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Three Ways Into Antarctica



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How to navigate travel on the continent.

There are places in this world where guides are optional, where it's possible to get by with careful planning, maps and research. Antarctica is not among them. The White Continent requires careful preparation, long lead times, teams of experts and modes of transportation that exist nowhere else. The journey has gotten easier (see "By Air"), but this is still the ends of the earth. Whether it's a cruise liner stocked with guides and scientists or an ice camp founded by a famed explorer, it takes a village and then some to properly experience this place. Most travel to Antarctica takes place during the Austral summer, which runs from November to March. The ice-scapes are at their most dramatic in November and December (early summer), when temperatures are frigid. High summer (January and February) brings almost perpetual daylight, penguin mating season and plentiful wildlife. Whales return to feed in March. But while their summer is the time to visit, the time to book a trip is now.

By Air: Antarctica XXI

There was a time when Antarctic travel meant a boat trip across 600 miles of rough seas. But that all changed when the XXI air bridge came along.

The Drake Passage crossing is affectionately known as the Drake Shake, due to unpredictable weather and seas as tall as buildings. Thanks to Antarctica XXI's British Aerospace BAE-146, what was once a nauseating two-day boat trip is now just a two-hour flight. There was a time when only scientists and penguin researchers used this back door to the White Continent. Then in 2001, a Chilean tour operator decided to create a civilian air bridge between Punta Arenas and the Antarctic Peninsula and run flights during the Southern Hemisphere's summer months. The plane touches down on King George Island, home to Chile's Eduardo Frei base. There's no dicey ice landing to negotiate—just an ordinary airstrip that, at worst, is covered in dry snow.

From there you go by sea. The *Ocean Nova*, a 68-passenger craft built in Denmark to conquer icy waters, is an intimate experience. The crew creates a South American atmosphere onboard, fueled by pisco sours and an authentic *parrilla*, or Latin barbecue, served on the upper deck while giant icebergs drift by. The lounge offers hot drinks during the day and cocktails in the evening; lectures and talks take place in a panoramic lounge. The *Ocean Nova's* most important asset is its 12-person expedition team, which includes seasoned biologists, naturalists, a historian, an ornithologist, an ocean specialist, a glaciologist, a doctor and crew members who have spent years in Arctic and Antarctic waters. Among the stops: the quirky Vernadsky Research Base, manned 365 days a year by feisty Ukrainians who offer visitors shots of vodka in their cozy homemade bar, complete with a pool table and a vintage record player. The amenities help them ride out the long, harsh winter, by which time you'll be far away. *Packages start at \$3,995 a person for five days; 877-994-2994; antarcticaxxi.com. —Debbie Pappyn*

By Land: White Desert's Whichaway Camp

While cruise ships circle Antarctica's perimeter, explorer Patrick Woodhead has carved out a luxurious ecocamp deep in the continent's interior.

Antarctica has two well-worn access points: the Peninsula, reachable from the tip of South America, and Victoria Land, accessed mostly from New Zealand, on Antarctica's opposite shore. White Desert is something else entirely. The company was founded by adventurer and explorer Patrick Woodhead, who was part of the first team to traverse the continent from east to west in 2005. During the polar summer, a private IL-66 Intercontinental jet flies guests from Cape Town to Queen Maud Land, about 500 miles from the coast. The plane touches down near Whichaway Camp, White Desert's seasonal, solar-and-wind-powered outpost, which was built just last year. The 12-guest camp is comprised of six dome-style fiberglass pods beside a frozen lake that looks out on a 200-foot ice shelf. Deep in the interior, visitors are immersed in the landscape in a way that cruise ships don't allow. It is not unlike an African safari on ice, with jeeps designed for snow and frozen surfaces, and colonies of emperor penguins standing in for prides of lions. The amenities and polish of the camp are what you might expect to find in

South Africa's Kruger National Park: carved wooden safari chairs, Stellenbosch wines and a leather-wrapped brass fender on which to relax by the fire. Six professional polar guides accompany every trip, most of which are bespoke, with activities including ice climbing, rappelling and picnics beneath a 24-hour sun. *Eight-night packages start at \$52,300 a person, based on 12 guests; 27-72/865-0228; white-desert.com. —Sophy Roberts*

By Sea: Quark's *Ocean Diamond*

An iconic Antarctic cruise—and a full Departures-approved fleet.

On the fourth day of Quark's Antarctic Explorer cruise, the *Ocean Diamond* enters Wilhelmina Bay, and you immediately understand why travelers flock here from every corner of the world. Alps rise out of the deep blue water, interspersed by occasionally calving glaciers. Seals sleep on pristine icebergs. Whale spouts are spotted, then backs, then tails. In the days that follow, those aboard are too busy to take advantage of the complimentary yoga classes or attend lectures by staff scientists. The friendly, expert crew members help passengers into Zodiacs and zip them to shore to traipse by nesting penguin colonies or up snowy hillsides to take in astonishing views. The 189-passenger ship, the largest in the fleet, is not as luxurious as the *Sea Spirit*, which also runs this brief-by-Antarctic-standards but utterly satisfying 11- or 12-day route. Upgrades include camping "overnight" (the sun doesn't set) and sea kayaking, which allows you to get even closer to the White Continent's wild inhabitants. *Packages start at \$4,995 for an 11-day Antarctic Explorer voyage, based on triple cabin; 888-892-0073; quarkexpeditions.com. —Sandra Allen*

A Tropical Remedy for Seasickness: Ginger is a proven antidote to nausea, but fresh roots are difficult to find at sea. Powdered pink Fijian ginger, organically grown on the island of Wakaya, can easily be mixed into hot water when the going gets rough. *\$25 for .6 oz; wakayaperfection.com.*

More Southern Ocean—Worthy Boats

Le Boreal: Captain Etienne Garcia goes the extra mile, occasionally mooring against an ice float for direct disembarkation and personally hosting night excursions under the midnight sun. Amenities include a salon and spa (complete with hammam), a five-star French restaurant and a heated outdoor pool. *From \$8,390 for ten nights; 888-400-1082; en.ponant.com.*

Ms Hanseatic: The elegant German expedition offers gourmet meals and soirées during the 22-day voyage between Ushuaia and the Antarctic Peninsula, which includes the Falklands and the South Shetland Islands. The suites are newly renovated, and an upper deck features a swimming pool, a sauna and a gym. *From \$16,970 for 21 nights; 800-782-3924; hl-cruises.com.*

Orion: The ship sails from New Zealand, stopping at subantarctic islands and passing through the Ross Sea. This is Scott and Shackleton's Antarctica, with visits to Cape Evans, the Possession Islands and the Ross Ice Shelf. Good sea legs are required, but the reward is an experience beyond the Peninsula. *From \$11,795 for 14 nights; 877-674-6687; orionexpeditions.com.*