

John C. Lincoln's Miracles- Antarctic Trauma

Written by Arizona Foothills Magazine

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It seemed like a good idea at the time. Other people were doing it and it looked like fun. So why NOT slide down the side of a glacier in Antarctica? It was just the latest in a series of ever-more-exotic travel adventures experienced in the last couple of decades by John and Pit Lucking.

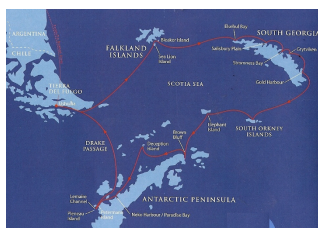


John and Pit Lucking share a laugh with Gianni Vishteh, MD, the trauma neurosurgeon who used screws and rods to fixate and fuse three broken bones in John Lucking's back.

Although John Lucking never even had a passport until age 46, in recent years travels have taken him and Pit far beyond the beaten tourist tracks of Europe and Asia.

They've been to Tahiti and Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific, met primitive tribesmen in New Guinea, been terrified by AK 47-wielding soldiers in Eritrea, enchanted by cheetahs in Namibia and awed by elephants on Tanzania's Serengeti Plain. They've gone white-water rafting on the Zambezi River in Zambia, climbed mountains in Bolivia and experienced an uncounted host of other truly extraordinary locales.

So when the opportunity arose to tour the southernmost portions of Argentina and the South Atlantic, including a stop in Antarctica, they couldn't resist. This seemed like the most exotic trip of all.



Map of the South Atlantic shows the area John and Pit Lucking were touring on their exotic cruise before John was injured.

It certainly started that way. They took off with about 100 others to Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, where they boarded a cruise ship that took them to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, the South Orkney Islands and on to the Antarctic peninsula, a strip of land that reaches north and points toward Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of South America.

"It was great," Lucking said. "We had all our warm gear on, boots up to our knees, and were hiking up to the top of the glacier ridge.

Sliding Out of Control

Indeed, up to that point, the trip was all they'd hoped for. Then a few of their fellow travelers started sliding down the glacier. "It looked like fun," Lucking said, and it was, until he started sliding out of control.

"I could tell about halfway down that I was in trouble," he recalled. "I had spun around and I was sliding way too fast."

Trouble, indeed. When he crashed into an ice bank at the bottom of the glacier, he shattered three vertebrae and was lucky not to be paralyzed on the spot.

Somehow, fellow passengers and crew members got him back to the ship and they sailed back to Ushuaia, their port in Tierra del Fuego. But it wasn't easy. "I couldn't get up without help," Lucking said. "It just hurt too much. There was a lot of screaming."



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Fellow Antarctic tourists explore the South Pole glacier just before John Lucking took his turn sliding down the ice, the adventure that led to his back injury and his med-evac Lear Jet journey from Tierra del Fuego to John C. Lincoln.

Freak fortune came to his aid, however. "I'd checked into medical evacuation insurance 10 years earlier when I detached a retina in Ethiopia," Lucking said. "It only cost \$350 a year, but one of the lessons here is that if you're going to be traveling to unusual parts of the Earth, you can't afford not to have it."

Lucking is big on lessons. His next bit of dearly won advice is to make sure you don't travel to isolated places alone. Make sure you travel with someone like Pit, he said. It's not easy to call 911 from Antarctica.

"I never could have made it home alone," Lucking said. "Pit was amazing. I have to give her so much credit. She figured out how to get me out; she got on the phone, she never gave up and she made all the connections."

Pit called in their markers with the evacuation insurance plan – jumped through the hoops and cut the red tape – and commandeered, so to speak, a medical Lear jet, four pilots and a couple of crews of EMTs. They flew to Santiago, Chile, refueled in Guayaquil, Ecuador, changed crews and flew on to Brownsville, Texas. They went through immigration and cleared customs in Texas before traveling on and landing in the middle of the night at Sky Harbor, almost two days after leaving Tierra del Fuego.

Good Care at John C.

They knew they needed to come home to Phoenix; the only question remaining was which hospital to choose. "My parents had received good care at John C. Lincoln and I'd been there about six months earlier for stitches. It was near our home on North Central Avenue, so we checked into the Intensive Care Unit at the North Mountain Hospital at 2:30 a.m."

Medical imaging the next morning showed a frightening blood clot around his fractured vertebrae, so immediate surgery was imperative. That's when fortune smiled one more time on John Lucking.

On call was Gianni Vishteh, MD, a Barrow-trained trauma neurosurgeon who specializes in the most complex kinds of spinal injuries, and who responded immediately.

"John's fractures were complicated by the fact that he has more than the usual level of osteoporosis," a weakening of the bones that makes them more likely to fracture, Dr. Vishteh said. "After examining the MRI images of John's injuries, we went quickly to surgery."

There, Dr. Vishteh performed a multilevel laminectomy to stabilize Lucking's spine and relieve pressure on the nerves in his spinal cord. The four- to five-hour surgery used screws and rods to fixate and fuse the three broken bones in the middle of Lucking's back.

"No additional surgery should be needed," Dr. Vishteh said, "but John needs to be followed with periodic medical imaging due to his osteoporosis. Because of that, there's always a chance that his spinal bones could become unstable. It's just something to watch."

"After a few days in the hospital, where the nursing staff was just great," Lucking said, "I came home and was flat on my back for a while. Then I started physical therapy two to three times a week where they taught me specific skills to strengthen my back.

"I progressively got better," he said, "and while I'm not perfect now – I still have a few aches and pains –this isn't going to slow us down."

Indeed not. They've already been to Hawaii this year, and the rest of their 2011 calendar includes a Stanford University alumni trip to investigate ancient Middle Eastern cultural sites and artifacts in Iran and a few months later, snorkeling in Indonesia.

No, slowing down is the one thing that is most definitely *not* on the Lucking family agenda.

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