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Insider's Guide to Antarctica

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If you're heading to Antarctica, consider yourself part of an elite group of travelers. Each year, only about 100,000 visitors make the trip (plan for two weeks), most reaching the icy continent from southern Argentina or Chile on expedition-style ships. Expect ships equipped with

naturalists, professional photographers and learning centers, in addition to comforts like fine dining and personalized service.

Prioritizing conservation, tour operators follow strict environmental guidelines, including how many people are allowed to disembark and what activities can be done with the least impact. While you're there, you might spot penguins waddling between their colonies, seals lounging on ice floes or whales breaching in the distance. Make sure to plan enough time for travel logistics (at least 12–14 days) — a trip to Antarctica cannot be rushed.

Need to know



- **Currency:** No local currency; USD and credit cards accepted at research stations, while on-board purchases are primarily cashless.
- **Languages:** English is the primary language at research stations and on tourist vessels.
- **Airports:** No commercial airports in Antarctica. Most visitors arrive by ship from Ushuaia, Argentina. Buenos Aires Ministro Pistarini International Airport (EZE) or Santiago Airport (SCL) are two common entry points before either taking a flight to Ushuaia and boarding a ship, or taking a flight to Punta Arenas to charter a flight to a small airstrip in Antarctica (this route avoids the Drake Passage).

- **Transportation:** Expedition ships, Zodiac boats for landings, some helicopter excursions.
- **Best time to visit:** November to February is ideal as it is the Antarctic summer when days are longer, with December to January being peak season.
- **Book in advance:** Book at least a year in advance due to limited availability and high demand. Antarctica expeditions can range anywhere from \$10,000 to \$30,000+ per person, depending on the ship, itinerary and included activities.
- **Ideal length of stay:** 12–14 days including travel time and Drake Passage crossing.
- **Cuisine:** No local cuisine because meals are provided on ships and at the stations.
- **What to wear:** Multiple warm layers, waterproof outer gear, thermal base layers, warm boots, sunglasses, sunscreen (heavy outerwear is usually provided by tour operators).

Vessels



Image courtesy of HX

National Geographic x Lindblad Expeditions

These cruises offer expert-led lectures, National Geographic photographers and activities like kayaking, hiking and wildlife viewing. Travelers who opt for this trip can expect lots of science-focused learning. This line's signature offering combines Lindblad's 50+ years of expedition experience with National Geographic's expertise in storytelling and research. Every voyage has a Nat Geo photographer who runs workshops, offers one-on-one instruction and helps guests capture the perfect shot. Family-owned Lindblad ships carry specialized equipment like underwater cameras that let passengers experience wildlife in unique ways.

- **Fora Perks:** \$200 onboard credit

Seabourn Cruise Line

Seabourn Cruise Line combines ultra-luxury with expedition-style experiences. Contrasting with the stark natural environment, the ship offers spacious suites, fine dining and excellent service. Each cruise offers a submarine experience, diving up to 1,000 feet for a once-in-a-lifetime viewing experience. The 26-person expedition team is notably large for the passenger count (around 260), allowing for more personalized guided experiences like kayaking, Zodiac tours and specialized photography workshops in the ship's custom-built classroom.

- **Fora Perks:** a choice of two Virtuoso benefits

Hurtigruten

With more than 125 years of sailing experience, Hurtigruten is well respected for its Antarctic program. Hybrid-powered ships and eco-conscious practices are designed to reduce environmental impact, and there's an on-board science center where passengers can learn about climate change and participate in ongoing projects. Guests can join the ship's robust Citizen Science Program, helping collect data on water temperatures, seal populations and cloud formations for actual research institutions. They also offer activities like overnight camping on the ice, snowshoeing and professional photography workshops.

- **Fora Perks:** €90 on-board credit

Quark Expeditions

Quark offers some of the most adventurous experiences in Antarctica. Known for their specialized small-ship fleet, Quark allows guests to go beyond traditional expeditions with activities like ice camping, mountaineering, cross-country skiing and stand-up paddleboarding. Guests have extensive itinerary options, including trips to Snow Hill Island's emperor penguin colony, helicopter excursions and voyages that push south of the Antarctic Circle. The expedition staff includes glaciologists and polar historians who provide in-depth context about the region.

- **Fora Perks:** \$250 on-board credit

Antarctica21

Ideal for travelers seeking efficient access and luxury in Antarctica, Antarctica21's Magellan Explorer offers fly-cruise expeditions that skip the Drake Passage by flying directly to the continent. Ships are smaller than most operators, carrying around 70 passengers, which allows for more time at landing sites (Antarctic regulations limit landings to 100 people at once). The shorter overall trip length makes their programs accessible to time-constrained travelers. Active adventures include extended hiking excursions, snowshoeing and backcountry skiing when conditions permit.

