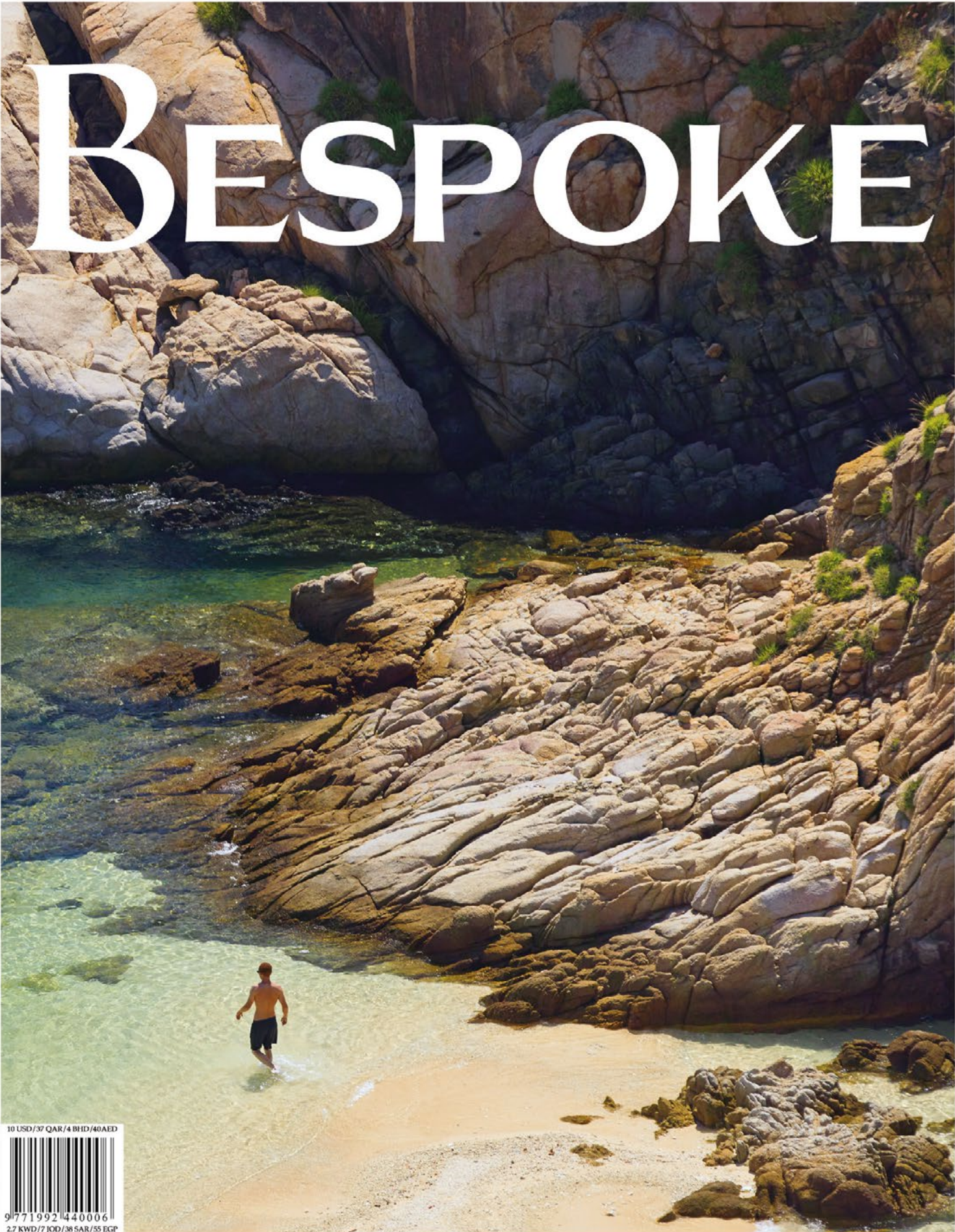


BESPOKE



10 USD / 37 QAR / 4 BHD / 40 AED



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2.7 KWD / 7 JOD / 38 SAR / 55 EGP

INTREPID We meet the Lebanese Central Bank's Executive Director, drive an Aventador on ice, relax at the Amano'i and more...

