

Antarctica: Traveling the Safe and Environmentally Responsible Way

By Steve Wellmeier

Travelers have been visiting Antarctica since the 1970s and 1980s, when pioneering expedition ships like the *Lindblad Explorer*, *Illyria* and *Society Explorer* took intrepid travelers to the continent. Since those early days—when the total number of visitors amounted to just a few hundred a year—tourism has increased steadily, with more ships of all shapes and sizes, more departures and more than 46,000 visitors during the 2007-08 season alone.

This number has decreased since then, to about 33,800 during the 2010-11 austral summer, mostly the result of the worldwide economic recession. And it fell even further for the most recent 2011-12 season, to 26,500 visitors. This latest decline was due to new maritime regulations prohibiting a type of fuel commonly used by larger cruise ships.

More on that in a moment, but it should be said that in spite of fewer visitors recently, international demand to see Antarctica, the amazing wildlife and pristine landscapes that it offers, remains very strong. Americans continue to represent the lion's share of visitors with nearly 9,000—about a third of the total—for the 2011-12 season. Australia took the number two spot, sending 2,900 travelers, or about 11%, compared with third place Germany with 2,300 (8.75%). Interestingly, China sent nearly 1,200 travelers last season, continuing the skyrocketing increase for this nationality over the past few years, and their citizens are expected to come in increasing numbers in the decades ahead.

Economic concerns and nationalities aside, many visitors also wonder about the impact of tourism on Antarctic wildlife, how climate change is modifying the continent's icescape, and whether regulations could make visiting Antarctica more difficult and more expensive.

Fortunately, there is good news to report on most of these fronts. To date, there is no clear evidence that tourism is causing harm to the Antarctic environment. One of the primary reasons for this is a strong, self-regulating organization of Antarctica tour operators called IAATO. The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators began in 1991, when seven private tour companies joined together to practice and promote the highest possible standards of travel in this remote, wild and delicate region of the world.

The overall governance of Antarctica, including tourism issues, lies within the power of the Antarctic Treaty, which was signed in 1959. The treaty, which formally designated Antarctica as "a natural reserve, devoted to peace and science," now has 48 par-



Steve Wellmeier enjoys a view of Paradise Bay above the Almirante Brown Station.

ties, 28 of which have consultative (or voting) status. Tourism is a legitimate activity under the Antarctic Treaty, and its Environmental Protocol—which was agreed to about the same time that IAATO was founded—sets further standards for all human activities, ensuring that they are planned and conducted in such a way that limits adverse impacts.

In 1994, the first of the visitor and tour operator guidelines were introduced at the 18th Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM), and subsequently adopted as Recommendation XVIII-1. These were based on the IAATO Code of Conduct, and indicated a start in the collaborative effort between governments, the industry and environmental organizations to ensure good regulation and management of Antarctic tourism. You can find these recommendations (in nine languages!) at <http://www.iaato.org/visitors.html>.

In 2009, the treaty parties codified Measure 15, which again was based on prescriptions developed by IAATO and followed by its members for the ten prior years. This measure is a legally binding requirement that tour operators refrain from making any landings in Antarctica from vessels carrying more than 500 passengers. The same measure requires that tour operators coordinate

with each other so that no more than one vessel is at a landing site at any one time; that no more than 100 passengers are ashore at a landing site at any one time; and that a 1:20 guide-to-passenger ratio be maintained while ashore.

And speaking of landing sites, IAATO has worked closely in recent years with the treaty parties to develop specific guidelines, with the 20 most frequented Antarctic sites now detailed. These guidelines are an important component of the IAATO Field Operations Manual, which all IAATO member-companies use at the Antarctic Peninsula, where 95% of tourism is focused. The guidelines ensure that expedition staffs are familiar with the idiosyncrasies of each place, the nesting areas, best spots for landing Zodiacs, or where dangerous crevices in the snow might be likely.

IAATO's role as an educator of best practices with its member companies carries over to the passengers themselves. IAATO has produced a new pamphlet, "Don't Pack a Pest," meant to inform visitors about the dangers of introducing non-native species. These

can include insects, algae, seeds or even microbes that might be lurking in a bit of mud on the bottom of your wellington boots. For a look at the pamphlet (just four languages so far), go to http://www.iaato.org/do_not_pack_a_pest.html. Surprisingly, recent studies have found that the potential for introducing non-native species appears to be a consideration with national program personnel at the scientific bases as much as with tourism, if not more.

Climate change, the result of human activity worldwide more so than in Antarctica, is something of a trickier matter. IAATO and its member companies recognize that this is a significant threat to the Antarctic environment and are moving forward to raise awareness, motivate behavioral change and inspire others on this issue. This includes a recent collaboration with the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR) to produce an informational pamphlet for travelers, "Climate Change in Antarctica—Understanding the Facts." For those interested in this topic, the pamphlet also can be downloaded from the IAATO website: <http://www.iaato.org/info.html>. More needs to be done, so a working group of IAATO members is undertaking a survey to develop baseline carbon footprint information for analysis and possible future use in drafting mitigation measures and guidelines for tour vessel operators.

Finally, will future regulations make it even more difficult to visit Antarctica in the decades ahead? This is difficult to say, as the industry, governments and maritime bodies such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) work together to ensure safety and minimize the potential for environmental damage. A new regulation came into affect in August 2011, for example, which prohibits the use and carriage of heavy fuel oil (HFO) in Antarctic waters. While the majority of traditional expedition vessels will not be significantly affected, large 500-plus passenger vessels—such as those operated by Princess Cruises, Oceania and Regent Seven Seas—are expected to withdraw from the marketplace, at least for the short term. Holland America, Celebrity and Azamara continue to operate to Antarctica, complying with the new fuel regulation. It should be pointed out that these vessels do not offer landings while in Antarctic waters, and instead provide a "cruise-only" type of experience, which is enjoyed by thousands of travelers annually.

Similarly, IMO is currently deliberating revisions to the Polar Code, which could limit ship-based tourism in the Arctic and Antarctic alike. Ship owners and Antarctic tour operators are watching these discussions carefully, as the Polar Code could potentially dictate the types of passenger vessels that are suitable for operating in ice-covered waters, based on factors such as ice class, the experience of the bridge team, seasonal and geographic operation of the vessel and so forth.

However, it is important to put all of these issues in perspective, with the expectation that factual evidence and pragmatism will prevail. Tourism will continue to be a driving force in Antarctic conservation in the years ahead. Firsthand travel experiences foster education and a better understanding of the destination; no one knows that better than TravLtips members! ▲

Steve Wellmeier is the administrative director of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), based in Providence, RI. Total membership in IAATO stands at 106 companies and organizations around the world. IAATO now represents all SOLAS passenger vessels operating in Antarctic waters. Steve previously worked in marketing at Clipper Cruise Line, INTRAV, Elegant Cruises and TravLtips, and spent two years following 9/11 as a public affairs liaison with FEMA in New York City. For more information on IAATO's mission of safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic, visit www.iaato.org.

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