

RIDING ANTARCTICA

BY GEOFF SMITH

THIS WAS THE CHOICE: GO TO ANTARCTICA and ride a motorcycle or don't go to Antarctica and don't ride a motorcycle. Some choice. As difficult as it was, I thought about it for maybe 15 seconds and then wrote a check.

This was my second trip with Ayres Adventures, with adventure being the operative word. The first ride, which involved Argentina, Chile and Peru, had been 1,000 percent more fun and adventurous than I had even hoped, so it was only logical to take another trip with them if one came along that piqued my interest. So, when a ride from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia and then a ship to Antarctica and a chance to ride on the "frozen continent" showed up on the website, it was a go!

I arrived in Buenos Aires a few days before the trip to take in a few sights I had missed in my first visit. Buenos Aires is a great city with some beautiful old sections that must have been magnificent in their heyday. But political graffiti is found everywhere, and like every large city, the infrastructure needs help. The whole group met the night before the ride was to begin and checked out the bikes. The next morning, in a blaze of glory and excitement, off we went! It was good that it was a Sunday morning, as the drivers in Buenos Aires

pay no attention to lane markings or motorcyclists.

The next five days were pretty similar in terms of riding. Argentina is big—really, really big—and the roads seemed to go on forever. I sort of felt like I was riding across Texas each day. There is virtually no traffic, so one can make great time (Speed limit? What speed limit?), and the R1200GS just flew down the road. We stopped in small towns or small cities each night. At last we arrived in El Calafate in Argentina and then Torres del Paine in Chile, which should be on everyone's bucket list. It's Mother Nature at her best and most dramatic, whether it is the Perito Moreno Glacier or the granite towers in the national park. The area is so magnificent, so unbelievably beautiful that it overwhelms the senses. I was feeling very insignificant! From there it was a two-day spectacular ride to Ushuaia at the tip of Tierra del Fuego. One day of rest and we then boarded the ship for Antarctica, with memories of great riding still with us. As usual, Ayres Adventures had not disappointed.

Once on the ship, it doesn't matter how jaded a traveler you are. There is a definite thrill in knowing that you are going where not that many people have gone before. We left Ushuaia about 5 p.m., the sea was like

glass, and sailing down the Beagle Channel was a visual delight. However, that all changed once we hit the Drake Passage. Suffice it to say that I wished I had taken the Dramamine concession on board. There were few for breakfast the next morning, and basically the captain just headed the ship into the wind to ride out the first storm (of several) that came through. The weather was lousy, and I really started to think that if this was going to be this way for the whole trip, it was going to be a long, long 10 days.

We slogged for two days across the Drake Passage and people slowly got their sea legs, but the weather did not clear. "The bike people," as we were called, had a meeting with the One Ocean group who were running the ship, and basically we were told that there was only one place we could possibly ride the bike and that we would need very calm seas to be able to even put the bike in a Zodiac, take it to shore and unload it. As the ship tossed and heaved, I thought there was as much chance of that happening as winning the lottery—a one in hundreds of millions chance! I think we all went to bed that night not expecting that the next morning we would do what no tourist had ever done before—ride a motorcycle in Antarctica!

Riding the Torres Del Paine in Chile



There's an old expression, "God looks after drunks and fools." I don't know if it was the whole group or just me, but when I got up about 6 a.m. and looked out the porthole of the ship, I was glad I was a fool and had probably drunk too much the night before. The sea was like glass, not a ripple on the surface. The Russian base

We had a quick breakfast and then 13 people dressed in red arctic suits, and like a group of dyed penguins, stumbled into a Zodiac and went to shore. We had decided to let Phil from Australia be the first to ride, as he was our senior member, and we were a well-mannered group if nothing else. The bike sat there, waiting for us. The road, and

I use that term loosely, waited for us. Phil got on, took off and disappeared behind a hill. Then we waited, and waited and waited for him to return. Finally, from around the hill he came, water spraying in all directions as he

headed for us. The smile on his face said it all. Basically, he said the "road" was really two ruts about 6–8 inches deep, so pick one because you won't be changing ruts halfway down the road. Turning around was tricky, as the road just ends and you have to get the bike in and out of the ruts to turn it. Plus, it was mud, gravel and water in the ruts. Immediately my mind went from being one of the first tourists to ever ride a bike in Antarctica to being the first tourist to ever dump a bike in Antarctica, with an audience of 85 shipmates watching.

