

ONCE UPON A TIME

A FAIRY TALE ABOUT WORLD EXPLORATION

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This story describes an imaginary journey to some of the most isolated corners of planet Earth. The main characters – Mary and John – are sister and brother. At the time when this story was written, they were three years old and five months, respectively.

I composed the story with the view to make it into something that will become part of their growing process. Specifically, I am hoping that the tale will inspire Mary and John to learn about the wonderful planet that they live on. Nevertheless, what inspired this story was in part my own journey to picturesque, far-off corners of the world.

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PREFACE

This is an imaginary adventure about Mary and her brother John, who one day, when they were already adults, decided to travel to the United States of America and learn about this remote continent in the Western Hemisphere. Thus, they flew, walked, rowed a boat, traveled by train, and occasionally, they were rescued by a helicopter. During their journey, Mary and John enjoyed the unique beauty of the desert, the loftiness of mountainous areas, the green lushness of hills and valleys, and the wildlife living in these places.

They crossed the Atlantic and flew to Colorado. From there, they drove to Wyoming. Ultimately, they flew to Alaska, a state that gave them a taste of icy weather and breath-taking landscape.

From Alaska, they continued their exploration of the regions within the Arctic Circle. Mary and John flew to an Inuit settlement in Greenland, and proceeded with their adventure by heading to Svalbard, an archipelago belonging to Norway. The most common route to reach Svalbard is to fly via Oslo, Norway to Longyearbyen on Spitsbergen. Flying time is 3 hours between Oslo and Longyearbyen. Longyearbyen has the world's most northerly airport to receive regular scheduled flights. While in Longyearbyen, Mary and John learned about the effect of living for two months-and-a-half without any sunlight.

CHAPTER I – MARY RECEIVES AN INTERESTING PRESENT FROM HER FATHER

I will start with “Once upon a time,” because any story can be a fairytale, a composite of reality and imagination. So here you are.

Once upon a time, there was a young person whose name was Mary. She was inquisitive and wished to learn about things in her immediate environment. Mary lived in a small town built on a mountain slope, and from the window of her home, she could view the valley with its tiny homes and lofty trees.

Mary loved that peaceful, picturesque piece of land.



Figure 1 – Mary and John lived in this little town.

At that point in her life, she was not yet aware that her little town was part of a country within a continent, and that the place where she lived was on a planet called Earth.

One day, her father brought home the globe of planet Earth. Thanks to her inquisitive nature, Mary understood that the world is large and full of opportunities for adventures. She admired her globe and tried to uncover the secrets held by the diversity of colors.



Figure 2 – Mary and John owned a globe like this one.

Mary had a brother, John. The two of them admired the view from the window of their home, but then, they glanced at the globe and wondered how this round shape – not much bigger than a soccer ball – can represent a world that is larger than their corner of the earth.

With time, they appreciated that colors represent different countries and diverse topographies, and that the earth is covered with oceans and land. They were told that places close to the North and South Poles are very cold and covered with ice and snow, while those by the Equator are unbearably hot and have only sparse vegetation.

Mary and John continued to look at this intriguing ball of theirs called “the globe,” and learned that the massive chunks of land were continents, and that some of these landmasses were separated by water called “oceans” or “seas.”

The closer they inspected it, however, the more they realized that the land was divided into sections that have different hues. They learnt that these are countries separated by borders, and that some countries are very large while others are so small that it is almost impossible to see them without a magnifying glass.



Figure 3 – Mary and John looked at the world map showing continents and countries.

Mary and John became curious about the world beyond their home and started looking at various types of maps in their Atlas book, some showing shades of green, brown, blue, and white. With time, they grasped that the brown areas represent mountains, that is, land high above the sea level, while pale yellow symbolizes a desert – a land covered by sand. White is the region close to the North and South Pole, which is covered with ice and snow.

