

# IAATO and Tourism

Below is a selection of questions the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) receive most regularly from journalists and researchers interested in safe and environmentally responsible Antarctic travel.

## **What kinds of vessels currently sail to the continent?**

Most Antarctic visitors travel there by ship, using the vessel or boat as their "hotel" during their stay on the White Continent.

IAATO Operator members offer a wide array of vessels to the prospective traveller, all authorised or permitted for such cruises by their Treaty Party authority, flag state and classification society. Vessels can be grouped into any of the following categories:

- C1 – Traditional expedition ships that carry 13-200 passengers and are making landings.
- C2 – Mid-size vessels that carry 201-500 passengers and are making landings.
- CR – Vessels that carry more than 500 passengers and do not make landings (cruise only).
- YA – Sailing or motor yachts that carry 12 or fewer passengers.

[Please see our Vessel Directory for more information.](#)

It is a condition of IAATO membership that our operators are operating under a permit or authorization from an Antarctic Treaty Party or relevant government. As part of this process, they must also submit their Environmental Impact Assessment to IAATO. If an IAATO organizer is registered in a country without necessary legislation in place (i.e., the country is not a Treaty Party or has not implemented the Environmental Protocol into their national legislation), the organizer must submit the equivalent documentation to the IAATO Secretariat ahead of the Antarctic season.

A full list of IAATO members is given in our [Membership Directory](#). Note that some operators are listed under Provisional Operators' until they have met all requirements for full membership, including carrying an observer.

### How many people visit per year?

104,897 people\* travelled with IAATO members during the 2022/23 Antarctic season, via both deep field and cruise expeditions, including 32,730 visitors who travelled on cruise-only vessels and did not set foot on the continent.

The table below will give you a breakdown of seaborne tourism (including Cruise Only) based on data provided by companies who submitted Post Visit Reports.

*\*Statistics accurate as of May 8, 2023.*

Year	No. of operators	No. of ships & yachts	No. of voyages	No. of passengers making landings	No. of cruise only passengers
2012-13	39	45	258	24,892	9,070
2013-14	42	51	283	27,374	9,670
2014-15	37	44	268	26,812	9,459
2015-16	38	48	286	29,960	8,109
2016-17	38	47	298	36,440	7,475
2017-18	44	50	344	42,576	9,131
2018-19	44	56	360	44,600	10,889
2019-20	47	62	408	55,164	18,506
2021-22	40	48	236	23,023	0
2022-23	50	60	540	71,346	32,730

821 people travelled to Antarctic during the 2022/23 season with deep-field operators.

Antarctic Treaty Parties come together once a year at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM). As an invited Expert since 1992, IAATO participates in annual ATCMs, providing expert advice on tourism-related issues. In its role as representative

for the Antarctic tourism industry, IAATO also submits Information Papers including visitors figures and contributes to discussions by the Antarctic Treaty party delegates.

### **When did the growth in Antarctic cruising start?**

Commercial tourism to Antarctica started in the late 1950s when 500 or so fare-paying passengers travelled aboard Chilean and Argentine naval vessels each season to visit the South Shetland Islands on re-supply missions to research stations. The first vessel specifically built for the purpose of taking fare-paying passengers to Antarctica was the ice-strengthened m/v Lindblad Explorer built in 1969. She paved the way for tourists to visit and enjoy the world's last pristine continent by means of "expedition cruising" — defined by the industry as cruising coupled with education as a major theme.

By the late 1980s, four companies were conducting ship borne tourism to the Antarctic as well as one land operator who pioneered commercial tourism flights to Antarctica in 1985. These flights took guests to a seasonal inland field camp for guided climbs, ski expeditions and other adventurous activities.

By the 1991-92 season when IAATO was founded, approximately 6,400 tourists visited Antarctica, traveling aboard ten different expedition ships operated by six operators plus the land-based activities of the one land operator. New members continued to join at a steady pace.

Seven companies that had already been operating expeditions to Antarctica for several years founded the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators in 1991. The main impetus behind forming a global, non-profit industry association was two-fold; firstly, the signing of the Antarctic Environmental Protocol in early 1991 by the Antarctic Treaty nations established rigorous standards beyond those already outlined in the Antarctic Treaty of 1959, which designated Antarctica as a "natural reserve dedicated to peace and science." The Protocol provided the framework for the continued protection of the Antarctic environment. And secondly, by joining together, the companies were able to pool resources and work with their national governments

to develop substantive regulations and guidelines compatible with the best practices that were already being followed in the field.

Antarctica receives relatively few visitors compared to other destinations, but its unique qualities require rigorous safeguards. IAATO's proven success in conscientious visitor management is the result of forward planning based on long-term understanding of the industry. Focused gatherings such as the IAATO annual meeting help the organization hone its policies and strategies to protect Antarctica while enabling Antarctic travellers to have an enriching, educational experience.

