

# Pole to Pole

Once off-limits to everyone but expeditionary types, the poles are coming out of the deep freeze for travel.

BY VICKY GOMELSKY

On a good day, the temperature's a balmy 30°F. The water is just right—for an ice cube. And the scenery is under a layer of perma-freeze thicker than the peas stranded in the back of your icebox. As far as summers go, it's a bit on the cool side. But for some, this is what a vacation is all about.

Maybe the arctic and antarctic aren't the most obvious places to spend your hard-earned holiday, but these far-flung ice caps are still hot spots for some travelers. "It's the closest you can get to heaven without dying," swears Shirley Metz, cofounder of Eco-Expeditions, a company that takes small groups of travelers to Antarctica.

Polar fans can be diehards for their cause, inspired by the haunting shapes and stark vistas at the ends of the world. Twisted blue ice sculptures, colored auroras flashing across the nighttime sky and iridescent bergs big enough to swallow a dozen *Titanics* make believers even out of travelers who've seen it all. "That great expanse of sky is endless; It touches your soul," raves Virginia Mason, a traveler from New Berlin, Wisconsin, who's planning her third trip to the north pole this summer.

With solo journeys through the arctic and antarctic next to impossible, outfitters are the prime route in, shuttling visitors by land, sea or air. "It's the chance to go where few people have," says Michelle Gervais, a regional director for Journeys, which has been in the Antarctica business since 1992. "A lot of our clients have been to most other continents, but not this one."

Most of the world looks at the poles and sees nothing; polarophiles see Nothing. "I love the barrenness of the two polar regions," says Metz. "You can travel for miles and miles and get a sense of the solitude that comes from nature." She should know. She

was the first woman to ski to the south pole in 1988–89. Only 13 men had made it overland to the pole before her. Five of those, including explorer Robert Falcon Scott, died in a fierce glacial blizzard in 1912, 33 days after Roald Amundsen of Norway became the first to set foot on the southernmost point of the earth.

The poles will help you develop an appreciation for man's "frailty as a creature of temperature," as Jack London once put it, but they're not identical twins, far from it. Antarctica is a continental landmass; the north pole is ice. Antarctica has 16,000-foot peaks; the north pole has ice floes.

Antarctica sits on 5.5 million square miles of the coldest, windiest, driest and highest land on the globe. Vincent Massif rises to 16,960 feet; even the pole is at the 9,000-foot mark. The lowest outdoor temperature ever recorded here, -129°F, doesn't even take the wind-chill factor into account. When gale-force zephyrs whirl in from the middle of the antarctic Sahara (the continent receives less than two inches of precipitation per year), temperatures can plummet further, sometimes without warning. "One minute it's balmy and sunny, and you're

wearing short sleeves. The next minute a wind comes blasting down, and it blows you right off the scale," warns Metz.

But the world's largest wilderness compensates for fickle weather with scenes that dwarf everything else. "Antarctica is definitely one of the places where you'll feel that there's something bigger out there, and you won't have to be a religious person to feel it," notes Werner Zehnder, president of Seattle-based Zegrahm Expeditions, a longtime polar specialist.

Humans and their lofty preoccupations tend to shrink in the scale of things at the uttermost earth. Sheer ice cliffs reach hundreds of feet skyward, framing stopovers like Elephant Island and the Antarctic Peninsula's Paradise Bay. Ice sculptures bathed in opaque shades of green and blue sparkle like gems, while beneath the glacial dome, million-year-old layers of ice slowly depress the supporting bedrock—at points, 14,000 feet below the surface.

Besides the geophysical attractions, another big calling card of Antarctica is the wildlife, the throngs of tuxedo-clad birds and marine mammals that call it home. As many as 30 million breeding pairs of penguins, from eight different species, crowd the fringes of the continent.

*Formal attire and dramatic staging are the rule at this Antarctica reception.*



TONY STONE/JOHN RENHARD

There are also plenty of seals, whales (blue, humpback and killer), albatross and petrels. It used to be that only a few intrepid visitors could get to the southern continent, mostly scientists studying everything from global warming to albatross flight patterns. But when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, it freed up a fleet of ships that found their way into the polar travel market. And a destination was born. Currently there are 24 companies in the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), a consortium formed in 1991 to oversee tourism and its environmental impact in the fragile antarctic ecosystem.

