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Pure joy of a holiday on ice

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NEVER in my wildest dreams did I imagine I would one day visit Antarctica. But it happened. The first Malaysian expedition was a great success. This largely ice-covered continent centred on the South Pole, despite being the wildest as well as the coldest continent, has around 80 permanent settlers - Chileans - on King George Island, and has a transient population of research and support staff numbering several hundred, made up of 10 nationalities. Perhaps more.

Each person in Antarctica is subject to his country's laws. Crime is negligible. However, there were - though rarely - cases of petty theft, always linked to visits by tourists to research stations.

Antarctica covers 10 per cent of the world's surface, locking 80 per cent of the earth's freshwater in ice-sheets, yet this unique eco-system supports one of the richest concentrations of wildlife.

Politics exists even here; rivalries among nations wishing to preserve Antarctica as a world park, and those pursuing territorial claims (Argentina, Australia, Britain, Chile, Norway, and New Zealand), but other nations, including us, do not recognise these claims. We want it to belong to all Mankind.

The Antarctic Treaty (1961) provides international governance, and to gain consultative status, the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has indicated Malaysia will set up a research station as soon as possible.

I was warned about the daunting nine-day voyage (February 5-13), but I knew I would survive it, because I had good training, having successfully overcome five years of deprivation, extreme loneliness in solitary confinement, exhaustion, and degradation in Ghulam's prison between 1976 and 1981. Anything else would be a joy.

But the expedition, though not a five-star cruise, was no hardship. Everything was acceptably good and well organised. We took a Malaysian chef, Hussain Bavutty. The ship's staff were excellent - multilingual, friendly, helpful and very efficient, comprising several nationalities.

I have never had better room service for some time than on this Russian ice-breaker, and yet I have stayed in five-star hotels with butler attached.

The 60-plus Malaysians led by Dr Mahathir, whose ages ranged from 77 years to seven years (Farah Zainal), easily survived Antarctica and the notoriously rough waters of the Drake Passage.

Dr Mahathir, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Ananda Krishnan and others, with the exception of my wife, Fauzah, Tan Sri Arumugam, Janice Toh and several others, overcame everything Antarctica and the violent sea could throw at them.

For Fauzah, Arumugam and Toh, even the right medication did not seem to be much help - not even a jab in the case of Fauzah. They kept the PM's personal physician, Datuk Dr Zainal Hamid, busy.

Khoo Teong Bing and his wife Ho Foong Nyook withdrew when she fell ill in Ushuaia, our departure point.

I must be fair to the trio - they only suffered sea-sickness during the journey to the Antarctic and back, which took five days; otherwise, they were up and about when the Russian ice breaker, the 10,047-tonne Kapitan Dranitsyn, under Captain Ivan Karavka, anchored.

Arumugam, Fauzah and Toh participated in all the activities - flying in

the helicopter (there were two) to watch our ship break ice, the sea and islands. One evening the ship was going back and forth for about three hours before it managed to batter through the pack ice.

They cruised in zodiacs (assault boats to me) to see glaciers, visit penguin colonies (in Neko Harbour, Andvord Harbour, Pleneau Bay and Cuverville Island), viewed whales, seals, blue-eyed shags and pintado petrels that nest around and in Paradise Bay. Penguins are beautiful, but I'm afraid their shit is particularly offensive!

Between fear and awe, I listened to the rumblings of the glaciers and watched Mother Nature's beautiful icebergs and walked on the ice! Perhaps this was the climax of the whole trip.

Virtually everyone did. All were delighted as if the ultimate aim of the expedition had been achieved. The younger members had snowball fights.

My wife, I and others embarked on the Kapitan Dranitsyn at Ushuaia, a former penal settlement at the end of the world, in Patagonia on the afternoon of February 5. However, we only set sail for Antarctica early next morning after Dr Mahathir and entourage arrived from New York.

After breakfast on Wednesday we attended a mandatory lifeboat muster and safety briefing at the Lecture Room, just steps away from my cabin 7-11. The PM was quartered in a suite below me. Before and after dinner, there were lectures on the geological evolution of the Antarctic Peninsula and seabirds and other wildlife of the Southern seas.

Those less inclined participated in karaoke or watched movies, and many also went straight to their cabins. Dr Mahathir, to my shame, attended all lectures (there were many) during the voyage, whereas I only went to the two compulsory briefings, the ones on zodiac and helicopter safety and signed the helicopter liability waiver, indemnifying everyone from all liability for any damage or death. Both lectures were given by Susan Adie, the expedition leader, a New Yorker.

The Minister of Defence, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, was heard to say: "What a quaint heli". The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, bravely strapped himself to the seat and said his prayers.

I also prayed but intoned a longer version during the very rough zodiac ride from Cuverville island. After that experience, I don't think I want to be on a zodiac except in the friendliest waters. I never had seasickness but the fear of it worried me all the time.

The ship's doctor, Dr Gary Colner, an American, said to me: "Sir, don't be a hero. If you feel sick, take the medicine I gave you."

