An Introduction to Antarctica
Remote, inaccessible and harsh, yet utterly beguiling, long has Antarctica’s incomparable scenery, exotic cast of wildlife and rich history beckoned the intrepid traveller.

Antarctica is said to be the coldest, driest and windiest place on earth, but this does an injustice to its compelling draw cards for the visitor, while ignoring the ability to experience this extraordinary region from the comfort of an ice strengthened expeditionary boat.

Steppes Travel was one of the first UK Tour Operators to offer holidays to Antarctica nearly ten years ago. Since then we’ve built an impressive reputation based on detailed first-hand knowledge and forged long-standing partnerships with all the leading small ship boat operators. Our main Antarctic specialists have over 20 years of Antarctic experience between them and have both visited the Peninsula.

From the spectacular ice-choked channels of the Antarctic Peninsula, to the stark beauty and historic huts of The Ross Sea, whether you want an express ‘Fly & Cruise’ or an extended voyage to cross the intangible Antarctic Circle, we have one of the broadest ranges of Antarctic cruises available.

Antarctica
The immense ice-shrouded wilderness of Antarctica is a winter wonderland which defies our senses.
Why Book with Steppes?

With 20 years experience of offering polar trips, we provide unparalleled first-hand knowledge, including tips and useful pointers you simply won’t find in any guidebook or website:

- Friendly, helpful and objective advice, backed up by many years of experience
- Unrivalled in-depth knowledge of the boats, many we’ve either sailed on or personally inspected
- Invaluable advice on which are the best cabins and which to be avoided on each ship
- Adept at cutting through the bewildering maze of options and matching you to the right boat and cabin

PEACE OF MIND

Booking with Steppes Travel you can be assured your money is safe; we offer a fully inclusive service with flights and pre and post voyage accommodation, which will give you full ATOL protection. All our flight options also include complimentary airline failure insurance.

All the boats we offer are members of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) and have agreed to abide by one of tourism’s most conscientious codes of conduct.

Antarctica map
What is Expeditionary Cruising?

If you think cruising is only about huge ships docking in small ports and disgorging thousands of passengers, then think again. Expeditionary voyages are everything traditional cruising is not:

**SMALL BOATS**
We offer a comprehensive range of smaller sized ice-strengthened boats, which accommodate between 20 – 128 passengers providing a very intimate, personalised Arctic experience.

**ACTIVE**
Active - Daily landings by zodiac allowing you to really experience the Arctic. Typically includes plenty of opportunity to spend time exploring the tundra with walks to suit all abilities.

**EDUCATIONAL**
All landings are accompanied by your expeditionary staff, and if time permits they will also offer a variety of lectures, providing a strong educational dimension to the whole experience.

**ADVENTURE OPTIONS**
The more adventurous may wish to consider exploring sea kayak or diving which are offered on select departures along with a specialist led photographic cruise.

**When to Go?**

The Antarctic summer season is quite short, running from late October through to mid March. There are seasonal nuances and the timing of your trip may be influenced by what you are hoping to see:

**LATE OCTOBER - NOVEMBER (SPRING)**
Early in the season you are likely to encounter larger amounts of snow and icebergs will be at their most spectacular. This is the time of year when courtship is in full swing and in the penguin rookeries you will see birds displaying and nest building. In South Georgia and the Falklands, the spring flowers bloom and the fur seals will also be courting. This is the ideal time to be visiting the Sub-Antarctic Islands for bird watching.

**DECEMBER - JANUARY (MID SUMMER)**
This is when Antarctica is at its warmest and wildlife at their most active; you will also have the advantage of up to 24 hours of daylight. The penguin chicks in the more northerly latitudes hatch first with those on the peninsula mainly hatching around mid December. This is the height of the season and coincides with the highest cabin fares. Expeditions from Australasia to the Ross Sea and East Antarctica depart during this season.

**FEBRUARY - MARCH (LATE SUMMER)**
These two months are traditionally known as the best for those interested in whale watching as they are likely to be seen in their most prolific numbers. The penguin rookeries will be busy with adult birds bringing in krill for their fast growing chicks, most of which will fledge in late February to early March. Leopard seal pups provide drama as they cut their teeth and hone hunting skills. By late summer the sea ice will have broken up making navigation further south easier, while the soft, low light can be ideal for photography.
There is no average day on board an expeditionary boat as the day’s activities will be very much determined by the prevailing weather conditions, ice and the wildlife encountered. Flexibility here is the key. If you are looking for a strict and structured itinerary then this is not the destination for you!

