**Visit Antarctica**

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**USHUAIA, Argentina** — The Antarctic travel season stretches through the Antarctic summer from November to April. This year over 20,000 visitors are expected to visit the world’s remotest continent, braving one of the most turbulent stretches of water on earth: The Drake Passage between the tip of South America and the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula.

The rewards are spectacles of ice and wildlife seen by only few hundred thousand people in the entire history of the human race.

Visitors come to see glaciers — some more than 20-km long — colonies of gentoo and chinstrap penguins numbering in the thousands, pods of minke and killer whales, and the solitude and silence of the vast white continent.

To do it, they’ll all make major investments of both time (12-35 days) and money ($3,500 to $16,000).

I joined their ranks on the *M/V Antarctic Dream*’s first sailing of the season.

The notoriously rough-and-tumble Drake Passage lived up its reputation with six-metre waves, but the natural wonders of Antarctica made the crossing worthwhile.

Adorable gentoo and chinstrap penguins, unafraid of man, approached within a few inches; my inflatable Zodiac boat was surrounded by a group of seven killer whales during one adrenaline-filled excursion; and crab-eater and Weddell seals also made an appearance. I even got to see a lone, 1.2-metre-tall emperor penguin.

I also learned some lessons the tour companies don’t tell you; and these fresh-off-the-boat tips will ensure you make the most of your own Antarctic adventure.

**DON’T WORRY ABOUT TIMING**

One of the first decisions you’ll have to make is when to go. Luckily, there’s really no wrong answer. Sailings earlier in the season tend to have the clearest weather (though about half of the excursions on my first-of-the-season sailing were curtailed or cancelled due to snow and wind). Early sailings also coincide with mating season, when animals gather to court and the shoreline is more pristine since landing sites haven’t yet been trampled by human and penguin feet.

Mid and late-season sailings offer (relatively) warmer temperatures and less ice and snow. Later departures also feature the arrival of penguin chicks and higher concentrations of whales and fur seals.

**SIZE MATTERS**

Currently large cruise ships can sail close enough to shore for passengers to see land from onboard, but starting in August 2011 cruise ships carrying more than 500 people will be banned from Antarctic waters. There are fears over about the environmental impact of so many visitors and such large vessels.

Larger, faster vessels may be better at handling the multi-day trip through the turbulent waters of the Drake Passage where the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans butt bellies like huge watery Sumo wrestlers. But smaller ships (like the 78 passenger *M/V Antarctic Dream*) do fine in the Passage.

Because ships are allowed to send a maximum of 100 people ashore at a time it can take larger vessels all day to get and all of their passengers to a single site. Smaller ships with fewer passengers can visit two or even three sites in a day.

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**How to make the most of an Antarctic adventure**

**Tips from the**

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World's End

STAY FLEXIBLE

Get used to the phrase “weather dependent.” In an environment like Antarctica the climate is changeable and potentially deadly and all activities are dictated by it.

Our first scheduled shore trip, to Aitcho Island, was cancelled during my sailing because of 40-knot winds. Instead we travelled on to Half Moon Island, where winds were calm enough to allow us to ride Zoarcas to the beach.

Less than an hour after landing, however, the captain called us all back to the ship as winds reached 35 knots. The gentoo penguins were too busy searching their bales together and bobbing their heads in what passes for penguin floating to notice as we hurried awkwardly off their island, unable to weather the weather like they can.

ASK QUESTIONS

With so many weather-forecast changes to each sailing’s itinerary, it’s important to make sure you’ve got the latest information before you commit.

Paul Anderson, a fellow passenger, booked his Antarctic trip to fulfill his dream of setting foot on Antarctic soil. When our Neko Harbour landing was scuttled due to dense ice he thought he had only one chance at walking on the mainland Antarctica had passed.

Disappointed, Anderson decided to skip the next excursion, which we had been told would be a Zodiac-only trip through Paradise Bay. What the crew had failed to tell us was they’d hurriedly planned a brief shore landing as well to allow passengers to set foot on mainland soil after missing out at Neko Harbour.

Unaware of this, Anderson, from Britain, missed out on a second chance to fulfill his dream and spent the rest of the sailing practicing that stiff upper lip thing.

DRESS THE PART

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