The actions agreed at the 2023 annual meeting include the introduction of 17 new trial site guidelines and enhanced geofenced time areas in the Gerlache Strait and South Shetland Islands to help protect whale-rich waters.

The new and enhanced measures support IAATO's five-year strategy, Embracing Our Role as Stewards of Antarctica, approved by members at its annual meeting held in Hamburg, Germany in April 2023 and consisting of four mainstays:

- Operators as stewards,
- Purposeful support of research,
- Deliberate resource management plan, and
- Persistent proactive measures focused on sustainability.

[\*\*Read more: IAATO Set to Begin 2023-24 Antarctic Season with New and Enhanced Responsible Tourism Measures\*\*](#)

### **How many companies are members of IAATO?**

As of the 2023/24 season, we have 111 members in total, 55 of which are Companies that operate directly in Antarctica and 56 of which are Associates; Tour operators, travel agents or other marketers that book their customers into Operator member's Antarctic programs. Also, companies or individuals with an interest in supporting responsible Antarctic tourism and IAATO's objectives.

Aside from small yachts (vessels carrying 12 or less), none of the passenger vessels operating in the Antarctic this season are operated outside of IAATO at this point.

### **How has avian influenza affected Antarctic tourism?**

IAATO will be following enhanced measures to help protect the region from the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 this Antarctic season.

Since 2021 the increasing intensity avian influenza outbreaks has resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of seabirds around the world. Marine mammals, including seals and sea lions, have also been affected.

In addition to the robust procedures already in place to protect Antarctica from pathogens and non-native species, polar stakeholders, from Antarctic Treaty parties to scientists, researchers and IAATO tour operators have heightened their vigilance with regards to operations South due to the [risk of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza \(HPAI\) outbreaks in Antarctica](#).

In consultation with the [SCAR](#) Antarctic Wildlife Health Working Group (AWHWG), additional protocols were introduced to IAATO's standard biosecurity procedures last season (2022-23). These protocols have since evolved and are mandatory for all IAATO Operators and their staff and crew operating in Antarctica.

They include:

- Assessing visitor sites for signs of HPAI in wildlife colonies before commencing any landing and being prepared to cancel a visit or leave a site if any behavioural signs of HPAI are detected.
- A minimum distance of 5 metres/15 feet must be maintained from Antarctic Wildlife
- Not sitting, kneeling, crouching, or lying down on the ground or snow, or leaving any equipment on the ground or snow, close to animal activity such as nests or breeding adults, pathways, haul out sites and faecal matter.

- If visitors are approached by wildlife, visitors must take appropriate action to ensure the advised minimum distance of 5 metres/15 feet is maintained where it can be safely done.

IAATO Members are united in their commitment to operate in the region safely and with environmental responsibility at the heart of all expeditions.

IAATO has hosted a number of virtual town hall meetings, a series of webinars and developed supporting resources on the topic of avian influenza for its members and their field staff and crew including a poster to communicate visitor obligations while they are in Antarctica. This poster and IAATO's Don't Pack a Pest biosecurity guidelines leaflet can also be found in the [Visitor Guidelines Library](#), available at [iaato.org](http://iaato.org).

### **What advice I can share with travellers considering a trip to the southern region?**

Part of the wonder of Antarctica is its unpredictability. Don't forget while it may be the most untouched, it's also the most hostile place on Earth. Bad weather or moving icebergs can often scupper expedition itineraries, so it's always best to approach your trip with an open mind.

We'd encourage potential visitors to Antarctica to visit Guidelines and Resources section of the IAATO website for advice on appropriate clothing, what to expect, bio security, including our enhanced avian influenza protocols, wildlife guidelines, reducing single-use plastic use while traveling and other responsible travel information.

### **Notes to Editors –**

Issued by the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators

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## **About IAATO**

IAATO is a member organization founded in 1991 to advocate and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to the Antarctic. IAATO Members work together to develop, adopt and implement operational standards that mitigate potential environmental impacts. These standards have proved to be successful including, but not limited to;

- Antarctic site-specific guidelines and site selection criteria;
- passenger to staff ratios and limiting numbers of passengers ashore;
- boot washing guidelines and the prevention of the transmission of non-native organisms;
- wilderness etiquette;
- ship scheduling and vessel communication procedures;
- emergency medical evacuation procedures and emergency contingency plans;
- reporting procedures;
- marine wildlife watching guidelines;
- station visitation policies.

IAATO has been carefully monitoring, analysing and reporting Antarctic tourism trends since 1991 as part of its commitment to the effective self-management of guest activities. Every year at IAATO's annual meeting, members have open and candid discussions on safety, environmental protection and self-regulation. Decision-making is supported by recommendations developed by IAATO's many dedicated committees and working groups throughout the year. The meetings conclude annually with the voting in of new policies on best practice which support the association's mission.