Lava at first sight

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There aren't many places where you can watch killer whales in the surf while you have your breakfast. However, there's one at the top of a volcano in the heart of the Southern Ocean

The Ship's Cove penguin colony.


Marine researcher Linda Clokie.


The *SA Agulhas*.

The morning we first dropped anchor off Marion Island, we marched, at 6am, up the seven flights of stairs to the top of the ship, where an officer warned us he wouldn't proceed to the monkey deck because the wind was gusting at 140km/h.

So we did what any self-respecting journalists would: the opposite of what we'd been told. Doom and destruction were waiting for us – it was an invitation too good to turn down.

It was cold out there – about 5°C – the wind howling something awful and chasing chariots of spume across the waters. The storm winds pressed us hard against the railings, so we sheltered in the lee above the bridge, dumbstruck by the sort of scene that put the fear of God into early sailors: an aquatic Hades that had them believe the edge of the earth lay just beyond the next horizon.

I'd joined a party of journalists and government officials aboard the country's polar research vessel, the *SA Agulhas*, to inspect SA's new R200 million science base at Marion Island. I could see why those original seafarers thought they might drop off the edge of the earth, right here in the heart of the Southern Ocean. That Marion has the somewhat prosaic classification as the City of Cape Town's Ward 55 (with an "021" satellite-linked phone number, to boot) belies its remote location at 46°S 37°E, 2 250km south-east of the city.

Almost 1,5 million penguins were squawking ashore now – gentoos, macaronis and rock-hoppers. Sorties of inquisitive king penguins splashed next to the hull; skuas and giant petrels – the gangsters of the Antarctic – stalked the skies. I saw my first light-mantled sooty albatross: ash-grey beauties with black wings that rarely visit the South African coast.

A double rainbow shimmered into sight, a perfect arc over the island's deep-jade peaks – the spongy, swamp-sodden tips of a volcanic undersea mountain that rears 5 000m from the ocean floor.

Then cabin doors slammed. Takkies squealed on passenger-deck floors. The captain's voice crackled over the ship's speakers, barking at us to report to the helicopter hangar. We grabbed what we could salvage, stuffed it into our government-issue togbags and made for the hangar, where the crew swaddled us in lifejackets.

The storm that greeted our arrival was over and this good-weather window had to be salvaged – there was no telling when next we'd have the chance to fly off the ship, moored a kilometre off the island. Just half an hour later, we were all buckled out on the helipad at the back door to Marion's base.

Painted traffic-light orange so that it can be spotted in the island's perpetual mist, the base was built for meteorological and biological research, which commenced when the South African Navy annexed these islands in 1947.

A breathtaking architectural and construction achievement, the base sprawls across 4 200m² of swamp like some space-age pumpkin patch. It incorporates science labs and residential facilities, with a Jacuzzi, no less – and a dining room with expansive windows where you can watch killer whales in the surf as you have your breakfast.

Edge of the earth, indeed. I could stay in this lost world.

In fact, it was during our first walkabout to the island's Trypot Beach, where many of Marion's penguins breed and bray, that we discovered just how much this heavily morassed place can suck you in. Literally.

It's one thing to be pursued by a furious beast on flat, dry land – and quite another to attempt your getaway when you're being chased up the muddy peak of a volcano that erupted as recently ➤

as the Eighties. It becomes even more of an unexpected cardio workout when your pursuer turns out to be a rabid swamp monster – imminently more capable of plotting a course across that kind of slurpy, precipitous topography than you are.

Yes, people, not all seals are cute.

The fur seals of Marion Island hold human beings in particularly low regard, but I'd hate us too, if I were a seal.

Fur seals were clubbed to death for their blubber throughout the 19th century. The slaughter only stopped in 1930, when their numbers became too few to exploit, although Marion's seals have increased significantly since then.

But they still don't dig us. The day before, we'd seen pictures of how one had eviscerated a mammal researcher's knee. The wily animal had stalked her from behind, pounced before she could say "blubber" and the two had hurtled down the side of the volcano as the aggressor's incisors sank ever deeper into her ill-fated patella.

When it comes to getting the shot, not much can send a photographer running in the opposite direction. But after this bit of information, nothing dispersed the visiting journalists across the swampy hillsides – notepads and cameras held aloft – quite like being charged by marauding mounds of blubber, which seemed to lie in wait behind every grassy knoll.

One amply proportioned government official even got stuck in the mud. It was only after some enterprising heaving and yanking that her husband and a nearby oceanographer dislodged her – although, thankfully, it was Marion's mire, rather than a seal, that claimed one of her gumboots for good and sent her packing for the base Jacuzzi.

