

Now that's what I call a Pelagic!

It's 6 a.m. on a September morning. Jumping out of bed, adrenalin already pumping, at last the day has arrived – I'm going Pelagic!

Peeping through the curtains all looks calm, it's still dark but there is no wind; we're looking good.

I am staying at the end of the quay where the boat should be – shouldn't the boat be there?

My clothes and gear were laid out last night so as not to forget anything. This included a T-shirt, shirt, jumper, fleece, wind stopper, waterproofs – there's nothing like having 6 layers of clothing to choose from.

I decide to put it all on except the water proofs which I stuff in the shoulder bag with the sunscreen, camera, lenses and video and food and drink and cloths to keep the lenses dry and a Palestinian headscarf.

I am due to meet the rest of the birders at 0645 but I am somewhat concerned that at 0640, in gradually improving light, that there is no-one there except two guys in shorts and T-shirts. And, just slightly worryingly, still no boat.

I kiss Susie goodbye and head off downstairs to the quay where magically has appeared a group of ridiculously 'under-dressed' potential fellow passengers. I meanwhile, am eyed up and down suspiciously. I can see them saying 'what is he dressed up like an arctic explorer for? Its nearly 20 degrees? What does he know? Is he stupid or what?'

Introductions are quickly made – there will be ten of us plus two guides. The two guides, who were recently in shorts and T-shirts, are now wearing something a bit more substantial - actually a lot more substantial making me look underdressed.

The briefing begins: 'Hold onto the boat at all times! It will be cold! It will be wet! You will get sun and wind burned etc etc'.

By the time the briefing has ended several layers of clothing have been donned by the other passengers, most of whom also now bear a passing resemblance to a sun screened Shane Warne – I, however, am already sweating inside my five layers and cannot wait for a gentle, cooling breeze.

The briefing over, there follows an ever so slightly embarrassing moment as the guide realises that there is no actual boat at the end of the pier to get on!

The mobile phone conversation goes something like What do you mean? Who's cancelled? Why is that? We're here waiting to go? What bad weather? You're kidding? We're waiting – well hurry up then.

Five minutes later we board (with trepidation) an alarmingly small vessel with thin wire ropes around the side called 'Zest 2'; and all the while the sun rises bleary-eyed above Cape Aghulas and we were on our way south.

The first hour is uneventful – we hardly look at the penguin colony at Boulders and the waters of False Bay are as gentle as the Knapp boating lake, though, as the Cape of Good Hope comes into view, a gentle swell whispers a hint of what may come. At Cape Point the obligatory photos are taken before full speed ahead – jeez! now we're really off!

Where two oceans meet face to face I don't suppose that one can really expect anything other than a maelstrom and we are all now diligently 'holding on to the boat at all times' only 'holding' would not be my description. Perhaps 'gripping or hugging' would be better. In no time we have sped headlong into some inshore fishing boats that are clearly getting stuck into a vast shoal of fish.

There are birds everywhere, thousands of them. Cape Gannets, doing what gannets do, Cape Cormorants, in a raft so thick that no water is to be seen between them and above them Sooty Shearwaters and a few White – chinned Petrels are shearing about. Then I

see my first Albatross – I have no idea what species it is so I shout ‘Albatross’ but nobody reacts, it is total pandemonium. I guess some passengers might be seeing their first Gannet, or would have if they weren’t more interested in not going overboard with the great white sharks! Welcome to the Southern Ocean.

We stop for a short while, which is slightly mysterious as no explanation is given. The deck hand comes aft (note the nautical parlance of the seasoned master mariner) and attaches a hook to a line and casts it over the stern.

Now I know less than little about fishing but when a hook is the size of your middle finger bent in an arc even I can guess that we are not fishing for sprats!

Just yesterday there had been a shocking case of a Great White Shark attacking a kyak in False Bay – the ‘paddler’ escaped, fortunately for him, but he won’t ride the two halves of his kyak again!.

We bob about in the ocean swell a little longer until the deck hand reels in the line.

