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Antarctica

Vital Statistics

The world's fifth-largest continent, larger than Australia and the subcontinent of Europe. The coldest, windiest, highest, and driest continent; mostly uninhabitable. Land use: arable land: 0%; permanent crops: 0%; permanent pastures: 0%; forests and woodland: 0%. Natural hazards: katabatic (gravity-driven) winds blow coastward from the high interior; frequent blizzards form near the foot of the plateau; cyclonic storms form over the ocean and move clockwise along the coast; volcanism on Deception Island and isolated areas of West Antarctica. Source: The CIA website (www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html).

Where To Go

Jeff Rubin, who has been to the Antarctic more than a dozen times, points us in the right direction:

"If you're only going to make one trip to the Antarctica, go to the Peninsula. I know people who have done that trip six or seven times and never want to venture to any other part of the continent. It's where all the wildlife is.

"After two or three trips to the Peninsula, most people want to see the 'real' Antarctica. Then you're talking about a much more expensive trip, and a much more difficult journey in terms of time and effort. If you go on a ship to the Eastern part of Antarctica with its ice shelves, or the Ross Sea with its historic huts, you're talking about colder temperatures, a much longer sea voyage with its accompanying discomfort, and even danger from being tossed around on the ship. Otherwise, you can take a flight into the interior."

When To Go

Unless you are planning to over-winter, visits to Antarctica must take place between November and March. At other times of the year, pack ice and/or

darkness prevents any attempts to reach the continent, unless you're a world-class pilot flying a specially-modified Hercules transport aircraft!

What To Take

If your wardrobe is kitted out for Scottish winter mountaineering, you already have most of what you need for Antarctica. Plenty of synthetic clothing, bombproof waterproofs, warm hat, gloves, mitts and a duvet jacket are all de rigueur. If you are attempting landings in inflatable zodiacs, your choice of footwear is important. High-legged waterproof boots are essential. Climbers attempting peaks such as Vinson should be aware that in addition to all the usual accoutrements necessary for ultra-cold weather climbing, a one-piece down suit or a down jacket and down salopettes are also required. Antarctica can also be very hot, so a wide-brimmed sunhat and a long-sleeved, light coloured shirt will help you stay cool in the sun. UV/IR-proof sunglasses and plenty of sunblock are mandatory. Buy double the amount of camera film that you think you will need for your camera, along with plenty of spare batteries. Binoculars are handy for viewing wildlife.

Accommodation

On board a ship the accommodation speaks for itself. If you are camping on the continent bring a deep-cold rated down sleeping bag as well as a closed cell foam mattress and/or Thermarest. It goes without saying that the highest quality tents - either double poled geodesic domes, semi-permanent double-walled tented accommodation or classic pyramid tents are the minimum necessary for survival.

Wildlife

One of the main attractions of Antarctica is its abundant wildlife. Penguins, whales, petrels, seals and albatross are all star attractions. Please remember that Antarctica is their home, so always view from a reasonable distance. Long camera lens and powerful binos really help in this respect.

Health

For the expeditioner planning to visit Antarctica, there are dozens of medical considerations. Most important is the vast distance from comprehensive medical care. Including a doctor on your team is almost essential. The remoteness is such that some expeditioners have paid to have their appendixes removed prior to departure in order to eliminate one potential life-threatening condition. If you are visiting Antarctica on a tourist ship, ensure that a doctor is on the staff, and take extra sets of any medicine that you require in case some become spoiled. Every person visiting Antarctica, however briefly, will almost certainly be exposed to extremes of temperature; sunburn and frostbite are possible on the same day! Antarctica's dry atmosphere encourages dehydration. If you're flying to the South Pole, the jump in altitude combined with the extreme southerly latitude can cause Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS).

Money

Since 1996 Antarctica has had its own 'currency'. David J. Hamilton has set up the Bank of Antarctica which produces reportedly beautiful notes of varying denominations. Until the end of 2001 the notes can be exchanged for their face value at his 'bank'. They are not recognised as legal tender anywhere else (including Antarctica) although their novelty value makes them excellent bartering material with fellow Antarcticans. 80% of the value of every note purchased will go to various Antarctic-related causes. All un-sold stock will be destroyed on December 31st 2001, increasing the historic value of the notes in circulation. You can find out more at www.bankofantarctica.com.

World Park, Tourist Trap, Mining Colony Or Rubbish Dump?

With ever-increasing pressure for Antarctica to be declared a World Park, and with the moratorium on mining due to expire in 2041, the future of Antarctica is far from certain. Unlike some government research stations which have in the past left many tons of rubbish scattered near their bases, tourist companies have done much to ensure that they do not leave any scarring on the continent. Most responsible operators are members of the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO). A member organisation founded in 1991, IAATO was established to "advocate, promote and practice safe and environmentally

responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic.” For more info (including Guidelines For Visitors To The Antarctic) visit their website: www.iaato.org.

