

HOTEL

ANTARCTICA

What does the future hold for tourism in Antarctica?

Fifteen years ago, a 'season' of Antarctic tourism meant 6000 travellers visiting the white continent. A handful of enthusiasts carried them there, on 12 ships. The Antarctic tourist was a relatively rare species.

But a boom was imminent. The increase in visits to the bottom of the world would be brought about by epochal political events: the collapse of the Soviet Union released Russian polar research vessels onto the market, and investors saw their chance to open up Antarctica. Eyeing this, seven American companies established an International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators.

Today the industry group has 75 members. A season sees more than 50 vessels plying Antarctic waters, bearing 33 000 tourists, of whom 28 000 step ashore. There are over 200 voyages in 140 days, more than 95 percent heading for the Antarctic Peninsula – the small finger of the white continent which reaches towards South America.

The Antarctic tourist, now more common, is almost as likely to spot other cruise ships laden with camera-toting nature-lovers as they are to catch the local wildlife on film. Several hundred catch planes to camp on the ice, climb mountains and ski; some take to yachts and kayaks; a couple of thousand see the sights from the comfort of a jumbo jet joy flight.

The rapid development of Antarctic tourism was virtually unforeseeable in 1991–92. In 15 years' time, what will it look like?

If the current trajectory persists, the 2021–22 season will see 200 000 people holiday in Antarctica. Ten ships will depart daily from Ushuaia, Argentina, to cross the Drake Passage. Penguin colonies that in 2006 received four visits per week will get four visits per day.

Such projections may prove inflated – growth may well taper, dampened by a loss of novelty or steep fuel and ticket prices. Even so, the general trend is bound to create new pressures on the Antarctic wilderness. In the next 15 years we should not be surprised if:

More ships offer cruises. Experienced operators charter extra ships. Giant liners, with indoor pools and casinos, bring less-intrepid cruise regulars to Antarctica as just another port of call. Others offer bunk beds on semi-converted research vessels. Unless there is an Antarctic Treaty certification system, how will customers tell the reputable companies from the dicey?

Popular sites come under pressure. Tourists expect to be shown the guidebook highlights: the most accessible penguins, the last albatrosses and picturesque sealing relics. Will voluntary limits become mandatory on King George Island and the

South Shetland Islands, or will the industry and Antarctic Treaty parties encourage visits to concentrate on fewer, more robust sites?

New markets emerge. Wealthy older Americans, British, Germans and Australians are still on board, but middle class Chinese or Indian travellers may well account for a large proportion of the tickets sold.

Some pioneer tour operators move on. Queues at landing sites will irritate those who fell in love with the Antarctic 'wilderness'. The cynics will say the Peninsula is just another wildlife park. Will they give up, or break new ground at more remote sites, spreading the footprint of Antarctic tourism?

The non-government/government line is blurred. In the quest for new products, 'ecotourism' companies want to offer tourists the chance to do Antarctic research. They say governments can make big savings by welcoming paying guests onto their stations.

Flights to Antarctica increase. Businesses are convinced people will pay a premium to get south and back in under a week, without the crowds. They press governments to allow them to land commercial flights on runways which were built to take scientists and official supply missions.

Pressure builds for 'Hotel Antarctica'. A major hotel group unveils a chain of Antarctic 'eco-lodges', offering five-star nights on the ice. If the shareholders demand security in the form of a private lease, how will the Antarctic Treaty system cope?

These possibilities for 2021 Antarctic tourism are based on what we know in 2006. A major unknown is technological change. If innovations slash the financial and environmental costs of travel by sea or air, the popularity of distant destinations, including Antarctica, may radically alter.

What seems certain, regardless of other trends, is that most 'visits' to Antarctica in 2021 will be made in comfort, as they are now. They will be made in suburban lounge rooms where televisions are tuned to spectacular documentaries, in cinemas, and in classrooms where students are inspired by teachers, and log on to informative web sites with live coverage and simulated experiences. Especially as the quality of electronic media improves, 'virtual' tourism will increasingly be the main means of switching people onto the wonders of Antarctica – it leaves no footprints, and doesn't stress the locals.

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When guides lead groups in single file, they minimise the number of tracks trodden into the wilderness.