It was a relief for the human intruders, then, when the king penguins of Trypot let us in uncomplainingly as we slid and skated down a rain-drenched, grass-covered hillock after a 5km hike, and lurched into their home on the beach.

We sat quietly among them for a while, as they brayed and doddered among us in their monochrome suits and yellow bow-ties. Spreading their wings as if intent on maintaining their balance, they were also curious and appraised us with detective-like intensity. One stuck its bill in my face and I almost expected it to haul out its monocle for a better inspection.

One of the world's most important colonies of wandering albatrosses roosts at Marion and they placidly guarded their nests, scattered along our footpath, as we now returned to the base. Our proximity didn't seem to bother them much – until we approached within arm's length and they started clapping their beaks in distress, like clapper-boards trying to halt a disastrous take. They were roosting parents, after all.

These masters of Southern Ocean stealth are great romancers too and, as we moved among them on land, a mating pair performed the albatross love dance, extending their 3,5m wings in mutual rapture.

It was easy to see why albatrosses would want to French kiss in these parts. Marion looked like KwaZulu-Natal's Valley of a Thousand Hills, fringed by waterfalls that hurtled down cliffs and into millions of square kilometres of Southern Ocean. Even on an inclement day like this, pools and lakes shimmered pure and pearlescent under overcast skies, bursting into snatches of gold as the sun pierced the gloom.

The following afternoon we marched to Ship's Cove, where meadows of moss and grass tumbled 200-300m down into a kilometre-long bay, thrumming with the blare of king penguins from end to end. A herd of elephant seals, the largest among them ➤

A fur seal.

Sorties of inquisitive king penguins splashed next to the hull; skuas and giant petrels – the gangsters of the Antarctic – stalked the skies.

easily packing in 3,5 tons of hide, blubber and meat, lay at the heart of this raucous, muddled menagerie. As the ocean flung the fringes of her lace petticoat over the heaving herd and withdrew it again, they snorted and bellowed deep, sonorous burbs from the depths of their bulbous bellies.

At the top of Ship's Cove, I sidestepped a nesting albatross and climbed halfway down the slope for a better view of the sheltered bay, careful not to sacrifice myself to the skuas that lunged at my head from time to time. After firing off a few camera shots, I folded into the waving grass to doze a while, satisfied that I might never again have an afternoon nap in a gem as rare as this.

Yet, at a wildlife Eden so fiercely protected that you can only visit it on invitation by the government, climate change is making life hard for the animals that migrated here after the ocean first revealed Marion between 500 000 and one million years ago.

Now that rising sea temperatures, changing currents and overfishing are redistributing their food, the penguins have no choice but to move on, Prof Steven Chown, a veteran Marion Island researcher, told me. Marion's rainfall has decreased from 2 800mm to 1 900mm per year and the mean temperature has risen by 1,5°C in a mere half-century, melting a millennia-old glacier that still existed here in the Eighties. As the higher altitudes become more temperate, plants are climbing Marion's mountains substantially. The small club moss, Chown noted, has increased in elevation by 388m since 1965.

After just two days, it was time to return to the ship for the voyage back to Cape Town.

There are no roads at Marion – just mountains and morass, and negotiating both in the island's sub-Antarctic gales, sleet and rain, with so much to see in such little time, had spent us.

Back in cabin 12, I fell asleep in my berth an hour or two before sunset. When I woke, I felt confused, dispossessed. As if something had been taken from me, or someone I loved had died, and I wouldn't feel what it was like to be in the country of their arms again.

The ship was moving.

I ran to my porthole, hoping I hadn't missed the chance to say goodbye to a Robinson Crusoe world I might never see again, but Marion Island had been replaced with a horizon of flat sea.

I didn't think the ship would leave so soon. I'd planned to hold Marion in my sights as long I could, as if she were an old woman whose fading beauty I wanted to keep real and young and primordial for as long as my gaze could hold hers.

I closed my eyes and pictured her still there, as untainted as the virgin planet Darwin had hoped to find when he set out on his seminal 1831 voyage aboard the *HMS Beagle*.

A whole wild world, where fortuitous circumstances would allow those amorous albatrosses to stay together for life – 50 years or more – as albatrosses often do; a place where a mountain rises from the sea, with an intractable glacier at the heart of it, that no human eye had seen, or hand could touch.

• *For work opportunities at Marion Island, contact the South African National Antarctic Programme.* *www.sanap.ac.za*

Marion Island's R200 million research base.