

AD FEEDBACK

Travel and Adventure by Various Travel Authors

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Antarctica in an Afternoon

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By Steve Murray

It's hard for passengers arriving at the airport in Christchurch, New Zealand, to miss the International Antarctic Centre. Its dull silver facade shines in the sun like an iceberg, and blue penguin footprints painted on the pavement mark the five-minute walk from the airport to its entrance. In fact, the IAC is a public window into the working research campus that surrounds it, a launching point for New Zealand, United States and Italian expeditions to the Antarctic continent. A brief visit to one of the city's most popular attractions provides a permanent appreciation for scientists working at the planet's extremes.

Christchurch, a city of about 376,000 people, has long ties to exploration in the Southern Ocean. Scott, Shackelford and Byrd – heroic names from the area's history – sailed from the city's Lyttelton Harbor, bound for the South Pole. This South Island city has earned its title of gateway to the ice.

The IAC opened in 1992 to give the public a glimpse of the challenges and [rewards](#) of science in Antarctica. As a first-time visitor to Christchurch and knowing I was unlikely ever to visit the Antarctic, I was eager to check it out.

A yellow Hagglund was parked in front of the entrance when I arrived. The [all-terrain vehicle](#) looked just like the no-nonsense transportation scientists would want in the Antarctic. The admissions clerk noticed my repeated glances at it as I purchased my ticket.

"You can start anywhere you like," she said, "but Alastair is about to leave on the Hagglund ride, and he

Recently

> [Life on the Rocks in Sydney, Australia](#)

By Steve Murray Both wall hangings look great: an aboriginal image in brown, ochre and white and a silver ceramic of Ned Kelly's body armor. The young artist who made them is standing nearby as the clean scent of eucalyptus drifts up from the next ...

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> [Up on Wine in Baja California](#)

By John Blanchette It was

2 a.m. my last night in Baja. I stood on the veranda of my hotel room on Rosarito Beach watching the full moon illuminate the slate-gray ocean and the phosphorescent white glow in the foaming waves as they ebbed and receded ...

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> [A Different Way to Discover Hawaii](#)

By Jim Farber When it comes to visiting the Hawaiian Islands, most travelers arrive by plane, check into one of the many resorts or go aboard massive cruise ships the size of floating cities. There is, however, another, more intimate, more ...

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> [Vacationing With a Child in Maui](#)

By Erica Dror Zeitlin I had always dreamed of going to Maui for a romantic holiday. But marriage came and went before I could get there. So when my sister, Carla, offered to accompany me to Maui – along with her son – I knew it would be ...

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still has room."

Alastair gave a weathered grin from under scattered brown hair and turned to lead me to the [vehicle](#) . Eight others were already strapped into the rear cab, so I took a seat in the front.

"Whatever you do," Alastair said in his clipped New Zealander speech, "don't touch the Titanic handle." The door handle didn't look very special to me, so I didn't ask why it had a special name.

We took off, driving around a hilly field clearly designed to challenge the rugged Hagglund. As the hills grew steeper, passengers grabbed the fixed handholds on the cab walls. When the track tilted sideways, most conversation stopped. Finally the vehicle dropped into a wide pool of muddy water that reached to the door windows. Alastair gleefully told us that the water was deeper than the Hagglund was high. Now I understood why he called it a Titanic handle. And, no, I wasn't about to touch it.

The ride takes a short route through simulated terrain to show visitors what it's like to operate on fields of snow, ice and rock. As we parked back in front of the IAC, I could appreciate that just getting to a research site was its own [reward](#)  in the Antarctic. It was a great introduction to what the IAC had to offer, and I was eager to explore inside.

Like many museums, the IAC offers hand-held audio guides to explain its exhibits. When I turned mine on, however, I was startled to hear the voice of Sir Edmund Hillary. The famous New Zealand explorer – the man who pioneered the first successful climb of Mount Everest – had thought enough of the IAC when it was opened to record his own thoughts and interpretations for visitors. With a guide like this, I paid very close attention.

The IAC is designed for both children and adults, and it makes good on its commitment to interactive experiences. I searched through a set of typical expedition supplies and checked out early and modern survival equipment, while Sir Edmund described cold weather safety and rescue procedures developed over years of difficult and sometimes tragic experience.

I learned about the lifeline planes that supply these field stations, about team selection and preparatory training, and even about new technological approaches to base operations.

Who knew they had wind farms for electricity in the Antarctic?

I could look in on the Little Blue Penguins' (their actual name) habitat and learn about the IAC's rescue and recovery program for these birds, examine the geological history and deep-sea marine life of the Antarctic continent, and even catch a 4-D film about Antarctic sea exploration complete with ocean smells, wind, sea spray and moving seats.

After the exhibit galleries, I was ready for another experience like the Hagglund ride. A lobby placard claims that Antarctica is the



"coldest, driest and windiest place on Earth." I headed for the Antarctic Storm simulation to get a taste of what this meant.



Gourmet dipped berries from [\\$19.99](#)

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This indoor storm system generates 25-mph winds with a zero-degree Fahrenheit wind chill.

This is serious, although still not as harsh as some Midwestern winters in the United States. The dim lighting and the haunting moan of the wind, however, are a different story. The noise was almost malevolent – much worse than the cold – and I was relieved when it stopped. It was hard to imagine doing meticulous scientific work for weeks or months in weather like that.

Outside the storm room, I cleaned the fog from my frozen eyeglasses and heard a strange comment from someone else who had been through the experience with me. "Neat, huh, kids? Kind of like Toronto."

I turned to look at the speaker. With the world-class cold in Canada as a benchmark, why bring his family to this particular attraction?

"Two reasons," he answered. "There's still a lot to learn here, of course. But then it's actually what's out there. This is where the real expeditions start. He paused for a moment and grinned. "That's pretty cool."

His comments reminded me that this isn't just a tourist attraction. It's the public face of a larger exploration enterprise where global science is conducted by international teams.

As I walked out, I took a closer look at the research [offices](#) [↗](#) of Antarctica New Zealand, directly across from the IAC's lobby. To my left, at the edge of the airport, were cobalt blue buildings that housed U.S. research support facilities, and to my right, was a single white building with a sign that read "United States Antarctic Program Passenger Terminal."

Now wouldn't I like to go through those doors!

WHEN YOU GO

Christchurch tourism has suffered over the past year as a result of serious earthquakes near the city center. Signs of repair and recovery are visible everywhere, and many visitors now use Christchurch only as a transit point for other New Zealand destinations. This is a pity, because many attractions such as the International Antarctic IAC, Christchurch Botanic Gardens and the Air Force Museum are still open. Many activities such as skiing, hot-air ballooning and river-rafting are also still available. City sights are continuously updated at www.christchurchnz.com.

International Antarctic Centre, 38 Orchard Road, Christchurch, New Zealand;

643-353-7798; free telephone within New Zealand, 0508-736-4846; www.iceberg.co.nz. Open every day, including Christmas. Disabled access, wheelchairs on request and luggage lockers on site. Summer hours (Oct. 1 to March 31) 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., winter hours (April 1 to Sept. 30), 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Children under 5 are free. Other prices are \$30 for older children, \$45 for students and seniors, \$53 for adults and \$136 for a family of two adults and up to four children.

It is possible to arrange a free shuttle to and from the airport by calling the IAC. A free hotel shuttle is also available. Routes and schedules are shown at www.iceberg.co.nz/assets/file/documents/PenguinExpressroute.pdf.

Steve Murray is a freelance travel writer. To read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate website at www.creators.com.

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