

Snorkelling the tip of the iceberg

SUZANNE MORPHET takes an unusual view of the white continent

It's probably just as well that I have to remove my hearing aids before plunging into the Southern Ocean of Antarctica.

It means I don't hear the scream of a fellow snorkeller during our first experience underwater. If I did, I might panic too, thinking it was fearsome leopard seals joining us in the water, rather than two friendly fur seals.

So, while Jennifer from California is being pulled from the water by our guides, I continue snorkelling in the intensely blue water, mesmerised by the colour and clarity, then thrilled when the frolicking seals appear and seem to welcome us to their icy world.

Snorkelling in Antarctica is something I never imagined doing. But when I learned my cruise with Australia-based Aurora Expeditions offered the activity, I immediately signed up.

This would be my first, and perhaps only, trip to the seventh continent and I wanted to make every minute count.

Once on board the company's new expedition-style ship, the Sylvia Earle, our three guides call a meeting of the "snorks", as they call us, telling us what to expect over the next eight days.

The 12 of us will snorkel twice a day. Three guides will watch from two Zodiac boats, which will always be close by. We'll be the first group to leave the ship morning and afternoon so we have time for adventures on both land and water. In other words, daily surf and turf. I'm stoked.

An added benefit of snorkelling, I soon realise, is that I immediately have a group of like-minded people to hang out with. My husband is on the cruise with me, but he has no interest in submerging himself in water that's barely above freezing.

At our first meeting we learn it's not leopard seals we need to worry about, as much as hypothermia.

"Last year, I had a doctor that had his drysuit half-full of water to his waist and then become non-responsive," says Edwin, one of our guides.

The water temperature fluctuates between 1C and 4C. All it takes is 12 minutes between being fine and being in trouble, should our drysuits malfunction or leak because we haven't closed the zipper completely.

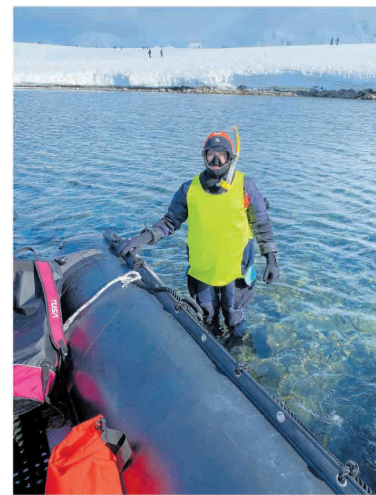
Learning how to put them on is critical. The legs are easy, but I feel like I'm being strangled after I



Snorkelling in Antarctica.



Enjoying the water. Picture: Stephen Scourfield



Suzanne in her snorkelling gear. Picture: Stephen Scourfield

push my head through the tight collar. We also experiment with how many layers we need underneath to stay warm. For me, four wool tops and three bottoms are the sweet spot; staying warm without being so bulky I can't move on land. (We wear our dry suits while walking on shore, and they're surprisingly comfortable.)

When we're finally suited up and I've lowered myself over the side of the Zodiac and put my face in the water for the first time, my brain races between two thoughts.

This is amazing!

This is crazy!

For the first few minutes, someone is sticking pins into my

face. At least it feels that way.

It's the only exposed part of my body. Soon, though, my face numbs and I'm mesmerised by the water of the Weddell Sea off the Antarctic Peninsula, said to be the clearest on the planet.

By the end of our second snorkel, I'm still fascinated, but also perplexed.

I'm not the only one. Alannah, a 71-year-old from Colorado, is the first to say out loud what we're all thinking.

"There's nothing to see," she complains in the mud room when we're struggling to get out of our drysuits.

Of course, there are rocks and some seaweed, the occasional starfish and, in one place, dead penguins on the ocean bottom. But we see nothing moving.

"Everything here is small," our guide Edie reminds us. "Just relax and train your eyes," suggests Ana, another guide.

"You may see sea angels, sea butterflies," enthuses Edie, referring to tiny translucent snails and slugs that appear to have wings.

"Once you start noticing these little creatures you're going to be like, 'Oh my God... this is incredible,'" says Ana. "It opens the door to another world," gushes Edie.

Their enthusiasm is contagious. When I take their advice and just float, I start seeing things. Tiny and translucent comb jellies with

long red tails shimmer in the water. A school of minuscule fish looks like a dense blur.

On the fourth day, I'm still looking for the small stuff when an Adelie penguin suddenly zips past me. Then another, and another. They're like fighter pilots flying in tight formation. For several minutes they careen back and forth, like they're putting on a display just for us.

Performing penguins are a hard act for sea slugs to follow. In the remaining days I resign myself to simply enjoying this ocean. One day we're bobbing in what looks like a giant Slurpee with chunks of blue ice cracking and popping. Another day we snorkel around a large iceberg where a couple of dozen blue-eyed shags are resting.

When I flop on to the floor of our Zodiac after our last snorkel, it's with a mixture of relief and gratitude for an adventure that's been both crazy and amazing.



Appreciating Antarctic wildlife.