Early morning call is normally around 07:00 with an update on the weather conditions and the morning’s anticipated excursion (landing). However the start of the day can be earlier, with an excited call of “whales spotted on the starboard bow” or something similarly enticing. Always be prepared to change quickly and have your camera ready for these occasions and you will be rewarded, no one will notice morning hair or odd socks pulled on in a hurry!

Breakfast is typically a buffet affair with a range of cereals, fresh fruit, breads and a cooked option. There will be a briefing regarding the morning excursion: what the options are, how long the zodiac cruise is likely to be and what the team hope you will encounter.

Standing at the top of the gangplank for the first time can be daunting, but you will soon learn to always keep one hand to rail, the sailors grip and the step, step, sit shuffle, shuffle for a safe and quick entry into your zodiac.

Once in your zodiac you may find yourself cruising along the front of a magnificent glacier with birds swirling above your head and rafts of penguins porpoising alongside. Watch penguins, the clowns of Antarctica, gather on the ice edge plucking up courage to jump into the abyss, knowing there is a leopard seal patrolling below. When the penguins return, they gather under the surface before rocketing to the surface like little torpedo’s and hurling themselves onto the rocks and ice, often landing in a comical ungainly heap.

On land, you may find yourself climbing up a steep snowy bank where you will be rewarded with a view far into the distance, over glaciers to snow capped peaks, while out at sea you watch a group of curious humpbacks as they circle your ship, wondering who these aliens are. Perhaps you will prefer to sit quietly on the edge of a penguin rookery and watch daily life unfold; they are never quiet with constant bickering and stone stealing for their nests going on.

Reluctantly, you return to the mothership by zodiac in time for a warming lunch. While you eat, the captain will be skilfully manoeuvring the ship to your next destination, ready for the afternoon’s excursion. While the ship is repositioning, spend time on the deck watching the elegant pintados glide on the updrafts created by your wake, or go to the bridge, which is often one of the best places to spot whales, where you can look at the nautical charts or just watch as the ship weaves between towering icebergs.

What will this afternoon’s excursion bring? An inquisitive Minke whale diving beneath your zodiac or encounter a crabeater or leopard seal relaxing on a slab of ice?

Maybe you will be lucky enough to see an iceberg calving, one moment calm then the next with a great whoosh turning and rebalancing itself, exposing the beautifully ridged and rippled underside in blue hues you never knew existed. Alternatively you may encounter one of the Antarctic deep fogs, with icebergs looming out of the mist evoking thoughts of those who explored this region before Gortex and fleeces; many of the bays, glaciers and mountains around you are named after them.

After a good hearty three course meal, most passengers are ready to head for their cabins for an early night, while the hardier may have opportunity to forsake their cabin to camp out for a night on this great continent. An unforgettable experience!
What Wildlife will I see?

Penguins

These inquisitive, endearing birds can be found in huge numbers across the Antarctic continent and where you go will determine what species you will see. The Antarctic Peninsula harbours Adelie, Chinstrap and Gentoo in great numbers and Macaroni’s in smaller numbers. Some of the penguin colonies number into the hundreds of thousands. You will have plenty of opportunity to visit these colonies and watch their clownish antics during the course of your voyage. In South Georgia and the Falkland Islands, you will encounter vast colonies of King Penguins, along with gaudy Rock Hoppers. If you visit some of the Sub Antarctic Islands you can see a number of endemic species including the Snares Crested, Erect Crested and Royal Penguin.

WHALES

All whale species found in Antarctic waters migrate long distances to feed in the cold, nutrient-rich Southern Oceans during the austral summer before heading to warmer northern waters to breed and give birth to their young during the winter months. If you visit the Antarctic Peninsula you can expect frequent encounters with Humpbacks and Minke whales as they are often very curious of the main ship and also the zodiacs. You may also encounter Orcas (Killer Whales) that patrol the waters hunting seal pups and penguins. Southern Right Whales and Sperm Whales are visitors to the region, migrating south from Latin America and South Africa. On voyages with long sea crossing you may encounter Fin and Sei whales, and if you are very privileged a rare sighting of the largest species of all, the Blue Whale.

