

South Shetland Islands



Thanks to their spectacular scenery, abundant wildlife and proximity to Tierra del Fuego, the South Shetlands are one of Antarctica's most visited areas. This major group of islands is just half a day's cruise across the Bransfield Strait from the Antarctic Peninsula.

Every voyage from South America to the Antarctic Peninsula stops in the South Shetlands, usually on the way south as the trip's exciting first landings, and often again on the return northward as a farewell to the Antarctic region.

The South Shetlands stretch 540km from northeast to southwest and consist of four distinct groupings: Clarence and Elephant Islands are in the northeast; King George and Nelson Islands are just northeast of Robert, Greenwich, Livingston, Snow and Deception Islands; and Smith and Low Islands are at the southwestern end of the chain.

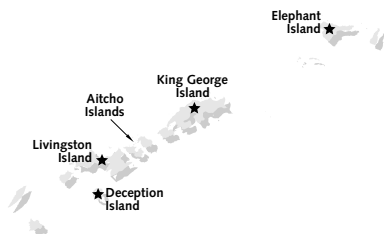
There are also 150-odd islets, skerries and rocks, many with picturesque names: Potmess Island, Hole Rock, Stump Rock, Sea Leopard Patch, Square End Island, The Watchkeeper, Pig Rock, Salient Rock, Conical Rock and The Pointers. The islands are about 80% glaciated and cover 3688 sq km. The archipelago's highest point is Smith Island's Mt Foster (2105m), first climbed in 1996 by a group from the Canadian yacht *Northanger*.

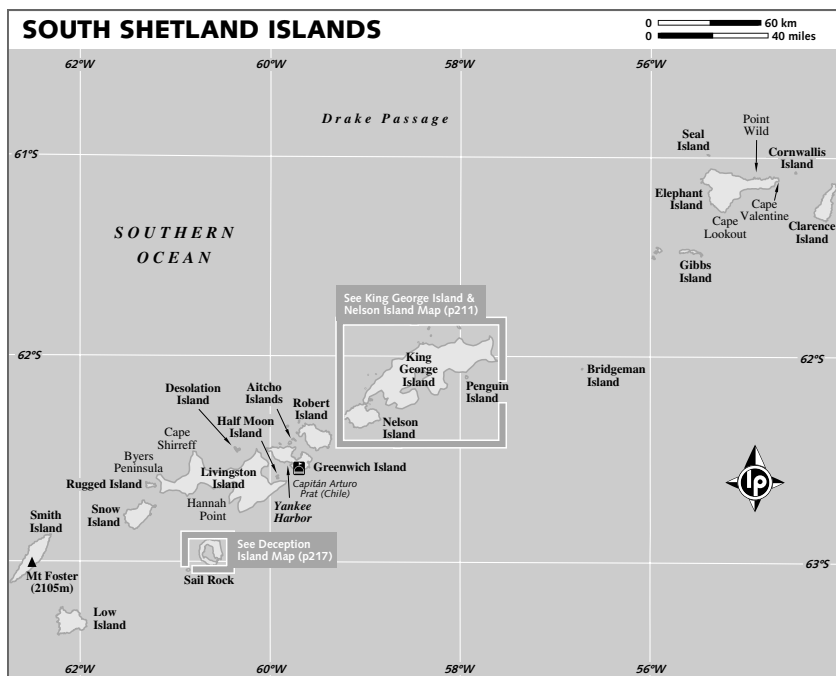
Most distinctive of the South Shetlands is Deception Island, a 'restless' volcano still considered to have 'a significant volcanic risk.' On the shore of its hidden inner harbor are the remains of a whaling station once known to its largely Norwegian inhabitants as New Sandefjord. Deception is also the site of the first flight in Antarctica, which took off from a runway at the whaling station in 1928.

SOUTH SHETLAND ISLANDS

HIGHLIGHTS

- Chat with winterovers at one of eight countries' Antarctic stations on **King George Island** (p210)
- Zodiac cruise off **Point Wild** (p210) on Elephant Island, where members of Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition survived more than four difficult months
- Brave the surging swell to reach Deception Island's giant chinstrap rookery at **Baily Head** (p220)
- Watch gentoos nest-building and chick-rearing at **Barrientos Island** (p214) in the Aitcho Islands
- Search for the occasional macaroni penguin nesting among the chinstraps at **Hannah Point** (p216) on Livingston Island





History

William Smith, sailing in the British ship *Williams*, was blown off course while rounding Cape Horn for Valparaiso, Chile, and discovered the islands on February 19, 1819, but made no landing. Sailing eastward on his return from Chile he headed south again, but this time was too far west and missed the islands. He returned later in the year and landed on King George Island on October 17, claiming the islands for King George III.

