

## Snowy Waring's Travel Blog – 7th May 2023

Hello again everyone the good news is that I have made it home safely all the way from Antarctica to Northern Ireland, thanks to Billy and Harry. The bad news is that this will be my final travel blog of what has been an amazing adventure. Once Harry has delivered me back to you, and I have told you all about my time away in more detail, where will you send me next?? 😊

The journey home from Rothera is not straightforward and first involved a 5-day voyage on BAS's new research vessel *The Sir David Attenborough (SDA)* to reach the Falkland Islands before flying via Cape Verde to RAF Brize Norton near Oxford and then a final flight back to Belfast. In total it took us 8 days from leaving Rothera to arriving at Belfast airport, but what a fantastic time we had.

Leaving Rothera was quite emotional as I had really felt at home there despite only spending a few weeks there compared to others who had spent over 6 months on station. I had met lots of interesting people and made many friends, some of whom were on board with me, but we also left behind 26 people who will continue their stay for another 12 months to maintain Rothera over the Winter and until the end of the next Summer season. It is a tradition for the Winterers to set off flares as the boat leaves and this made for a spectacular site especially as the snow started soon after as we made our way North along the Antarctic Peninsula.



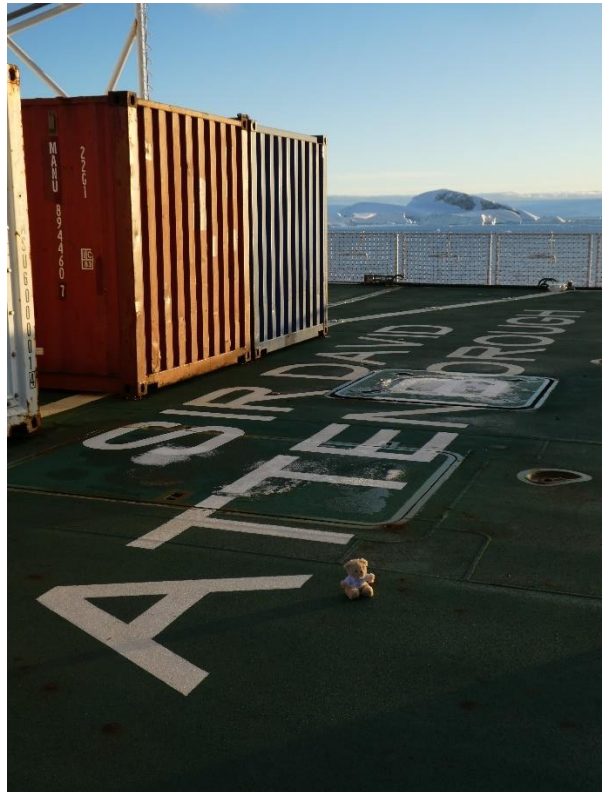
Rothera sits at the Southern end of Adelaide Island on the Antarctic Peninsula and as we headed North our route led us through a narrow channel, called The Gullet, that stretches 11 nautical miles between the eastern side of Adelaide Island and the western edge of the peninsula. The scenery all along the peninsula was stunning with amazing icebergs and mountains but as we slowed down to approach and navigate our way through the Gullet the sun came out from behind the clouds and made for an even more impressive sight. We were also lucky enough to spot more humpback whales and sea ice as we made our way through.





The SDA is one of the most advanced polar research vessels in the world and is full of state-of-the-art technology that will allow BAS to undertake marine science in both Polar regions. The SDA is also used to transport people and supplies to ensure BAS's research stations are fully equipped to operate each season. The 15,000t vessel was built at the famous Cammell Laird shipyard in Liverpool and took 4 years to build before departing the UK for its maiden voyage in November 2021.

The SDA is 129m long and 24m wide and can break ice up to 1m thick while travelling at 3 knots (3.45 mph) and has a range of 19,000 nautical miles travelling at 13 knots (15mph). That is further than a return voyage from the UK to Rothera or to circle the whole Antarctic continent twice, which is mind boggling! It has a full-time crew of approx. 30 and can accommodate up to 60 scientists.



A wide range of specialist scientific facilities, instruments and laboratories enable scientists to conduct multi-disciplinary sciences to study the ocean, seafloor, ice and atmosphere. Marine robotics and remotely operated vehicles – including the famous Boaty McBoatface – can capture data from the deep ocean and previously inaccessible locations under the ice. Unfortunately there was no science being undertaken while we were on board so we did not get a chance to explore the instruments and laboratories.

