For over 50 years, organised tours to Antarctica have enabled visitors from all over the world to experience the continent’s natural splendour. Today, the majority of Antarctic tour operators are members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), which was founded in 1991 by seven operators with a mission to advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible Antarctic travel. IAATO now has 115 members (as of 18 April 2017) who work together to implement and develop operational procedures, guidelines and membership requirements that fulfil their mission while ensuring that visitors have a safe and enriching wilderness experience. The success they have achieved is unprecedented in the global tourism industry; to date almost no discernible impact on the environment has been observed. Effective visitor management in Antarctica relies on continued collaboration between the industry, Antarctic Treaty Parties and environmental organizations.

Tourism and the Antarctic Treaty System
IAATO works within the framework of the Antarctic Treaty System (www.ats.aq), an extraordinary global partnership of over 50 countries that has governed Antarctica for more than a half-century and puts all territorial claims on hold. The Treaty is supplemented by the Protocol on Environmental Protection (Environment Protocol) that designates the entire continent as a “natural reserve, devoted to peace and science.” It sets standards for all human activities in Antarctica – governmental and tourism alike – and requires that anyone planning activities must first gain authorization or permission from a relevant national authority.

Part of this process involves submitting environmental assessments of any potential impacts. IAATO operators plan their activities with the aim of causing no more than a minor or transitory impact (www.iaato.org/guidance-for-those-organising-tourism). Not all Treaty Parties have ratified the Environment Protocol, so IAATO has endeavoured to fill any potential loop holes by requiring its member operators to abide by the Protocol and supply Environmental Impact Assessments even if their national authority does not request them.

IAATO shares its data and expertise each year at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM), which it attends as an Invited Expert (www.iaato.org/the-antarctic-treaty). IAATO and Antarctic Treaty Parties have worked together to develop site guidelines for the most visited sites in Antarctica (ats.aq/e/ats_other_siteguidelines.htm) and general codes of conduct, which include guidelines for:

- Protecting Antarctic Wildlife
- Keeping Antarctica Pristine
- Respecting Protected Areas
- Being Safe
- Respecting Scientific Research
- Landing & Transport Requirements

www.iaato.org/visitor-guidelines
Antarctic Tourism Trends

IAATO manages the most comprehensive database on any human activity in Antarctica. Nearly all visitors travelling to Antarctica with IAATO operators arrive by sea from Chile or Argentina. A limited number depart from New Zealand or Australia. Some fly from South America to the northern Antarctic Peninsula where they meet a vessel for onward cruising. Around 1% of all annual visitors fly to experience the interior of Antarctica from South America or South Africa. Following a peak of 46,265 visitors in the 2007-2008 Antarctic season, there was a decline in numbers due to world economic crisis and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) ban on the use and carriage of heavy fuel oil. Numbers have been growing steadily since 2011-2012, with 44,367 in the 2016-2017 season.

www.iaato.org/tourism-statistics

IAATO in the Antarctic Treaty Area

Codified from established IAATO operating procedures, ATCM Measure 15 (2009) aims to reduce visitation pressure from passenger vessels by:

- Prohibiting vessels carrying more than 500 passengers from making landings in Antarctica;
- Requiring that tour operators coordinate their itineraries so that no more than one vessel visits a landing site at any one time;
- Permitting no more than 100 passengers ashore at one time with a guide to staff ratio of 1:20.

Developing Best Practice

To fulfil IAATO’s mission of promoting the practice of safe, environmentally responsible tourism, IAATO members and the Secretariat:

