

Commentary...

Cavorting with penguins in the Falkland Islands

By Craig Frederick Eisenbeis
Columnist

A Facebook item spotted by my wife, Kathi, noted the posting person's most useless purchase of the year: "my 2020 planner." The collapse of the travel industry in the wake of the novel coronavirus has definitely limited our adventures and unique wildlife experiences. One that we managed to squeeze in last year, however, was visiting penguin colonies in the Falkland Islands.

Our first-ever wild penguin sighting happened to be a single, swimming specimen in New Zealand. Just over a year later, however, we would see them by the thousands in the Falkland Islands! Our penguin bonanza, however, almost didn't happen.

Last year, on our Princess Cruise Line voyage circumnavigating South America, penguins were at the very top of our list of planned activities; and we signed up for a penguin tour in Patagonia. Unfortunately, the weather was so bad that we were unable to dock there; and we lost that opportunity. Our next scheduled port was in the Falkland Islands, but we hadn't signed up for penguins there because we thought we already had that covered. That's when we belatedly discovered that all the Falkland penguin tours were full.

As an alternative, we heard about a public bus line that could take us to a spot where penguins were visible from a distance, so we figured we would have to settle for that. Then we learned that a Norwegian Cruise Ship ahead of us had been unable to land in the Falklands, also due to weather. In the end, though, our ship made it. Then, by mere chance, as we prepared to disembark, we encountered someone who had just decided not to go ashore for the top-rated penguin tour! There was only one ticket,

and Kathi insisted that I take it. So, with a precious ticket in hand, I headed for the Bluff Cove penguin excursion. Kathi took the public bus.

The tour started with a mini-bus ride to the other side of East Falkland and the penguin rookeries located at a place called Bluff Cove. On the way, we learned about the islands, their economy, and the 1982 Falklands War. We also learned that there were more of us aboard the Royal Princess (5,600) than inhabited the islands themselves (about 3,200).

With no native trees, the Falklands are windswept and grassy, somewhat reminiscent of Alaska's Aleutian Islands. Principal industries are fishing, tourism, and sheep. Like most of the civilized world outside the United States, health care is free. Only a few hundred miles from the Antarctic Peninsula, typical summer high temperatures are in the mid 50s. It was much colder on the day of our February summer visit, and some snowflakes were falling.

Our bus arrived at a 35,000-acre sheep farm, where we were parceled out to private 4x4 vehicles and bounced across the tundra-like surface to the ocean's edge, where thousands of penguins awaited. There are five species of penguins in the Falklands, and we would see three. By far the most numerous were the Gentoo penguins, which stand about two and a half feet tall. One third of the world's Gentoos live in the Falklands. Reaching swimming speeds of 22 mph, Gentoos are the fastest penguin; and they can dive to depths of 600 feet. They do not migrate.

The Bluff Cove colony of King penguins consisted of about 40 specimens, including several large, fuzzy chicks. Kings do not build a nest and take turns incubating a single egg on the tops of their feet. The King penguin parents also take turns

going to sea to hunt for food; they can dive to 750 feet and eat a variety of sea creatures, especially fish and squid. At three feet tall and 30 pounds, Kings are second in size only to Emperor penguins, which are not found here.

The third species we saw, the Falkland's smallest, was the two-foot Magellanic; but most of those were at sea. They are named for the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, who first saw these flightless birds in 1520.

In the vicinity of the rookeries, we were restricted in where we were allowed to walk; but the curious penguins were not similarly constrained and often approached to inspect us closely. Most of the Gentoo chicks were nearly full grown, but some still sported spotty tufts of residual chick down clinging to their bodies. Fallen feathers and down lay thick on the ground.

The tour concluded with crumpets and tea at a tiny café and gift shop perched amidst the rookery. Fortunately, as it turned out, Kathi was also able to see plenty of penguins on her (much cheaper) tour, but without the up-close and personal penguin contact at Bluff Cove.

The Falkland Islands are a former British Colony that is now referred to as a "British Overseas Territory." It has been under British rule since 1853, except for 74 days in 1982, when the Argentines invaded the territory with the intent of annexing the islands they refer to as *Islas Malvinas*. The war was initiated by the Argentine dictator, Leopoldo Galtieri, who was having image and political difficulties at home. He is said to have initiated the war to distract the nation from his problems. It didn't work out



PHOTO BY KATHI EISENBEIS

Craig Eisenbeis visiting a Gentoo penguin rookery in the Falkland Islands.

so well, either for him or the nearly 1,000 fatalities of the war.

British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, took umbrage and immediate action, and the British recaptured the islands. The vast majority of casualties were on the Argentinian side. In addition to the land fighting, the British sunk a major Argentine warship, accounting for approximately half the Argentine deaths. Galtieri was removed from power four days after the Argentine surrender. Relations between the 2 countries have since improved but remain frosty.

On a subsequent tour later that day, we visited the Liberation Monument, "In Memory of Those Who Liberated Us 14 June 1982." In another war, the islands

were also the site of a major British 1914 naval victory in World War I. In that engagement, six of eight German ships were sunk, with more than 2,000 casualties. The British suffered ten deaths. The date of the sea battle, December 8, is observed as a public holiday in the Falklands.

Returning by boat to the ship, we left the penguins behind and sailed west. The next evening, we reached the Pacific Ocean and rounded a misty Cape Horn as my great-grandfather, Frederick Eisenbeis, had done in 1858 on his way to the Pacific Northwest. However, our trip was doubtlessly more comfortable than his; and we were served champagne and Oysters Rockefeller as we rounded The Horn.



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King penguins are the largest of five penguin species in the Falkland Islands.

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