The fun factor was fading fast, but then it was my turn. I prayed that the "drunk and fool" factor was still operational. The bike was sliding in the rut and the water and mud was spraying everywhere, but I was upright. I made it to the end and started to once again breathe. Turning the bike around took forever, as the ruts are deep, but I managed. Off I went, heading back but, wait, there were people from the ship walking down the road ahead of me. I don't know what I yelled, but all of a sudden 10 people moved at the speed of light and the road was clear. I left the rut and the last body of muddy water, rode another 100 feet and stopped in front of the group. I had done it, hadn't dropped the bike and could now tell anyone who cared that I was the third tourist in the world to ever ride a motorcycle on the Antarctic continent. Was I happy? Well, let's be honest, this doesn't happen every day.

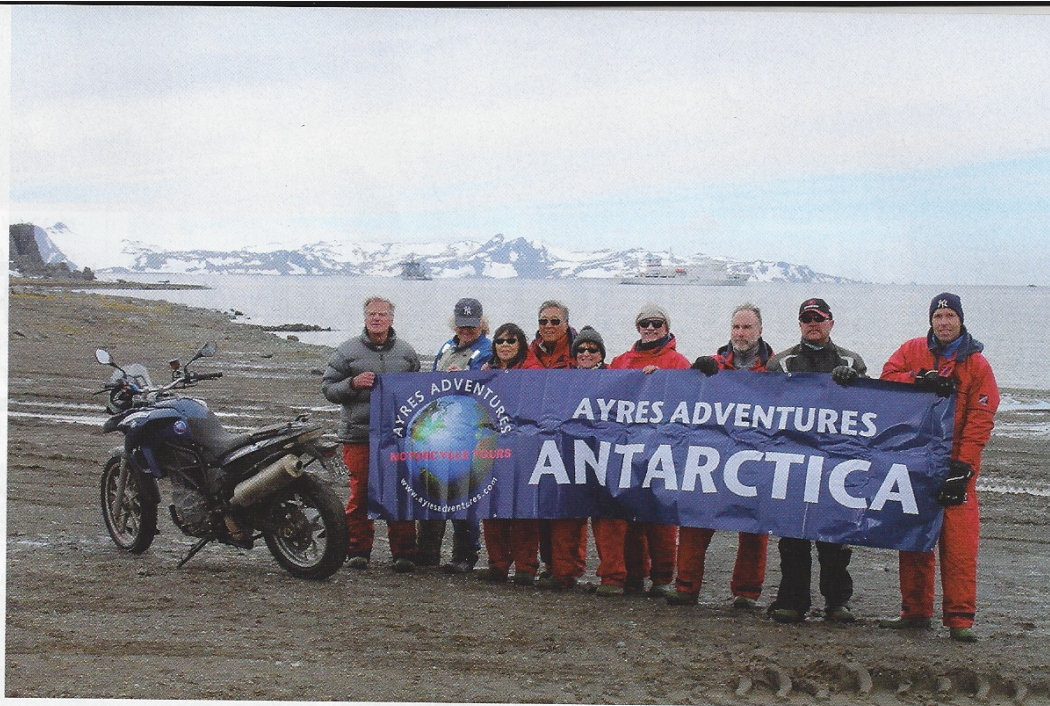
Top to Bottom: Preparing to drop, Alex and Ida Lunardi from Indonesia, Antarctica terrane



where we were to ride was about a quarter-mile away, its red buildings gleaming in the morning sun. I went up on deck and saw the bike, resembling some bizarre pre-historic creature, hanging out over the water from a crane. A Zodiac circled below like a hungry shark, waiting for its prey to descend into its waiting jaws. Slowly, the bike was lowered into the Zodiac and off it went to shore. Damn! This is going to happen!



The rest of the group took their turns and all made it in one piece. Then Claus and John, our tour leaders, took their rides and the sense of relief that this had happened at all, and safely, was clearly visible on their faces. We then took the obligatory group photo, wrangled our beast back into the Zodiac for the trip back to its cage on the ship, not to be seen again until we docked in Ushuaia. We walked around the Russian base for a bit and then headed back to the ship to go to another bay. We found out later that the base commander said he had been there for about four years and had never seen the ocean so still. When I heard that, fool or not, I went and had a drink. After all, we had five more days of seeing this magnificent, unworlly frozen continent. What can I say, Ayres Adventures and BMW had come through



Ayres Adventures group

again for me, and for the next five days I was not disappointed in any way! I took over 2,200 photographs, but I have yet to

see a photograph that even begins to capture the soul of Antarctica. But maybe that is the way it should be. ☺

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