

20/03/2002

The Antarctica Kid

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MOST people who brave the voyage to Antarctica discover that they need two crutches to make the trip: seasickness medication and prayer.

At least, that's what the 60-odd members of a delegation led by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad found out during their voyage last month onboard the icebreaker Kapitan Dranitsyn.

The journey to and from the icy wilderness at the bottom of the world sent many among the group to their beds for much of the trip, their heads and stomachs spinning.

Still, not everyone fared badly. Among the hardiest in the group was Dr Mahathir himself, who never missed the frequent onboard lectures about Antarctica.

But the one who amazed everyone with her resilience and fearlessness was Farah Zainal, 7, the youngest passenger on the vessel.

"I was excited," said Farah, now back at home in Bandar Utama, Kuala Lumpur. "I was only a bit scared of frostbite, which is when you might lose some of your fingers. That's why we brought lots of clothing."

With a child's indestructible optimism, Farah, who travelled with her family, never doubted that she would have anything but fun during the often rocky voyage: "I was never scared. I never thought anything bad would happen."

Her optimism was undimmed even when they endured the notoriously rough waters of Drake Passage, from Cape Horn to the Antarctic Peninsular.

The roiling was severe enough to result in several bruising falls as some passengers were thrown out of their beds and chairs. Adding to the misery were the cabin and closet doors, which occasionally banged smartly on unsuspecting fingers.

"At Drake Passage my brother Rizal fell out of his chair two times," she said with a giggle. "My father fell too. But I didn't fall, because I was on the bed with my mother."

"You had to hold on to something because the ship was going up and down. You just had to close your eyes and fall asleep."

On their first overseas trip, most children accompany their parents to some conventional tourist destination where they spend their time shopping and sightseeing. But for Farah, who had never been out of Malaysia before, Antarctica was a massive and spectacular playground of ice and snow.

She's lost a front tooth since their return, and is a little wistful when looking at her full set of teeth in the pictures of her family's unforgettable trip.

But she breaks out into a grin when she reaches the pictures of the penguins and seals they encountered.

"I also saw humpback whales for the first time; they were so huge. And the seals, I didn't think they could move because their legs looked like tails. They were so lazy, all they did was sleep."

"The penguins were cute, but smelly," she said, pulling out a picture that showed the pint-sized creatures cavorting on a large patch of soiled snow. "They were a little dirty, so be careful of them if you go to Antarctica."

For her, one of the best parts of the trip was the opportunity to see snow for the first time and engage in a series of ferocious snowball fights with her siblings and other passengers.

"I thought snow would be like sand, but it was sticky," she said. "It

was clean too, so we tried to eat it." She was mildly disappointed to discover that it tasted just like ordinary ice.

For all the fun she had, however, even this bundle of tireless energy couldn't escape the exhaustion that engulfed much of the delegation once it reached home soil.

"But I would go again. Antarctica was very nice," she said. "It feels like we went there such a long time ago."

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