

RON NAVEEN, PENGUIN ENTHUSIAST

By Bella Bathurst

I first met Ron Naveen in the dining room of an Antarctic cruise vessel. We were queuing for buns and grated carrot, and a big man wearing sandals and a baseball cap embellished with images of hairy penguins introduced himself. Everyone else in the dining room was dressed as if on a Shackelton expedition, but it's a good rule of thumb in life that the worst-dressed people are often the best at what they do; as it proved over the next few days. I watched Peter Getzels, Harriet Gordon and Erik Osterholm following Ron around Falkland Island albatross colonies, South Georgian king penguin nurseries and, finally, Deception Island. All the time Ron talked to the camera about what he was doing and why he was doing it, and all the time he wore that baseball cap and usually those sandals too.



Exactly what is it that convinces a man to spend weeks – months, sometimes – traveling to the most inhospitable place on earth in order to hang out with a colony of penguins? What is it that makes Ron Naveen forsake his wife and warm house in Washington DC, for a tipping boat and undersized living quarters? Neither the conviction nor the strength nor – mercifully – the penguins are evident when you first meet Ron. If you're lucky you get the full bear hug, a smile so big his eyes almost close, in his genuine delight in the interestingness of other people. He wants to find out about you, to match enthusiasm for enthusiasm. He wants to talk Robert Louis Stevenson or the great walking routes of Lowland Scotland; he wants to exchange thoughts on books and food and culture. He doesn't particularly want

to harangue you about birds.

If you met him at a party, you might think he was just another white-haired, white-collar ex-hippie who'd gone straight and was now coasting his way over the golf courses of Maryland towards an inoffensive twilight. You would not think, because he almost certainly wouldn't tell you unprompted, that he's probably spent more time in Antarctica than almost any person alive, and that he is the man who provides much of the data on which all fifty Antarctic Treaty governments rely.

He was born in 1945, the only child of conservative Jewish parents in Pennsylvania. Soon after his Bar Mitzvah, at the age of 14 he discovered birdwatching. Initially it was just, "Hey, this is a great way to get out of the house. Away from all the rules!" While his hobby flourished, he studied chemistry rather than zoology at college, and then, as his parents might have expected, he went to law school before becoming a government lawyer.

Through his work for the Fisheries Service, Ron started a sideline in whale- and bird-watching from Ocean City, Maryland. And in 1982 he decided to leave it all behind, and follow seabirds south – ending up at the bottom of the world for the very first time. "When I came face to face with my first chinstrap penguin, it was like my life changed. I mean, to have this little animal come running up in the middle of nowhere, shouting like a bureaucrat – you know, 'gimme your passport, tell me who you are'... I was just totally into it."

For three years in order to be near his seabird colonies, Ron became an expedition leader, hosting tables of eager tourists on cruise ships. He got seasick, the passengers got seasick, and he once had to perform the Heimlich Maneuver on someone who choked on some lettuce. "I was a total wreck, but the guy survived." It took Ron awhile to realise that, for a continent without parliaments, customs, or bureaucrats, what the Antarctic really needed most was not more studies on how minimal the impact of tourism actually is in the area, but information and data on the region itself: Facts about the Peninsula and its non-human inhabitants, along with reliable environmental surveys on the world's last terra incognita.

Other governmental and scientific organizations supply some of that information, but none have done so with the same consistency or close focus as Ron and his team, who now work through his nonprofit, called Oceanites. Since penguin populations are unusually sensitive to changes in the natural world, whether that be a decline in krill stocks or an increase in sea temperature, they have become the canaries in the coalmine of global warming, warning us of changes further down the line. Some breeds of penguin (gentoo) seem to be thriving under the altered conditions, while others, (Adelie and chinstrap) are in steep decline.