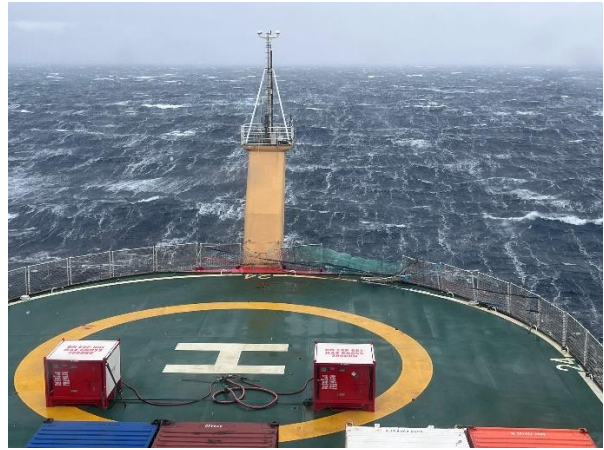
Before leaving the peninsula we made a short stop close to Ukraine's Vernadsky Research Station to collect one of their staff and some cargo. Vernadsky is a very small research station that was originally operated by the British until 1996 when Ukraine took over the base. There is no wharf to berth the SDA so we sat in a sheltered bay and the small tender boat was deployed to access the base and collect the scientist. It was a pretty scenic spot to spend a couple of hours but was very windy to be out on deck.



The stretch of water between the Antarctic Peninsula and the Southern tip of South America is called Drake Passage and is considered to be one of the most treacherous voyages that ships make to cross it. There are no landmasses this far south to provide resistance to the strong currents, strong winds are also very common, and waves greater than 12m have been recorded. However crossings can also be pretty calm and uneventful and you either get to experience Drake Shake or Drake Lake.

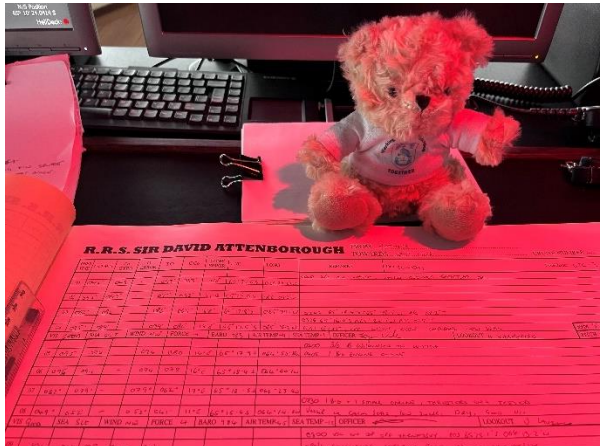
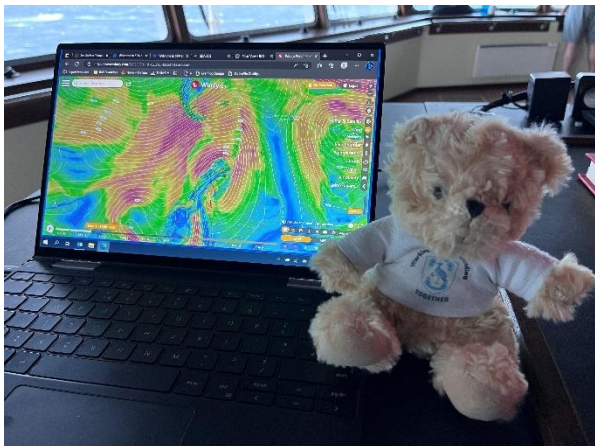
As we headed away from Vernadsky the winds were increasing and the waves were starting to get bigger and there was a noticeable change in motion on board, it looked likely that we would be getting the Drake Shake experience. The first few hours were not too bad as we were partly sheltered by some of the smaller islands at the end of the peninsula, but things started to get worse as the evening went on. Sea sickness tablets were soon dished out to those that had not taken them and walking about on board started to become a challenge as the ship rocked and rolled its way into Drake Passage.

