

# ANTARCTIC TOURISM BOOMS, WITH ALARMING CONSEQUENCES



A journey to Antarctica, the continent of ice, is an experience many people aspire to have before they die. A cruise to Antarctica has long been on many bucket lists, and interest surged dramatically following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This trend is supported by data from IAATO (the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators), formed in the wake of the Antarctic Environmental Protocol signed in early 1991. In its inaugural year, only 6,400 tourists visited Antarctica. However, **Antarctica tourism in the region has grown steadily since then.**

Between 1992 and 2020, the number of visitors increased tenfold. During the 2019-20 season, approximately 75,000 tourists traveled to the continent, while around 105,000 visited during the summer months of 2022-23, and last year, the numbers exceeded 120,000.

## From Shared Bath to Luxury Expedition

While the first voyages to Antarctica were made in boats equipped with bunk beds and shared bathrooms, many of today's tours are luxurious, allowing participants to experience minimal deprivation. Nevertheless, most travelers still arrive by ship, and many prefer a sense of "expedition" during their journey. No permanent tourist use structures are allowed because the countries involved in Antarctic tourism and research have all signed the Antarctic Treaty. In other words, there are no hotels in Antarctica.

## Antarctic Tourism Endangers the Continent's Environment

Climate change seriously threatens Antarctica, and increasing visitor numbers have raised concerns among experts. While physical waste, such as garbage and human excrement, is removed from the continent, other types of waste, including smoke, soot, and carbon particles, remain behind.

Two years ago, researchers from Keele University (UK) published a study in the journal *Nature Communications* highlighting that samples taken from human settlements and research stations along a 2,000-kilometer stretch from the Antarctic Peninsula to the interior of West Antarctica contained elevated levels of soot. These levels were significantly above the typical values found in Antarctica, indicating the impact of human emissions.

For example, increased soot levels alter how snow absorbs light, a property known as "albedo." When snow has a lower albedo, it melts more quickly. The researchers concluded that the rate of snowmelt has likely accelerated due to human activities. According to their calculations, each visitor to the continent between 2016 and 2020 effectively melted approximately 83 tonnes of snow.

## What Visitors Need to Know about Going to Antarctica

Cruise ships significantly contribute to environmental emissions, and the impact of the rising number of visitors is increasingly noticeable in popular tourist destinations. There have been reports

of cruise ships queuing in Fildes Bay, instances of fuel leaks, trampling of vegetation, and historic buildings being covered in graffiti.

However, Antarctic tourism operators are becoming more aware of their environmental impact and are taking preventive measures. For example, in preparation for the 2024-2025 Antarctic season, which runs from October to early April, Aurora Expeditions—a provider of smaller expedition cruises—has announced that it will limit its capacity to a maximum of 130 passengers. **IAATO has also begun tracking cruise ships' fuel consumption in the Antarctic region, and some operators are adopting electric propulsion systems to minimize soot and carbon dioxide emissions.**

Travel providers advise passengers not to bring food or similar items when landing in Antarctica and to avoid lying down in the snow. Lara Nestle highlights the importance of maintaining a safe distance from animals to prevent transmitting bacteria and viruses that could harm wildlife. This caution has increased, especially following the outbreak of bird flu in the Antarctic.

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