One To Read: ‘The Last Continent: Discovering Antarctica’ by Dr. Bernard Stonehouse, who has worked in Antarctic for decades (most recently on tourism-impact issues) has recently been published. For availability contact Shuttlewood Collinson. email: scp@paston.co.uk. tel: 01493 781 695.

Red Tape

British citizens joining a commercial tour to Antarctica do not require any special permissions. All that changes if you want to organise your own expedition. As British citizens you are obliged to comply with the workings of the Antarctic Act 1994, the Antarctic Regulations 1995 and the Antarctic (Amendment) Regulations 1998. Part 2 of the Antarctic Act 1994 states: “No person who is on a British expedition may enter or remain in Antarctica except in accordance with a permit granted in this section.” Details can be obtained from the Overseas Territories Department, Polar Regions Section of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (www.fco.gov.uk).

Employment In Antarctica

A number of governments, including Britain, have research stations in Antarctica. The British Antarctic Survey (BAS) recruits both scientists and people with trades, so whether you’re a geologist or plumber, you may have the skills that BAS are looking for. Experienced mountaineers are also needed to look after scientists in the field. For more info contact: The Personnel Department, British Antarctic Survey, High Cross, Madingley Road, Cambridge, CB3 0ET. email: employment@bas.ac.uk. tel: 01223 221508/7. fax: 01223 362616.

Antarctic Air: why does it cost so much to fly to the South Pole?

We asked Anne Kershaw, who runs Adventure Network International, the only private Antarctic airline, to explain why you need \$25,000 to fly to the South Pole. Surely an individual could go and hire what he needed for less?

“One of things that I talk about when people ask price is the cost of Fuchs and Hillary’s Transantarctic Expedition of 1955-1958. In today’s money that expedition cost £47 million. So if we look at the South Pole, there is nothing to stop someone doing it themselves. Here’s what they would need to do:

“Hire an aircraft to fly the 2000 nautical miles from Chile to the runway at Patriot Hills in Antarctica. To get a good price you would need to hire it for three years. But it’s only needed for a short period, say three months. That’s OK, but the aircraft owner will need to compensate himself for the fact that he may miss out on lucrative work either side of the flight to Antarctica if the season extends or something happens. Tell the aircraft owner that you’re going to Antarctica, and he will bump up the insurance because it sounds dangerous, it’s far away, there’s no back-up, there’s no fire service and there’s no fuel available. The crew need to eat or drink in Punta Arenas in Chile whilst they’re waiting to fly. Cost: \$2 million.

“Now a light aircraft - say a ski-equipped Twin Otter - is needed to fly from Patriot Hills to the Geographic South Pole. There aren’t any ski-equipped Twin Otters in South or Central America. But they do exist in Canada. They’re not particularly busy during the Antarctic summer. But the Chileans (in whose airspace you’ll be flying) will demand a back-up aircraft. So you’ll need two. Add on hotels, insurance, food, and time in Punta. Cost: £\$1 million.

“Next, fuel: You’re going to need 100 drums of fuel at Patriot for the Twin Otter flight to the Pole and back, including some emergency fuel. But the Hercules can only transport 25 drums at a time. So that’s four Hercules flights. Cost: \$1.5 million.

“So for around \$4.5 million you can fly to the South Pole. But you’ve still got to buy radios, tents, clothing and equipment, and hire a guide, a radio operator and a meteorological person. But if you want to fly with ANI, we will only charge you \$25,000. And we serve great food at our camp at Patriot Hills; last year our staff served 12,500 meals during the three month season!”

ANI has an unparalleled environmental service; for example, all rubbish and waste gets flown out - including human waste. The company also operates a programme for children. Called 'Kershaw's Kids' in memory of the late Giles Kershaw who pioneered private aviation in the Antarctic, ANI takes six children aged 12-14 to Patriot Hills each season. They learn to ski, climb, cook, paint and ice carve, and are encouraged to write poetry. ANI have taken orphans from Poland, drug addicts from Chile, young people who look after their disabled parents, kids from inner-city LA and single-parent children from the UK. Some of the children have never even seen snow before!

ANI can be contacted at: www.adventure-network.com.

Go To The South Pole For Free!

If the multi-thousand dollar cost of flying or sailing to Antarctica is a little beyond the reach of your credit card, get on-line to <http://astro.uchicago.edu/cara/vtour/>. This site will take you from New Zealand to McMurdo and on to the South Pole. Virtual tours of the two stations are included. After that, log on to: <http://205.174.118.254/nspt/home.htm>. This is the website for The New South Polar Times, which is updated by the residents of the Scott-Amundsen base at the South Pole. Finally, you can keep informed of all things Antarctic by checking out The Antarctic at www.antarctican.com.

