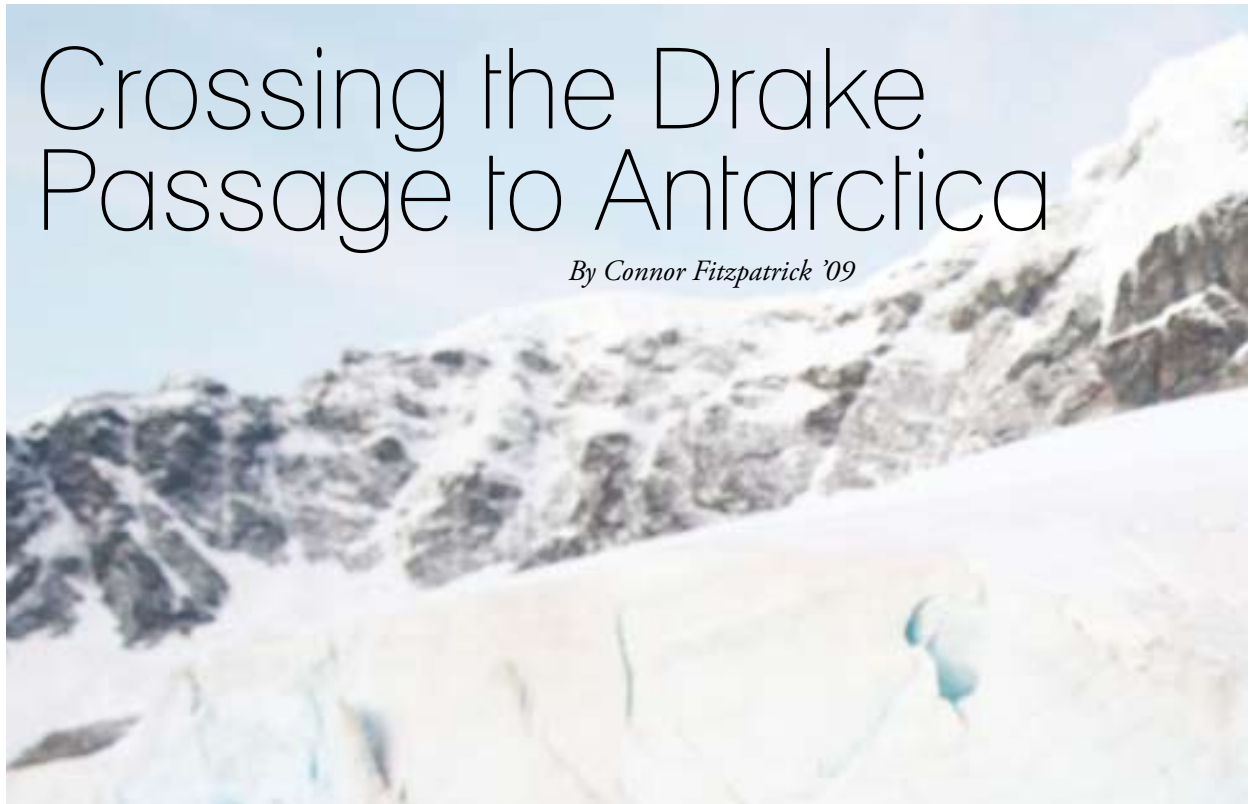


Crossing the Drake Passage to Antarctica

By Connor Fitzpatrick '09



While most of my friends were off to the tropics for their Senior year spring break, I joined an expedition to somewhere far cooler (literally)—Antarctica, the last frontier on earth. The continent remains one of the most remote and inhospitable environments, covered by over 5 million square miles of solid ice. With record low temperatures of -89 Celsius, it is the coldest, driest, and windiest place on the globe.

The journey began when Robert Swan, OBE, came to speak at Brunswick this past winter. In 1989, he became the first man to walk to both the North and South Poles. Since then, he has founded *2041*, an environmental organization working towards the protection of the Environmental Protocol of the Antarctic Treaty. As an activist, Rob Swan successfully removed over 1,500 tons of waste from the Antarctic Peninsula, was the keynote speaker at the world's first Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, and has established the first education base in Antarctica. After his lecture and slide presentation, at Brunswick I was hooked on his mission.

Paul Withstandley, Upper School Spanish teacher and Senior Class Dean, decided to take the 10-day expedition with me. On March 14, after nearly 26 hours of continuous travel, we landed in Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world.