SEALS

Of the six Antarctic seal species, four are ice habitat specialists, breeding on the sea ice in spring. Leopard and Ross seals tend to be solitary, whereas Weddell and Crabeater seals form loose breeding aggregations. The Leopard Seal is Antarctica’s top penguin predator, growing up to just over 3 meters. Antarctic fur seals and elephant seals are both found north of the pack-ice zone and breed in dense colonies on beaches. Here dominant males (bulls) maintain harems of females (cows) in territories. In constantly defending these, bulls will not forage at sea, relying instead on blubber reserves laid down in the previous winter. All seals breed annually and the timing of pup production and associated behaviour is linked to habitat and ecology. Mating occurs after pupping, though a fertilised egg will not implant in the uterus until later in the year.

ALBATROSS & OTHER BIRDS

For birders, other than the obvious penguins colonies, the islands around Antarctica offer some spectacular opportunities to get close to many species. The Wandering Albatross is the largest of seabirds, with a staggering wing span reaching 3 metres and a body mass of 8 –12 kg. They arrive in South Georgia in November to breed in loose colonies on flat grasslands. The chicks hatch in April and are reared throughout the winter, and then they fledge during November and December. The Falkland Islands are home to 65% of the world’s Black-browed Albatross population, while South Georgia hosts Grey-Headed and the Light-Mantled Sooty Albatross.
**FAQ's**

**How cold will it be?**

 Probably not as cold as you imagine as you will be travelling during the austral summer. There is very little change in temperature between day and night, which usually hovers around 0 – 5 degrees. The wind chill however can make this feel considerably cooler! For land based expeditions and South Pole trips the temperatures will be much colder, we will advise on the specific requirements for each expedition.

**Do I need to purchase specialist equipment or clothing?**

 The good news is that you don’t need to spend lots of money on specialist equipment, but a good set of thermals will be a worthwhile investment. A good quality outer jacket and waterproof over trousers are also essential. On some voyages it’s possible to hire jackets, and wellington boots are generally available on loan. Some vessels provide you with a complimentary expedition equipment, we will advise on the specific requirements for each expedition.

**How fit do I need to be?**

 This is an active voyage involving walking excursions (not necessarily long, but over broken ground) and zodiac cruises. To be able to get the most out of your voyage you should be in good general health. In order to join the excursions, you must be able to get in and out of the zodiacs. Please note that none of these ships have an internal lift system between decks and stairs on ships tend to be steep. Each ship has a dedicated doctor on board who accompanies all excursions and is available on call. You will be required to complete a medical questionnaire, this is not designed to stop you from travelling simply provide accurate information to the resident Dr.

 Please be aware that in the case of a medical emergency, due to its geographical remoteness, helicopter rescue from Antarctica is not available. In an emergency, the ship would head directly for the nearest port, which could be up to 2 days sail away, from where a hospital transfer will be arranged.

**Am I too old?**

 The simple answer is ‘No’, there is no maximum age restriction, your health and general outlook on life being far more relevant criteria. Many of our clients over the years have been well into their seventies and eighties.

**Is Antarctica suitable for children/families?**

 Antarctica will undoubtedly make a lasting impression on a child; however we would discourage travellers under the age of 12. These voyages simply don’t cater for children and don’t offer any specific activities for children, child minding services, a child friendly food menu or smaller life preservers.

**Will I suffer for Sea Sickness?**

 As you will possibly be crossing the Drake Passage twice you should anticipate potentially rough seas at some stage on the voyage. Should you be prone to motion or sea sickness, we suggest consulting your local pharmacy or GP for advice on anti-seasickness medication. “How rough is the Drake Passage?” is an often asked question for many potential Antarctica travellers. It’s a tricky one as the crossings can be anything from a millpond to a force eleven hurricane, the latter being the less common, around 1 in 10 crossings are stormy. Ultimately it’s down to a little luck, but most people find that their own experience wasn’t as bad as they thought it would be. We can certainly help to hopefully reduce concern by recommending boats known for their stability. For those still worried, it’s possible to avoid sailing the Drake Passage altogether by taking a 2 hour flight rather than undertaking a 2-day seas journey, see the Fly & Cruise option for details.

**Single travellers**

 As these voyages offer a collective experience in the company of like-minded people, they’re very well suited for single travellers. You have the option to either share a triple or twin same sex or to cover the supplement to secure your own cabin. If sharing, a cabin mate will be allocated to you by the boat operator.

**Do I need to pack a jacket & tie/cocktail dress?**

 Dress code on board the boat is very informal and leans strongly towards the practical. When not undertaking excursions, people dress casually, even for dinner in the evenings. You may want a smarter shirt for the captain's dinner on the final night. The boat itself is always warm inside.

