



World's end

Italian photographer **Alex Bernasconi** talks to **Oliver Atwell** about his epic journeys across Antarctica and South Georgia, and the book that was the result

Anyone familiar with nature photographer Alex Bernasconi's previous work will probably occupy one of two camps when viewing his new publication *Blue Ice*. The first will feature those who'll be caught a little off guard by the stark contrast between this project and the vibrant dust-inflected frames caught within the

pages of his previous publication *Wild Africa*. Others will likely see this project as an inevitable next step on Bernasconi's journey to capture the most extreme zones of the world. The one thing that both will agree on is that *Blue Ice*, which chronicles Bernasconi's journey through South Georgia and Antarctica, is a real achievement. The images suck you into a yawning

Above: A wonderful arch in an iceberg near Paulet Island, off the north-eastern end of the Antarctic Peninsula. The island is composed of lava flows and is capped by a cinder cone surrounding a small summit crater. Geothermal heat keeps part of the island ice-free

white void where snowscapes and icescapes stretch for endless miles, icebergs and glaciers dominate the horizon, and the only company to be found are penguins and seals.

Bernasconi journeyed across open sea on a ship called the *Zodiac*. As he says in the introduction to the book, there are actually several ways a traveller can reach the Antarctic Peninsula: 'When the weather permits, many people fly from Chile to avoid days of sailing in the stormiest seas in the world. But the experience of navigating the routes of the great explorers, and visiting the wonderful Falkland Islands and South Georgia with their spectacular views and fauna



Above: A black-browed albatross, Westpoint Cove, Westpoint Island, north-western Falkland Islands

Below: A tabular iceberg in the Southern Ocean

before reaching the Antarctic Peninsula, makes this expedition one of the most incredible a man can take.'

'After many years spent mostly in Africa I needed to get out of the dust,' laughs Alex, now back within the welcome warmth of central heating. 'Joking aside, I'm always trying to widen my perspective on the natural world and I'm especially attracted to the most diverse environments. I've been photographing polar bears in Churchill [Canada] and Svalbard [Norway] in recent years, and I just fell in love with these wild areas. The ability of animals to live and survive in such extreme conditions is astonishing, and the remoteness of these places has a magnetic attraction for me. Antarctica is the most remote, extreme place on earth, and the decision to plan a longer expedition there really just came as a natural consequence.'

It's unsurprising to hear Alex say this. Looking through his images, the uniqueness of the region is vividly apparent. It extends to a number of elements, all of which are vital components in conveying the almost-alien nature of the land.

'I hope that's something I'm able to explain through my images,' says Alex. 'I don't think words can describe it. Everything is



King penguins,
off Salisbury Plain,
South Georgia



unique: the climate, light, scenery, fauna – all these elements carried me into another dimension. It really is like being in another world. I've been in some of the most remote locations of the world, but when you embrace an expedition so far away from any human presence, you really feel a deep contact with nature like in no other place on earth.'

Alex says what surprised him more than anything was just how much life is present – even when the extreme weather conditions wouldn't facilitate human survival. Although, as he grimly notes, we can still have an impact on the environment despite our corporeal absence there.

Safety measures

Faced with such extreme conditions Alex, naturally, had to take measures to ensure his equipment was kept safe at all times. It would be more than a little heartbreaking to go out into such a far-flung field and find your equipment crippled.

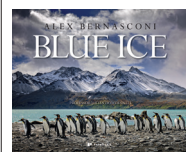
'The extreme conditions you find at these latitudes make it necessary to carry more gear in case of malfunctioning or damage,' says Alex. 'Salt spray, rain, wind and cold can affect even the sturdiest equipment in Antarctica. I usually



worked with and carried two bodies (a Nikon D3X and D700) and zoom lenses to avoid changing them too frequently. I also had two spare bodies on board in case I needed them. An essential part of my equipment is a waterproof dry bag to protect my backpack during transports and landings, where you can accidentally fall in the water or get soaked by a wave. I should also mention that rain protectors for camera and lenses are vital to work on rainy or snowy days.'