Like No Other

The brief was simple: the clients wanted the best Antarctic wildlife experience possible. But there were a limited number of options capable of meeting their high expectations.



He says that those with large budgets have a unique position to be able to really blaze a trail but often, may not have the awareness or imagination to ask for a truly adventurous trip.

T rue, they could fly into a mainland camp, but most of the wildlife is along the coast. Documentary-level drama called for being mobile. And water-based.

Cruise ships were an option but they tend to follow a regimented itinerary with little ability to respond to the unexpected appearances of Polar wildlife. And so, Henry Cookson, of Henry Cookson Adventures, continued to search.

This led him to the handful of luxury superyachts capable of serious cruising in the Antarctic: those that offer comfort plus robustness. Enter M/Y SuRi, a one-time commercial crabbing vessel converted to a luxury superyacht.

"Our briefs are often very simple or flexible and sometimes we have total free reign on planning," explains Cookson. "For this trip, the timing was over Christmas and New Year for a family with teenagers, so they needed a comfortable platform from which to explore."

"We laid out a basic plan to take the yacht down but then gave the clients further options to really push the envelope. We suggested heli-skiing, cold water drysuit scuba diving, having a night's luxury camp on the shore and – to add extra scope – helicopters and two submersibles."

The clients had the means and the daring to jump fully into Cookson's dream itinerary, with all the toys available. Then

the hard work really started.

"For our clients, we can be planning up to a year ahead of the trip starting. But for the Antarctic trip on SuRi, we had half that time," he continues. "It took six months with six of us operating around the clock. There were huge amounts of permits required, so we had to work very hard. Logistically, there was a lot going on in the background."

It was like mobilising a small army: shipping a container from the UK, a second helicopter from South America to complement the yacht's one, two Triton submarines from Florida, scouring the globe for expert staff to complement the yacht's crew, creating customised expedition clothes for the trip, working with the British Foreign Office on obtaining permits with regulatory bodies. Cookson's team even created a full backup itinerary in South America, planned to the finest detail, in case weather prevented the Antarctic expedition at the last minute.

As his clients' enthusiasm swelled along with the project, so did their party size. Five guests became eleven and 29 staff had to be found to provide adequate support, each with a combination of skills to keep numbers down - the doctor, who was the kayaking guide and mountain guide, the regulatory expedition leader, who was a scientist and ski guide.