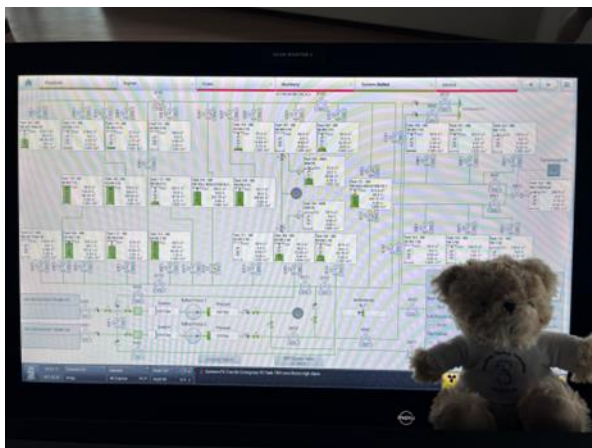
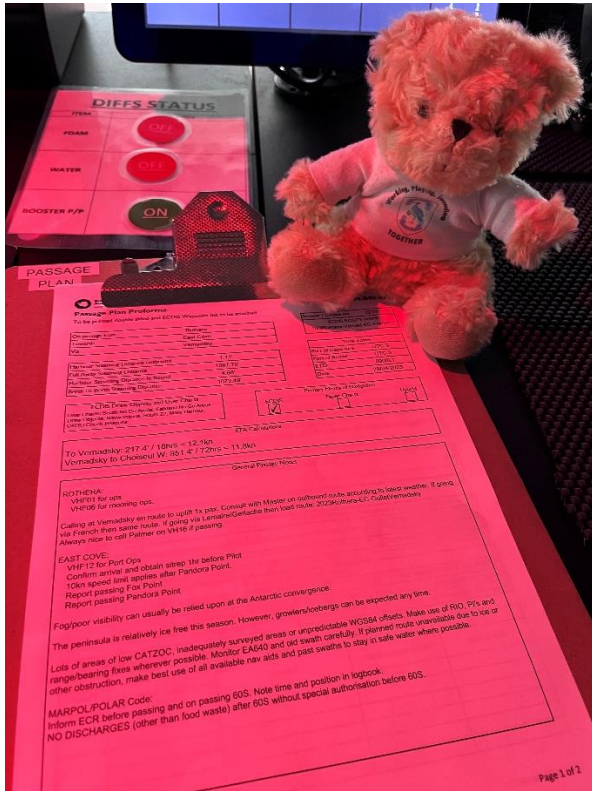
I visited the bridge with Billy to speak to the Captain and we spent an hour watching the waves steadily get bigger and start to crash over the deck with the spray covering the bridge. As we were there the winds increased to force 11 on the Beaufort Wind Scale with gusts up to 70 knots (80mph) and 8m high waves! Seeing the power of mother nature from the comfort of the bridge was amazing and made us thankful that we were in a big ship and not a tiny boat like the explorers of old. Billy will be sending some videos which capture the storm better than the photos!



These conditions lasted until the early hours of the next day but the rocking motion against the waves lasted for a few days longer. Quite a few people were suffering the effects of seasickness and spent lots of time in their cabins where they could lie down to get through it. Billy was fine as he has good sea legs but my little bear legs had a slight wobble and I felt a little poorly but managed to survive without too much of a problem, but I was glad when things started to settle down a few days later!

As conditions were not ideal we were unable to visit the engine room which would have been of great interest but I did return to the bridge. There were so many screens all around the bridge that provide lots of information for the Captain to safely navigate such as the weather, radar for identifying other vessels and icebergs, maps and cameras and information on all of the ship's systems. I was even given the opportunity to take control, under close supervision from the Captain of course 😊. The bridge allows for 360 degree views and even extend out over the sides of the ship with a partial glass floor which is slightly unnerving to stand on.



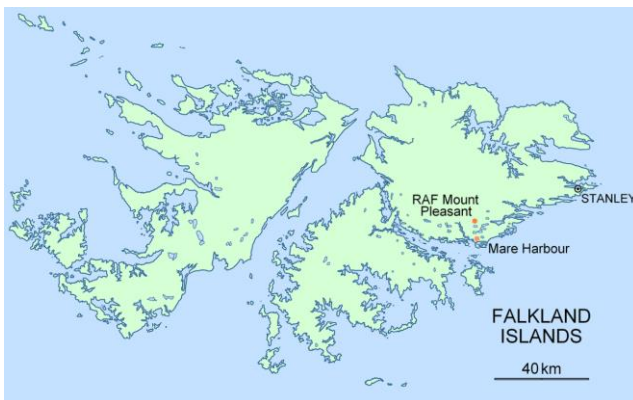


All meals are self-served in a large canteen, similar to Rothera's dining area. The chefs prepare three tasty meals a day whatever the conditions of the sea, however trying to eat during rough seas is tricky. The tables all have non-slip mats on to prevent your plates and glasses from sliding off of the tables, and to make things easier the chairs are relatively low compared to the table reducing the distance from plate to mouth! They also have a freezer full of ice cream that is accessible 24 hrs a day, perfect for bears with a sweet tooth.