**Can I contact the outside world?**

 One of the great bonuses of travelling in this region is there is no mobile phone signal. If necessary it is possible to make outgoing calls by satellite phone and you can send and receive emails via the ship’s email address, all of which is charged to your tab. Rejoice in the solitude.

 If you have further questions, please don’t hesitate to give us a call, we would be delighted to help and assist you in making the right decisions.
What are my choices?

Below is a brief overview of some of our Antarctic voyages, for more detailed itineraries please contact us:

**Classic Antarctica & South Shetlands**
A fantastic adventure encompassing the highlights of the Antarctica Peninsula, the most accessible part of the White Continent, which offers the best of Antarctica’s dramatic landscape and wildlife in microcosm. Be warned you may be hooked by this trip & want to return.

**Fly & Cruise Antarctica**
Access Antarctica in just over 1.5 hours by plane from the toe of Chile, and avoid the +2 days by ship across the infamous Drake Passage - ideal for those either short of time or poor sailors! Options include a trip heading south into the Antarctic Circle.

**Crossing The Antarctic Circle**
Of all the Peninsular trips we offer this expedition spends the most time exploring the Antarctic Peninsula itself. The extra time gives you even more chance to explore by zodiac and on foot. Be one of only a small handful of people each year to cross the Antarctic Circle.

**Antarctic Peninsula, Falkland Islands & South Georgia**
One of the world’s greatest voyages combining the history and variety of The Falklands, the extraordinary density of wildlife of South Georgia, finishing with Antarctica itself as the ‘jewel in the crown’. This is our most popular departure.

**South Georgia**
Fly into the Falklands Islands and visit the Rock Hopper colonies. Then sail across the Scotia Sea to South Georgia for an in-depth exploration. Spend seven full days with zodiac cruises and landings at St Andrews Bay and Grytviken to name just a few.

**Falklands & Antarctica**
An alternative fly & cruise option combining the history and King Penguins on the Falklands with the classic highlights of the Antarctic Peninsula and no sailing across the Drake Passage, fly into the Falklands & back from Antarctica.
**Weddell Sea Voyages**

Voyage by ice breaker deep into the icepack in and the Weddell Sea, where huge icebergs become trapped like Shackleton & his men. There is a chance to helicopter into the Emperor Penguin colonies on Snow Hill Island.

**Ross Sea**

The remote Ross Sea region of Antarctica is inaccessible but for two months every year when the ice thaws allowing access to five historic huts of some of the greatest polar explorers. On route you can explore the Sub-Antarctic islands and their endemic species.

**Sailing around Antarctica, the Falkland Islands & South Georgia**

An epic voyage that takes you onwards from the Antarctic Peninsula continuing on through the Bellinghausen and Amundsen Sea’s to the Ross Sea region where you can visit the historic huts and onboard helicopters allow for indepth exploration of the interior and it’s Emperor Penguin colonies.

**Land based adventures**

If you don’t fancy an expedition cruise then we can offer a selection of fly in and land based adventures:
- Visit the South Pole Base
- Ski the last degree
- Combine the Weddell Sea Snow Hill Emperor Penguin colonies with the South Pole Mountaineering in Antarctica Footsteps of Amundsen

We are always on the lookout for new and interesting voyages & expeditions to this vast region so this is not a comprehensive list of your options, call us for the most up to date information.
The Vessels

### Spirit of Enderby
- Capacity 50 passengers
- Small and nimble, capable of reaching places many larger ships cannot
- Staffed by extremely knowledgeable personnel
- Offers a very authentic and personalised expeditionary voyage
- Strong naturalist and birding emphasis

### Polar Pioneer
- Capacity 54 passengers
- A robust, homely vessel small enough to explore places beyond the reach of bigger ships
- Authentic, expeditionary ship with ice strengthened capabilities
- Choice of 5 different cabins types from shared triples to the captain’s suites, with choice of private or shared bathroom

### Ocean Nova
- Capacity 78 passengers
- Offers a dedicated single cabin
- All cabins have twin lower berths with en suite bathrooms
- Spacious observation deck and communal areas
- Zodiac platform at water level for easy transfer in and out of the zodiacs

### Ushuaia
- Capacity 84 passengers
- A comfortable expedition ship with Argentinean flair
- A range of cabins from semi shared to private facilities
- Lounge and bar area with large picture windows
- Airy dining room/ observation deck & dedicated lecture theatre
- Wellington boots are provided to all passengers