Datuk Azhar Mansor, the famed sailor (appeared to be always at ease, and always to be found in the lounge), Maizura Mahathir, Mazhar Mahathir, Datin Seri Sharifah Aziah Syed Zainal Abidin (Syed Hamid's wife), all members of Dr Zainal's family (Datin Norsalma, Zahra, Noreen, Rizal and Farah) and Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor (Najib's spouse) were active, albeit, in Rosmah's and Najib's case by their own admission, because they took medication against seasickness and it worked!

Sharifah Aziah painted a watercolour portrait of her husband with a three-day beard, which was as good as a photograph, on the deck, while Rosmah dominated the night scene singing; a live wire of the karaoke lounge. Being an owl, I was a keen listener. Fauzah was always with me when she was awake.

Occasionally, I would join PM, Datuk Law Hieng Ding, Ananda Krishnan, the Malaysian scientists on board - Datuk Dr Salleh Mohd Nor, Dr Azian Abu Samah, Dr Siti Aishah Alias, the "favourite scientist", Dr Zainol Abidin Abdul Rashid and Tan Sri Dr Ahmad Zaharudin Idrus - in the library, had coffee with the Antarctic historian John Killingbeck, Arumugam, S. Thanarajasingam, Datuk Mariappan Santhanaban (our Ambassador in Argentina), Datuk Ahmad Fuzi and Datuk Hasmy Agam (our man at the UN), and

bumping between decks with Matthias Chang, Dr Mahathir's political secretary, and other officials in the PM's office, particularly Datuk Mohamad Ali, the longtime aide-de-camp of Dr Mahathir.

I frequently visited the Malaysian secretariat, manned efficiently by David Yap, Jessy Chow, Norhayati Mohamad Arif, and the singing and always happy Mohd Razaleigh Zainal, to keep abreast with events besides relying on announcements via the loudspeakers. Or spent time talking with the youngsters on the trip.

The heroine of the trip, without any doubt, was seven-year-old Farah, the youngest daughter of Dr Zainal. Farah was never ill and she happily and with ease, never once betraying any apprehension, participated in all activities.

I asked the bilingual Farah, "You are scared, aren't you?"

Politeness itself, she said without any hesitation: "Tidak, I am not scared, Sir."

Farah impressed me greatly. I have great faith in her and if she is an indication of Malaysian women of the future, I am a happy man, a very happy grandfather.

Dr Zainal told me the family loves the sea and they sail often. Farah is accustomed to strong, even high, winds and stormy seas.

It was marvellous to be away from the office. The expedition has invigorated me. For nine days, I heard (though communication was excellent) no World or Malaysian news, so I had no knowledge about Pas and its satellite ulama's latest strategy to make the creation of an Islamic theocratic state inevitable, until I reached London.

On Kapitan Dranitsyn, besides Fauzah's seasickness, there was peace, happiness and forgiveness. I formed new perspectives about some individuals. Nine days in an intimate environment is a long time. I learned, unlearned, and re-learned a few things.

I slept well despite the bed which almost swayed around the clock. The expedition has been an adventure rather than an ordeal, to me at least. The 1,500 nautical miles covered drained Fauzah's and several others' strength and sapped their spirit for five days.

But she told me the ordeal had not discouraged her. She said she wanted a second chance, perhaps in a gentler situation. Brave words from Fauzah who could not take solace from the fact that the expedition was nearly over, she desperately wanted and prayed that it was over there and then.

One of the PM's security officers, Sabri bin Talib, on a particularly rough night, Thursday night, I think, slightly injured his left eyelid and had to be bandaged, when he was woken by being thrown from his sofa to the cabin floor, or perhaps thrown against the cabin walls.

Syed Hamid also, according to Najib, was thrown out of his bed; thank goodness he was not hurt. That was the night the ship rolled 43 degrees and the waves were 20 feet high. Many cried silently in their cabins.

As I wrote previously, Antarctica is a land we barely know, a white frozen desert filled with beauty and fraught with danger even in modern and comfortable environment. It is a celebration of Antarctica itself; of earth and sea and ice and of the wildlife that live there.

Antarctica is a story of light, darkness, intimidation, imagination, gale, solitude, wilderness, high winds and icy majesty.

I love water, rivers and gentle seas. I have great affinity with them. I am always lifted by the beauty of the sunset each evening and the sunrise each morning. One evening, I was on the deck alone, contemplating, ice and snow all around, and I felt seduced by the quiet, desolate, and infinite icy majesty.

The endless buffeting of force eight, nine, 10 and 11 winds did not deter me or two other "expeditioners". One of them always has wine with

his meals, and the other is a teetotaller, yet they could not read their dessert menu!

And yet many other expeditioners seemed unaffected by anything - early to rise and last to retire. Dr Mahathir and Dr Siti Hasmah participated in all activities and found time to make everyone feel cared for.

A senior Umno leader told me in KL after I returned that Dr Mahathir made the gruelling journey to send a political message: though 76-plus, he is healthy and intends to go on captaining "HMS Malaysia".

Yes, Prime Minister - Arctic Circle next year!

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