



The *Belgica* cruising through the Gerlache Strait in 1898, during the Belgian Antarctic Expedition.

In the Wake of History For his new book on a harrowing Antarctic expedition, *Julian Sancton* traveled to the continent himself and discovered its mysterious allure remains unchanged.

BY THE END of the 19th century, the southernmost region of the earth—an area half the size of North America—remained all but blank on world maps. A handful of whalers, sealers, and navigators had sketched a few fragmentary coastlines, but it wasn't known whether what lay beyond them was a vast continent or, as in the Arctic, an ocean of ice. The void around the South Pole was as outer space is to us now: fertile ground for the imaginations of science fiction writers and a promise of glory for anyone bold enough to venture into it. The world's geographical societies declared its exploration an urgent priority.

In 1897, Adrien de Gerlache, a skilled but relatively inexperienced Belgian naval lieutenant, heeded the call, leading the first scientific expedition to Antarctica aboard a three-master, the *Belgica*. After a tumultuous journey marked by a near-mutiny and a near-shipwreck, the *Belgica* reached the Antarctic Peninsula on January 23, 1898, the height of the austral summer. Four days later, the ship sailed into an undiscovered strait, a spectacular waterway stretching 100 miles between glacier-covered mountains shooting straight out the water, as if the sea had risen halfway up the Himalayas. Drunk on the thrill of discovery, the scientists explored the channel for two blissful weeks before de Gerlache urged the expedition southward in a hubristic attempt to reach a record latitude before the winter ice set in. But he had left too late and the pack ice closed around the ship, imprisoning it for more than a year. The *Belgica's* men were the first humans to

endure a winter beyond the Antarctic Circle, and through months of cold and endless night their bodies and minds broke down.

When I set out to research *Madhouse at the End of the Earth*, my book about the *Belgica* expedition, I wanted to put myself in my characters' boots. To a reasonable extent. I figured I could write about scurvy without developing it, and though I was curious to know what penguin tasted like, I wasn't prepared to break any laws. But I thought it would be impossible to fully describe the sights, sounds, and smells of Antarctica by relying on 120-year-old diaries. I had to go there.

With the help of my friend Alex Ros, who runs the boutique operator Open Sky Expeditions (openskyexpeditions.com), I booked a cabin with the Chilean outfitter Antarctica21 (*eight-day itineraries from \$11,495 per person; antarctica21.com*), one of the first cruise companies to charter flights over the Drake Passage—a crossing that's notoriously nauseating by boat—and reduce the two-day journey to two hours. (I had been told that sailing the Drake built up anticipation and gave travelers a concrete sense of how remote and alien this land is, but, again, method writing has its limits.)

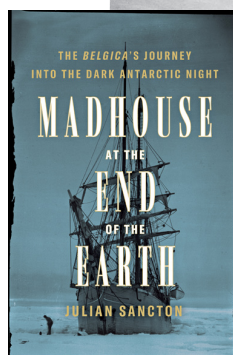
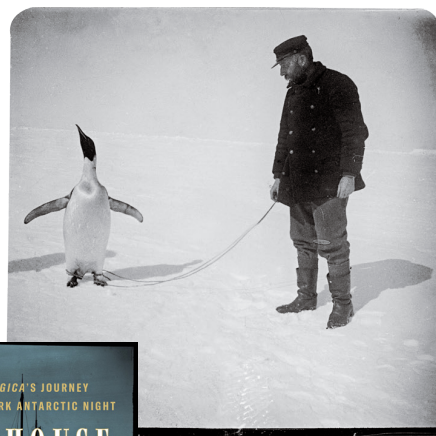
My 70-odd fellow passengers and I took off from Punta Arenas, Chile, and landed on King George, one of the South Shetland Islands. From there we were ferried by Zodiac to the *Hebridean Sky*, which awaited us in the bay. The ship is small by the standards of Antarctic travel—especially compared with

behemoths that can carry more than 400 people. But since an eco-conscious agreement by Antarctic tour operators prevents more than 100 passengers from landing at any one time, the smaller size meant that I would have more time on the ground. (Antarctica21 has recently acquired a brand-new, even more luxurious ship, called the *Magellan Explorer*.)

We sailed south all night. A mix of giddiness and early summer light got me out of bed and onto the deck at 4:30. Camera in hand, I watched the sun caress the peaks of the Antarctic. We had arrived at the mouth of the channel discovered by de Gerlache in 1898.

For six days, we cruised in the wake of the *Belgica*, escorted by gentoo and chinstrap penguins, spuming humpback whales, and braying skuas. Weddell seals lounging on icebergs gave us the side-eye. The Gerlache Strait, as it is called today, is one of the most sublime places on earth, the goal of most Antarctica-bound cruises that depart from South America, even though the treacherous weather never guarantees they'll make it. Though more and more companies and ships are traveling there every year—with upwards of 74,000 visitors to Antarctica in the 2019–2020 season (October to April)—operators do a good job of avoiding one another. We felt like we had the strait to ourselves.

I was stunned by how familiar this landscape seemed to me, having studied the marvelous photos taken by the *Belgica*'s American surgeon, Frederick Cook. (What his images didn't capture was the reason I'd come: the impossible turquoise of submerged ice, the subtle colors of lichen, the fishy reek of penguin rookeries...)



From top: The *Belgica*'s commandant, Adrien de Gerlache, in 1898; the journey is chronicled in the new book *Madhouse at the End of the Earth*.

Nothing seemed to have changed in 120 years, though the scientists on board the *Hebridean Sky* assured me that global warming was causing alarming shifts in the ecosystem. It's not possible—nor perhaps should it be—to travel there without guilt.

Our southern progress halted at the Lemaire Channel, the narrow passage that marks the end of the Gerlache Strait. Today the Lemaire is known informally as the Kodak Gap. On calm, sunny days, the white mountains reflect perfectly against the glassy blue water, making for the kind of vista well suited to a MacBook background. I prefer it the way I saw it: through a veil of fog that masked the summits of the mountains and the reaches of the canyon. I saw a ghostly image of the *Belgica* sailing through it to her possible doom, and was happy to turn back.

Julian Sancton's Madhouse at the End of the Earth is out May 4.



A rookery of gentoo penguins in the Gerlache Strait, photographed during a trip with Antarctica21.