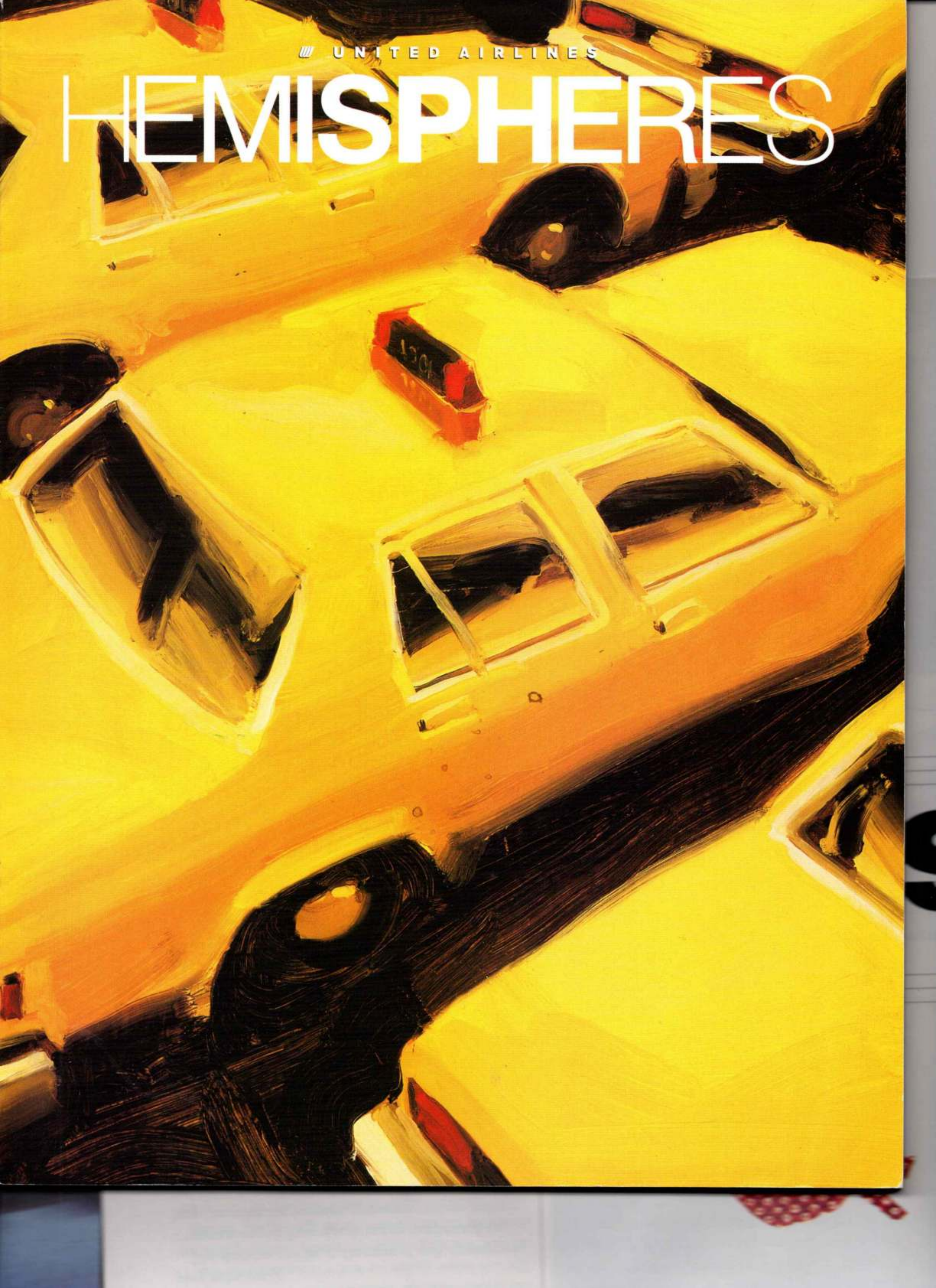
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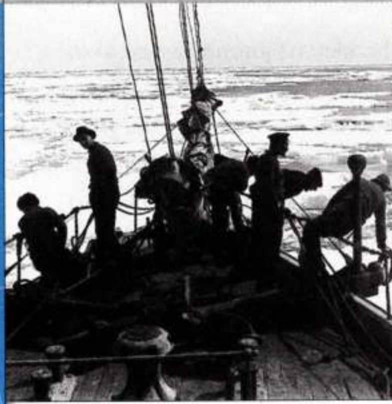
T*he waters between Cape Horn and Antarctica are home to deadly icebergs, gale storms—and enduring legends. At the ends*