But the predominant color on all maps was blue of various shades. There were oceans separating continents, but the Pacific seemed to be the largest. And then, Mary and John noticed a large area colored in blue and splitting two

landmasses. Apparently, this was the Atlantic making it difficult for the Europeans and Americans to reach each other without the help of airplanes.

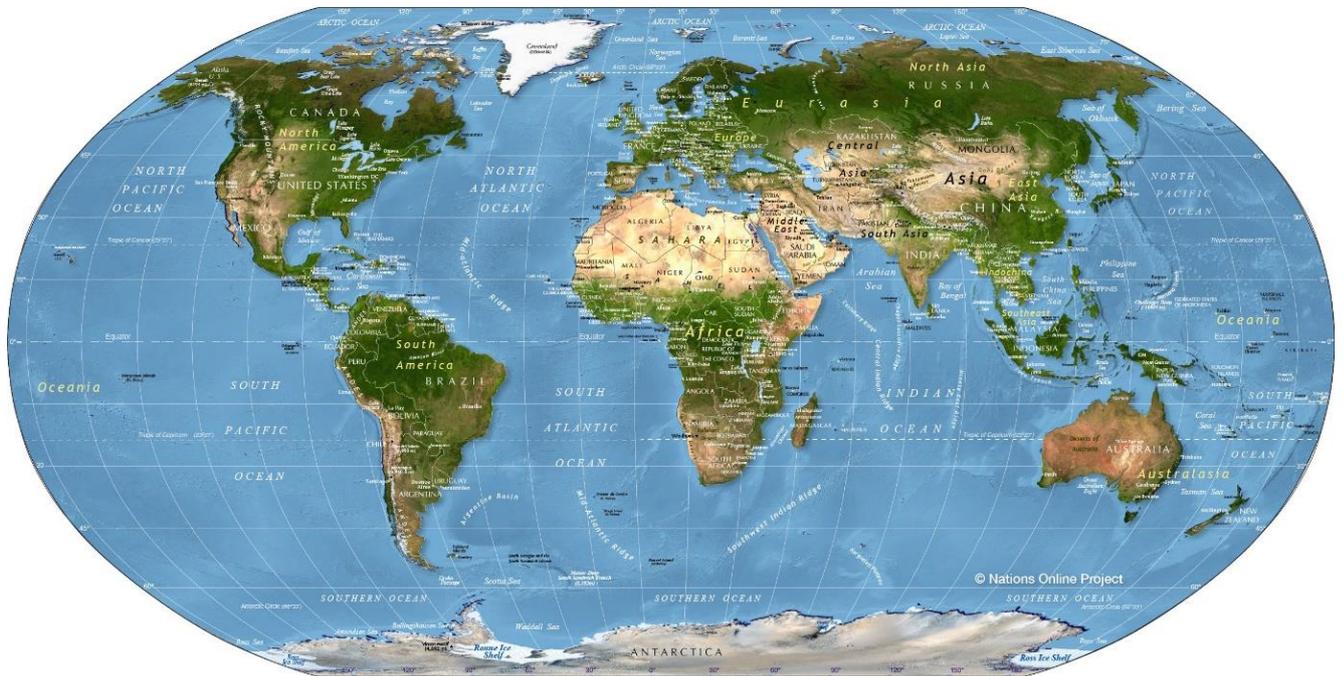


Figure 4 – Mary and John learned about mountains and valleys from this map.

CHAPTER II – JOHN SUGGESTS TO MARY THAT THEY SHOULD TRAVEL

Mary and John lived on the East Coast of the Mediterranean Sea, a water mass surrounded by Anatolia, the Balkan Peninsula, the Italian Peninsula, and the Iberian Peninsula. To the South, they noticed that the Mediterranean was cuddled by African countries, with the Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert not far from its shore.

As time was passing, Mary and John started dreaming about places that they had identified on their globe and the Atlas story and wondered how it would be possible to reach all these destinations. They would need a relatively large boat to maneuver their journey through the waves of the Mediterranean but were not yet sure how they would travel once they reach dry land.



Figure 5 – Initially, Mary and John wanted to travel to Europe.

