Here today, gone tomorrow

The Arctic and Antarctica are now within reach of the modern tourist, with many going to see these icy wildernesses before it's too late. Christian Amodeo reports on the growth of polar tourism.

Travel at the North and South Poles has become an expensive leisure activity, suitable for tourists of all ages. The poles may be inhospitable places, but they are seeing increasing numbers of visitors.

Annual figures for the Arctic, where tourism has existed since the 19th century, have increased from about a million in the early 1990s to more than 1.5 million today. This is partly because of the lengthening summer season brought about by climate change.

Most visitors arrive by ship. In 2007, 370,000 cruise passengers visited Norway, twice the number that arrived in 2000. Iceland, a country where tourism is the second-largest industry, has enjoyed an annual growth rate of nine percent since 1990. Meanwhile, Alaska received some 1,029,800 passengers, a rise of 7.3 percent from 2006. Greenland has seen the most rapid growth in marine tourism, with a sharp increase in cruise-ship arrivals of 250 percent since 2004.

The global economic downturn may have affected the annual 20.6 percent rate of increase in visitors to the Antarctic – last season saw a drop of 17 percent to 38,200 – but there has been a 760 percent rise in land-based tourism there since 1997. More people than ever are landing at fragile sites, with light aircraft, helicopters and all-terrain vehicles increasingly used for greater access, while in the past two seasons, 'fly–sail' operations have begun. These deliver tourists by air to ships, so far more groups can enjoy a cruise in a season; large cruise ships capable of carrying up to 800 passengers are not uncommon.

In addition, it seems that a high number of visitors return to the poles. 'Looking at six years' worth of data, of the people who have been to the polar regions, roughly 25 percent go for a second time,' says Louisa Richardson, a senior marketing executive at tour operator Exodus.

In the same period that tourism has exploded, the 'health' of the poles has 'deteriorated'. 'The biggest changes taking place in the Antarctic are related to climate change,' says Rod Downie, Environmental Manager with the British Antarctic Survey (BAS). Large numbers of visitors increase these problems.

Although polar tourism is widely accepted, there have been few regulations up until recently. At the meeting of the Antarctic Treaty in Baltimore, the 28 member nations adopted proposals for limits to tourist numbers. These included safety codes for tourist vessels in Antarctic waters, and improved environmental protection for the continent. They agreed to prevent ships with more than 500 passengers from landing in Antarctica, as well as limit the number of passengers going ashore to a maximum of 100 at any one time, with a minimum of one guide for every 20 tourists. 'Tourism in Antarctica is not without its risks,' says Downie. 'After all, Antarctica doesn't have a coastguard rescue service.'

'So far, no surveys confirm that people are going quickly to see polar regions before they change,' says Frigg Jørgensen, General Secretary of the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators (AECO). 'However, Hillary Clinton and many other big names have been to Svalbard in the northernmost part of Norway to see the effects of climate change. The associated media coverage could influence others to do the same.'

These days, rarely a week passes without a negative headline in the newspapers. The suffering polar bear has become a symbol of a warming world, its plight a warning that the clock is ticking. It would seem that this ticking clock is a small but growing factor for some tourists. 'There's an element of "do it now",' acknowledges Prisca Campbell, Marketing Director of Quark Expeditions, which takes 7,000 people to the poles annually. Leaving the trip until later, it seems, may mean leaving it too late.

adapted from *Geographical* magazine

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Match each statement with the correct person, ***A–D****.*

NB *You may use any letter more than once.*

List of People

A Louisa Richardson
B Rod Downie
C Frigg Jørgensen
D Prisca Campbell

8 Some tourists believe they should not delay their trip to the poles.

9 There are some dangers to travelling in Antarctica.

10 Some famous people have travelled to polar regions to look at the impacts of global warming.

11 Some tourists make more than one trip to the poles.

12 There is no evidence that visitors are hurrying to the poles.

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