I Did It! Dave Halton sprinted up Mount Vinson

I was asked to help Rebecca Stephens become the first British woman to climb the Seven Summits. At the time there was a race on for this title so we knew we had to get a move on. As for the flight to Antarctica, there's no rollercoaster ride in the world that can beat it. We landed on a blue ice runway at the camp at Patriot Hills; that's the biggest rollercoaster ride of 'em all! Fortunately the palettes are screwed down with large bolts, because if they came out you'd shoot out the top of the fuselage!

On a nice day at Patriot Hills it can be very hot; the place is bathed in un-polluted sunshine. It's so much more remote than anywhere else I have ever been. Other than the nearby hills you're on an open plateau. Patriot Hills is a tented village but

there is also an underground warren with enough food and supplies to last a year if people get stranded.

“From Patriot Hills it’s a two-hour flight in a Twin Otter to the Base Camp at Mount Vinson. Vinson is of a similar technical difficulty to the standard route on McKinley, but the location makes it much more serious. The colours on the mountains change hourly, from blinding arc white to beautiful golden hues. The evening light and the midnight sun is phenomenal.

“Rebecca and I were already fully acclimatised from climbing Aconcagua [South America’s highest mountain] just a few weeks before. The only thing we had to acclimatise from was the amount of cocktails drunk before departure! We took five days and one bad weather day to ascend and descend the mountain; normally it takes seven or eight. I had gone to Aconcagua not knowing that I was going on to Vinson, so I borrowed some down salopettes to go with my stinking old down pullover and one-piece windbreaker. Rebecca had a luxurious down suit! The temperature on summit day was -26°C; I had to move quickly because I was so cold. When I summited, more people had gone into space than where I stood, which felt pretty amazing”

I Did It! Kate Baker describes an evening of cruising in Paradise Bay on the Antarctic Peninsula.

“The sun was still high in the sky when we dropped Anchor in Paradise Bay. It was a long ride through the pack ice to the shore, and the paddle was frequently used to push the icebergs to the side. We could also turn icebergs over and find shrimp-like Krill which turn bright red when agitated. Finally we arrived on shore to the strong perfume of the Gentoo penguin rookery - we smelt them long before we saw them! However, on this particular evening our quest was to climb the hill behind the government base.

“The scramble up the snow-laden slope was more difficult than expected. Once on top we just managed to fit the whole group on the top ridge - it was quite cosy! The magnificent view of the surrounding peaks remains deeply etched in my memory. Although the mountain vista was as impressive as the Himalayas, the

iceberg-strewn bay in the evening light looked simply stunning. Everyone was reluctant to leave the view behind, but eventually toes began to go numb and the light began to fade.

“I took the quick route down; on my bum! Having waterproof clothes in a very dry climate does have some advantages! It was a real buzz as I had no idea where I was heading; thankfully there were no stray Gentoos about. My alternative route down began a trend and everyone ended up flying down - head first, sideways, flat on backs. It was a hoot!

“Back on board we quickly warmed up with a hot shower, which was followed by a delicious roast dinner. On this particular evening there was a birthday party for Heinrick, the Dive Master. Streamers, funny hats and birthday cake all added to the party atmosphere in the bar; it was hard to believe we were in such a remote corner of the world. A late night visit to the bridge, to witness the dwindling light and the last glimpse of Paradise Bay, topped off an extraordinary evening for me.”

Kate sailed to Antarctica with IAATO member Aurora Expeditions, whose UK agents are World Expeditions (tel: 020 8870 2600). Aurora also offers optional extras including camping, diving, kayaking and climbing on some of its departures aboard The Professor Molchanov which accommodates 52 passengers. Prices (ex-Ushuaia) begin at around \$3700. Aurora is run by veteran climber Greg Mortimer, the first Australian to climb Everest and K2, so you'll be in good hands.

One To Watch: Neil Laughton plans to follow in Shackleton's oarstrokes

“Whilst I was climbing Vinson in 1997 I promised myself that the next time I went to Antarctica I would go to the Peninsula. But rather than go on a cruise liner I thought it would be more appropriate to do something a little bit adventurous; what better than to try and get a feel for what Sir Ernest Shackleton went through on his epic journey from Elephant island to South Georgia in his open lifeboat, ‘The James Caird’? So I have decided to do a modern-day re-enactment with

appropriate modern technology and safety back-up, whilst still retaining a flavour of the place, the challenge and the endurance side of it.