Alex admits that he's not the kind of wise photographer who's able to pack the strictly necessary equipment. As he says, he doesn't want to miss a shot just because he decided not to carry a few extra kilograms. With that in mind,

Above: Stand-off in St Andrew's Bay. An elephant seal vs a king penguin



Blue Ice by Alex Bernasconi is out now. It is published by Papadakis and is priced at £30

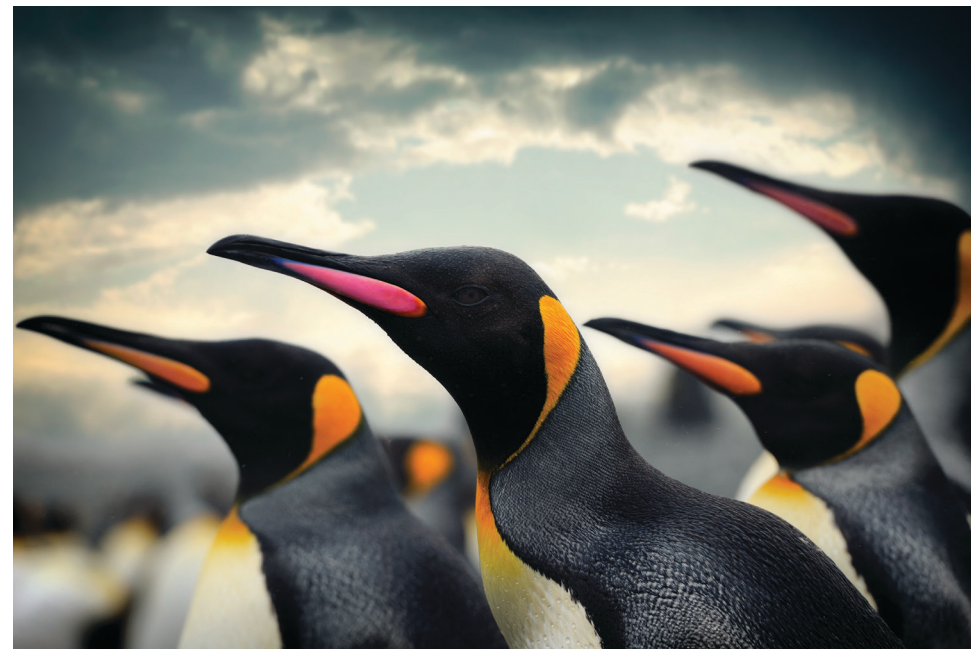
'So far away from any human presence, you really feel a deep contact with nature'

it's unsurprising to hear that he took along every type of lens, ranging from a 14mm to a 500mm, and actually had the chance to use them all.

'I also had accessories, such as Lee ND filters,' says Alex. 'I used these for most of my landscape images, and at times, a polariser. However, it can be very tricky to use large rectangular ND filters when it's windy or drizzling. Unfortunately, that's often the case in a place like South Georgia and Antarctica.'

There are shots in *Blue Ice* that are breathtaking in their scope. Of particular note are his images of icebergs. That was when pan-stitching came into play.

'Panoramas sometimes are the only way to express the vastness, the greatness and magnificence of landscapes, so those incredible icebergs dotted with penguin colonies under dramatic skies can be appreciated only with very wide images,' he says. 'Shooting them from a moving ship meant I couldn't use the pano equipment I'd used on



land, so they've been produced handheld with wideangle lenses, mainly the 24-70mm f/2.8, then stitched together in Photoshop.'

Into the wild

What's particularly striking about *Blue Ice* is the delicate balance between wildlife and landscape imagery. While there are occasions when these two genres are distinct within the work, there are other

times when the two genres blur. Perhaps it would be more convenient to identify Alex as a nature photographer.