Cape Crusaders

of the earth lie the beginnings of a once-in-a-lifetime sailing adventure. / **B***y Todd Jarrell* / **P***hotography By Rob Bonte*

"GENTLEMEN, WE ARE GOING SAILING!" ¶ CAPTAIN Klaas Gaastra's Dutch accent resonates across the deck of the three-masted barque *Europa.* The mooring lines snake from the dock, the ship's bow slowly turns, and the crew awaits the next words: "Fore and main masts ... topsails ... lower topgallants ... staysails ... inner and outer jibs!" The crew is already scrambling up the masts to loose the heavy sails. ¶ Gaastra's declaration is not an overstatement of the obvious, but rather an artful understatement. We are not *just* going sailing. In fact, we are taking this square-rigged tall ship from Argentina's Tierra del Fuego to Antarctica—and back—via the turbulent Drake Passage and notorious Cape Horn. Certain names will forever be associated with these latitudes—Roald Amundson, Robert F. Scott, and Sir Ernest Shackleton. Amundson's success and Scott's tragedy have become ►

the stuff of legend, and Shackleton's journey is one of the most epic endurance and rescue stories in history. But for every intrepid explorer obsessed with reaching the geographic South Pole, there were countless sailors who braved the brutal elements in the surrounding Southern Ocean.

Europa will undertake four Antarctic voyages during this austral summer of 2001. I am invited to work and live with the ship's small crew of professional sailors, and our "voyage crew" of novice sailors who pay to serve as trainees.

WE SAIL FROM TIERRA DEL FUEGO. THESE ISLANDS AND mountains form the tip of the South American continent, but they do not end here. They slip beneath the Southern Ocean in a serpentine route, rising at last from the frigid depths 600 miles to the south as the peninsular finger of Antarctica: sun-blanched, ice-glazed, hardened in the polar winter, and polished by the katabatic winds.

Between Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica lies Drake Passage, which seafarers hold with a great and abiding respect, for its most renowned feature is infamous Cape Horn, the fulcrum of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Over the centuries, explorers, privateers, and military expeditions all tried the Horn, losing crew to storms, scurvy, and the fierce cold—the captain's log punctuated with the splash of sailor's burials. The clippers carrying tea and spices from the Orient braved the Horn, as did the massive windjammers carrying timber, ore, and nitrates bound for the world's awakening industries.

The opening of the Panama Canal dramatically reduced shipping around South America; tall ships in these waters are particularly rare—*Europa* is the only square-rigged ship to call into Antarctica and round the Horn this season. A contemporary of Shackleton's ship *Endurance*, *Europa* was built in 1911 and is truly one of the most graceful of the modern tall ship fleet, seeking world adventures and teaching the arcane arts of the sea. Gaastra has earned his reputation as a hard-driving but fair and eminently capable captain.

We begin our voyage in the same manner as those historical sailors who fought Drake Passage. Once aloft in the rigging, the square rig deckhand's basic duties have changed precious little in 200 years. Into the evening, the watch ensures that all is secure, rigging hand lines and lashing "crew strainer" netting shoulder-high along the waist of the vessel to keep the people *on* the ship *in* the ship.

The Drake wastes no time in asserting its bold reputation. The waves, pushed by relentless Force 9 to 10 (50 to 60 mph) winds, roll the deck, and seasickness claims its first victims as we drive southward. In the night's first watch, the fore lower topsail sheet (a sturdy stainless-steel chain with quarter inch–thick links) breaks with an explosive bang. The unfettered sail flogs mightily as Gaastra calls "all hands" from their warm bunks to rush on deck and save the sail from the claw of the gale. Seawater bursts through the freeing ports and waves pour green over the rails and then race, foaming and knee-deep, across the rolling deck.

As we climb aloft, the sea-sprayed shrouds freeze our hands and slip beneath heavy sea boots. The wind is a tangible force—with will and weight—flailing the sails and whipping random rifle cracks and concussive booms that shake the yards and mast. Halfway up the rocking 100-foot mast we step out on the footropes slung beneath the topsail yards to tie rope "gaskets" around the sails, in an effort to still them from the wind.