As the crew loaded our ship—RV *Akademik Ioffe*—with provisions, our expedition team hiked Ushuaia's unknown gem, the Glaciar Martial, to prepare us for the challenges ahead. On March 17, after three days in Argentina acclimating, we departed for Antarctica via the Beagle Channel. The *Akademik Ioffe* is an active, working Russian research vessel. In between expeditions to the polar regions, she is often occupied by European scientists who study various aspects of benthos composition and oceanic temperatures. It was through a special arrangement that we were able to sail aboard such an exceptionally capable ship for our expedition. An official Argentinean pilot came aboard to guide us through the narrow passage since the Beagle Channel can be extremely hazardous at night.

After two days crossing the fearsome Drake Passage, we arrived in Antarctic waters, and landed on King George Island, home to bases of many nationalities, including Russia, Uruguay, Chile, and Korea. *2041* was the first organization to build a base solely for educational purposes in the Antarctic. The "E-Base" made history last year when Rob and his team broadcasts live from Antarctica to schools around the globe, relying solely off of renewable energy. This year, our team took it to the next level: E-Base is now capable of broadcasting educational content to the world—365 days a year—off of





Paul Withstandley (Upper School Spanish teacher and Senior Class Dean), Robert Swan, OBE (polar explorer and environmental leader), and Connor Fitzpatrick '09 in Antarctica.



wind and solar energy. Because the batteries at the base discharge a small amount of heat when they are fully charged, we are even able to heat E-Base with renewable technologies. If we can successfully implement green technologies in the harshest environment in the world, why can't we do it at home?

Once we departed E-Base and King George Island, the 2041 group steamed into the Weddell Sea to visit a famous location aptly titled "Iceberg Alley." As a result of a large oceanic gyre, icebergs become trapped in this one specific area and form *fast ice*, a particular iceberg that is grounded on the sea floor. In our case, we were exploring waters that were nearly 80 meters deep. Just as we were about to seek shelter from the harsh wind and extreme cold, several humpback whales breached off the starboard bow of the ship.

For the next several days, we moved down the Gerlache Strait exploring Wilhelmina Bay, Cuverville, Paradise Bay, and Neko Harbour. In order to show us both sides of the human damage spectrum, Rob showed us how virgin certain areas can be (Wilhelmina Bay), and how altered others can be (Neko Harbour). Because we did not want to leave any traces behind, we decided to not go ashore in Wilhelmina Bay. Instead, we motored around icebergs in our inflatable Zodiacs. Because of the krill concentration in this area, there is an abundance of seals, whales, and seabirds. When I looked upwards, all I could see were walls of deep blue ice formed several thousand years ago. I have never seen anything as amazing as 1,000-foot-tall walls of ice on all sides of me. Sadly, when we landed at Neko Harbour, all we saw were remnants of a Chilean base. It was a tragedy to see how people can be so careless as to discard waste without regard to the environment. While no country has recog-

nized claims on the Antarctic, as a result of the Antarctic Treaty, there have been an increasing number of new constructions in the event that the treaty is not renewed in the year 2041.

As I was standing on the bridge of our ship before we turned back north via Drake Passage, the VHF radio crackled to life. "All mariners be advised of an impending Force 10 gale." I had no idea how rough the return trip would truly be. We encountered waves that were nearly 65 feet from trough to crest, and winds up to 65 mph. Thankfully, neither Mr. Withstandley nor I are affected by motion sickness.

The Antarctic is one of the last true wildernesses on the planet Earth. It is our job to protect it from exploitation, be it mining, drilling, or global warming. Over 90 percent of the world's freshwater is locked up in nearly 13.72 million km² of ice. I hate to admit it, but I had to travel to the ends of the Earth to realize that immediate action needs to be taken to reverse society's damage.

During a meeting with Rob, I heard a student from Canada's Northwest Territories describe how his family's livelihood has been destroyed as a result of global warming. All of their homes are sinking into the ground because the permafrost is melting. When our team heard this, all 79 of us from 28 different nations pledged to "Think Global, Act Local." I have learned that we need to show people that we mean business through actions, and not just words. As we proved at E-Base, sustainable solutions are the key to modern societies' success and survival. Rob's lifelong goal has been to inspire people and get them to believe the journey is possible by taking small achievable steps.

The time has come to transition from the inconvenient truth, to the convenient solution. ■

THE TIME
HAS COME TO
TRANSITION
FROM THE
INCONVENIENT
TRUTH, TO THE
CONVENIENT
SOLUTION.