During a typical season in the Antarctic, Ron and his team of field biologists escort several box-loads of unwieldy scientific gear onto a plane from DC to the port of Ushuaia at the bottom of Argentina. There, they load the gear onto an

Antarctic cruise vessel, and spend three weeks in the company of passengers who happily laugh at jokes about elephant seals, before reaching a small hostile speck of land at the end of the world – in this case, Deception Island. There, they load all their stuff onto a fifty-foot yacht, and spend a further two weeks standing in a blizzard with a notebook and a one-two-three manual clicker, counting penguins. Or if the weather is deadly, staring out of a steamed-up porthole so filthy they can't go on deck let alone onshore. Two weeks later they board the same ship for another week of seasickness and bad jokes.

As commutes go, it's a bummer. Ron has done it more times than he can count and calculates that overall he must have spent between six or seven years in the Antarctic. Once on site, Ron and his colleagues start moving from nest to nest, triple checking to make sure they've got their figures absolutely right. It's hard both physically and mentally since all the counters need to remain hyper-aware of changes in temperature or pressure. When the weather changes, it changes fast. 'It's a dangerous place, the Antarctic. You see the best and worst of humankind, and you see the best and worst of the weather – storms, gales, howling winds. But you also have these quiet moments on the beach when a gentoo penguin crawls into your lap.'

Over the years, Ron has spent enough time there to see the variations between penguin breeds. 'It's anthropomorphic, but I believe there are differences. Chinstraps are very noisy, Adelies will bite your leg off – I've grown to like them, and I've especially grown to like gentoos. They're very gentle and curious. The Adelies will attack you and the chinstraps just make a lot of noise. They're like all bluster but no fight.'

The rest of Ron's year is spent in Washington, preparing for Antarctic Treaty meetings. Does he ever get to autumn and think, oh hell, I can't face the Drake Passage again? No, he says. If anything, it's the opposite. He's pushed back and back to the Antarctic by a swelling sense of urgency. Partly because all the data he has collected so far seems to point towards global warming on a catastrophic scale, but partly because he is aware that at some time in the future he will have to stop.

"People keep asking me if I'm going to retire. No, I'm not going to retire. I'm not ready to let go." Of what? "Of the Antarctic. It charges up my batteries and keeps me thinking I'm on the right track. The best thing about it is that you're totally on your own – no radio, no TV, no politicians, no noise, just you and the environment and the animals. You can feel your own heart beating through your parka. It gives you a chance to think a little more expansively about who you are, what your place might be in the scheme of things."

Isn't it lonely though? Doesn't he miss his wife Ellen, working as a psychotherapist back in DC? She would come if she could, but the three or four weeks required to get to and from the Peninsula are too long away from work. "We're both pretty much independent contractors – I do miss her but

certainly love that I have the space and she has the space to do whatever we want to do, and then we get together and share the agonies and joys of it all, and it all works out pretty well.”

And if the Antarctic was taken out of his life, what would be missing? “I think I’d be kind of miserable. I would really really miss that guano smell.” So after all that, it’s the smell of penguin poo in the morning that really does it for him? He laughs. “I’m not going to bottle it or anything, it is pretty gross, but there is something about that freshness which reminds you that you’re in the wild. And there’s something about the aloneness too. Those five years camping at Petermann, just three of us on this mile-long island, that ranks high as among the most special things I’ve ever done. We all had radios so we could keep in contact with each other, but I would get a jug of hot chocolate and walk down to the southern side of the island sitting among gentoo penguins, watching the sun set due south at 65 degrees latitude, and it was just special – something that very few people have seen.”

A century earlier, the great polar explorer Ernest Shackleton’s deputy, Frank Wild, tried to explain the allure of the Antarctic. ‘Once you have been to the white unknown, you can never escape the call of the little voices,’ he said. It’s a place that can never be home to any human being, but between the ice, the penguins and the silence, it can feel very complete.

‘I’m an incredibly privileged person to have gone once, but to have had the opportunity many times and over thirty seasons...’ says Ron. For him, it will always be worth going to the ends of the earth in order to find his beginning again. ‘I’m still watching birds, I’ve never stopped watching birds, and despite all these turns and iterations, I always keep coming back to birds.’

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