



Dr. Lyle Wescott at Neko Harbor, Antarctica

Voyage to the Bottom of the Earth

Two retired CBU chemistry teachers coldly go where only one percent of man has gone before.

BY CORY DUGAN

BROTHER MATTHEW SMITH and Dr. Lyle Wescott celebrated New Year's Day during the summer this year. They were on a continent that is considered a desert. But it was still January 1, and they were dressed in caps and parkas. Welcome to Antarctica.

"Lyle and I are a lot alike," Brother Matthew said with a laugh. "We're both chemists, and we both like to go to places that other people just say 'Oh, I'd like to go there someday.' So when he emailed me last summer and said he'd found this deal on a trip to Antarctica, I said 'Sure, sign me up.'"

The two adventurers left Memphis on December 20 on flight to Santiago, Chile with stopovers in Dallas and Denver. "We landed in Denver just as the Colorado Holiday Blizzard hit," Brother Matthew said. "That seemed fitting somehow." Although thousands of other travelers ended up stranded in the airport, CBU's Antarctic expedition made it out without much delay.

They spent a day and a half sightseeing in Santiago and then boarded the *MS Nordkapp*, a Norwegian registry cruise ship that served as home for two weeks, at Punta Arenas.

"The ship would hold up to 400, but it was limited to 300 for the Antarctic trip," Brother Matthew explained. "Half of the people on our cruise were



Brother Matthew Smith with Gentoo penguins on Greenwich Island

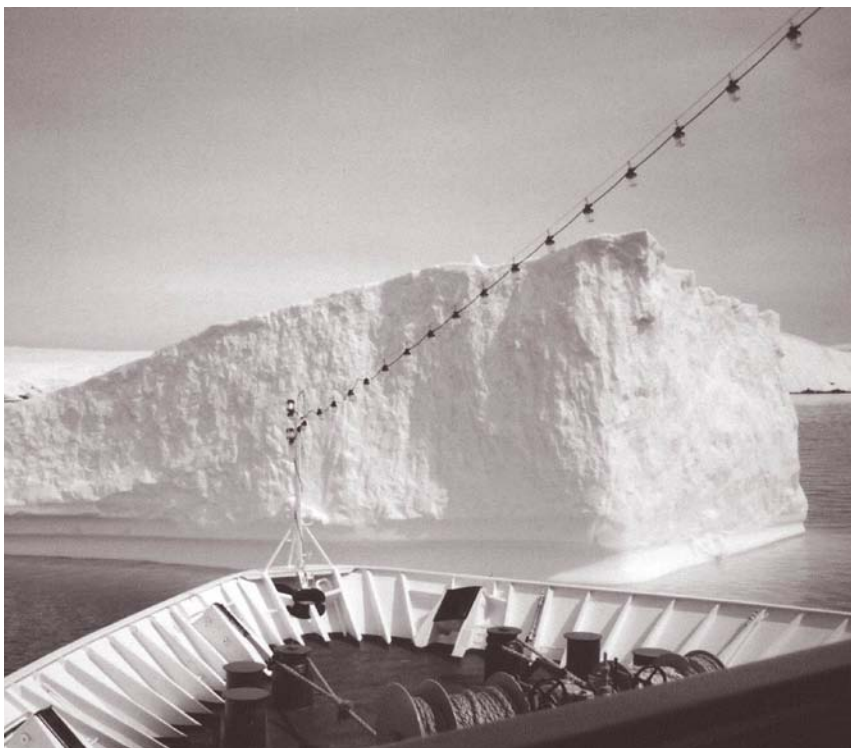
German, the rest were a mix of English-speakers—American, Canadian, Australian, New Zealanders, and Scots.”

From Punta Arenas, they sailed through the Magellan Strait and Kirke Narrows with stops at Tucker Island and Puerto Natale (on Christmas Day) en route to Cape Horn, the jumping-off point for Antarctica. “When you leave Cape Horn for the Antarctic Peninsula, which is where they take most visitors, it’s a 400-mile crossing through the Drake Passage,” Brother Matthew said.

