

Adventure Associates helps travelers retrace Captain Scott's path through the Ross Sea.



TRAVEL

FRESH WAYS TO SEE ANTARCTICA

Several outfitters are making the seventh continent more accessible — and exciting — than ever.

FOUR YEARS AGO I HOPPED A cargo plane bound for Antarctica to discover for myself why Apsley Cherry-Garrard, a surviving member of Captain Robert F. Scott's ill-fated attempt on the South Pole, had described polar exploration as "at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time which has been devised." It was August, and it was minus-40 degrees. Ice crystallized in my beard within seconds. I remember huddling in the lee of a volcanic boulder, looking across a frozen sea that met the sun — which, down there, seemed simultaneously more alien and more animate. We called it the Great White Eye. That's when I came to love the place, and it's why I urge anyone curious to go.

And this season, outfitters have devised lots of trips that combine adventure with luxury, making the continent more enjoyable than ever. "Initially the ships that went to Antarctica were research vessels converted for tourist use," says Steve Wellmeier, executive director of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators. "Now the emphasis is comfort." For example, you can book

a spot on Abercrombie & Kent's *Minerva* ship, which has been outfitted for luxury and power, or on the icebreaker *Kapitan Khlebnikov*, which has a heated indoor pool. "These aren't really innovations," Wellmeier admits, "but for Antarctica they are."

Other, more adventurous trips delve deep into the seventh continent, allowing you to climb, camp, kiteski, and even complete a marathon. The most ambitious such trip also comes from A&K. Called "South Pole: Conquering the Final Degree" (\$42,595; akextremeadventures.com), the expedition is led by Geoff Somers, the only man to cross Antarctica by its longest, 4,000-mile axis. The trip begins with a flight from Punta Arenas to the Thiel Mountains. From there you'll strap on skis and tents and ski the final, 69-mile push to latitude 90°0'S, longitude 0°0'E.

If you can't afford the hefty price tag attached to some of these trips, take a cue from me: I was on the *Ice* for the less than glamorous task of washing dishes at the U.S.-operated McMurdo research station, and although my wages weren't much, I got paid to spend six full months on the bottom of the world. —HUNTER R. SLATON