CHAPTER III – MARY AND JOHN DECIDE TO TRAVEL TO AMERICA

One day, Mary and John were chatting about their plans for world exploration. Their father overheard them and decided to intervene. He told them the story of his trip to the Wild West of the United States when he was nine years old and added that this journey had been unforgettable. He learnt about the geology of mountainous areas, the quality of white-water rafting, the unimaginable pleasure of crossing the desert in a jeep, the unforgettable experience of witnessing places of a bygone era. Mary and John listened attentively to their father's narrations and decided: they would travel to the Western United States. However, crossing the Atlantic's rough waters in a boat to reach the shores of America did not appear to be a viable proposition.

Thus, they would fly to Denver, Colorado, and from that point, they would travel by car or walk on foot, trying to reproduce their father's adventures into the heart of this magic continent.



Figure 6 – Mary and John would eventually land at the International Airport in Denver, Colorado.

CHAPTER IV – MARY AND JOHN LAND IN DENVER, CO

After a long flight, Mary and John finally reached Denver, Colorado. There, they rented a car and started exploring the Wild West of America.

First, they wished to climb Pikes Peak Mountain, the highest summit of the southern Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in North America. Mary and John stopped at a town called Manitou Springs at the base of the mountain, before starting their arduous climb. Initially, Mary and John were part of an expedition, but eventually they decided to climb Pikes Peak on their own, so they left the expedition, camped on the plains, and climbed the peak in two days, encountering little difficulty. There, the brother and sister discovered gold, but did not loiter to gather the metal; they only cared about reaching the top. Once at the summit, they had a view of the cliffs, the ravine, and the clouds embracing the rocks.



Figure 7 – Mary and John attempt to reach the top of the mountain. They have a donkey that carries their luggage.



Figure 8 – Mary and John reach the top of the mountain and admire the views

CHAPTER V – MARY AND JOHN EXPLORE THE DESERT

The two explorers descended the Pikes Peak and headed for their next adventure. It was still cold and windy, and snow covered the earth, but this did not prevent Mary and John from engaging in their next escapade. They drove to the Sand Dunes National Park in Colorado, a place known for blizzards and subzero temperatures at night.

After marching some miles, Mary and John discovered sandy hills at the foot of the White Mountains [today's Sangre de Cristos]. After encamping, they ascended one of the largest hills of sand, and there, they discovered a large river [the Rio Grande]. The sand hills extended up and down the foot of the White Mountains about 15 miles and appeared to be about five miles in width. Their appearance was exactly that of the sea in a storm, except as to color, not the least sign of vegetation existing thereon.



Figure 9 – Mary and John climb the sand dunes.

Mary and John took their shoes off and started climbing the dunes. They enjoyed the pleasant sensation of sand between their toes and held hands while watching their shadows stretching in front of them. As they progressed up the sandy slope, they admired the breath-taking views of the yellow dunes and orange cottonwood trees below.



Figure 10 – Mary and John admire the dunes and cottonwood trees.

Mary and John waited for the snows to melt, so that they would ride horses along the base of the dunes as they followed a creek upstream.



Figure 11 – Mary and John make new friends and they all ride horses upstream.

CHAPTER V – MARY AND JOHN DISCOVER THE ARCHES NATIONAL PARK

When Mary and John were very young, their grandmother told them a story about a fascinating writer, Edward Abby, who had worked as a park ranger. He wrote an autobiography about his six-months sojourn on Arches Monument and described his existence in total isolation.

Arches National Monument, now, a national park, is a desert that lies north of Moab in the state of Utah. The desert has 2,000 natural sandstone arches. Mary and John became enthralled with the writer's story and wished to explore this area.



Figure 12 – Mary and John are hiking on the trail to North Window

Eventually, the two explorers decided to climb to a place called the Balanced Rock, a huge boulder weighing four million kilograms. One day, not long from now, this structure will come tumbling down.



