Lisa Kelley joined IAATO in 2016 and is responsible for the field operations aspect of the organisation, developing industry best practice and guidelines for field operations.

She began working aboard expedition ships in 2000. Most at home in the Polar Regions, she has worked as undersea specialist, logistics coordinator, dive master and expedition leader in the Arctic and the Antarctic. She was also the station manager at Palmer Station for the United States Antarctic Program during the austral winter of 2010.

Lisa began representing Operators in 2004 at the annual IAATO conferences, sits on the IAATO Field Operations Committee, and contributes to AECO (Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators). She is also a member of the board for Friends of South Georgia Island.

Her vast experience of diving "the Ice" led to her publishing *Below Freezing: The Antarctic Dive Guide* in 2006, now in its third edition. Her underwater experience and exploration of the Polar Regions led to her acceptance into the Explorers Club.
How long have you been involved in responsible polar tourism?

Although I started my expedition career in 2000, I have been directly involved in responsible tourism since 2003 when I started to represent operators at both IAATO and AECO meetings. At first with IAATO, even though there was not a full slot available to me, I wanted to be involved so much I would pay my own way to the meetings.

How many days have you spent south of 60?

It’s hard for me to calculate total days spent south of 60, but I’ve had 133 trips via expedition ship South and one over-winter as Station Manager at Palmer Station, so I know I have spent roughly 545 days in the Drake Passage!

What has been your ‘defining moment’?

My defining moment was the first time I stepped on board an expedition ship. I was a guest with my grandparents, who raised me. I had just finished up my post-grad work in immunology, and was supposed to be taking a year off before medical school. I had never been on an ocean-going vessel and it is a still a moment I remember today; walking up the gangway and stepping on board. I had a feeling I still can feel in my heart today; I was home. Four months later I started as gift shop manager in Antarctica and the rest, as they say, is history.

What does International Women’s Day mean to you?

Whilst it is a celebration of the fantastic achievements women have made around the world, for me I hope the stories which are highlighted on International Women’s Day, are the ones which inspire younger generations to do more and do better than the women who have preceded them. Young girls/women should no longer be defined by gender roles, they should just crash right through that glass ceiling, waving at my generation as they go by.

How have things changed for women in the polar fields since you first joined?

When I first joined, the expedition world was predominantly men. I would often be the only woman on a team of 15. But these days, it isn’t uncommon for the men to be outnumbered, and currently I am with a team of 10 women and five men.

Who inspires you?

I am pretty obsessed with leadership, and looking at examples of leadership – both successes and failures - throughout time. There are many people who have inspired me for various reasons; Ben Franklin, Steve Jobs, James Cameron. In the conservation world Enric Sala and Sylvia Earle. In the expedition world, women like Susan Adie, Anja Erdmann, and Karin Stand, who not only lead expeditions but have places within their companies where they can help affect the change their companies see necessary to continue sustainable tourism in Antarctica.

What are you most proud of?

I am most proud of the teams I have worked with over the years in the polar tourism industry; the Field Staff on the front lines, who trip after trip, year after year, continue to deliver amazing experiences for their guests; whether it be watching seabirds in the Drake from the windows on the bridge, driving shuttles to and from the ship, or sharing their knowledge and experiences over and over again with their guests. They do it simply because it is their passion to do so, and without expecting praise.

What three things would you like to see happen for women within responsible tourism?

For this one I don’t want to make a gender differentiation. As I mentioned, gender issues in the expedition world have changed a lot in the almost 20 years I have worked in the industry, and women by-and-large, at least as...
field staff, are on equal footing with men now. Yes, of course you still get the odd predictable comment when a woman is driving a Zodiac, but all-in-all, some of the most accomplished people in the industry are women, and they are recognised as such.

As far as the changes I would like to see happen within the industry, I’d like to see environmental changes such as much less utilisation of single use plastics and not having to print the daily programs – instead, ideally electronic versions, or a few paper copies posted in ideal spots around the ships (and I note that some ships have already started this). I’d also like to see recycling programs available in Stanley, Punta Arenas and Ushuaia.

I would also like there to be a greater understanding of IAATO and the Antarctic Treaty. Understanding how we are able to visit the Antarctic, the processes involved, and why the Antarctic Treaty is important to uphold, as well as a greater understanding of IAATO and this membership organisation works.

Other than the obvious, what must-have items do you always take to Antarctica?

An insulated water bottle, my preference being Hydroflask.

It gives me the option of either keeping something like tea hot or keeping a drink cold while I am out on landings.

What one piece of advice would you give your younger self?

Work less, explore more. I worked longer contracts while I was out on the vessels, and didn’t take the opportunities to explore the areas when I was leaving the ships.

What would you say to young girls with ambitions to work in Antarctic tourism?

Go for it! There are all sorts of ways to start your career in Antarctic tourism. There are education programs which focus on tourism, and one could narrow that focus down to Antarctica. But the main advice is to never get discouraged. It can sometimes be a daunting business to get into, and in the past, it was all about “who you know.” But now there are many different ways, and companies are actively looking for knowledgeable, enthusiastic staff.

Name a memorable Antarctic moment for you…

There are so many it is hard to choose one. But the most memorable moments are with the teams with which I have been lucky enough to work. It is those moments when you are getting wet and cold, catching boats on a surf landing on South Georgia, yet everyone is laughing and smiling.

The singular moments when you and another staff member are sitting on the bridge wing looking at a wandering albatross soar by. You may sit in silence, but that feeling of being in such a special place creates a silent bond. The epiphanies - about work or life - which happen when like-minded people are standing on shore in all the majesty that is Antarctica.

What small change could we all make to better protect the continent?

Protecting the continent is a small piece of the bigger picture. On the small scale, looking for alternatives to krill products would be a way to help protect the fragile Antarctic ecosystem. On a larger scale, plastics is one of the most pressing issues of our time, and the simplest small action like rejecting plastic straws can make a world of difference.