'I love to live in and to explore the wilderness,' says Alex, 'and I use photography as a medium to express my vision of the natural world. Nevertheless, I'm passionate about all different kinds of photography as an art – street, conceptual, photojournalism,

Above: A close-up of king penguins on Salisbury Plain, South Georgia, where it's estimated that there are two to three million breeding pairs

'I use photography as a medium to express my emotions and vision of the natural world'

travel, portraits and abstract, not only nature and wildlife. I'm considered a nature photographer because nature is the main subject of my work, and that includes being a wildlife photographer and a landscape photographer too. But I'm not out there just to record and classify all the species that I meet, or put a flag in all the places I've explored. I just want to convey my strong emotions and feelings when I witness incredible beauty, and strive to move people's awareness about the importance of conservation.'

Alex has always been keen to get as close as he can to the wildlife he encounters, particularly as he prefers to use short lenses, or realise extreme close-ups with zoom lenses. 'I'd like the viewer to feel immersed in the image,' says Alex. 'I want them to be out there with me, in front of a lion, a bear or a seal, to look into the animal's eyes and reflect about their conditions or thoughts, or to imagine the feeling of being surrounded by wildlife in every direction, to feel cold

An iceberg in Erebus and Terror Gulf, on the south-east tip of the Antarctic peninsula. Its form is reminiscent of a Navajo Native American with headdress



'I'd like the viewer to feel immersed in the image – I want them to be out there with me'

► or hot, to shiver, to smell the scent, to hear the sound. I also like to include the landscape in my wildlife images, so that the link between them and their environment is clear.

'As a general rule, I usually approach wildlife in a way that lets them get used to my presence. Lying very still on the ground, until they don't care about me any more and behave naturally, as if I wasn't there at all. In this way they set their own comfort distance.'

According to Alex, penguins are particularly curious and friendly and are therefore easy to deal with. Elephant seals, however, are massive and can be ill tempered and, as a result, require more caution.

'Fur seals are particularly aggressive, and it's always better to keep your eyes open because they can charge and bite you with no

warning,' says Alex. 'An injury in these regions can be dangerous, being so far away from any hospital and where being evacuated can be impossible for days.'

While viewers are, of course, welcome to see *Blue Ice* as simply a collection of stunning images, that would mean missing the deeper meaning. The fact is, those inexplicably strange landscapes, and the animals that inhabit them, may not be there for much longer. The world and its climate are shifting at frightening rates. As a result the ice is turning to water and the wildlife is finding itself starved and displaced.

'Antarctica is so vast, remote and difficult to monitor, yet we still have clear signs of devastating changes,' says Alex. 'It's impressive to think that the Antarctic ice sheet contains enough ice to raise worldwide sea levels by more than 60m if melted completely. Species such as the Adélie penguin populations have been declining in recent years due to reductions in krill and changing weather conditions in their traditional nesting areas. Emperor



Alex Bernasconi is a renowned adventurer, traveller and multi-award-winning nature photographer. His images have been featured in multiple publications and in 2011 his book *Wild Africa* won a gold medal as the best photography book at the Independent Publisher Book Awards. www.alexbernasconi.com

penguins are also highly vulnerable and are predicted to suffer when the world's average temperature increases by 2°C.'

Bernasconi's project has much in common with Werner Herzog's humbling 2007 documentary *Encounters at the End of the World*, a film that saw the filmmaker travelling to meet the scientists residing in the McMurdo Station research centre in Antarctica. Through the eyes of the people Herzog interviews we see our place within the world and just how spellbinding even the most seemingly inhospitable regions of our vast planet can be. It's only when you leave the chaos of the urban lifestyle behind that you can truly see where we stand with regard to nature. Like Herzog, Bernasconi delivers us a vision of our place on earth. It's at once awe-inspiring, comforting and alienating. However, the reality is that the human influence on these regions is nothing short of heartbreaking. Thankfully we have *Blue Ice* to remind us what we stand to lose.

