

Published February 1st, 2023

Saklan School teacher selected for a trip of a lifetime to Antarctica

By Vera Kochan



Saklan School teacher Victoria Obenchain with penguins in Antarctica. Photo provided

Virtually uninhabited, the earth's southernmost continent of Antarctica spans 5.5 million square miles of ice-covered terrain. While scientists and tourists make up any of the insignificant human population, the only permanent inhabitants are penguins, seals, whales and seabirds.

Moraga's Saklan School teacher Victoria Obenchain was selected for the 2021 Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship with Lindblad Expeditions and the National Geographic Society. The middle school science teacher/science specialist was one of 50 educators from the United States and Canada chosen to participate in this 14th iteration to either the high Arctic, southeast Alaska, Central America, Antarctica or the Galapagos Islands for an enhanced professional development opportunity. Unfortunately, COVID protocols postponed her adventure until December 2022.

According to the National Geographic Society's website, no matter where the educators are assigned, "throughout their journey, they will encounter wildlife and explore breathtaking landscapes while accompanied by a team of Lindblad Expeditions naturalists, including marine biologists, geologists, historians, undersea specialists and National Geographic photographers. Each will return home with an experience they will translate into reimagined curricula that inspire their students, colleagues and communities to care more deeply about the planet and take action on global issues."

Obenchain had been trying for three years to be chosen for this experience of a lifetime. The process involves a series of four essays and a personal video about her classroom curriculum. She also took several of National Geographic's online courses to give her an added edge. Most of the teachers who apply for the fellowship are science-oriented which made for stiffer competition in that field.

The chosen fellows do not get to pick their destination. "I was assigned Antarctica, and I really wanted it," explained Obenchain. "I was so excited, I cried while I was telling my mom. I felt really lucky to be chosen. It was my first choice."

Obenchain's trip began with the airline losing her luggage on the flight to Buenos Aires. However, a quick trip to the local mall replenished her travel needs (she picked up her eventually found luggage on her return flight). The entire expedition took 12 days, allowing for two days to get to the ship and two days to return home. The voyage/cruise began in the port town of Ushuaia, Argentina aboard one of the largest ships in the fleet, National Geographic Explorer. In order to get to the first destination, the South Shetland Islands, the ship made its way through one of the most treacherous waterways on the planet - Drake Passage. Many of the travelers succumbed to sea sickness, but Obenchain's lurching stomach was basically kept under control.

The passengers consisted of three teachers, approximately 100 tourists, and about 40-50 crew members. Located in the Southern Hemisphere, Antarctica was in the middle of summer, and the temperature enjoyed by the visitors was, on average, a balmy 32 degrees Fahrenheit. At one point on the trip, passengers were encouraged to jump into the frigid waters from a deck while wearing just a bathing suit. Obenchain decided to participate in this version of a Polar Plunge. "I was in the water for about 15 seconds. There's a person already in there that helps you get out, and they immediately give you blankets and hot chocolate."

The teachers on the trip were encouraged to make it a learning experience. "It was the expectation of sharing what we've learned with our classes back home and to share the experience with the community through a presentation," stated Obenchain. "I learned about animal adaptations; rock formations; and the food web. I walked through an actively steaming volcanic site and learned about the physics of the streamlined shape of penguins." She was treated to up-close views of thousands of penguins; watched killer whales come up for air and slap their massive tail fins while descending back into the sea; and observed seals sleeping on shoreline beaches.

Every day a new excursion away from the ship brought more wonders to the eyes of the passengers. "I just wanted to experience everything! We would sometimes go kayaking or go on a zodiac (a large inflatable kayak) that would take us to shore. We came across humpback whales eating. It was incredible to experience the wildlife and to understand how fragile the ecosystem is."

Obenchain plans to submit another application in the hopes that she will once again be chosen to take another life-changing trip to a different destination. The National Geographic Society promotes a continued dialogue amongst teachers as part of an ongoing educational practice. "I would encourage any teacher to apply to the Fellowship; and anyone who's not a teacher, I would encourage a trip to Antarctica. It's like the last great wilderness!"

Reach the reporter at: vera@lamorindaweekly.com

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