Bumping together, icebergs sound hollow, brittle, and light. But however harmless they may appear, one

"One hand for you and one for the ship" is the sailors' cautionary maxim, but it takes two hands for this job. The sails balloon in our arms; their gale-filled bellies hammer at our legs and feet; canvas smacks at hands and faces. In moments the sail is split and tattered, the thick roping at its edge completely disintegrated in places: The stricken sail is literally beating the life from itself. All the while we hang on, trying not to be thrown or blown from this lofty perch.

Far below, the bow wave caroms into the darkness. White-crested rollers lift and roll the ship like creatures trapped beneath our keel. At last, with sails secured, we lay below to the deckhouse, sleeping in soaked gear and sea boots, ready to hit the writhing deck in a moment. This is The Drake. And we have gotten off easy.

AFTER A FEW ROUGH BUT REASONABLE DAYS AT SEA, WE fetch the South Shetland Islands. Elephant Island is only 200 miles to our east. From there Shackleton launched his epic seaborne attempt to seek rescue after 16 months on the ice;

his men anxiously awaited their leader's return for five long months on that barren rock. Our first impression is of indescribable desolation, but ultimately the rock beaches give onto soaring cliffs and hillsides splashed with rust-yellow lichens and soft mats of rich, green mosses. Thousands of penguins stake their claims on small depressions in the cold stones, milling about like shipwrecked partygoers.

Through Bransfield Strait, watch is kept for perilous, smaller icebergs known as "bergy bits" or submerged "growlers." Though heavily overcast, the night sky never fully darkens. On the horizon a strange chrome ribbon stays the night. With morning's light we reach the volcanic caldera of Deception Island. Such is its bleakness that only lichens shade the black-brown lava walls; muddy sluices from the mountains vein the clay-colored marl of the floodplain below. The island's whaling station and research base are abandoned and now stand bleached and vacant, their floors covered with ash and broken lava. Rusted, freeze-ruptured food tins still line the kitchen shelves.

Geothermally heated waters stream from the dark lava

never forgets them to be the grinding brutes they are.

beach, and we enjoy a warm bath–an anomaly in such frozen, tortured terrain. Chill breezes sweep great banks of steam up the blackened shoreline to the oxidized crags. The dun, barren mounts appear ice-spackled and drawn beneath the blank white sky. This must be that cold day in hell one hears mentioned from time to time.

A TRANSIENT HERD OF ICEBERGS HAS COLLECTED IN the channel separating Trinity and Spert islands. Here is a gallery of gigantic flotsam, a stately menagerie of beautifully blued abstractions. Like clouds, they seem to mimic a vast array of familiar forms. The captain of the *Endurance,* Frank Worsley, remarking on the same phenomenon, wrote, "Swans of weird shapes pecked at our planks, a gondola steered by a giraffe ran foul of us, ... strange, fantastic shapes rose and fell in stately cadence ..." Bumping together, icebergs sound hollow, brittle, and light. But however harmless they may appear, one never forgets them to be the grinding brutes they are.

We enter the Gerlache Strait; the wind must squeeze between the surrounding mountains here, making for

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HISTORICAL SHACKLETON EXPEDITION PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRANK HURLEY

violent storms. Just before midnight, Gaastra logs a calm Force 3 wind. Ten minutes later it's Force 6, and gaining rapidly. The crew hurries aloft to furl. Our wind-filled hoods balloon around our heads like wacky cartoon halos; our clothes rattle; our voices are lost to the bitter wind. The sails billow against our feet, making secure footing difficult. The sea grows by the minute. Struggling aloft we do not see the iceberg until we are upon it, and the ship lunges against its edge. We fear it is capable of blading the steel hull. The first mate, Conny van Moergastel, takes all headway off the engines, and the fierce wind pushes the bow off the dangerous berg.

Building to Force 9, then 10, with gusts ramming up to Force 11—more than 60 miles per hour—the wind is straight on the ship's head and shrieking in the cordage. Long streaks of foam stretch along the white-capped waves; the wind blows smokelike mist off the tops of them. Suddenly the telephone pole–sized mizzenmast gaff snaps in two, dangling like a battered and broken wing. We secure the flogging timber to avoid further damage and risk to the

F*inally, ahead is Cape Horn. It fills our forward horizon*

crew. The wind then shears the flagpole from atop the mainmast. Spray from the bow wave blows 150 feet straight back over the stern. The ice lookouts aloft can withstand the freezing onslaught only 20 minutes per turn. We button up the ship to ride out the storm, and, in the morning, it blows out as quickly as it came.