Figure 13 – Balanced Rock at sunset

Mary and John were captivated by this red desert and decided to go backpacking through the entire region. They were aware of the fact that water is rarely available there, so they carried bottles with them. They had been told that the terrain is steep, and that loose rocks are a present danger. Since the sun was already setting Mary and John decided to camp in the area. There, they

encountered scorpions, rattlesnakes, black widow spiders, cone-nosed kissing bugs and other desert creatures that make their homes in the park.



Figure 14 – Mary and John are preparing a meal as the sun sets.

Rather than go to sleep, Mary and John decided to admire the Skyline Arch at night.



Figure 15 – The Milky Way and stars stretch over Skyline Arch at night.

CHAPTER VI – MARY AND JOHN ARE HEADING NORTH TO WYOMING

After a long journey, Mary and John finally reached the northern region of the United States. They stopped at the entrance of the Yellow Stone National Park, one of the most spectacular places on earth. They were especially interested in observing the wildlife of this area, so they proceeded north, into the heart of the park. Here, Mary and John encountered bears and wolves, so they brought with them binoculars and watched these animals from a safe distance.



Figure 16 - Photographing a grizzly from a safe distance.



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Figure 18 – Mary and John came upon bison grazing through an open forest.

Having encountered various wild animals, Mary and John decided to focus their attention on the natural wonders of the Yellowstone Park. They came upon the Mammoth Hot Springs, an intricate collection of fountains. Here, they spotted water trickling over the edges from one to another and producing the effect of a frozen waterfall. The hot springs were an early commercialized attraction for those seeking relief from ailments in the mineral waters. Today, to preserve these unique and fragile features, soaking in the hot springs is prohibited.





Figure 19 - Virtually wander around Mammoth Hot Springs, where the underlying limestone allow large terraces to form above ground.

CHAPTER VII – MARY AND JOHN WISH TO EXPLORE ALASKA

Mary and John had always wished to explore Alaska, the largest state in the United States of America. They desired to tour areas close to the North Pole and understand how human beings can survive the icy cold weather in that part of the world. First, they examined Alaska's location on the USA map.



Figure 20 – Location map of the State of Alaska in the US.

They realized that they would have to take an airplane from Wyoming, a state in the interior of America, to Alaska, which is not part of mainland country.



Figure 21 – Alaska Airlines

Mary and John wished to learn a few things about Alaska, before traveling to that remote peninsula of North America. Alaska is separated from the 48 contiguous U.S. states by Canada. The Bering Strait, a strait between the Pacific and Arctic Oceans, separates Asia (the Chukchi Peninsula of Russia) from North America (the Seward Peninsula of Alaska). Alaska is one of two US states not bordered by another state.

Alaska borders Canada to the east (the Canadian provinces of Yukon Territory and British Columbia), and it shares a maritime border with Russia to the west. The state's nickname is "**The Last Frontier.**"

Mary and John decided to explore the wonders of the Glacier Bay and Bering Glacier National Parks.



Figure 22 – Margerie Glacier seen from a boat

The Bering Glacier complex is the largest glacier in Alaska. Ice fields cover approximately five percent of the state.



Figure 23 – Bering Glacier including Bagley Icefield in southeastern Alaska

Mary and John were eager to explore the old gold mines of Alaska. They learned that in 1880, the Tlingit Natives agreed to allow prospectors to cross Chilkoot Pass. There, Joe Juneau and Richard Harris (founders of the city of Juneau) discovered gold deposits.



Figure 24 – Prospectors on Chilkoot Pass

Mary and John toured Alaska during the winter month, when there is only night, and the sky is draped in the vibrant Aurora Borealis.

From Alaska, Mary and John flew on a small plane to the Arctic land of Greenland. There, they came across settlements with tiny houses lost in the land

of ice and snow. Three hundred fifty Inuit people live there. They are subsidized by the Danish government. Mary and John saw in that village icebergs as high as skyscrapers.



