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EXPEDITIONS

# Seasons of Antarctica

## Seasons in the Antarctic Peninsula and South Shetland Islands

**A**ntarctic wildlife is at its most active during the southern summer. The beauty and solitude of the Antarctic seas and mountains conceals the frantic activity of the shoreline colonies of birds and mammals. In this five-months period, from November to March, we operate our cruises aboard the m/v Plancius. Summer arrives first in the South Shetland Islands and spreads south along the Antarctic Peninsula. As the Antarctic year progresses, from spring to autumn, the Antarctic Peninsula and Islands change in appearance and character, each season offering a different range of spectacular sights and possibilities to the visitor.

### November - December (Spring – early Summer)

**A**fter the winter darkness, spring fever hits Antarctica and the sun causes an explosive growth of phytoplankton in areas of mineral upwelling. The phytoplankton provides food to the astronomical swarms of zooplankton, including krill. Krill forms the base of the food chain for squid, fish and ultimately for seabirds, seals and whales, which flock in to fatten themselves and to produce their young.

- Largest snow cover on most sites
- Elephant Seals' pups are just a few weeks old and the big males still guard their harems aggressively
- The first big whales have arrived on their migration to Antarctica to feed, among them Humpback, Minke and Southern Right Whale
- Amazing displays of the penguins' courtship ritual, including nest building, sky pointing and stone stealing
- Penguin, petrel and cormorant eggs are incubated hence colonies are the most populated at this stage of the summer
- Most penguin chicks start to hatch at the end of December
- Wintering scientists at the research stations welcome the first visitors of the season
- Longest days in December create longer daylight hours – photographs can be taken at midnight!
- Last winter's sea-ice offers sometimes spectacular sailing among the floes with some ice seals, like Weddell, Crabeater and Leopard seals, sometimes still along with their pup aged just a few weeks old

## January - February (Summer)

In Antarctica's warmest months wildlife activities are in full swing. Most penguin chicks hatch in January, earliest in the South Shetland Islands and later more to the south at the Peninsula. The frantic activity continues in the colonies in February as the young get older and bolder and are gathering in crèches.

- Whale watching is at its best in February
- Penguin colonies at their busiest, fetching krill and feeding chicks
- In February receding ice allows exploration further south along the Antarctic Peninsula
- Concentration of Fur Seals increases
- Huge concentration of Crabeater seals can often be seen travelling at sea or resting on icebergs

## March (Autumn)

Nightly Darkness returns as the sun sinks farther below the southern horizon, but temperatures are still above zero, though we may experience a touch of Antarctic winter with night frosts, creating beautiful patterns of thin sea ice on the surface. The snow cover is at its minimum allowing for easy and extensive walks in the South Shetland Islands.

- Penguin chicks are in their adolescent state now and quite curious about visitors
- The adult penguins moult and the young go to sea.
- Receding ice allows exploration farthest south along the Antarctic Peninsula
- Spectacular green and pink algae blooms on snow-slopes and ice cliffs
- Whale watching is still very good as the whales are well fed and have now "spare time" to be curious around ships
- Fur seals are now crowding many shorelines, still feeding on krill before returning to their breeding grounds in South Georgia next spring

In Falkland Islands and South Georgia spring and summer arrive earlier than in the South Shetlands & the Antarctic Peninsula and consequently the breeding activities of sea-birds and sea mammals start earlier there. South Georgia is home to several birds with a cycle longer than one year, so eggs and young in King Penguin colonies can always be found from November to March. November is full spring in South Georgia, comparable with December in the South Shetlands, but without sea-ice. On the long beaches the fur seals still defend their harems fiercely in November while later on in January-February they leave the area to the females and their young pups.