On Christmas Day that same year, the first British sealing ship arrived – with Joseph Herring, who had been the mate of *Williams* when the islands were discovered. (He obviously saw his chance to make a fortune – and acted quickly.) This vessel was the advance party for a veritable navy that proceeded to descend upon the seal-rich islands the next year.

During the summer of 1819–20, the senior British naval officer for the western coast of South America, William Henry Shirreff, chartered *Williams* from Captain Smith and placed Edward Bransfield aboard as senior naval officer. Smith and Bransfield surveyed

the island group and today the strait between the South Shetlands and the northwestern coast of the Antarctic Peninsula (which he discovered) bears Bransfield's name. Bransfield landed on both King George Island (January 22, 1820) and Clarence Island (February 4) to claim them for the new sovereign, King George IV.

Smith returned to the South Shetlands for a fifth time during the summer season of 1820–21, this time on a sealing voyage designed to reap a rich harvest from his discovery – a goal he certainly achieved. His two vessels alone took an extraordinary 60,000 fur-seal skins.

An incredible 91 sealing ships operated in the South Shetlands during that season, most of them British or American. The predictable result: the fur seals were almost completely gone by the end of 1821. It was half a century before sealers visited the islands again in great numbers. From 1871–74 a handful of American sealing ships returned to kill anew, taking another 33,000 fur seals from the slowly recovering populations. By 1888–89 the American sealer *Sarah W Hunt* reported taking just 39 skins in a season of

South Shetland sealing, and two years later, found just 41.

As they sought unexploited new islands, the sealers must have ranged throughout the Bransfield Strait area. They probably 'discovered' the Antarctic Peninsula several times over, but because the finding of untouched sealing grounds was always a secret, no such discoveries were reported.

Death visited the sealers as well as the seals: with so many vessels operating in such treacherous waters, there were many wrecks. Six ships – *San Telmo*, *Ann*, *Clothier*, *Lady Troubridge*, *Cora* and *Venus* – all foundered within just three years between 1819 and 1821. Over the succeeding decades, there were more wrecks: *Richard Henry* (1845), *Catherine* (1847), *Lion* (1854), *Graham* (1924) and *Professor Gruvel* (1927).

In 1944, despite having its hands full with war in Europe, the British government took steps in the islands to detect enemy raiders and to underscore its sovereignty. It established permanent stations and issued postage stamps for the South Shetlands, South Orkneys, South Georgia and Graham Land, or the Antarctic Peninsula. Argentina and Chile naturally protested, since they had rival territorial claims.

Some of the first Antarctic tourism took place in the South Shetlands. The first Antarctic tourist flight, by LAN Chile in 1956, flew over the South Shetlands and the Antarctic Peninsula. Two of the earliest cruises to Antarctica, by the Argentine ship *Les Eclaireurs*, reached the South Shetlands in January and February 1958. In 1959 the Argentine ship *Yapeyú* and the Chilean vessel *Navarino* both took passengers to the South Shetlands. In the earliest mass visit of tourists to the Antarctic, the Spanish cruise ship *Cabo San Roque* carried 900 passengers to the South Shetlands and the Peninsula in 1973. It visited again in 1974 and 1975, but made no landings.

ELEPHANT ISLAND

Elephant Island is located at the South Shetlands' northeastern end. It was originally named 'Sea Elephant Island' by the British sealers who first charted it in the early 1820s, because of its abundance of elephant seals. The island itself bears a superficial resemblance to an elephant's head and trunk.

It was here that 22 members of Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition, stranded in 1915 after their ship was crushed in the Weddell Sea pack ice, spent 135 days. At **Point Wild**, on the northern coast 10km west of Cape Valentine (the island's easternmost point), where the men lived beneath two upturned boats, a monolith with a bust of Piloto Pardo, commander of the Chilean navy cutter *Yelcho*, commemorates the rescue on August 30, 1916. Landings are difficult – heavy surf often prevents even Zodiac tours, and if it is calm, the beach may be too crowded with fur seals and chinstraps to go ashore.

At **Cape Lookout**, a 240m-high bluff on the southern coast charted in 1822 by Powell, there are chinstrap, gentoo and macaroni penguins.