Figure 25 – Aurora Borealis in Alaska



Figure 26 – Flying from Alaska to Greenland



Figure 27 – Icebergs the size of sky scrapers

CHAPTER VIII – MARY AND JOHN FLY TO GREENLAND

Greenland is an island country belonging to the Kingdom of Denmark. It is located between the Arctic and Atlantic oceans. Mary and John landed on Kangerlussuaq Airport, which is the largest airport and the main aviation hub for international passenger transport.

Mary and John were determined to experience the Northern Lights or the Aurora Borealis. The brother and sister were mesmerized by the shades of green suddenly lighting up the horizons of this magic land. They learned about this phenomenon from their geography stories which explain that the Sun emits electrically charged particles called ions that correspondingly move away from the Sun in a stream of plasma (ionized gas) known as the solar wind. When the plasma meets the Earth's magnetic field, the ions start moving around the Earth. Some of the ions become trapped and will consequently interact with the Earth's ionosphere (an average of 60-80 miles above the surface), causing the ions to glow. The Aurora are constantly changing and moving in streams of light or curtains, because the process of how the Sun's ionized gas interacts with the Earth's magnetic field is dynamic. Although harmless to life on Earth, the Aurora can cause power disruptions in satellite communications and in radio/TV broadcasts.



Figure 28 – Aurora Borealis in Greenland

Mary and John had learnt from their parents that every spring, a dozen or so scientists arrive at Station Nord near the North Pole to study changes in the Earth's climate. The small military and science research base can feel very isolated. But two dogs make great company for the visiting scientists—and for six soldiers who live there all year long. Tucked near the tip of northeastern Greenland, Station Nord is 1,000 miles above the Arctic Circle and only about 575 miles from the North Pole. It can feel like a million miles from anywhere! During the winter, it is totally dark all the time, for two months.

CHAPTER IX – MARY AND JOHN ARE HEADING FOR SVALBARD, THE CLOSEST PLACE TO THE NORTH POLE

Mary and John's next stop was Longyearbyen in Svalbard archipelago. The flight from Greenland to Svalbard lasted seventeen hours. Svalbard is part of Norway, so Mary and John landed first on an airport in Denmark, and from there, they took another flight to their destination.

After a long flight, Mary and John finally landed in Longyearbyen, the largest settlement in Svalbard. This place is mostly covered with glaciers, and the islands feature numerous mountains and fjords. Mary and John were determined to learn about Svalbard's climate and geography, since they

understood that its proximity to the North Pole makes it different from other places on our planet.



Figure 29 – Flying from Greenland to Svalbard

Mary and John reported sightings of whales, walrus, seals, and polar bears, and carried guns for protection against aggressive animals.

Finally, Mary and John spotted a blue whale while sailing the waters surrounding Svalbard. Mary described this mammal in her diary, specifying that the blue whale is the largest animal ever to have lived on earth, and that its color is a mix of light and dark patches of slate grey, often appearing as various shades of blue when seen through the water.

Mary and John had arrived during the winter months and were eager to experience the Northern Lights – Aurora Borealis – so they decided to delay their departure by a few days. After all, this was a time when the sun does not rise, and darkness embraces this remote island. Mary and John could not contain their excitement at the sight of the undulating green curtain illuminating the sky,



Figure 30 – A polar bear approaches Mary and John.



Figure 31 – Mary finds polar bear tracks near Tunabreen in Svalbard.



Figure 32 – Mary and John spot the blue whale.



Figure 33 - Aurora borealis, Longyearbyen

Once they caught a glimpse of Aurora borealis, Mary and John decided to travel to warmer parts of our planet. After all, they had grown up in a subtropical country with much higher temperatures than those in Greenland and Svalbard.

Mary and John decided to explore Australia, specifically, Uluru, also known as Ayers, a large sandstone formation in the central part of Australia.

CHAPTER X – MARY AND JOHN EXPLORE AUSTRALIA

Uluru, the big red rock right in the middle of Australia, is 1,364 miles (2,195 km) from Brisbane. Thus, Mary and John decided to fly into Brisbane, a destination that took many hours to reach from Norway.

