



Follow Captain Cousteau's tracks in Antarctica

January 1, 2007: in Antarctica, following in the tracks of Captain Jacques Cousteau

The Cousteau Society has dispatched Tarik Chekchak, an ecological engineer by training and a specialist in polar habitats, to Antarctica. His mission: to retrace the path taken by Captain Jacques Cousteau and his ship Calypso in order to assess the current status of the ice continent. Here is his report.

In a few days, I am supposed to embark on the *Grigoriy Mikheev*, a research vessel of the Department of Hydrographic Studies of Ushuaia in Russia. It was constructed in 1990 and measures 66 meters long by 12.8 meters wide. It draws 3.5 meters with a tonnage of 2,000 tonnes. The *Mikheev* will take me to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and finally Antarctica, where we will join the international mission of the German oceanographic ship *Polarstern*.

My thoughts turn to the day, September 29, 1972, when *Calypso* left Monaco for Antarctica for one of her most wonderful and most difficult expeditions. HRH Prince Rainier of Monaco and his son Albert were present to wish her good sailing. *Calypso*'s divers were impatient to explore under the ice but they didn't know that one among them would not return: Michel Laval would tragically lose his life on Deception Island. Disaster brushed close by the entire crew when *Calypso* barely escaped being crushed by the icy jaws of the polar winter. In the end, the risk was worth it: four films would be produced from the voyage, including the full-length *Voyage to the Edge of the World*. The astonishing images that Captain Cousteau brought back with him constituted a unique and first documentation of the marine life and fragility of the ice continent.

Cousteau never forgot Antarctica. When, in 1988, signature of the Wellington Convention threatened the protective measures of the Antarctic Treaty and raised the possibility of sacrificing virgin territory to market forces, Captain Cousteau rose to lead the opposition. After an intense campaign and a petition that garnered more than 1.5 million signatures, he succeeded in radically changing the course of events. The Wellington Convention would not be ratified and Antarctica would remain protected for at least 50 years. In 1990, Captain Cousteau returned to Antarctica with children representing the other six continents on behalf of future generations. He produced the film *Lilliput in Antarctica* as a visual manifesto for the crucial need to preserve Antarctica for the future.

As the International Polar Year 2007-2008 dawns, the Cousteau Society is returning to Antarctica, following in the footsteps of Captain Cousteau. Visiting the same places where *Calypso* stopped 35 years ago, we will draw up an assessment of the current issues that Antarctica faces. The old worries (pollution from mining, tourism, etc.) have not been resolved but new, more diffuse dangers lurk in the impacts of climate change. We will address these subjects throughout the one-month voyage.

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