We arrived to the Falkland Islands after 5 days at sea and headed to the military port of Mare Harbour on East Falkland that is operated by the Royal Navy. Mare Harbour is 60 minutes by road from the capital Stanley, and 15 minutes from the international airport at RAF Mount Pleasant (MPA), which is home to up to 2000 British military personnel.



Luckily we had a whole day to spare in the Falklands before our flight home so a bus was arranged to take us from Mare Harbour to spend the day sight seeing in Stanley, for those that wanted to get off the ship. I jumped at the chance to explore the capital and get back on to dry land, however I still had a slight feeling of the ships motion despite being on solid ground! Billy has been to Stanley on a few previous occasions so was my tour guide as we went for a long walk to the beautiful sandy beaches around Stanley Harbour before ending up in Stanley, home to approx. 2500 residents. We ended up walking over 14 miles and had a brilliant day out.

The beaches were amazing and the sand so soft and bright against a typically overcast and cloudy day. Although you do need to watch where you go as there are some areas of quicksand to avoid. They were deserted too apart from a large colony of Gentoo penguins that have made their home in the dunes a short waddle away from the water. Gentoos are slightly larger than the Adelies that inhabit Rothera and are the third tallest type after the Emperor and King penguins.



We walked along a number of wide sandy beaches and ended up at Gypsy Cove which is home to a breeding colony of Magellanic penguins, but sadly we were here at the wrong time of year to meet them. Magellanics are almost the same size as Adelies but have two black bands between their heads and chests. There were even some penguins on the doors of the public toilets at Gypsy Cove!



Until 2019 these beaches were off limits to people as they contained 100's of mines laid during the Falklands War in 1982. This was a short conflict between the UK and Argentina over the long-disputed sovereignty of the islands after forces from Argentina invaded and occupied the islands. The UK forces reclaimed the islands following Argentina's surrender after 74 days. There are many other remnants of the Falklands conflict and WW2 dotted about Stanley such as the large gun at the entrance to defend Stanley Harbour.



On the way back into Stanley we took a slight detour to look at a well-known local landmark, called The Totem Pole, that was erected in 1982. This is a pole that has 100's of small signposts with distances from Stanley to points from all over the world. There was even one from Bangor, NI in amongst them 😊.



In Stanley we visited the information centre and wandered about the waterfront, passing the cathedral and whalebone arches, to the interesting Falklands Museum that had lots of information on the cultural heritage of the islands. We arrived too late to enter the museum exhibits, but it was still good to look at the old outbuildings and artefacts on display outside and around the city.





The Falkland Islands are a British Overseas Territory and are self-governed but the UK takes responsibility for their defence and foreign affairs. There are many sites about Stanley that are familiar to the UK such as the iconic red post and phone boxes, including one all dressed up outside Stanley's post office ahead of the coronation of King Charles the Third.



After all that excitement it was back to the SDA to start packing as we had to be up and ready to leave the ship at 04:00 in the morning as our flight had been moved forward a couple of hours to avoid some bad weather that would have delayed our take off. There are two flights a week between MPA and RAF Brize Norton in England and the flights are used by military personnel as well as local residents and tourists and are a vital connection back to the UK. The flights go via Cape Verde off the West coast of Africa with a 9.5hr leg from MPA to the Cape, where you spend a couple of hours for the plane to refuel, before the final 6 hr flight to Brize Norton.

It was quite a tiring journey but due to the early start I managed to get plenty of rest on the plane and awoke refreshed for the final part of my way back home, once Billy had handed me over to Harry, who will be returning me to you all very soon!



It has been a truly, unforgettable experience for such a small bear to travel so far to visit and live in Antarctica and it would not have been possible without BAS and BAM, and particularly by Billy to share his knowledge and passion for Antarctica. I have learnt so much about our planet, the scientific research undertaken by BAS and the incredible creatures that inhabit it, and I hope you have all enjoyed my blogs as much as I have in sharing them with you.

It won't be long until we are reunited and I can't wait to see you all again.

Antarctica's only Polar Bear, Snowy.