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FOLLOWING HER ANCESTORS TO ANTARCTICA

Caroline Eubanks finds connection in retracing the snowy footsteps of her grandparents, who traveled to the ‘white continent’ before tourism there became commonplace



JASON HENRY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

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While grieving a family friend, I’m reminded that loving, safe grown-ups can shape a kid’s world in profound, permanent ways, writes Heidi Stevens



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A traveler takes in the panoramic views from the bow of the 148-passenger National Geographic Explorer of Lindblad Expeditions. **LINDBLAD**

RETRACING THEIR SNOWY FOOTSTEPS

My grandparents traveled to Antarctica before it became commonplace and inspired my love of travel

By Caroline Eubanks
For the Chicago Tribune

The chance to travel to the farthest corner of the planet, the Antarctic continent, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for most people. It's the last frontier on Earth, a place where explorers such as Ernest Shackleton and Roald Amundsen became legends. But for me, the trip to Antarctica followed in the snowy footsteps of my relatives, who traveled there decades earlier, long before civilian travel became commonplace.

"We expect to be docking about noon. Here the Pacific, the Strait of Magellan, and the Atlantic will be surrounding the Tierra del Fuego area. We are sailing along snow-tipped mountain ranges toward Antarctica. Our first sightings have been spectacular."

These aren't my words, or even the diaries of a polar explorer, but those of my grandmother Sara Eubanks, who traveled to what is called the white continent in January 2003 in celebration of my grandfather Robert's 70th birthday.

They traveled with Holland America, flying from our hometown of Atlanta to Miami and then on to Santiago and Valparaiso in Chile before boarding the ship that would take them to the ends of the earth.

Even before that, my great-grandfather traveled to Antarctica in 1989, snapping photos at Palmer Station, the year-round United States research station.

My grandparents are responsible for my love of travel. Some of my earliest memories were of picking them up at the airport with my father, eager to hear stories and see what souvenirs they brought my siblings and me.

My grandparents didn't start traveling until their children had all left the nest; but then they hit the ground — and air — running, eventually reaching every continent.

Visiting a place they traveled together is nothing new for me. In my decade-long career as a writer, I've followed their tracks across the globe, from the outback of Australia to the cathedrals of Germany. And in 2024, I was able to reach the seventh continent myself, alongside my sister Sammi, another generation to make the journey south. We flew to Ushuaia, Argentina, the



Caroline Eubanks jumps into the icy depths as part of a polar plunge, one of her favorite experiences during a trip to Antarctica. **NATHAN KELLEY/LINDBLAD**

southernmost city where most Antarctic cruises depart from.

Then we traveled aboard the 148-passenger National Geographic Explorer with Lindblad Expeditions, named for Lars-Eric Lindblad, who in 1966 launched the Antarctic cruise industry.

I carried my grandmother's journal alongside my own, feeling the importance of the experience through her words. She's still a consummate record keeper, just like me, with drawers full of notebooks like these. They became all the more treasured after my grandfather's death a few years ago.

We both wrote about the majesty of the icebergs as they came into view from our cabin windows, some as big as buildings, and heard about the history of the continent from the people who studied at the various research stations.

I wondered how much of what I was seeing matched up with her own experiences, despite the decades of climate change that have affected the icy region. Unlike on her trip, my sister and I were actually able to step foot on the carefully protected islands.

Perhaps the best part of the trip was coming home and telling my grandmother all about it: the colonies of chinstrap and gentoo penguins we saw up close, the volcanic shores of the former

whaling station at Deception Island, and the adrenaline-inducing polar plunge, followed by a warming Negroni from my favorite onboard bartender, Pete.

A trip to the otherworldly deserts and icy landscapes of Antarctica is difficult to describe. You'll never see quite so much untouched wilderness or the range of fauna, including several species of penguins and whales. And you'll join a special club of people who have been there.

I could say this club is small, but that's becoming less true with every passing year, especially since pandemic travel restrictions eased. According to the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators, the governing tourism body with 52 member operators, the past year saw over 40,000 cruise-only passengers, over 80,000 land visitors to land, and over 700 so-called deep field visitors who travel to the interior of the continent.

And while my relatives waited until they were older, the demographics of visitors are also starting to change. On my trip, I was surrounded by people in their 30s and 40s, all crossing off the elusive seventh continent from their list. The cost remains fairly prohibitive but many travelers are looking to experience it at a younger age.

My trip had the option to fly over the

famously rough waters of the Drake Passage on DAP, the airline serving the continent since 1989, which allows more people to travel directly to King George Island in Antarctica. We opted for the flight on our return trip.

There are also increasingly more land-based expeditions such as White Desert, a series of luxury glamping trips with private flights and fine dining, which start at about \$16,000 for one night and run up to \$110,000 for seven to eight nights. Another company, Runbuk Inc., holds an Ice Marathon on the continent.

When it comes to choosing an operator, I suggest using IAATO members, who are required to follow strict protocols to protect the delicate ecosystem.

Conditions in Antarctica are changing constantly and ship landings must be scheduled well in advance. A certain level of flexibility is required, especially for those prone to seasickness. Travelers can't be beholden to their bucket list as there are some experiences you won't even know to add to the list until you arrive.

What's most important is to take it all in: the place, its majesty and its importance. Like my family, you will come away with a lifetime's worth of memories.

Caroline Eubanks is a freelancer.