



IAATO Background and Role

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) is a non-profit, member-driven industry association established to advocate for and promote the practice of safe and environmentally responsible private-sector travel to Antarctica. Our organization operates within the framework of the [Antarctic Treaty System](#), including the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty (the Madrid Protocol), and adheres to relevant international and national laws and agreements.

Coinciding with the creation of the Madrid Protocol, which established rigorous standards beyond those already outlined in the Antarctic Treaty and provided the framework for the continued protection of the Antarctic environment, seven companies which had already been operating in Antarctica founded IAATO in 1991. Joining together meant the individual companies could collaborate to establish the highest possible standards for safe, responsible, and environmentally conscious travel in this remote wilderness. It also enabled them to pool resources and engage their respective governments to develop substantive regulations and guidelines aligned with the best practices already followed in the field.

IAATO's focus on safety, conservation, management and education promotes a greater worldwide understanding and protection of the Antarctic. Our goal is to leave the region as majestic for future generations as it is today. This effort is unique, and the challenge of maintaining safe, environmentally responsible tourism to this extent is rare in other regions of the world. Sharing best practices — based on decades of combined operating experience — demonstrates that ecologically responsible tourism is possible in remote and sensitive wilderness areas.

It is important to note that IAATO is not a regulatory authority and does not possess the legal mandate to enforce visitor caps or other binding regulations. The authority to regulate tourism activities in Antarctica resides with the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties (ATCPs), who are responsible for permitting or authorising human activity in the region and implementing and enforcing protection measures under the Antarctic Treaty System.

IAATO Membership

IAATO is comprised of more than 120 companies and organizations from across the world. IAATO membership includes:

Operators, who operate directly in Antarctica and organize their own travel programs. Operators (and Provisional Operators) must receive a permit or authorisation from an ATCP to visit Antarctica.

Associates are tour operators, travel agents or other marketers that book their customers into operator members' Antarctic programs. IAATO also has non-profit associates with an interest in supporting IAATO's objectives.

Provisional Operators, who have some outstanding requirements, such as undergoing a mandatory IAATO observation, to fulfil before they reach full operator status.

IAATO members engage in open, candid discussions on safety, environmental protection, and self-management at the association's annual meeting. Decision-making is supported by recommendations developed by IAATO's many dedicated committees, subcommittees and working groups throughout the year. The meetings conclude with voting on new policies that support and further the association's mission.

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

IAATO Vessels

Most Antarctic visitors travel by vessel, using the ship or boat as their accommodation during their stay on the White Continent. IAATO Member Operators have an array of vessels available to the prospective traveller, all authorised or permitted for Antarctic expeditions 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 make landings.

C2 – Mid-size vessels that carry 201-500 passengers and make 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.](#)

Managing Human Activity

Antarctica is one of the most protected locations - if not the most protected location - on Earth when it comes to managing human activity. All human activities in Antarctica, including tourism, science and fishing, must be authorised/permited by a relevant national competent authority/government office (i.e., Antarctic Treaty Party) and are subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) before proceeding. IAATO requires its members to abide by the Antarctic Treaty System and works closely with governments, scientists, Antarctic Treaty Parties, environmental groups, and other stakeholders to achieve the best outcomes for the continent's ongoing protection.

Treaty Parties come together once a year at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) to exchange information, consult together and formulate instruments to further the objectives of the Treaty. As an Invited Expert since 1994, IAATO participates in annual ATCMs, providing expert advice on tourism-related issues to facilitate discussions on the management of human activity in Antarctica.

Site Management

IAATO works closely with Antarctic Treaty Parties to develop site guidelines for visitors and operational procedures that are regularly reviewed and enhanced.

There are two types of site guidelines:

- [Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting](#) (ATCM) guidelines, for adherence by all
- IAATO guidelines, for adherence by IAATO members in addition to ATCM guidelines)

IAATO participates with Treaty Parties on site guideline review trips approximately every five years. In the intervening years, we work with Treaty Parties to update existing ATCM site guidelines.

IAATO routinely creates and enhances its own site guidelines, which it mandates for its members. These can be adopted at ATCM and have been in the past. We often work in conjunction with Treaty Parties as we develop IAATO site guidelines. We then share them, and the Treaty Parties determine whether they wish to proceed to adoption. Regardless of whether they do so, these guidelines remain mandatory for IAATO members.

