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Next year, the North Pole!

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OUR goal was achieved, the journey ended. Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen described the Antarctica as "glittering white, shining blue, raven black, in the light of the sun, the land looks like a fairy tale. Pinnacle after pinnacle, peak after peak, crevassed, wild as any land on our globe, it lies unseen and untrodden".

In the new millennium, even the White Continent in the South has changed and is changing.

Antarctica covers 10 per cent of the world's surface, as big an area as the United States and Mexico combined, locking in about 80 per cent of the world's fresh water in ice sheets.

Desolate, even hostile in its weather, yet Antarctica's unique ecosystem supports one of the richest concentrations of wildlife on earth.

For most people, Antarctica is seemingly unreachable. However, 60 Malaysians, led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, were there from Feb 5 to 13.

None on the expedition (except four Malaysian scientists whom I mentioned in a previous article in the NST on Wednesday) had had any polar experience.

Nevertheless, we found the expedition and the preparation in Kuala Lumpur, the flight to Ushuaia at the southernmost tip of Patagonia and the subsequent adventures at sea to be as thrilling, more challenging than any other which we had hitherto experienced.

We boarded the Russian ice-breaker Kapitan Dranitsyn on Tuesday, Feb 5, heading towards Beagle Channel and the dreaded Drake Passage, to pursue and promote Malaysian interests in Antarctica which was begun by Dr Mahathir two decades ago.

I was asked, why Antarctica? And why not, may I ask? It's simply to provide Malaysian scientists and scholars the opportunity to embark on a new research area.

Besides, we have, as a nation, but largely unknown to the public, been active in promoting Antarctica as belonging to all mankind. We'll soon sign the Antarctic Treaty to enable us to participate in the decision-making process in the future management of the White Continent, and hopefully set up a research station.

Already, Malaysian scientists are working alongside New Zealand and Australian researchers to understand the mysteries of this vast and icy continent.

During the captain's welcome lunch on Wednesday, my wife and I, and Datuk Hasmy Agam (our man at the United Nations in NewYork), were invited to join the Prime Minister and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali at Captain Ivan Karavka's table.

We were served with a selection: smoked eel terrine with tomato mousse and vegetable garnish, beef consomme (with pancake strips), poached "blue eye" fish on lemon grass rice, veal fillet or vegetarian dishes.

On Saturday, we had rendang with tomato rice prepared by chef Hussain Bavutty from Subang Hyatt. From then on, we had choices of Malaysian or European breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner.

Hussain did not suffer sea-sickness during the first few days. What he prepared was good and tasty, and if one was late, he would find little or sometimes nothing left.

I asked him how he managed to remain well despite never having been on a

ship before. "I have a petua (tip): eat a lot of ginger!"

One day, he looked tired, melancholic and quiet (he was always otherwise chirpy). He told me the ginger had not worked. He laughed when I said now I knew why the quality of his food had suffered. It seemed the standard fluctuated according to his spirit and mood!

Dr Mahathir has visited the bottom of the world. He has, I suppose, now to go to the North Pole, the top of the world, sometime this year or next. He has not seen a polar bear!

There are really no more places which are out of reach today. The more isolated they are, the better; they stir greater curiosity, which will tempt Malaysian adventurers.

Datuk Seri Law Hieng Ding and his wife Datin Seri Ngui Soon Leng hosted a Chinese New Year dinner for the ship's crew and us on our last night on board.

At nine o'clock sharp on Wednesday morning, Feb 13, the "expeditioners" disembarked in Ushuaia, where it all began. Many flew home, whilst others headed to various destinations to continue their holidays or assignments.

Amundsen, the first man to reach the South Pole (in 1911), had depicted Antarctica as a fairy tale. Perhaps it was then. Perhaps even now, albeit a modern fairy tale populated by permanent bases where scientists and researchers of many nationalities have penetrated, and are penetrating, the mysteries of the White Desert, as well as cruise ships.

As Dr Mahathir said: "Antarctica is a good place for holidays", adding jokingly, and greeted with laughter, that "... also a good place to despatch one's enemies, terrorists or those whom you don't want around. In the case of my Ministers, if they don't perform, I just remove them."

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