- Assess trends, commission research, address emerging or ongoing issues and monitor for impacts using independent analysis and in collaboration with the science community and Treaty Parties;
- Regularly review and develop IAATO guidelines, practices and procedures such as visitor management at specific sites, emergency response, waste management, small boat handling, unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) use, wildlife watching and preventing the introduction of non-native species;
- Share lessons learned, best practice and knowledge;
- Make visitors aware of their obligations in Antarctica through comprehensive briefings in multiple languages;
- Use a web-based ship scheduling system to plan itineraries before each season in order to abide by the requirement of no more than one ship at one landing site at any given time. Operators then communicate regularly in the field to ensure this rule is maintained should itineraries change due to operational or environmental conditions;
- Promote excellence in guiding by providing an online Field Staff Assessment and Certification Programme (880 staff passed the assessment in 2016-2017);
- Represented all commercial International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) passenger ship operators conducting tourism activities in Antarctica with one ‘cruise-only’ exception in the 2016-2017 season;
- Participate in a web-based vessel tracking system and maintain a comprehensive vessel database. To enhance Search and Rescue capabilities, this is shared with the five Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres with responsibility in Antarctica;
- Participated actively in the development of the Polar Code and then with tools to implement its requirements.
Origin of Visitors to Antarctica

Traditionally most Antarctic travellers were from North America and other English-speaking countries, but recently there have been increasing numbers from emerging markets such as China. The demographics are heavily influenced by global socio-economic factors.

Number of Antarctic visitors travelling with IAATO member operators as of April 18, 2017, subject to change. See www.iaato.org/tourism-statistics for more information.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seaborne tourism with landings¹</td>
<td>35,973</td>
<td>33,237</td>
<td>27,607</td>
<td>25,341</td>
<td>25,526</td>
<td>23,305</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seaborne tourism, no landings²</td>
<td>6,430</td>
<td>7,475</td>
<td>8,109</td>
<td>9,459</td>
<td>9,670</td>
<td>9,070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air &amp; cruise combination, with landings</td>
<td>3,405</td>
<td>3,203</td>
<td>2,353</td>
<td>1,471</td>
<td>1,848</td>
<td>1,587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air &amp; land tourism, Antarctic interior</td>
<td>577</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>431</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46,385</td>
<td>44,367</td>
<td>38,478</td>
<td>36,702</td>
<td>37,405</td>
<td>34,316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹“Landings” are excursions ashore.
²These ships carry more than 500 passengers and cannot make landings.
³Includes seven companies with pending IAATO membership applications at time of writing (18 April 2017).
Supporting Science, Conservation and Community

IAATO operators play an important role in advancing Antarctic science given the logistical challenges of operating in the region. They routinely carry over 100 scientists and National Program personnel and/or equipment free, or at minimal expense, to and from research sites annually.

Many Antarctic visitors are offered the opportunity to participate in citizen science, which is the practice of involving members of the public in scientific projects. It is a powerful tool for building scientific knowledge, public engagement and education. For example, visitors who take photographs of whales on their trip can submit them to researchers who, by identifying individual animals over time, can analyse movements, populations and behaviour, data on which is still surprisingly scarce. See examples of citizen science in action by visiting happywhale.com or www.penguinwatch.org.

Hydrographic surveying in Antarctica is difficult and expensive so IAATO vessels routinely share this information, collected as part their everyday operations, with the International Hydrographic Organization’s (IHO) Hydrographic Commission on Antarctica to improve navigation.

IAATO operates an active member of the Antarctic community particularly when it comes to the issue of managing human activity in the region. In addition to Antarctic Treaty Parties, IAATO also works with: Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programmes (COMNAP); Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research (SCAR); Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR); the fishing industry; World Meterological Organisation (WMO); Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition; Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO).

Creating Ambassadors

Tourism is and should continue to be a driving force in Antarctic conservation. First-hand travel experiences lead to a better understanding of the destination, the need for responsible tourism and ultimately continued protection. IAATO members highlight education as a component of visiting Antarctica, enabling visitors to learn about this unique, natural environment and its value to global science. Education programmes not only include expert lectures and workshops, but create space and time to experience Antarctica's great wilderness. Visitors to the continent – representing more than 100 different nationalities on average per season – return home as ambassadors for its continued conservation.

Are you an Antarctic Ambassador?
Join the community on
Facebook (AntarcticAmbassadors)
Twitter (@ANT_Ambassadors)
Instagram (#Antarctic_Ambassadors)
#LoveAntarctica