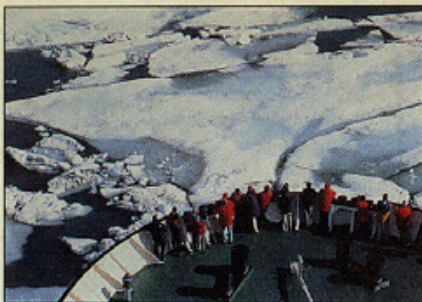


## This week's dream: exploring Antarctica

Antarctica is the "coldest, whitest, purest, loneliest, most alluring place on earth", says Carol McDavid in *The Observer*. Until recently, its walls of ice and gale-force winds made it impenetrable to all but the most intrepid adventurers. Now, however, a Russian icebreaker – the *Kapitan Dranitsyn* – has been converted into a cruise ship, capable of transporting tourists right into the ice.

The ship sets sail from Tierra del Fuego on the southern tip of Argentina. With no land in sight for the first few days, guests can enjoy the (admittedly limited) onboard facilities – which include a sauna and "Sir David Attenborough on video". Once the ship reaches its first stop, the South Shetland islands, inflatable boats are used to ferry guests to the shore. Clad in six layers of thermals, with bright red parkas over the top, the group is taken to see Antarctica's resident penguins. The birds show a marked lack of interest in their visitors – they



The *Kapitan Dranitsyn* breaks through the Antarctic ice

are far too busy bellysiding down snow slopes and jumping off boulders with their wings stuck up in the air.

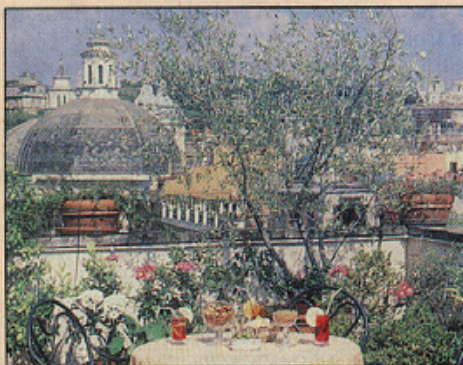
Over the next few days, the group leaves the ship for regular forays on to land: taking dips in a "blissfully hot" thermal pool, strolling through a "sculpture park of giant turquoise bergs", and watching seals lounge around on the shore. In December, these perfect days never really end; you are so far south that the sun doesn't set.

There is also a chance to meet some of Antarctica's more temporary residents – the scientists. A helicopter takes you to

Veradsky, a small Ukrainian research base where men are isolated for months on end, studying the ozone layer. Grateful for contact with the outside world, they will ply passing visitors with free shots of their home-made vodka.

Contact: *Quark Expeditions* (01494-464080) has 11-night trips on the *Kapitan Dranitsyn* icebreaker for £2,885.

### Movie-star style in Rome



#### Hotel Locarno, Rome

With its belle-époque birdcage lift, crumbling terrazzo floor and genuine Art Nouveau furniture, Rome's Hotel Locarno could be mistaken for a film set, says Herbert Ypma in *The Guardian*. It's the kind of place where "dark-haired women in clinging black and Manolo Blahnik mules" disappear into the lift, never to be seen again. It feels like the "setting of an Agatha Christie novel", and there is a mystery at the heart of it. Although the Locarno is always full, you hardly ever see another guest. Certainly, "almost nobody turns up for breakfast". But it's well worth waking up in time: in the summer, breakfast is served on a roof terrace with stunning views (above) over Rome's church spires and domes to the River Tiber.

Contact: 00 39 06 361 0841.  
Doubles from £79.

### Getting the flavour of...

#### Escaping to Langkawi

This is the worst time of year to be in Britain, says Matt Rudd in *The Sunday Times*. It's cold, miserable, and "we've all got the flu". So why not leave it all behind and head to the tropical paradise of Langkawi. This idyllic island – situated off the northwest coast of peninsular Malaysia – is blessed with "the kind of beach you only dream about; long, white, clean and virtually empty". Its other attraction is a jungle-swathed interior, which can be explored on a hired moped. At night, you can enjoy a candlelit dinner beneath the stars, with lobster served at "hamburger prices". And there's no loud music to block out the sound of breaking waves as you make your way back home along the beach. Contact: *Bridge the World* (0870-444 1716) has flights to Langkawi from £544.

#### Tribal life in India

For 50 years, Nagaland has been one of India's seven "forbidden" territories; a land populated by such a belligerent independence movement that its borders were closed to foreigners. Now, however, a ceasefire has opened up the state to visitors, says Richard Madden in *The Daily Telegraph*. For the more adventurous tourist, Nagaland offers "breathtaking natural beauty" and a fascinating glimpse into

tribal culture. Foreigners can expect a warm welcome, the local people having thankfully abandoned their tradition of "hunting human heads". But many of the Nagas' ancient rituals have survived. In villages like Khonoma, for example, the centre of the village is dominated by a circular stone platform where a council of elders presides over matters of justice. Contact: *Himalayan Kingdoms* (01453-844400) has 16-day treks through Nagaland for £2,695.

#### Fontainebleau's kitsch splendours

Fontainebleau chateau is best enjoyed as a "temple to kitsch", says Alix Sharkey in *The Guardian*. Sixty-five miles southeast of Paris, the chateau is "the 16th century equivalent of the Millennium Dome". Built for the French monarchy and home to some splendidly ugly decor and tacky artefacts, it boasts "six centuries of Royal New Money sprayed up the walls". Spend a morning exploring the grotesque splendours of the chateau, and then escape to the "green sanctuary" of the grounds. Used as a royal hunting ground, the woodland has been left untouched for hundreds of years, and makes for "a wonderful rambling area". Contact: *Train tickets from Gare de Lyon, Paris, cost less than £10 and can be booked over the internet (snCF.fr).*

### Last-minute offers from top travel companies

#### Gourmet living

Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons (01844-278881), Oxon, is offering a one-night mid-week family break, including seven-course dinner, for £255 per adult and £45 per child (child's menu from £16).

#### Antiguan antics

Virgin Holidays (01293-617181) has seven nights in Antigua in a self-catering villa for £549 (based on four sharing), including return flights from Gatwick. Until 14 March.

#### Sicilian Valentine

Spend Valentine's Day in a restored farmhouse near Syracuse, surrounded by almond and orange trees. A three-night break costs £429 with Magic of Italy (020-8241 5135).

#### Exploring central Asia

Dragoman (01728-861133) has a seven-week overland trip from Istanbul to Tashkent. The tour, which includes accommodation and transport but not flights, costs £2,100 and departs 6 July.