Well, the deck was quite crowded before the fish was landed but the fish soon had it all to himself when he came aboard.

A full-grown Snoek is about four feet long, mean looking, with big teeth and is as thick as your leg. They are related to Barracudas and anyone who fancies having a go at subduing one has my sincere admiration. There is however a deft technique that results in the untimely death of the fish and the immediate appearance of Antarctic (Brown) Skuas. It is as if we had sent up a message ‘calling all Skuas’. Four skuas appear who just know we have a dead fish on board and are six feet above us waiting for a hand-out. The fishing over, and supper secured, we are again full speed ahead. Vague suggestions are being made as to the direction we are going in – maybe southwest? Cape Point is now very small and indeed quickly disappears – we are out of sight of the land and heading roughly in the direction of oblivion and /or Antarctica.

Meanwhile the guide explains to me the subtle points of Albatross ID.

Shy is plentiful and has a little black ‘thumb print’ mark on the fore-under wing where it meets the body – that is diagnostic. ‘How will we see that’, I ask – ‘no problem’ says he. The under wing appears to be rather white because the fore and aft black fringes are thin.

Black-browed Albatross, on the other hand, has a thick black fore – underwing and immatures have darker underwings. Adults have orange bills.

He also explains that he never uses binoculars and considers them a nuisance – wow! or what? I am impressed.

I just wish I did not wear spectacles as the continual spray has to be constantly cleared off. I invent a finger windscreen wiper technique for inside and out. I am reminded of the TV comedies where someone throws buckets of water over the players in a comedy sketch or a very, very bad trip from St Mary’s to St Agnes.

What is also all too apparent is that I am soaking wet through my six layers of clothing and water is running down to ‘where the sun don’t shine’ like a tap that has been left on. My mind wanders back to school days – now what was the poem?

‘It is an ancient mariner and he stoppeth one of three.

By thy long grey beard and glittering eye-

Now wherefore stopp’st thou me.

The fair breeze blew and the white foam flew

The furrow followed free-

We were the first that ever burst

Into that silent sea’good old Sam T. but hardly right for us.

A ‘snow – storm’ of seabirds is slowly but surely surrounding us. White-chinned Petrels and Pintados and increasing numbers of Shy and Black-browed Albatrosses and also

Wilson's petrels. Our immediate destination, now in view, is a big trawler with a large white cloud behind it – the cloud being a mixed flock of sea birds numbering at least a thousand, possibly two.

The Albatrosses and Pintados are approaching now occasionally to within an arm's length. A good game 'grab the Pintado's wing tip' – impossible of course because they make sure that you miss by an inch at least. The huge Shy Albatrosses are also NOT Shy at all and come within feet of the bounding boat.

With relief the boat at last slows to the pace of the Trawler and we drift along behind it with the birds flying past in an endless stream. Great Shearwaters impress the guides but not the Brits. Wilson's Petrels hardly get a mention. A Southern Giant Petrel gulps a huge fish down in one, watched by an envious raft of Albatrosses. Thousands of Pintado's sit in rafts and Brown Skuas skip in and out of the hundreds of White-chinned Petrels. A couple of Flesh-footed Shearwaters with dark-tipped pink bills appear, an Antarctic Fulmar gives only the briefest view and a Yellow-nosed Albatross veers first into and then out of view never to be seen again.

'Estamos en la Gloria' – we are in heaven! as Hemingway would have put it.

And so it was that we spent 6 hours at sea following first one trawler then another and all the while surrounded by hundreds if not thousands of Albatrosses. Even the guide admitted that this was the most he had ever seen in one place.

Arriving back at the pier at 1530 it is crowded with tourists having a late lunch and a few beers on a warm Saturday afternoon in spring. They hardly notice the soaking 'pelageers' disembarking and staggering up the quay like returning astronauts after a splash down. They probably couldn't begin to imagine what we have seen or where we have been.

To be honest we don't really notice them either – our thoughts are elsewhere, 60 miles out into the Ocean at the edge of the roaring forties.

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Richard G. Smith.