

# What's ahead: Antarctic tourism in 2003–04

Estimates of predicted tourist numbers in Antarctica for the 2003–04 austral summer season indicate continued growth in interest in Antarctic tourism. Initial analyses of tour brochures and schedules published by tour companies for next season indicate that there could be a record number of tourists visiting the Antarctic and subantarctic next season with the focus of activity remaining the Antarctic Peninsula region. The actual number will depend on passenger loadings for vessels and this in turn will depend on international factors affecting the travel market such as the world economic situation, the SARS outbreak and security concerns.

The potential increase in tourist numbers is a result of an increase in the number of tour ships that will be operating in Antarctic waters next season and the carrying capacity of those vessels. The increase is expected to affect the Antarctic Peninsula area, while tourist numbers in the Pacific and Indian Ocean sectors, south of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, are likely to be similar to those in 2002–03.

There could be a record 31 vessels operating a total of almost 170 Antarctic tourist cruises in 2003–04. Of these, 27 will undertake cruises in the Antarctic Peninsula area, with up to 150 voyages planned. Of these vessels 22, possibly 24, could make passenger landings. There is also a trend towards larger average passenger capacity for the vessels. Six will have passenger capacities less than 100, two fewer vessels than last season; eleven will have capacities between 100 and 200, five more than 2002–03; two have capacities between 200 and 500; and eight have capacities above 500. Six of these eight 500-plus vessels will be visiting Antarctica for the first time. Up to ten commercially operated yachts are also likely to operate in



Tourists admire the spectacular peaks of Heard Island's Big Ben from the deck of Akademik Shokalskiy

the Antarctic Peninsula area next season.

There are about 12 cruises scheduled in the Pacific and Indian Ocean Antarctic and subantarctic sectors that will be undertaken by four vessels: the 112-passenger *Kapitan Khlebnikov* and the 46-passenger *Akademik Shokalskiy* have respectively scheduled four and five voyages each, some of which will travel to the Ross Sea area; and the 128-passenger *Clipper Odyssey* will conduct a single subantarctic cruise.

Of strong interest to enthusiasts in 2003–04 will be a total eclipse of the sun that will occur over parts of Eastern Antarctica on 24 November, local time. Eclipse watchers are being catered for by a number of tour companies. Australian-based Croydon Travel, which plans four Antarctic overflights in 2003–04 using a chartered Qantas 747, will operate the first of these from Perth to view the eclipse. The US-based company Travel Quest International is chartering a Lan Chile Airbus A340 to undertake an eclipse overflight

from Punta Arenas, Chile. In addition to the two overflights, the first voyage of the *Kapitan Khlebnikov* for the season will depart from South Africa to visit some of the Indian Ocean subantarctic islands before heading south to the coast of Queen Mary Land to witness the event near the Russian Mirny station. An on-the-ground viewing experience, departing from Cape Town, South Africa, has been organised by US-based company Astronomical Tours. The company proposes using logistic support provided by South African based company, Antarctic Logistics Centre International to fly its clients to and from Dronning Maud Land. The eclipse watchers will watch the eclipse late on the evening of 23 November, local time, and stay overnight at the Russian Novolazarevskaya station, and in other temporary accommodation if needed, before flying back to Cape Town on the morning of 24 November.

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## XXVI<sup>th</sup> Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting

The twenty-sixth Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting was held from 9–20 June, 2003 in Madrid, Spain. As usual, the meeting of the Committee for Environmental Protection (CEP) was held during the first week, from 9–13 June. It was the sixth meeting of the CEP.

Major issues discussed at ATXM XXVI included the development of a regime on liability for environmental damage, the establishment of the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat, and management of tourism and non-government operations in the Antarctic. In addition, the meeting continued the review of past recommendations of Treaty meetings and examined measures to improve the efficiency of its meetings.

In the lead-up to ATCM XXVI Australia was active on inter-sessional working groups and other forums in progressing these issues and a number of working papers was submitted by Australia to assist consideration of these issues at ATCM XXVI.

Significant issues discussed at CEP VI included the review of Annex II to the Madrid Protocol, consideration of draft comprehensive environmental evaluations (CEE), and the review and approval of management plans for protected areas.