

Tourism in Antarctica: Opportunities and Environmental Concerns



Source: Pixabay (2023)

Background

Being the coldest, highest, driest, and windiest place on Earth, Antarctica is a continent described as a ‘natural reserve, devoted to peace and science’ (British Antarctic Survey, n.d.). For many years, very few people set foot on this ‘cold desert’ except scientists, but now it is slowly becoming a popular destination on many people’s bucket lists.

The surge in travel to Antarctica started well before the pandemic, with close to 44,000 visits in the winter of 2017. That number almost tripled in 2024 following the post-Covid travel boom (CNN, 2024). Scholars attribute the tourism boom in Antarctica to social media, citing a noticeable increase in travellers after videos and related hashtags reached over 200 million views on TikTok (ABC News, 2025). This shows that many people are curious about what it is like to travel in the coldest and most remote continent on Earth.

With growing interest and market demand, many cruise companies and travel agents have begun offering trips to Antarctica over the past decade. Unlike in the past, when scientific expeditions were the main purpose of travel, cruises to the Southern Ocean now cater to a wide range of interests, from wellness tours to even erotic entertainment (SCMP, 2025). At the same time, adventure activities such as skiing, snowboarding, ice walking, snorkeling, and scuba diving are steadily increasing, with peak tourist season aligning with penguin breeding season (Nature India, 2024).

Established in 1991, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) is an organization promoting safe and environmentally responsible travel in Antarctica (The Umweltbundesamt, 2016). It consists of more than 100 members, representing over 90% of commercial tour operators worldwide (IAATO, n.d.). As part of its mission to govern the carbon footprint left on the sensitive ecosystem by tourism practiced by its members, IAATO

formulates high-standard environmental and safety guidelines, including a maximum of 100 visitors per landing, safety distances from nesting birds, and protection of native fauna and flora (The Umweltbundesamt, 2016).

Challenges

Despite the minimal disturbance to the natural reserve achieved through IAATO's efforts, environmentalists continue to oppose the rising levels of tourist activity in Antarctica. "Antarctica is known to be 'one of the last great wildernesses on Earth,' but we are now seeing a risk of Antarctica becoming an 'adventurous playground' for humans to entertain themselves," says Ricardo Roura, senior adviser at the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC) (SCMP, 2025). Criticisms have also been made towards frivolous behaviour among tourists in Antarctica, such as engaging in dangerous activities and practicing vandalism, with concerns that such behaviour shown on social media reflects just the tip of the iceberg of the actual situation (ABC News, 2025). Furthermore, the increase in cruises has also posed a significant risk to the environment, as gas emissions from these vessels have been found to result in the darkening of snow around landing sites (Yahoo! News, 2025).

Discussion Questions

1. What are the environmental risks associated with increased tourism in Antarctica?
2. How does tourist behavior, including potential vandalism and dangerous activities, impact the perception of Antarctica, and what can be done to promote responsible behavior?
3. How can cruise companies and travel agents be held accountable for their environmental impact in Antarctica, and what incentives could encourage more sustainable practices?
4. What ethical considerations arise from offering entertainment-focused tours in Antarctica?
5. Given the current trends, what do you think the future holds for tourism in Antarctica, and how might it evolve in the coming decades?

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Keywords

- Tourism
- Sustainable tourism
- Natural environment
- Tourist activity
- Responsible travel
- Environmental impact