

Sojourn to the ice

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Back from a trip to Antarctica, Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Law Hieng Ding tells DEBORAH LOH of the wonders of the ice continent.

continent

SIX-metre high waves and winds at 60 knots per hour. Holding in the contents of one's stomach as the ship rolls from side to side at a 45 degree angle.

Two days of this giddy voyaging and then suddenly, calm, as the vessel slows and crunches through ice upon entering quieter waters around the Antarctic Peninsula.

Sheer walls of white, hundreds of metres high. An audience of penguins and seals, too many to count. Humpback whales breach the water's surface in greeting.

"It was an entirely different experience from any other place I've been to in my life. Never had I imagined that one day I would go there," says Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk

hardy Dr Mahathir proved to be throughout the trip.

"It was not an easy journey. Several people got seasick when we were sailing on the open sea which was very rough. It was the first time many of us had been in such rough seas. But the PM took the journey very well and even seemed to be used to it."

Besides Law and his wife Datin Seri Ngui Soon Leng, other Cabinet ministers and their wives present were Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and wife Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and wife Datin Seri Sharifah Aziah Syed Zainal Abidin.

Three Malaysian scientists and national solo sailor Datuk Azhar Mansor, were also on the journey.

“ We need to prove our value to the continent and we can do that by increasing our scientific activity there in order to become a treaty member. ”

Seri Law Hieng Ding.

He was part of a Government delegation accompanying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali on a recent week-long trip to the world's largest continent.

Antarctica is a continent of extremes. The coldest, windiest, driest and most remote place on earth is 98 per cent covered in ice that is millennia-old.

Its ice cover has an average thickness of about 3,000 metres, Law says, and holds about 75 per cent of the world's fresh water. If all of Antarctica were to melt, the global sea level would rise by about 60 metres.

Relating the visit to the *New Sunday Times*, Law said the delegation was impressed with how

The delegation started off from Ushuaia in southern Argentina on Feb 5. The next two days were spent crossing the Southern Ocean, notorious among seafarers for dangerous sailing conditions thanks to extreme weather and the colliding currents of the South Pacific and the South Atlantic oceans.

They sailed on board the *Kapitan Dranitsyn*, a Russian icebreaker. The 10-storey vessel weighed 10,000 tonnes and had a capacity for 100 passengers and 60 crew.

There were only 70 passengers at the time of Dr Mahathir's visit, comprising a 38-member Government delegation while the rest were from the private sector.

Law said they enjoyed befriending the ship's multinational crew.

"We even had a little Chinese

New Year celebration on board. There were decorations and some Chinese songs. The PM and I each gave speeches. Then Dr Siti Hasmah gave out *ang pous* to the unmarried members in our group and to the ship's crew."

The delegation lived on board the icebreaker for the three days of the trip, anchored off the Argentinian section of the Antarctic Peninsula. (Argentina and six other countries claim parts of the continent as national territory.)