick that's going to survive."

Biding their time for the hatching season, leopard seals lurk beneath ledges of ice. Sea lions blink before falling back to sleep on beds of volcanic beach. A crab-eater seal slides along bright sea ice and slips into a fissure; so clear is the water I can see bleached whale bones on the seabed.

There's no sign of the whalers who once plundered these waters, just the remains of their huts, frozen in time. Human presence is confined now to this ship as it slices through shattered sheet ice, to tight groups trekking across fast ice. Immaculate though it is, we can sense our impact in the receding glaciers and melting ice.

"The polar areas are the canaries in the coal mine," says naturalist Adam Cropp. "Huge volumes of ice that have been here for 15,000 years have melted."

Much as our fingerprints can't be truly wiped from Antarctica, its testament will remain forever etched on my soul. The only continent we can never inhabit, it's a place that allows us to contemplate our own transience, and comprehend the perfection of a habitat that's been left to its own devices.

*To organise your trip to Antarctica, contact one of Travel Associates' Bucket List Specialists at [travelassociates.com](http://travelassociates.com).*