

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 spectacular: 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

Passengers, top, from the Antarctic Dream enjoy a shore excursion near Port Lockroy, where research is being conducted to gauge the impact of tourists on penguins.

Gentoo penguins, right, greet passengers during a Zodiac landing at Bahia Balleneros (Whale Bay). Located in the caldera of a volcano, Bahia Balleneros once served as a whaling station.

How to make the most of an Antarctic adventure

Tips from the

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 Wedell 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.

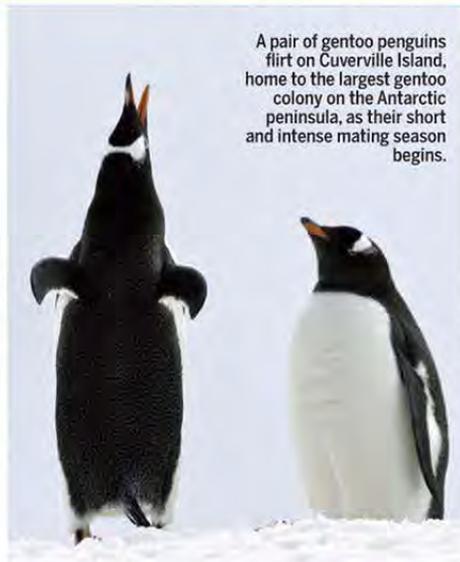
Mid and late-season sailings offer (relatively) warmer temperatures and less ice and snow. Later departures also feature the arrival of penguin chicks and higher concentrations of whales and fur seals.

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.

Smaller expedition-style vessels will continue to be allowed to tour Antarctica and make landings with passenger capacities between 80 and a few hundred people per ship.

A pair of gentoo penguins flirt on Cuverville Island, home to the largest gentoo colony on the Antarctic peninsula, as their short and intense mating season begins.





This massive iceberg near Bluff Island was big enough to motor a Zodiac through, although safety regulations forbid entering glaciers, which can collapse or capsize at any time.



ERIC MOHL PHOTOS/HORIZON WRITERS' GROUP

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 Zodiacs 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 slapping their beaks together and bobbing their heads in what passes for penguin flirting to notice as we hurried awkwardly off their island, unable to weather the weather like they can.

ASK QUESTIONS

With so many weather-induced changes to each sailing's itinerary, it's important to make sure you've got the latest information or risk disappointment.

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 his only chance at walking on the mainland Antarctic had passed.

Gentoo penguins survey the arrival of the M/V Antarctic Dream at Port Lockroy, where as the Antarctic summer progresses the flock will grow to number thousands.

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

Gone are the days when ill-prepared passengers used to board ships to tour Antarctica wearing shorts and T-shirts as if they were headed for St. Bart's. To ensure passengers are appropriately dressed some Antarctic tour companies now even supply waterproof boots and parkas to their passengers. Double-check your ship's policy.

Waterproof pants are another essential that none of the tour companies supply. Do not leave home without them (motorcycle supply stores may have cheaper



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Passengers from the Antarctic Dream head off in a Zodiac to the beach near Bahia Balleneros.

options than outdoor clothing stores).

Landings and Zodiac excursions, even under clear sunny skies, include a number of ways to end up wet, from getting splashed, to sitting on a snow patch communing with penguins, to reaching into the frigid water to retrieve an impossibly clear chunk of ice for the evening's cocktails.

Being wet is not only uncomfortable it can be dangerous when the daytime high is -17 C. During my sailing our guides sent two passengers back to the ship early after their jeans became soaked during an excursion, and some guides may not let passengers in non-waterproof pants off the ship at all.

PACK LIKE A PRO

You'll receive a basic pack-

ing list from your tour operator but it will likely be far from comprehensive. For example, you will be told to bring sunglasses. But as the snow blew sideways during a Zodiac trip through North Wilhelminia Bay, sneaking into the sides of my sunglasses and stinging my eyes so badly it was impossible to scan the water for whales, I began openly coveting the ski goggles one (smarter) passenger had brought along with her.

Other packing lessons I learned from fellow passengers:

■ A waterproof housing for your camera and video camera (rain and sea spray claimed more than one camera on my sailing)

■ Menthol-scented Carmex to dab under your nose to mask the less-than-adorable aroma

created when thousands of penguins hang out together

■ A refillable water bottle to use instead of disposable bottles of drinking water supplied onboard. Your own insulated non-spill coffee mug is a great idea, too.

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE USHUAIA

All Antarctic adventures begin and end in Ushuaia (pronounced oos-why-ah), roughly 725 km from Antarctica. But treating this port town merely as an embarkation point would be a mistake.

Founded as a prison colony in the late 1800s (a small prison museum commemorates that heritage), Ushuaia is the southernmost city in the world and it charms with the look and feel of a fishing village whose primary prey is

IF YOU GO to Antarctica

CRUISE TOURS

Antarctic tours usually depart from Ushuaia, where their ships are docked, but some may offer extra days in Buenos Aires en route. For details of 11-day cruises on the 78-passenger M/V Antarctic Dream, see antarcticdream.com. This company provides waterproof boots and parkas to passengers, reducing the pre-trip shopping list. It also organises Antarctic camping, trekking and kayaking trips.

GETTING THERE

Local airlines offer services between Ushuaia and the Argentinian capital, which is served by several North American airlines. The excellent LAN Chile has also recently inaugurated direct flights from San Francisco to Lima, Peru (lanchile.com) with connecting service to Ushuaia.

IN USHUAIA

In addition to hostels and budget hotels is the chic 30-room Lennox Hotel (lennoxhotel.com.ar/en) and the 48-suite (with living rooms and kitchenettes) Cilene del Faro Hotel (cilenedelfaro.com/eng/index.htm). In 2011, a Hilton is expected to open on a scenic bluff above the town. Enjoy coffee, pastry, panini, a glass of wine or a pint of the local Cape Horn beer at Ramos Generales (ramosgeneralesushuaia.com), an inviting cafe on the waterfront.

now tourists, not tuna.

The whole town is in fact a duty-free zone and if you forget an Antarctic essential it's probably available there.

Oddly Nordic-looking buildings seem to soak up the brief summer sun as you stroll around the tidy grid that makes up "downtown" Ushuaia.

Streets are dotted with coffee shops, parrilla restaurants — where slabs of lamb and chicken are grilled in a traditional Argentinian style — and more than a few souvenir shops.

Is there anything you can't put a penguin on?