### Akademik Sergey Vavilov
- Capacity 92 passengers
- Exceptionally stable, quiet and manoeuvrable, expeditionary ship
- Choice of 6 different cabins types from shared triple to suite, with choice of private or shared bathroom
- Spacious public areas and generous deck space

### Akademik Ioffe
- Capacity 96, passengers although designed to carry 112
- Exceptionally stable, quiet and manoeuvrable with a fast cruising speed of 14.5 knots makes her a good option for less confident sailors
- Authentic, expeditionary ship offering a high level of customer service
- A wide choice cabins types from shared triple to suites,
- A range of adventurous activities on offer, with camping included

### Sea Explorer
- Capacity of 111 passengers
- Offers comfort and adventure
- Includes a wide variety of adventure activities including kayaking on all voyages and mountaineering on selected departures
- All cabins are suites with sea views
- High ratio of zodiacs and guides
**Plancius**
- Capacity of 116 passengers
- Completely re-built & refurbished in 2009
- Spacious observation deck with bar on deck 5 offering panoramic views
- Choice of cabins from shared quad to superior, all with private bathroom
- Two starboard gangways for swift zodiac logistics

**Ortelius**
- Capacity 116 passengers
- Fully refurbished in 2005 and cabins upgraded in 2010
- Wide choice of cabin types from quads, triples and twins to a suite offering options for all budgets
- Wellington boots are provided for all clients

### Voyage Extensions

For those travellers wishing to make more of their time in South America or New Zealand (Ross Sea and East Antarctica), we offer a full range of tailor-made extensions. Please find a few suggestions below:

**Argentina**
- Iguazu Falls, arguably the world’s most impressive waterfall
- Trekking in Patagonia amongst the granite spires of Fitzroy
- Explore the cosmopolitan city of Buenos Aires
- Experience the mountains of Argentina’s forgotten North West

**Chile**
- Trekking in Chile’s Torres Del Paine National Park
- Visit Santiago’s museums and Chile’s wineland’s
- Easter Island, a land of mythical Moai
- Visit another great desert the Atacama in Chile’s far north

**New Zealand & Pacific Islands**
- Self drive around the spectacular south island
- Take in one of the many classic multi day hikes
- Chill out on one of the Pacific Island

**Ultimate Wildlife Combos**
- The Galapagos Islands with more playful, inquisitive seals and penguins
- Baja California a whale watching mecca for another seven species

**Brazil**
- Feel the buzz of Rio de Janeiro
- Chill out on one of Brazil’s many beautiful beaches
- Visit the wildlife spectacles of the Pantanal & the Amazon
Having spent the best part of 5 years on my 'gap year' working in travel seemed the natural progression. Most recently returning from South Georgia and the Antarctic Peninsula I love exploring the remote polar regions. I have been lucky enough to visit many of the polar regions including Spitsbergen, Alaska, the Canadian High Arctic, and Russia’s Wrangel & Herald Islands. Occasionally I travel to warmer climes where a voyage down the Amazon and whale watching in Baja California would rank amongst the highlights. With a life-long passion for wildlife I love to get up close either by kayak or on foot and learn the local bushcraft skills.

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It was on a 1991 jaunt through Ecuador that I first fell for the allure of Latin America, bumping from A to B on chicken buses and high-Andean railways (more often than not on the roof). I’ve partyed with penguins in Antarctica and over the past couple of decades, broadened my experience throughout Central America, discovering more comfortable modes of transportation and enjoying stays at some of the region’s luxury small boutique hotels and lodges. I still thoroughly enjoy running up volcanoes, clambering through caves strewn with Mayan relics and snorkelling whenever the opportunity arises. Neighbouring Caribbean also holds huge appeal for me and if you can detach yourself from its beaches, there’s an exciting world of historic, scenic, cultural, culinary and environmental interests to be explored....not to mention a great selection of rums.

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The opportunity to discover new places, cultures and different people. The amazing experiences, sights and remote places I have been to and more importantly the people I have encountered, will remain in my memory for ever. I love travelling ‘off piste’ and some of great places I have visited include – travelling across the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia, trekking in the high Paramo of Venezuela, diving with sea lions and exploring the underwater world of the Galapagos, incredible wildlife in the Serengeti, Orang-utan encounters in Malaysia Borneo and the ultimate remote Antarctica.

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