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The Development of Tourism in Antarctica

Antarctica is the wildest and most unknown area of our Earth. It is frequently called the South Pole. There are no cities, towns, or villages and no permanent population in Antarctica. The only people who live there are scientists involved in research work. The numbers of the stations that deal with science on the icy continent are around 80. 27 countries have their territories in Antarctica.

This continent has an extremely cold polar climate. The temperature is always below 0°C (it ranges from – 70 C° in July to – 5 C° in January). It almost never rains there. The place is as dry as the Sahara. The difference is that when it rains there, the precipitations always fall in the form of the snow that contributes to the formation of a thick snow cover in Antarctica. Icy continent is covered by very thick snow cover, which reaches 4000 meters in some places. If the ice melts suddenly, the rocks that are under the ice will begin to rise rapidly. Antarctica, unlike the Arctic, has rocks under the snow, while the Arctic consists only of the permafrost ocean waters.

Antarctica has become one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, but only during summer months (it is winter in the North), when the cold is more bearable. Today various travel companies offer the most exciting adventure for their customers. Tourists usually travel on a board of some major research or expedition ships. Travels to Antarctica are held during summer, from December to February.

There are no hotels where tourist can be accommodated there. Visitors usually stay on the ship on the board of which they travel. The purpose to travel to this icy continent is to touch completely unknown world. In general, this continent is inaccessible from the Pacific Ocean.

Sometimes tourists are allowed to go ashore when they arrive to Antarctica (in particular, some of the islands around the Antarctic Peninsula). In other cruises, however, going ashore is prohibited.

Before embarking on this journey to a detached end of the world, one should be aware that every journey carries some risk. The waters here are not only extremely cold but very dangerous, because they are filled with hundred thousand icebergs. It sometimes, though rarely, happens that the ship hits one of the floating icebergs. In 2007 one Canadian cruise ship hit an iceberg and all of the passengers had to be evacuated to the lifeboats, watching the sink ship before their eyes. Fortunately, all people have survived.

The first expedition to Antarctica with the travellers was in 1966 which was led by the Swedish explorer Lars Eric Lindblad. He wanted to give the tourists a first-hand experience on the ecological sensitivity of the Antarctic environment, in order to educate them and promote a greater understanding of the continent's role in the world. The modern expedition cruise industry was born in 1969, when Lindblad built the world's first expedition ship, the "MS Lindblad Explorer", which was specifically designed to transport the tourists to Antarctica.

In 1977 both Australia and New Zealand started to offer scenic flights to Antarctica through Qantas and Air New Zealand. The flights often flew to the continent without landing and returned to the departure airport. The average experience was from 12 to 14 hours with up to 4 hours flying directly over the continent.

The flights from Australia and New Zealand stopped in 1980. It was due in large part to the Air New Zealand Flight 901 accident on November 28, 1979, in which a McDonnell Douglas DC-10-30 aircraft carrying 237 passengers and 20 crew members collided into Mount Erebus on Ross Island, Antarctica, killing all on board. Flights to Antarctica did not resume again until 1994.

All activities in Antarctica are heavily regulated by the Antarctic Treaty for the environmental protection purposes and the industry is largely managed by International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO).

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators is a single organization dedicated to the advocacy, promotion, and practice of environmentally responsible private-sector travel to Antarctica. It was originally formed by seven tour

operators in 1991, and now includes more than 100 member organizations representing many countries across the globe.

The IAATO's original visitor and tour operator guidelines served as the basis in the development of the Antarctic Treaty Recommendation XVIII-1 which includes the guidance for Antarctic visitors and for non-government tour organizers. Some of the mandated guidelines include:

- Do not disturb wildlife either at sea or on land;
- Do not feed, touch animals or photograph them in a way that will disturb;
- Do not damage the plants;
- Do not damage, destroy, or remove artefacts from the historic sites. It includes rocks, fossils and content of buildings;
- Do not interfere with the scientific equipment;
- Do not walk onto the glaciers or large snowfield unless properly trained;
- Do not litter.

There are currently over 58 vessels registered with the IAATO. Seventeen of the vessels are categorized as yachts which can transport up to 12 passengers, 28 are considered category 1 (up to 200 passengers), 7 are category 2 (up to 500 passengers), and 6 are cruise ships which are capable to house from 500 to 3,000 visitors.

Antarctic cruises generally only operate from November to March which are spring and summer months for the Southern Hemisphere. It is far too dangerous to travel by sea to Antarctica in winter.

Most ships depart from South America, Australia and New Zealand. The principal destination is the region of Antarctic Peninsula which includes the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. Certain private expedition may include the visits to the inland sites including Mt. Vinson (the highest mountain) and the geographic South Pole. An expedition can last from a few days to several weeks.

The excursions are always accompanied by the seasoned staff members who are an ornithologist, marine biologist, geologist, naturalist, historian, general biologist, and/or glaciologist.

A trip to Antarctica can cost from 3,000–4,000\$ to over 40,000\$ depending on the scope of the transportation, housing, and activity needs.

References:

1. Rubin J. Antarctica: Lonely Planet Country Guides [4th edition] / Jeff Rubin. – Lonely Planet Publications, 2008. – 380 p.
2. <http://www.iaato.org>.