Antarctica
The Elysium Expedition
Like many great endeavors this one began with a drink in an Orlando Hotel bar during DEMA. In retrospect, I fully suspect many good ideas have been born, lost and sometimes launched in this great cerebral incubator that is the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association convention. Michael AW, fellow photographer and publisher of Ocean Geographic Magazine raised his glass and proclaimed, “It will be the adventure of a lifetime! We will celebrate the approaching centennial of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s epic endeavor in the Antarctic with a visual tribute that follows in his footsteps... above and below water.”

Jen and I looked at each other and said, “Sure, ok, we’re in”, thinking somewhere in the back of our minds that this had a snowball’s chance in hell of coming together. Several months passed and all was forgotten in the whirlwind of assignments and deadlines until an email arrived asking for our measurements for custom drysuits to be provided by Waterproof Expeditions. We raised our eyebrows and marked our February 2010 calendar for an Antarctic journey that suddenly had a name, Elysium Expedition, Greek for a paradise of fallen heroes, a ship: the Professor Molchanov, and sponsors.

The first order of business was to reacquaint ourselves with Sir Ernest Shackleton’s epic journey, brought to life in the pages of our tattered copies of Endurance and a well-thumbed volume of magnificent photographs by expedition photographer, Frank Hurley. Shackleton’s story is one of survival and dedication to his men while trapped in the ice, battling through seas of hell to Elephant and South Georgia islands, and finally to the rescue of his entire crew. Our second order of business was to quickly procure the shockingly expensive, best drysuit underwear on the planet – a single set rivals the cost of an Armani tuxedo. And third, but not least, we needed to acquire official Arctic Muck Boots, the sole secret of polar guides.
Wildlife ‘Grail’

The Holy Grail of Antarctic wildlife is the leopard seal, part dangerous predator, and part crazed and curious pinniped. Leopard seals are immense streamlined creatures up to 12 feet (over 3.5m) long with enormous heads and a politician’s smile. They swim straight at you, open their jaws and expose a very large set of teeth, including a matched set of five-inch (13cm) incisors surrounding a very pink mouth. Their toothy approach is a combination of greeting, challenge and vanity. This vain bunch is given to peering at their reflections in the large glass dome ports on our cameras: fortuitous behaviour for photographers and videographers.

Our first encounter found us swimming through thick brash ice to get eye to eye with a leopard seal sleeping on an ice floe, against the background of soaring mountains on the Peninsula. It took just the one leopard seal dive to figure out the best approach: forget the tank and pretend to be a piece of ice... that happens to wear a snorkel.

Pleńeau Bay sheltered fleets of stranded icebergs and crab eater seals. The trick to iceberg diving is to pick one that’s stable and won’t roll or disintegrate on top of you. We descended down the side of a large sculpted floe with the texture of a golf ball, peered over a shelf into blackness at 90 feet (30m), then called the dive to go look for crab eater and leopard seals.

At Couverville Island we waited underwater as Gentoo penguins leapt off a rock and shot past us like released party balloons. In contrast, shy Weddell seals swam teasingly at the edge of our vision. We moved on to Paradise Harbour.
surrounded by walls undamaged by ice scour and draped in curtains of kelp that hid a world of starfish, nudibranchs, limpets and anemones.

We found our Holy Grail at Astrolabe Island diving off an iceberg that was anchored to a ridge of rock. There, a group of leopard seals slid playfully down the 30-foot (10m) side of the submerged ice wall. Their thrill ride at an end they’d rise straight up to us and move from one diver to the next like a well-trained Walmart greeter. It was a perfect stage combining crystal clear water, blue sky and white light reflected from the iceberg.

A side expedition led by Emory Kristof was called by an impenetrable ice pack that blocked entry to an area of the Ross Sea near Paulet Island. So then the professor Molchanov steamed north toward our second objective: Elephant Island. En route and with some time on our side we stopped at Gourdin Island to dive with what proved to be a group of truly psychotic fur seals. This place is also a major rookery for three species of brush-tailed penguins: Gentoo, Adelies and Chinstraps.
Good Luck Islands

We were all holding our breath as we approached Elephant Island. And in yet another stroke of inexplicable luck weather and seas held calm allowing us to make a rare landing on this tiny, precipitous sherd of rock that juts out of the sea. It was here that 22 of Shackleton’s men survived for three months living under a lifeboat on a narrow shingle beach, eating penguins and fur seals. A monument to Luis Alberto Paudo Villan, the captain who saved Shackleton’s crew from this desolate place, has become the local hangout for Chinstraps.

Our onwards journey to South Georgia Island was a mostly comfortable two-and-a-half day steam, in stark comparison to Schakleton’s two weeks of misery aboard the pitching and exposed James Caird. Our crossing was agreeable enough for shipmate Cabell Davis to deploy plankton recorders. 100-mile long South Georgia Island is the King penguin capital of the world. It sits astride the southern ocean north of the sea ice. On its stone and mud fields, called Salisbury Plain, there’s a colony of 200,000 breeding pairs of King penguins. It’s a gathering of

Elephant seals resting at Prion Island, South Georgia. Photo: Jen Hayes

Elephant seal “threat” yawn: Jason’s Bay, South Georgia. Photo: Jen Hayes
life that quite literally ascends up the sides of mountains. We’re assaulted by a cacophony of sound – calls and counter calls come in waves and is as much a part of the landscape as the legions of black and white birds packed so tightly under the grey sky. Standing at the penguin rookeries of Fortuna Bay and Salisbury Plain was to feel a great pulse of life on the planet. It brought to mind ever-expanding humanity, our affect on the world and, in particular, on this wild place in the southern ocean.

We had heard and learned first hand that diving conditions off South Georgia are generally not good due to simple biology: penguin rookeries generate biological run off and poop-poor visibility. Prince Olav Harbour offered us a last chance underwater. Some on our team abandoned a proper dive to surf with fur seals while others clung to bottom kelp that swung us around like so many rubber clad rag dolls.

Departing South Georgia and headed for Ushuaia we encountered a fearsome storm that grew into a Force 10 gale, with 60 mph (100kph) winds and 45-foot (14m) seas. The ship shook like a terrier, holding her place at one knot in the churning sea. In the end, we emerged in the watery sunlight of the Beagle Channel. We discovered the crashing seas had breached the dive pod and shorted the electric heater system creating an immense stew of ruined dry suits and melted dive gear. In final farewell, a 70 mph (113kph) wind roared out of the mountains closing the harbour to all ship traffic. Payback in Antarctica can be hell.