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Passage to Antarctica

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"ON the Good Ship Lollipop..." it certainly wasn't. Neither were Zahra Zainal and sister Noreen "... on a sweet trip to the candy shop" as how child star Shirley Temple put it in her 1930s song.

Aboard an old Russian ice-breaker, in the middle of the Drake Passage - the roughest waters in the world - the only song and dance the two sisters could manage was the twist and shout... and probably some dizzy twirls, followed by the impromptu Quick Step to break their fall now and then.

Zahra, 17, and Noreen, 15, were on their way to the Antarctica with their dad Dr. Zainal Hamid, mom, Norsalma, brother Rizal and younger sister Farah. They were in a delegation of 60 people, who included Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

Eight hours after leaving harbour at Ushuaia, Argentina, their ship, Kapitan Dranitsyn, began to rock as the sea started to roll in the midst of howling winds and screeching gales.

This was the beginning of the Drake Passage - a body of water that links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans - an area one would need to pass to reach the southernmost tip of the hemisphere. Here, hurricanes and cyclones hit about once every three weeks.

Travelling by ice-breaker, which would be useful when threading through the frozen waters in Antarctica, is the worst kind of ship one could ever take through stormy seas. Shaped like a big bathtub, much of the ship's stabilisation equipment has had to make way for its icebreaking functions.

On board, Zahra and Noreen heard many lamenting their predicament and wondering why they agreed to come.

"Meal times, especially dinner, were a good indicator to see who was still up and about. During the five days from Ushuaia to Antarctica and back, there was never a full house in the dining room..

"The seas were merciless. Waves were higher than our 10-storey ship, about 10 metres high. We went up and down like a yoyo, and sideways ... almost simultaneously.

"There were barf bags everywhere. You'd see one every half a metre along the railings, a saviour to those who would suddenly fall sick," said Noreen, relating her Antarctic adventure in the much calmer, more serene surroundings of her home in Bandar Utama, Petaling Jaya.

"I brought my Sejarah book to study but could only manage two pages. I just couldn't go on," recounted Zahra.

Noreen was more adventurous. From the ship's bridge, she "saw" scenes from the movie The Perfect Storm, starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg.

"I saw the really swollen seas swallow our ship. Things were especially rough on our trip back. We'd be rocking so hard... That was the only time I felt quite ill and the pill I took for seasickness seemed ineffective."

Rocky ride or not, the lectures on the Kapitan Dranitsyn went on. The passengers - those who could make it - attended classes by experts who gave lessons on Antarctica, its environment, the habitat, the do's and don'ts when one was there.

"It was amazing to see how they balanced themselves as they taught. The lecturers would talk with their legs straddled and when the ship rocked to the left, they would do likewise and skip sideways as they continued to teach us as if nothing was happening.

"It was quite funny to see the Russian waiters at work too. They were so skilful. They would sway from side to side at almost 45 degrees, much like an offbeat metronome, following the movements of the ship and not once spilling a drop of water on the floor!" said Zahra, who missed a few classes herself.

Just as the ocean started becoming calmer, an announcement by the expedition leader told them that they were now in Antarctica. Soon after, the girls would be experiencing the other side of the journey - one that would have them singing but this time with joy!

It started with the sighting of several Humpback and Minke whales.

"I got to see a few schools of whales moving in twos and threes. They were so close, so beautiful. That was a most exhilarating experience for me," Zahra recalled.

A while later the group was making trips onto massive icebergs and the rocky islands. It was summertime but the temperature was still about 10C. Earlier, the group was warned that a person could only last two minutes in the freezing waters before dying of hypothermia.

This resulted in everyone being extra careful. Still, in these slippery, icy conditions Zahra and Noreen took a tumble or two onto the thick ice. That however did not deter the girls from enjoying the sight of cute penguins waddling single file or flocking in groups.

"These were Gentoo penguins, the smaller ones with orange beaks. They were so cute! And to see many of them at one time, doing their own thing, that was fabulous," said Zahra.

"And there were the seals too. They were quite ugly but adorable at the same time.

"I wish we could have gone closer, but we had to stay about five metres away so as not to disturb them or threaten them with any kind of disease we might be carrying ..."

The two girls continued to sing praises about Antarctica - about the magnificent whiteness all around which sometimes took an orange tinge because of moss, about climbing a mountain and getting a truly spectacular view from the top, about laughing in the cold air when a boot got caught in the thick snow...

The girls are eager for another visit. Indeed, it does seem as if they can't wait to take that passage again to Antarctica, never mind the shake, rattle and roll ...

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