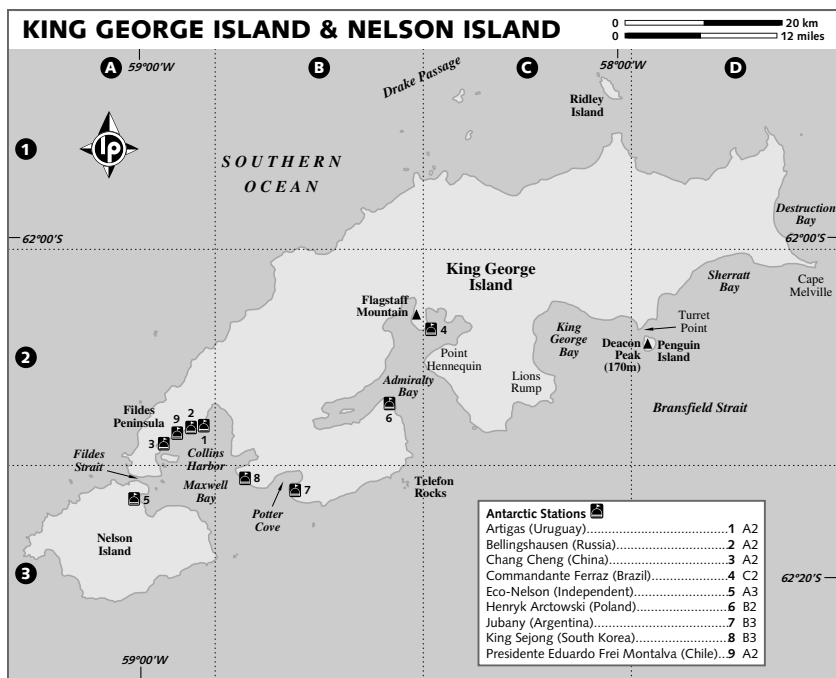
Elephant Island is also home to some very old moss colonies, dated at more than 2000 years old – with peat nearly 3m deep.

Wreckage of a wooden sailing vessel found on the southwestern coast was examined in 1999, raising hopes that it was from Nordenskjöld's *Antarctic*, or even Shackleton's *Endurance*. Subsequent tests suggest that it was the remains of a Connecticut sealing ship, *Charles Shearer*, lost en route to the South Shetlands in 1877.

A group of surfers from the US and elsewhere surfed here in February 2000 while visiting on a passenger yacht. They wore fleece-lined neoprene undersuits, oversuits and drysuits with specially fitted hoods. They later reported that 'there's good surf in Antarctica' – the best they found was at the southwestern tip of Low Island – but it seems unlikely that the line-up will ever get crowded.

KING GEORGE ISLAND

Sometimes called Antarctica's unofficial capital, thanks to the eight national winter stations crowded onto it, King George Island is the largest of the South Shetlands and the first stop in the Antarctic for many tourists. Less than 10% of the island's 1295 sq km is ice-free, yet it supports year-round stations maintained by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, South Korea, Poland, Russia and Uruguay, all connected by more than 20km of roads and tracks. There are also Dutch, Ecuadorian, German, Peruvian and US summer bases. The stations, some within walking distance of one another, are here because King George Island



is so accessible to South America. This makes it an easy place for a country to build a station and perform scientific research, thus earning the status of a consultative party, or full member, of the Antarctic Treaty.

Before the island's station-building boom began, whalers set up operations at Admiralty Bay on the southern coast in 1906. Two years later the whaling supply vessel *Telefon* ran aground on Telefon Rocks at the entrance to the bay and was abandoned. In 1909 it was salvaged and towed to Telefon Bay at Deception Island, where it was repaired.

The British were first to build a base on King George Island, in 1946–47, on Admiralty Bay, but it was closed in 1961. Base G, as it was known, was removed by members of Brazil's nearby Commandante Ferraz station in 1995–96.

Argentina built **Jubany station** at Potter Cove in 1953. It has been a year-round facility since 1984. It accommodates 80 people; 20 people normally winter here. Prominent above the station is Three Brothers Hill (210m). The summer-only **Dallman Laboratory** here was opened in 1994 by Argentina, the

Netherlands and Germany, and is the first research facility in Antarctica designed as a multinational laboratory.

Russia set up its **Bellingshausen station** in 1968 on the nearly ice-free Fildes Peninsula at the island's southwestern tip. After a fuel-tank farm was established, the station became a major fuel depot for the Soviet Antarctic fishing fleet.

Bellingshausen has a normal winter population of only 13, despite its maximum capacity of 50. The station consists of 15 one-story buildings painted silver and red, and built on stilts. The *banya* (sauna), showers and washing machines are located in the power station, where warm water is produced using the waste heat from the generators.

The station underwent a remarkable cleanup in 2002, with more than 1350 tonnes of scrap metal and other waste cleared from the beach in front of the station and removed to Uruguay and the UK. Every season since then, small additional amounts of waste have been removed.

Russia is working with South Korea to outfit and staff a laboratory at Bellingshausen,