But, because it's one of Australia's most popular travel destinations, it's relatively easy to get to. A direct flight from Brisbane to **Ayers Rock Airport** takes about three hours, or you can take a multi-day outback road trip that passes through some of Australia's beautiful national parks.



Figure 34 – Uluru, a red stone formation in central Australia

During their relaxing walks through this national park, Mary and John came across a variety of mammals, but by far the most interesting was the red kangaroo, the largest of all kangaroos native to Australia. The brother and sister learned from native Australians that the red kangaroo is found across mainland Australia, except for the more fertile areas, such as southern Western Australia, the eastern and southeastern coasts, and the rainforests along the northern coast.

Mary and John considered it important to learn about the indigenous people inhabiting the Uluru area. Thus, they met with the Pitjantjatjara, an Aboriginal people of the Central Australian desert near Uluru. Their languages are, to a large extent, mutually intelligible (all are varieties of the Western Desert language). Consequently, Mary and John communicated with them using their hands. The Pitjantjatjara refer to themselves as Anangu (people).

Anangu have given up their nomadic hunting and gathering lifestyle but have retained their language and much of their culture in synergy with increasing influences from the broader Australian community. Today, Anangu consider Uluru to have an important spiritual and ceremonial significance.



Figure 35 – Red kangaroo

Next, Mary and John headed for Kata Tjuta, which means ‘many heads’ in Pitjantjatjara. This landform is fifty kilometers from Uluru and Yulara. It is an Anangu men’s site and is sacred under their traditional law.



Figure 36 – An anangu tour leader at Uluru, doing a public demonstration.

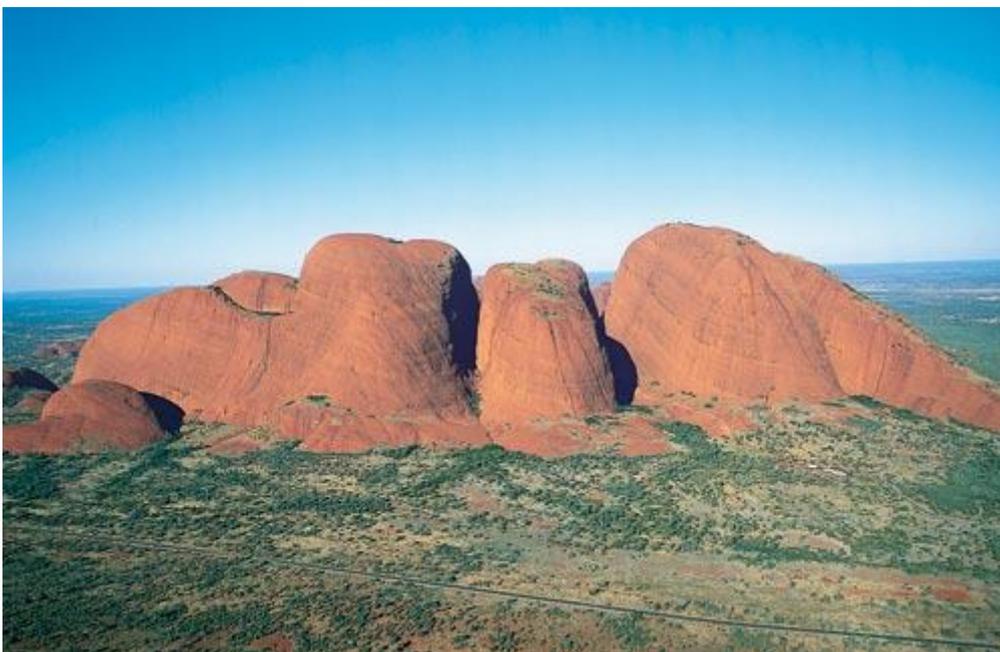


Figure 37 – Kata Tjuta / Mount Olga

Mary and John were told by the local inhabitants that legends in Uluru and Kata Tjuta / Mount Olga describe the great snake king Wanambi, who is said to live on the summit of Kata Tjuta / Mount Olga and only comes down during the dry season. His breath is said to be able to transform a breeze into a hurricane to punish those who did evil deeds.