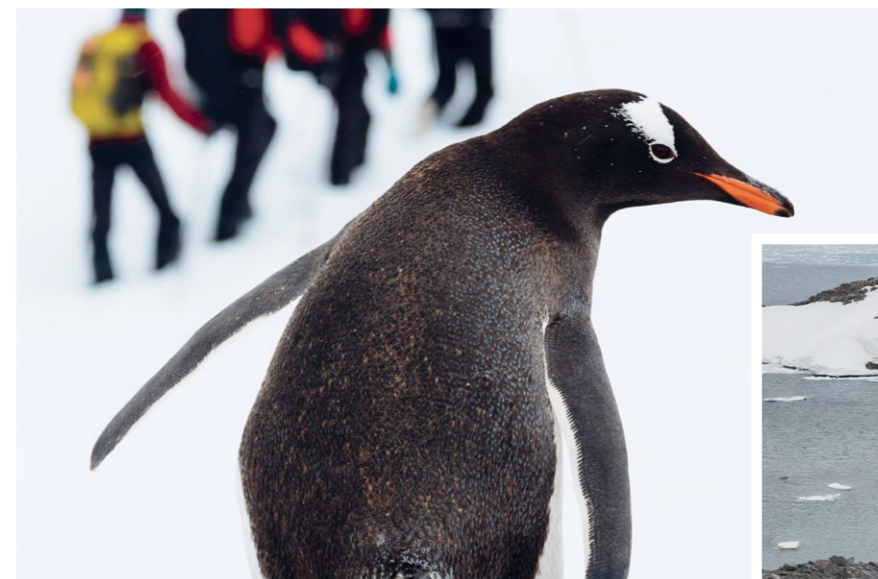
Cookson's easy-going and humble

outward disposition belies the significant effort and pioneering nature of this expedition. Superyachts have been to the Antarctic before, some widely reported on. But this trip's outlook was different: immersive and revolutionary. He had guests zorbing across the frigid iceberg-strewn surface and descending to unexplored waters, with penguins swirling overhead.

"We were very clear that some of it had never been done before," Cookson admits with a wry smile. "Even the American scientific community had not been down there with submersibles. So we had these toys but didn't know what we were going to find because it was uncharted territory. There wasn't a huge amount to see because we didn't know where the polar equivalent of the reefs were but the clients loved the submersibles, they were a lot of fun."

By his own admission, Cookson is an accidental adventurer. Starting off in London's Square Mile, he always had wanderlust at his core but says that he never planned to get involved in serious, record-breaking extreme exploration – calling himself "lazy" as a youngster, something that is hard to believe when looking at all he's done.

Resigning from the City, he was preparing to head to Kenya when on a whim, he decided to enter a race to the Magnetic North Pole with two ➤





“People can take polar expeditions too seriously. Yes, you need to be safe but it’s not as hard as people make out. You can still be serious and have fun.”

friends. After a year of training, the trio of novices, who had limited experience in extreme conditions, ended up winning, beating military teams and professional athletes. That led to their next challenge when, over Christmas 2006, they kite-skied to the Southern Pole of Inaccessibility, an old Soviet Antarctic research station, the first recorded arrival there on foot.

“People can take polar expeditions too seriously. Yes, you need to be safe but it’s not as hard as people make out. You can still be serious and have fun,” says Cookson with hard-earned nonchalance.

His outlook on adventure altered by this life-changing journey, Cookson set out for Alaska to complete his guide training, and Henry Cookson Adventures was born. “After a couple of trips and without any marketing or advertising, I had these wealthy people calling me up and requesting I put together special itineraries for them,” he explains. “There are so many amazing trips if you have the budget. People have ticked off their heli-skiing trip, the safari-to-end-all-safaris, the ultimate boating trip in the Med or the Caribbean. So what a service like ours

offers is something that’s different, that’s truly bespoke to our clients, through ‘experiential travel’. The more difficult something is to arrange, the better your experience can be because it is unique and private. Some people are driven by bragging rights but others are naturally curious and the vast majority of our clients fall into the second category.”

Although many people are competitive within their social circle when it comes to travel, Cookson thinks that this is often manifested in unoriginal ways. He says that those with large budgets have a unique position to be able to really blaze a trail but often, may not have the awareness or the imagination to ask for a truly adventurous trip and that’s where a service like Henry Cookson Adventures steps in.

He is understandably wary of sharing his secrets. One of Cookson’s greatest assets is his knowledge of hidden spots,

accumulated over many years. Giving away too much can mean losing out to competitors. But his motivation does not seem to be financial; Cookson would simply be heartbroken if someone else got there first.

“I want to do more on the yachting side because it’s such a great platform, in the Pacific and Northern Alaska in particular,” he says as our meeting draws to a close. He alludes to dream trips in the Bering Strait to spot endangered cetaceans, a place in the Pacific where there’s a fleet of sunken warships, perfect for diving enthusiasts and a defunct submarine base rumoured to have been created in volcanic caverns that is only accessible via underwater tunnels.

Though relatively new as a concept, ‘experiential travel’ does so much more than show you the world. It allows you to be a part of its very discovery and as Cookson rightly points out, with today’s remarkable expedition superyacht fleet constantly growing to meet the demand for intrepid travel, you can now have your cake and eat it; adventure in luxurious surroundings. All you need is the gumption to get up and go. **B**