“Having just come back from the first sea trials of our replica of The James Caird, I’ve discovered that the boat is shockingly small for five people! I have no illusions now as to how cramped and uncomfortable it is going to be. It’s going to be hideous! But that’s all part of the challenge and I am looking forward to the event. The other thing we are trying to do is raise awareness of three Antarctic charities: the United Kingdom Antarctic Heritage Trust which maintains many of the historic huts; the Shackleton Scholarship Fund which provides opportunities for young people to see what is happening in Antarctica, and tries to educate and preserve that environment in the manner in which it should be kept; and also the South Georgia Museum.

“We leave at the end of March 2001 for six weeks, and also intend to cross South Georgia as Shackleton did. We will also be diving on the shore of Elephant Island to see if any relics can be found from the time that Shackleton’s crew were marooned there, waiting to be rescued. But I’m not going to leave a bunch of mates on Elephant Island whilst we sail to South Georgia!”

The Shackleton Memorial Expedition can be followed at www.shackleton-expedition.org

What Is The Future Of Antarctic Tourism?

Jeff Rubin, author of Lonely Planet’s guide to Antarctica, peers into his ice-crystal ball.

“What I have noticed over the last few years is that the Antarctic tourist market is starting to mature. Until recently a 28-year old desperate to get out on the ice and start climbing had to go on the same trip as a 60-year old. Now the market is starting to diversify and a few operators are offering more adventurous options. Nevertheless these packages are not without risk; the weather can change so dramatically that the thought of 30 people on-shore overnight makes me worried. Nevertheless, together with sky-diving this is the new wave of Antarctic tourism.

The Queen Maud Land is now a mecca for a few world-class mountaineers but overall Antarctica is a tiny market. Some people are wondering if it is reaching a peak. This year's millennium and next year's 'real' millennium may have artificially inflated the figures. Some sites on the peninsula have had 60,000 visitors. The \$10,000 question is what is the cumulative impact of so many visitors? Regulation of some sort is inevitable. But the continent is so gigantic that so far it has been able to resist people.

"There are some natural limitations on the market; these have nothing to do with Antarctica itself but have everything to do with logistics. Most ships that take people to the continent are former Soviet research vessels with their experienced crews. The majority of the vessels available are already doing this kind of work. They are the single factor that has allowed Antarctic tourism to flourish over the last 10-15 years. If the Soviets hadn't hit the hard times financially they would still be operating the research vessels themselves, and Antarctic tours would be limited to purpose-built ships which are much more expensive to build and operate.

"You'll see discussion in the press from time to time about building hotels in Antarctica but that's the line most people don't want to cross. The Chileans have one hotel but it's not getting much traffic. One reason I think Antarctic tourism works so well is that ships combine accommodation with transport. Whilst you're eating and sleeping the ship moves you from one beautiful spot to another. Even if a hotel was built in the nicest part of Antarctica - and I sincerely hope they never do - you wouldn't want to spend your entire holiday in just one place.

"A real highlight of my time in Antarctica was visiting the historic huts. But I do think that the line between tourism and adventures that re-create the journeys made by the early explorers has gone; nowadays it's all tourism. 14 years ago when Robert Swan re-created 'In The Footsteps Of Scott', that was a true expedition. Now you have an operator willing to fly people to within one degree to the pole, and rent them all the clothing and equipment they need. That's not exploration or even adventure. It's tourism.

"I see the vast majority of tourism remaining in the peninsula. And I think that works. People go to Antarctica to experience something totally different and the peninsula more than fulfils that wish."

The second edition of Lonely Planet's guide to Antarctica is just out at £12.99. Packed with useful and unusual information it will of interest not only to visitors to the continent but also to armchair Antarcticans. Jeff welcomes any comments on his book. email: rubinwiles@worldnet.att.net.

Three Men And A Pole: The remarkable story of the 'In The Footsteps of Scott' Expedition

Since the end of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration perhaps the most remarkable expedition of modern times occurred in 1996 when Robert Swan, Roger Mear and Gareth Wood walked to the South Pole along the route taken by Scott. Obsessed by the Antarctic, Swan defied the odds - and the authorities - by raising sufficient cash to purchase a boat, sail to Antarctica, overwinter in a tiny hut and then walk to the South Pole. Triumph turned to disaster just three minutes after arriving at 90°S when their ship sank, stranding the crew. The plan had been for the late Giles Kershaw to fly a Cessna light aircraft from the coast to the South Pole to pick up the trio. Whilst Kershaw succeeded in unloading the Cessna from the ship, the Americans (who else) waded in and took over the situation, flying the three polar walkers out from the South Pole and saddling Swan with a bill for \$500,000 as the cost for 'rescuing' the entire crew. But Swan had the last laugh; four years later he became the first man in history to walk to both the North and South Poles! Roger Mear's book, 'In The Footsteps of Scott' (ISBN 0224014183) is an inspirational tale; anyone reading this article and thinking "I'd love to go to Antarctica but..." should read this book.

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