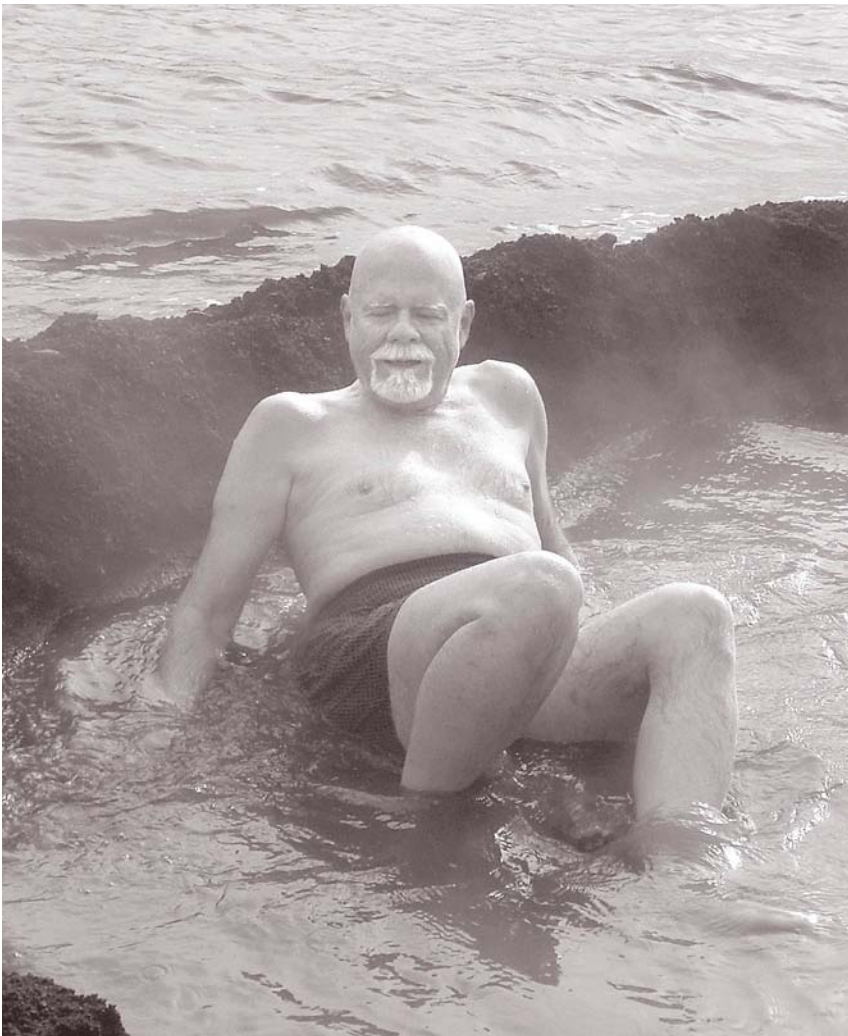
The Drake Passage is notorious for rough seas, frequent storms, and high rolling waves. “We were lucky on the way down,” Brother Matthew said. “The crew said they’d never had such a good crossing. We did have some bad weather on the return trip, though. The waves were 20-30 feet high, lifting the screws on the ship out of the water, and about a third of the passengers were seasick.”

Along the way, Brother Matthew also kept an eye out for the indigenous wildlife of the region—he spotted rhea (a relative of the ostrich) and guanaco (a camelid relative of the llama) in southern Chile, and a Weddell seal on one the islands in the Drake Passage. “It was huge,” he said. “It had to weigh

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An iceberg in Andvord Bay. “Eventually this berg bumped us in the prow,” Brother Matthew said. “Someone was not watching.”



Above: Dr. Wescott taking a dip in volcanically heated water on Deception Island.
Right: A Chinstrap penguin on Half Moon Island.



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about half a ton.”

The first sighting of penguins was in Chile, but that sighting was only the tip of the iceberg (so to speak). “There are thousands of them, and they are everywhere” Brother Matthew said. “The only population control for them is their one predator, the schooner bird, which eats their unprotected eggs. During the voyage, we saw four different species of penguins: the Magellanic, the Gentoo, the Chinstrap, and the Adélie. As long as you didn’t move they’d come right up to you.

“And I have to tell you,” he added, “despite what you might think, penguin poop *stinks*.”

On the printed agenda for the *Nordkapp*’s voyage, Brother Matthew pointed out the recurring disclaimers of “weather and ice permitting,” but said they were luckily never stopped by either.

“It was summer there, but the weather was usually right around freezing for the daily high temperature. Cold, but very manageable. The icebergs weren’t ever a real hindrance, although the ones in the Weddell Sea were about the size of a city block—our deck was about 70 feet above the sea, and we still had to look up at them. We dropped anchor one day to get a better look at one, and eventually this berg bumped us in the prow. You could hear this loud thunk. Someone was not watching, but the engines revved up, and they backed away from it pretty fast.”

Landings during the Southern Ocean voyage included stops at Greenwich Island, Neko Harbor, Peterman Island, Goudier Island, and Half Moon Island. Another stop was at Deception Island, an active volcano in the South Shetland Island group.

“When we landed, they scooped out a lot of the lava crystals and hot water seeped into the basin,” Brother Matthew explained. “So people went swimming in the ocean and then dropped into the hot water to warm up. Lyle stripped down to his skivvies and went for a dip, but I didn’t have the courage to try it,” he laughed.

On their return, the ship docked in Ushuaia, Argentina the southernmost city in the world. The “CBU Polar Expedition” flew to Buenos Aires from there and then home.

“We never got into the actual Antarctic Circle,” Brother Matthew said (although they were only a few degrees away at their southernmost latitude). “But less than 1% of the world’s population has been or ever will set foot in Antarctica. I guess that makes Lyle and I part of a pretty select group.” ■