Figure 38 - In the Valley of the Winds walk at Kata Tjuta a / Mount Olga.

CHAPTER XI – MARY AND JOHN ARE DETERMINED TO REACH ANTARCTICA

They were now in Brisbane, Australia, and ready to embark on their next adventure. Mary and John wished to travel to Antarctica and reach the South Pole, but first, they had to reach Ushuaia, a town at the Southern tip of South America. It took them almost two full days to reach the destination.

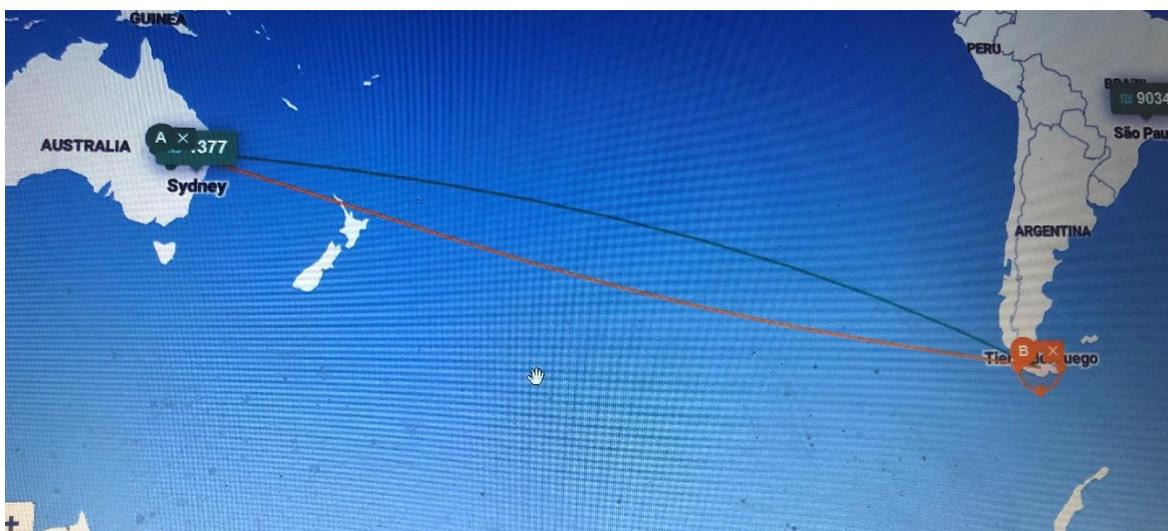


Figure 39 – Flying from Brisbane, Australia, to Ushuaia, Argentina

Mary and John landed in Ushuaia in the early evening and decided to stay the night at a hotel in town. Their trip to Antarctica was due to leave Tierra del Fuego the next day.



Figure 40 - Aerial image of the Ushuaia Airport

They woke up early the next morning and took a Norwegian cruise ship to Antarctica. Mary and John joined a group of tourists heading for a unique adventure.