Just when things are getting back to normal, an iceberg catches the ship under the chin, pushing us off our anchorage in Paradise Bay, and we head for open water—such as it is. The narrow, picturesque "Kodak Crack" of the LeMaire Channel is spectacular, rising to sharp isosceles peaks dividing vast overhangs of ice, poised to cataract into the water below and join the mosaic of frozen hazards we must continually negotiate. Below decks, ominous, grinding screeches thud on the hull; the ice comes to taste our metal, probing the steel belly of the *Europa*.

Every tall ship has a singular personality blending talents, weaknesses, and eccentricities. The novice's attraction to a ship is an infatuation, but to one who has served her, the connection is a symbiotic friendship, a pact of mutual survival. Shackleton understood this. Listening to the lingering

death of his cherished *Endurance* in the strangle of the ice, he mourned, "... straining and groaning, her timbers cracking and her wounds gaping, she is slowly giving up her sentient life at the very outset of her career." During Shackleton's entire two-year ordeal, she was the only member of his party to be lost.

The abundance of life in the midst of such desolation is a constant marvel: Pods of seals laze on beaches and icebergs, innumerable penguins congregate onshore, seabirds are visible everywhere, and the waters are rich with whales. But the least-adapted of all to Antarctic life—humans—thrive here, as well. We visit the Ukrainian researchers at Vernadsky Base. These dozen men will be isolated here a full year with new projects, old letters, and their homemade vodka still. I meet Slava, whose parents met and married in Antarctica. Gregor's grandfather tended the ponies of Admiral Scott's first expedition. For these men, Antarctica is a family affair.

We call into British Port Lockroy: population two. Its citizens, Ken and Jim, eke out an existence in the "warm" season with no heat, no running water, and no electricity. Between counting penguins and hand-canceling mail from passing boats at Her Majesty's loneliest postal center, they drag ice off the beach to melt for drinking water. Ken has spent 10 winters here. For him, Antarctica is just another day at the office.

BEHIND CURTAINS OF RAIN, THE HORN HIDES—COY for all its wicked reputation. Our return across the Antarctic Convergence Zone offers warmer temperatures. We have less snow now and are relieved not to stand watch in such bitter wind. Reinoud, one of my watchmates, says, "It's four degrees Celsius. We talk about how warm it feels. What is wrong with us?"

Gaastra declares that the sun will soon shine, according to his plan. "Always on schedule, you know me," he says. "I just keep changing the schedule." Soon the sky does clear, and, finally, ahead is Cape Horn. Everyone is quietly jubilant and privately relieved. It fills our forward horizon as we set the topsails. Aloft before Cape Horn we share the invisible company of those who have pioneered these waters. The crew acts cool, but this is a proud moment for each of us, and soon we are all having our pictures taken before the infamous headland.

as we set the topsails. Aloft before it we share the invisible company of those who have pioneered these waters.

Though none of us feels that we have lived up to any legends, we are now "Cape Horners," members of a small club that nevertheless reaches far back into the history of a race in search of the planet's endpoints and the thresholds of human endurance. Why did they all come here, to the very worst that the ocean has to offer, and further still to the frozen terra incognita beyond? Why are we still fascinated by these figures? What is the pull for people like Slava, Gregor, Ken, and Jim? Why did we come here on this voyage?

I find part of the answer this same night, as the ship—storm sails set—rides yet another wild sea and we sit braced up in the wheelhouse watching the radar, the slashing rain, and the waves rushing in from the dark. Our sparse conversation turns to other ships and other seas. Gaastra tells a story about the *Europa*'s original port of Hamburg, where the River Elbe sets up nasty crosscurrents in the already nasty and shoaling North Sea. He finishes, looking out at the raging Force 10 Cape Horn storm. Then, referring to Hamburg and with no apparent sense of irony, he adds: "Now, there's a place you don't want to be." But it sounds suspiciously as though he wouldn't mind heading there right now.

And maybe that's it. People want to go where they really shouldn't be; ask any teenager. People aren't having fun unless they're a little scared; ask any carnival barker. Though many of the early missions to Cape Horn and Antarctica were, in fact, failures, we respect these men for the simple reason that they stuck it out, handling themselves with bravery and aplomb. Maybe we just want to know whether we, in similar circumstances, would behave equally.

When Shackleton interviewed the nearly 5,000 applicants for his 50 or so available expedition posts, he sorted them into three piles: Mad, Hopeless, and Possible. Which, if you think about it, are the three words that should come up when describing any really good trip. /**END**/

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