Most companies cruise the wildlife-rich Antarctic Peninsula, just below the tip of South America. Mountain Travel Sobek and Journeys will take you in Zodiacs to sites such as Penguin Island and Half Moon Island to ogle seal colonies, penguin rookeries and old whaling stations. Last year, Quark Expeditions, based in Darien, Connecticut, offered the first-ever circumnavigation of the continent for passengers—a 66-day, 12,000-mile journey, calling on rarely visited research stations and emperor penguin rookeries.

Zegrahm offers a 37-day expedition that begins in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. It's a journey to the seldom-seen subantarctic islands of Marion, Crozet, Kerguelen and Heard, where the wildlife lives in Pluto-like isolation.

Each of the trips comes with a complete supply of naturalists and experts on the region. So along the way, you'll learn about Antarctica's volatile temper, plus details on seabirds, krill and ice (e.g., *growler*—an iceberg smaller than a "bergy bit" but larger than "brash").

If you truly want to stand at the official bottom of the earth, only one company can get you there. U.K.-based Adventure Network International flies custom trips to the south pole from a base camp at Patriot Hills, 680 miles and six hours away. The trip actually begins in Punta Arenas, Chile, where pilots check satellite photos and weather conditions before setting their compasses for the 90° mark.

The north pole boasts a splendor more subtle than that of its southern sibling. "You're being fed all this incredible beauty in Antarctica, while in the arctic, you have to use your imagination to



*Slush Fun.* Russian icebreaker Yamal, making cubes en route to the north pole.

compose the scene," explains Zehnder.

While Antarctica is a continent surrounded by oceans, the arctic is an ocean topped by a crackling web of ice, ringed by the rugged fjords of the Canadian, Russian and Greenland northern coasts. In July, when the sun's rays are strongest, the wide, flat expanse of the high north is salted with ephemeral summertime lakes. But for the rest of the year, all is plunged into a bitter, icy darkness—an effect amplified by the mirror-like icescape, which reflects solar energy back into outer space. And that's exactly how many describe it. "It's like the sensation of being on another planet; it's otherworldly," says Anna Vdovenko, a coordinator for expeditions to the pole and environs. "It sort of transforms you once you're there."

Thousands of years ago, the predecessors of today's Inuit, Inupiat, Yupik and Greenlanders passed through nooks and inlets bordering the arctic circle and decided to stay. Many polar trips call on the towns of their distant relatives, at stops such as Greenland's Qaanaaq and the Baffin Island region.

If your inner explorer is aching for that final trip, though, you can head straight for the top. Zegrahm, Quark and a few others offer trips to 90° north—the official pole—aboard Russian-owned nuclear icebreakers. The *Sovetskiy Soyuz* and the *Yamal* use 75,000-horsepower engines to crush through

ice that can be close to 20 feet thick.

When the ice is especially thick, the journey to the pole is a lot more gratifying, says Esther Pereira, a guide for Quark and Seattle-based TCS Expeditions, another company that sub-charters icebreakers. "This year, we were wondering seriously if we were going to make it. It was really an adventure."

Polar travel also has other perks. Depending on the conditions, the trips can include sightseeing stops at places like Franz Josef Land, a jagged cluster of mountainous isles north of Russia, stocked with polar bears. "They're very curious and absolutely unafraid," says Zehnder. "I bet if the gangway were down, they would come right on board."

Twenty-four-hour sunlight is another draw, adding a surreal quality to arctic trips. "It's not unusual to have passengers up on the bridge till two in the morning, because you just can't pull yourself away," says Pereira.

It's all part of what makes polar travelers crave another helping. Even the first north pole visitor, Robert Peary, despite being rudely treated, couldn't help himself. "I began to long for . . . the silence, the vastness of the great, white lonely North. And back I went. . . ." ☉

Zegrahm Expeditions/Eco-Expeditions, Seattle, WA (800) 628-8748; Quark Expeditions, Darien, CT (800) 356-5699; Mountain Travel Sobek, El Cerrito, CA (800) 227-2384; TCS Expeditions, Seattle, WA (800) 727-7477; Journeys, Ann Arbor, MI (800) 255-8735.