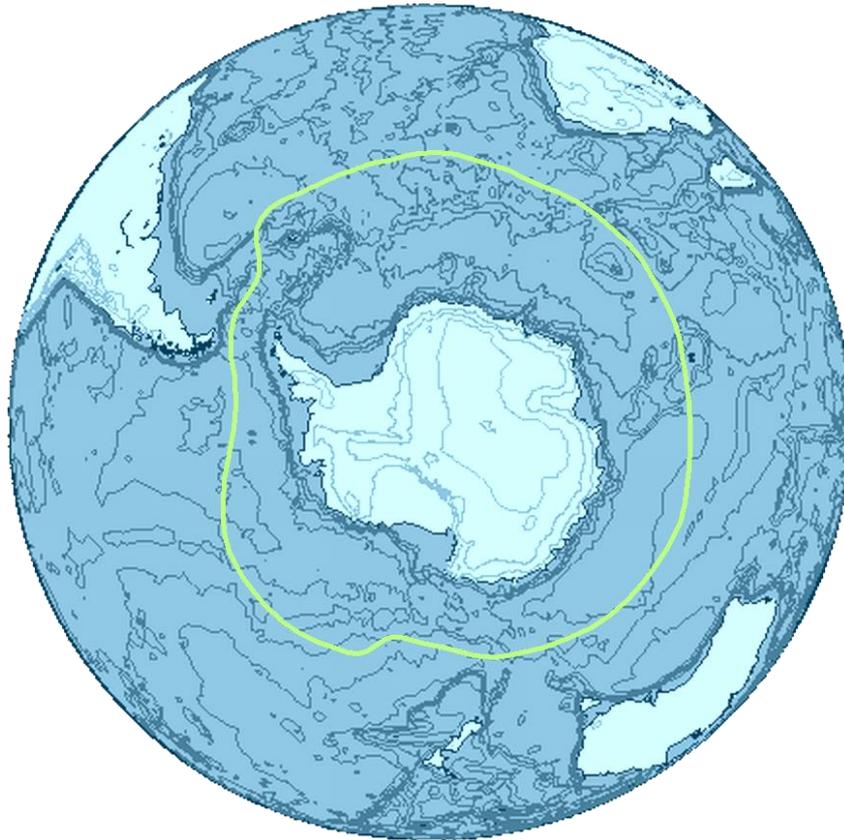


Figure 41 – The Antarctica region and its boundary, the Antarctic Convergence.



Figure 42 - Penguin colonies, cruise ship and tourists, Petermann Island, Kiev Peninsula of Antarctic Peninsula.

After a few hours of exploring the Western tip of Antarctica, they came across brush-tailed penguins. They learned that penguins are great at staying warm—they have very dense and thick waterproof feathers. When they swim, these feathers trap air bubbles to help them stay warm in the water, so it is important to keep feathers in good shape. Thus, penguins spend a long time preening and grooming themselves with their beak. The penguins seem to love the cold weather.

At one point, Mary and John decided to explore this remote continent using a sledge pulled by dogs. They took with them experienced guides to assist them in crossing this desolate land.



Figure 43 – Mary and John catch sight of brush-tailed penguins.



Figure 44 – Dogs pulled Mary and John's sledge across a glacier.

Mary and John were now on a continent covered by glaciers. They were eager to understand the structures of these ice formations, and to comprehend the difference between glaciers and icebergs. Glaciers are in the Arctic and Antarctica, with the largest glaciers appearing in Antarctica. Icebergs, on the other hand, are smaller pieces of ice that have broken off (or calved) from glaciers and now drift with the ocean currents.



Figure 45 – A large block of ice is breaking off from the glacier (top picture); the block of ice drifts into the ocean and becomes an iceberg (bottom picture).

There are no ports, docks, or piers for ships in Antarctica, so Mary, John and their guides used rubber boats to return to the ship that they were traveling on. Luckily for them, the staff and officers of the *National Geographic Explorer* that accompanied them, were the most skilled and safest drivers in Antarctica.

Without their support, Mary and John might not have been able to visit the continent at the South Pole.



Figure 46 – Mary, John, and their guides, depart Yalour Islands, Antarctica.

CHAPTER XII – MARY AND JOHN RETURN HOME TO THEIR SUBTROPICAL COUNTRY

After a few months of traveling to remote parts of the Earth, Mary and John started missing their home in a far-away land. They realized that such a long trip would require some planning. After all, they were now in Ushuaia, located at the tip of South America.

They thought that they should travel first back to North America, where they would find flights to their native country. They took a flight to New York City, with a stop in Buenos Aires, Argentina. From New York, they flew directly to their Mediterranean country, where their parents and grandparents welcomed them.

The family was again together. Mary and John had stories to tell everyone, and many photographs to show to their beloved parents and friends.

THE END