All Activity Management

Antarctic Treaty Parties implement the Antarctic Treaty and its Environment Protocol into their individual domestic law. National legislations establish a permitting or authorizing regime for activities in Antarctica, and eligible visitors are required to obtain the necessary permits/authorisation in advance from the

relevant [National Competent Authority](#) of an Antarctic Treaty Party. Whether accepted in national legislation, IAATO requires its members to abide by Antarctic Treaty System rules and guidelines and works closely with governments, scientists, Antarctic Treaty Parties, environmental groups, and other stakeholders to achieve the best outcomes for the continent's ongoing protection.

IAATO Operations

IAATO requires its operators to adhere to all ATCM guidance and regulations. In addition, IAATO members have proactively developed comprehensive guidelines and operational procedures to minimise environmental impacts and reduce safety risks. These include:

- Implementing IAATO site-specific visitation guidelines to manage human activity at frequently visited locations.
- Coordinating vessel itineraries through a centralised ship scheduling system to prevent overcrowding and mitigate cumulative impacts.
- Mandatory assessments for field guides and vessel crews to ensure understanding of best practices in environmental stewardship.
- Safeguarding measures for wildlife, including whale slow-down zones and mandatory acoustic awareness zones.
- Participating in wildlife and environmental monitoring efforts, including a robust Site Stewardship program and the [Voluntary Cetacean and Pinniped Sightings \(V-CaPS\)](#) program.

These measures align with the objectives of the Antarctic Treaty System and demonstrate the IAATO membership's capacity to self-manage effectively.

Wildlife and Environmental Monitoring

As dedicated Antarctic stewards, IAATO member operators contribute to environmental and wildlife monitoring through the association's programs, partnerships and operations.

[The Voluntary Cetacean and Pinniped Sightings \(V-CaPS\)](#) program asks field staff on IAATO-operated vessels to document wildlife presence in the region. Since its launch in 2022, data gathered through the program has been used to strengthen safeguarding measures for whales and seals in Antarctica. These measures include slow-down zones and mandatory acoustic awareness zones in whale-rich areas.

Operators log V-CaPS sightings in the OceanWatchers app, which contributes to a global dataset of marine mammal sightings available to international researchers.

IAATO's Site Stewardship Program was developed to identify trends in environmental changes and inform management decisions. Each season, vessels are assigned specific sites to monitor and report changes to site conditions, wildlife presence and other observations.

Latest Visitor Statistics

IAATO has been carefully monitoring, analysing and reporting Antarctic tourism trends since 1991.

During the 2025-26 Antarctic season, 113,518 people travelled with IAATO members, including 27,217 visitors who travelled on cruise-only vessels and did not set foot on the continent. [The latest statistics are available here.](#)

Antarctic Ambassadorship

Antarctic Ambassadors is a community created and supported by IAATO to encourage and inspire people around the world to act for Antarctica, uniting a global community of passionate individuals. An Antarctic Ambassador is someone who loves and respects the region, educates others by using their Antarctic experiences, advocates for Antarctica when the opportunity arises, and protects the region by making positive changes at home.

IAATO believes that Antarctic expeditions with responsible and robust environmental practices at their core create among visitors a greater understanding of the environment, Antarctica's value to global science, and how changes to the region can impact us all. By inspiring travellers to become Antarctic Ambassadors, we ensure that this extraordinary place remains protected for future generations. As of April 2025, Antarctic Ambassadorship is enshrined in IAATO's bylaws, formally committing its members to cultivate a corps of Antarctic Ambassadors.

Tourism Growth

Tourism growth is a trend identified worldwide, and the rise in visitor numbers to Antarctica is consistent with other tourist locations. While Antarctica receives relatively few visitors compared to other destinations,

its unique qualities require rigorous safeguards. IAATO remains committed to promoting responsible tourism practices that prioritise the protection of Antarctica's unique environment. We work closely with regulatory bodies, scientific institutions, and other valued stakeholders and polar partners to ensure that tourism activities are conducted sustainably and in accordance with the principles of the Antarctic Treaty System.

[The latest IAATO 2025-26 visitor statistics](#), released following the 2026 ATCM in Hiroshima, Japan, show a 4.2% reduction in visitor numbers compared to 2024-25. In the current global economic climate, we anticipate a slowdown in travel to Antarctica. Our preliminary estimates for the 2026-27 season indicate a slight decline in passenger numbers.