

Camp on Antarctica with White Desert

As told to Kimberley Lovato

April 25, 2022



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ichaway Camp.



The Upchurch family in an ice cave.
Andrew Ling



Wagyu steaks for dinner.

Touch down at this luxe Antarctic base camp.

This story is part of our [comprehensive guide](#) to visiting Antarctica.

Most travelers tackle [Antarctica](#) from posh cruise ships departing from South America. Virtuoso vice-chair and sustainability strategist Jessica Hall Upchurch and CEO Matthew D. Upchurch, and their two sons, Clay,

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17, and Benji, 13, chose a more direct (and adventurous) route: Taking off from Cape Town on [White Desert](#)'s 13-passenger private Gulfstream jet, they touched down five hours later on the sustainably minded tour company's ice runway on the southernmost continent. Founded by Patrick and Robyn Woodhead, White Desert is the same company that, in March, provided safety and on-ice survival assistance to the team that [located the wreck of the Endurance](#), polar explorer Ernest Shackleton's

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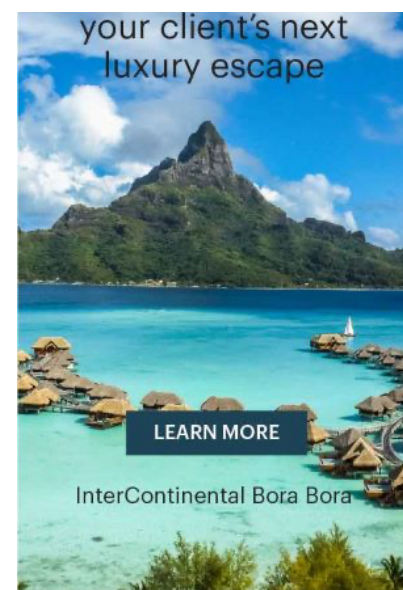


Jessica and Matthew Upchurch trekking to the nunatak near camp.
Matthew D. Upchurch

Base Camp, Antarctica

The vast whiteness of Antarctica was surreal. About an hour before landing, we changed into our gear, looked out the window at the icy runway and landscape, and thought, "We're landing there?" A cauldron of emotions bubbled up - we were excited and grateful at the same time, and proud that we weren't there to impact the continent, but to help with the preservation and understanding of it.

Our home base, Whichaway Camp, was like an earthly moon landing. Its polar sleeping pods, as the yurtlike accommodations are called, are cozy, amazingly comfortable, and beautifully outfitted. They're scattered



across this little canyon and look out over a frozen lake to a glacier with the ridge of a mountain – called a nunatak – protruding from it, like Mother Earth’s art.

This was our first time in 24-hour daylight. Antarctica already feels otherworldly, and the fact that the sun never sets during its summer just enhances that. It also creates this sense of freedom – that it’s never too late or too early to do something. We could be awake and out on an adventure, or, if we wanted to take a nap or sleep in, we just pulled down the shades. Our pods were our cocoons.

In addition to the six private bedroom pods, Whichaway has communal pods for dining and hanging out. Meals are amazing: One highlight was when we gathered during a blizzard and the chef brought us mushroom ravioli, then shaved truffles on top; another time we sat down to Wagyu steaks cooked on searing-hot salt stones. The meals were a great time to connect with other guests, guides, and staff – it was a lively, multinational, multilingual group.



Emperor penguins.
Kelvin Trautman

Ice-World Adventures

The first thing we did each morning was sip coffee and look out the window. Blues, whites, and browns dance with each other across the Antarctic landscape. There isn’t the constant hum of society, so the only sounds you hear come from nature.



There's no typical day in Antarctica: On each one, guests choose how much or how little they want to do. Visiting ice caves stands out as our favorite activity by far – one of the most visually stunning things we've ever seen. Another day, during a hike to the nunatak, our guide, Alesh, clipped the kids onto a safety rope and took them with him; it was a great moment watching them set off trekking ahead of us. The day we visited the emperor penguin colony was gorgeous – we didn't need more than our sweaters. We kept a respectful distance from the penguins, but Robyn and Patrick estimated the colony was about 20,000 strong.



Clay and Matthew at the South Pole.
Matthew D. Upchurch

Matthew and Clay's trip to the South Pole was a monumental experience.

For 15 hours, they flew in an unpressurized turboprop, stopping twice for refueling and for a nine-hour rest stop at Dixie's Camp, where you could see to the horizon in every direction, every inch of it flat, desolate, and white. They arrived on a nice day: minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit and mostly sunny with low winds. Matthew had planned to put his finger on the geographic South Pole and go around it ten times. Clay filmed but couldn't keep his hands out for long, so he cut it short at three.



The Woodheads and Upchurches visiting the colony.
Andrew Ling

Planet Protectors

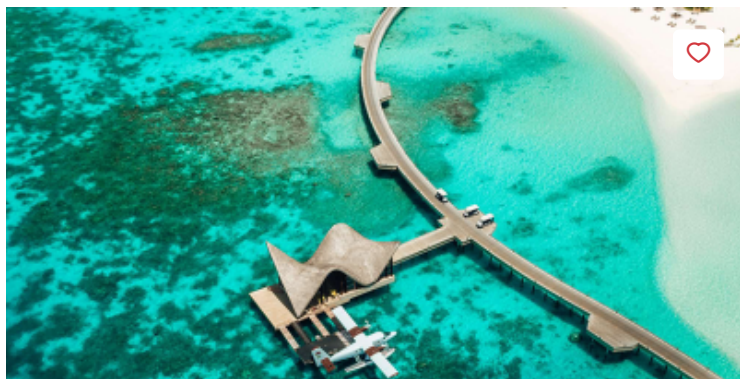
Sustainability is important to us as a family and to Virtuoso, and it's built into White Desert's DNA; they understand what's required to preserve and protect the continent, and work with scientists to provide logistical support for research bases. The company has been carbon neutral since 2007 and this season became the first operator in Antarctica to use sustainable aviation fuel for its flights. Solar panels provide the heat for camp pods. Robyn currently serves as the chair of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators' executive committee, which shapes policy and helps the polar community and future visitors to Antarctica effect positive change.

When you're there, it's important to be open to whatever comes. We've all heard the saying "Go with the flow." But now we like to say, "Go with the snow." One of our biggest lessons and joys of the whole experience was learning to be flexible; for example, we had to extend our trip because inclement weather made it unsafe to fly. The idea of approaching each day without a structured schedule to guide us was beautiful and will stick with us for a long time.

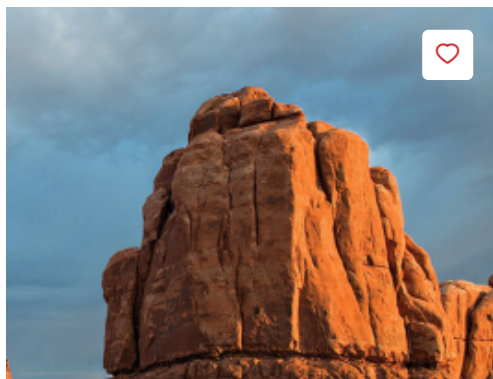
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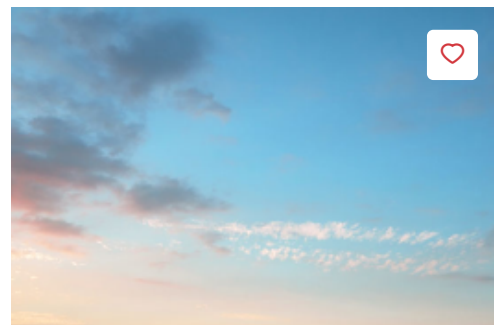
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