Other ships

- **Scenic Luxury Cruises and Tours:** Offers ultra-luxury Antarctic expeditions with state-of-the-art ships featuring spacious suites and fine dining. Highlights include Zodiac excursions to glaciers, kayaking among icebergs and a focus on sustainability in one of the world's most remote environments.
- **A&K's Luxury Expedition Cruises (Ponant):** Combines luxury with Antarctic exploration, offering expert-led activities like wildlife observation of penguins and whales, naturalist talks and exclusive shore landings on the White Continent.
- **Antarctica21:** Specializes in fly-cruise Antarctic expeditions, skipping the Drake Passage for quicker access. Small ships allow for intimate Zodiac landings, kayaking around icebergs and up-close wildlife experiences in Antarctic landscapes.
- **Aurora Expeditions:** Focused on adventurous Antarctic experiences, including climbing icy peaks, polar diving in frigid waters and Zodiac landings near penguin colonies, all aboard sustainably designed expedition ships.
- **Hapag-Lloyd:** A luxury German cruise line known for its expedition vessels, offering high-end Antarctic voyages with strong focus on scientific education and expert naturalist guides.

- **Swan Hellenic:** A British heritage cruise line operating two expedition ships with a focus on cultural immersion alongside Antarctic exploration, featuring lecture programs and sophisticated onboard amenities.

Weather and packing



Image courtesy of Lindblad Expeditions

Many visitors are surprised to learn that Antarctica is actually the world's largest (and coldest) desert, with very little precipitation despite all that ice. You'll likely visit during the Antarctic summer (November to February), when temperatures hover around freezing and you can experience the midnight sun.

When it comes to your packing list, your ship will likely send you a list, as well as offer some gear you can rent on board. Here are some general recommendations:

- Layers: a thermal base layer (avoid cotton), fleece or sweaters, and waterproof outer jackets and pants.

- Gloves: Waterproof gloves, liners and heavy ski mittens.
- Hat and neckwear : Insulated, wind-resistant headgear.
- Footwear: Knee-high waterproof boots for landings (rent or purchase durable options like Bogs). Compression socks under wool socks (e.g., Bombas, Costco). Comfortable shoes (e.g., Birkenstocks, Uggs) for onboard use.
- Sun protections: Polarized sunglasses with UV protection, sunscreen and lip balm.
- Backpack: Waterproof and padded for carrying essentials during excursions.
- Dry bags: protection for cameras and phones.
- Boots: Waterproof boots for landings and walks.
- Rentals are a cost-effective option for boots and waterproof pants (e.g., boots ~\$100, pants ~\$50).
- Confirm if your expedition provides parkas or other essentials to reduce packing.

Activities



Some smaller ships include all activities in the rates, while larger ones require sign ups and extra payment for certain excursions. Book ahead for activities like kayaking and special landings that fill up quickly.

- Set out on **Zodiac excursions** to explore icebergs up close, spot seals lounging on ice floes and observe penguins darting through the water.
- Glide silently through icy waters on a **kayaking adventure**, offering a view of towering glaciers and pristine landscapes.
- Join naturalists and scientists for **engaging talks** on Antarctic wildlife, geology and history to better understand the remote region.
- Capture the dramatic beauty of Antarctica with **photography sessions**, whether from the deck of the ship or during shore landings.
- **Hike among penguin colonies** and along icy shores, with only 100 visitors allowed on land at a time.
- Take the **Polar Plunge** for a once-in-a-lifetime dip into icy waters, followed by a warm-up with sundowners whilst enjoying a drink.

Add-on destinations



Getting to Antarctica is a journey in itself, so it's recommended to spend some time in nearby regions, especially before boarding the ship. Because the ships will set sail at a specific time,

plan to arrive in South America early to avoid any logistical snags or delays that might cause you to miss your cruise. Here are some favorite pairings.

Chilean Patagonia (1.5–4.5 hour drive from Punta Arenas): Explore the dramatic landscapes of Torres del Paine National Park, with its towering granite peaks, turquoise lakes and sprawling glaciers.

Iguazú Falls (2-hour flight from Buenos Aires): Witness the awesome power of Iguazú Falls, one of the world's most impressive natural wonders. Take in panoramic views, explore jungle trails and opt for a thrilling boat ride under the falls.

Mendoza (2-hour flight from Buenos Aires): Visit Argentina's wine capital, renowned for its Malbec and scenic vineyards. Enjoy wine tastings, gourmet meals and majestic views of the Andes.

Bariloche (2.5-hour flight from Buenos Aires): Head to the Lake District for outdoor adventures like hiking, kayaking and exploring alpine landscapes in the Andes.

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