



Antarctica: Seeing the Ice and More in This Exciting Cruise Destination

By Erica Silverstein

Expedition cruising is on the rise as travelers seek out immersive experiences, nature-based exploration, uncrowded destinations, and bucket list adventures. [Cruise Lines International Association \(CLIA\) reports](#) that the global capacity for expedition ships will increase 150% from 2019 to 2029. The key destination for adventurous cruisers in winter is Antarctica.

During the 2024-2025 season, according to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), 117,020 travelers visited Antarctica by cruise ship, including on more than a dozen CLIA member lines. Roughly two-thirds of passengers had the opportunity to bundle up in parkas and make a landing on Antarctica's shores, while others viewed the icy "White Continent" and wildlife such as penguins and marine mammals from the comfort of their cruise ships.

What's the appeal of sailing to the end of the world? "Antarctica captures the imagination because it offers a rare glimpse into one of our planet's most untouched and extreme environments," says Samuel Chamberlain, CEO, Americas at small ship line Ponant.

A vast range of itineraries and experiences

"Guests are looking beyond traditional itineraries, drawn to destinations that offer true exploration, learning, and a sense of accomplishment," says Robin West, Vice President of Expeditions for Seabourn. Antarctica offers a diverse array of itineraries, ships, and experiences that appeal to many types of cruisers.

The basic Antarctica itinerary visits landing sites on the Antarctic peninsula, the long arm that stretches toward the tip of South America, and its surrounding islands. Longer trips (three to four weeks) incorporate visits to the South Shetland Islands, South Georgia, and the Falkland Islands.

Most itineraries depart from Ushuaia, Argentina, and cross the famed Drake Passage, which typically adds two days to and from Antarctica. An option is skipping the Drake and flying one or both ways to board your ship. Silversea is opening a hotel in fall 2026 in Puerto Williams, Chile, to house Antarctica-going guests on its fly/cruise itineraries. Other lines with fly-in options include Aurora and Quark.

Creature comforts in the wilderness

Modern shipbuilding has brought a sea change to the vessels plying Antarctica waters, and cruise travelers need not give up creature comforts to sail south.

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) classes non-yacht cruise ships into three categories. Ships carrying more than 500 guests cannot discharge passengers ashore for landings. Guests on Azamara Cruise, Celebrity Cruises, Holland America Line, Oceana Cruises and

Princess Cruises can take in the otherworldly scenery while enjoying the many onboard amenities of these larger ships.

Ships carrying between 201 and 500 passengers can make landings at a limited number of stops. Ponant, Seabourn, Scenic Cruises and Silversea have expedition fleets that feature luxurious suites and upscale lounges to enjoy when guests are not ashore. Seabourn and Scenic carry submersible vessels for underwater exploration, and Scenic also carries a helicopter for flightseeing.

Small ships (up to 200 guests) have access to IAATO's full roster of landing sites. These cruise lines – such as Aurora Expeditions, HX Expeditions and Quark Expeditions (with helicopters onboard the Ultramarine ship) might make multiple landings in a day or offer additional activities such as snowshoeing, kayaking, and onshore camping.

Antarctica cruise tourism benefits the local economy and global science

IAATO sets guidelines for member cruise lines to support environmentally responsible tourism in Antarctica and works with numerous partners to make tourism beneficial to the surrounding gateway communities, as well as to conservation efforts and research science.

“IAATO works with local government and the community to identify shared goals and collaborative opportunities which create meaningful impact for those who call Ushuaia home,” says Lisa Kelley, IAATO's Executive Director. The organization has partnered with cruise lines to increase the locally sourced products used on board and to hire more workers from southern Argentina, for example.

Cruise lines are also using their unique access to remote places to support global science. Many ships feature science labs on board and offer participatory “citizen science” opportunities to guests. Projects include contributing photos to a whale identification database, analyzing sea water samples, and launching weather balloons.

Antarctica-based ships partner with research facilities to transport scientists and research equipment to field sites. Some lines also host scientists aboard, giving them space to conduct field research. As an example, Ponant's Le Commandant Charcot icebreaker hosts scientists from the University of Western Australia, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in the U.S., and French research institute EPHE to study ocean dynamics, ice systems, and seabird ecology.

Antarctica cruises, as noted by IAATO, bring first-hand opportunity to turn curious travelers into advocates for the preservation of the remote and pristine continent, preserving Antarctica for future generations.

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