

# Cape Town as Africa's Gateway for Tourism to Antarctica – Development Potential and Need for Regulation

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## Abstract

Cape Town is one of the five 'Antarctic gateway' cities from which ships and aircraft travel to and from various parts of Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands. Gateway cities are used by government scientific expeditions, as well as for tourism. While tourism to Antarctica is increasing rapidly, most of it occurs from the South American gateways of Ushuaia and Punta Arenas, and to a lesser extent from Christchurch (New Zealand) and Hobart (Australia). The Cape Town-Antarctica tourism industry is relatively undeveloped in comparison to other gateway cities, mainly because the distance to Antarctica from the South American gateways is considerably less than from Cape Town. In 2009 the City of Cape Town signed the Southern Rim Gateway Cities Agreement, joining the other gateway cities in an agreement to cooperate on issues such as science, education, logistics, business opportunities and tourism. Tourism to Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands, and the regulation thereof, is discussed in the light of the fact that South Africa, unlike countries like Australia, does not have any specific policy to develop or regulate tourism to Antarctica, neither to its own bases, nor to other parts of Antarctica accessible from Cape Town by ship or air. This paper considers the development potential of Cape Town as a gateway for tourism to Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands, with recommendations for particular types of tourism development, in specific locations, and suggestions for both growing and regulating the industry.

**Keywords:** Antarctica, gateway city, tourism, development, regulation

## Introduction

Cape Town is one of five 'Antarctic Gateway' cities' (Figure 1). These are cities that are situated adjacent to Antarctica, from where ships and aircraft depart for various Antarctic destinations, both for transporting personnel and equipment to and from scientific bases, as well as for tourism purposes. In the 2012/3 summer season a total of 34 316 tourists visited Antarctica (IAATO, 2013a). Of these, some 94% visited on cruise ships, 5% on air-cruise combinations, and 1% on air-land combinations. Currently most tourism to Antarctica originates in Ushuaia (Argentina) and Punta Arenas (Chile), and to a lesser extent from Christchurch (New Zealand) and Hobart (Tasmania). The Cape Town-Antarctica tourism industry, while it does exist, is relatively undeveloped in comparison to other

gateway cities, and whether or not it develops further will depend to a large extent on what measures and policies are put in place by local and national authorities, both to grow as well as to regulate the industry.

South Africa is one of the original Antarctic Treaty signatories, maintaining a year-round presence in the Antarctic Treaty Area at Sanae, its scientific base, and is strongly committed to the principles of the Antarctic Treaty. In addition South Africa exercises national sovereignty over the sub-Antarctic Prince Edward Islands (Marion Island and Prince Edward Island), and has a scientific base on Marion Island, as well as on British-owned Gough Island. The Sub-Directorate: Antarctica and Islands, of the Department of Environment Affairs, maintains and services South Africa's bases, in conjunction with the

research and supply vessel, the SA Agulhas II, all under the auspices of the South African National Antarctic Programme.

Ship-based tourism to Antarctica ranges from small yachts, bigger sailing ships, and expedition ships, to large cruise liners (Lamers, Stel & Amelung, 2007). Most tourist ships concentrate their visits around the Antarctic Peninsula and nearby islands, which are relatively free of sea ice from November to March. This area has been favoured because of reduced sea-time for access (from Punta Arenas and Ushuaia), a relatively benign climate, fewer ice-pack obstructions, greater diversity of wildlife and scenery, and the presence of numerous operational as well as abandoned scientific bases (Cessford & Dingwall, 1994). The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the availability of many ice-strengthened ships, which has led to a dramatic increase in tourism to the continent (Headland, 1994), and by the early 1990s the annual number of tourists visiting Antarctica overtook the number of scientists. Today improving transport technologies, growing popularity, increasing wealth and leisure time, a moderating climate, and intensive tourism promotion are all contributing to the growth of tourism in Antarctica, with the expected likelihood that it will continue to grow and expand in the future (United Nations Environment Programme & International Ecotourism Society, 2007).

The recent discovery that wheeled aircraft can land on blue ice runways has ushered in a new era of land-based, or air-land, Antarctic tourism, particularly suitable for private expeditions and adventure tourists. Air-land tourism is mostly limited to two areas in Antarctica, one of which is accessible from Cape Town. In the first, Adventure Network International (ANI) has set up the Patriot Hills summer tented camp in Ellsworth Mountains where Hercules aircraft, originating in Punta

Arenas, land on a blue ice runway. From there smaller aircraft take climbers, skiers and adventurers to the Vinson Massif (the highest mountain in Antarctica and thus one of the objectives of those seeking to climb the 'Seven Summits', the highest peak on each on the seven continents), the Geographic South Pole, and numerous glaciers and penguin colonies. In the second, Antarctic Logistics Centre International (ALCI) operates flights from Cape Town to another blue ice runway, at Novo Airbase, near the Russian scientific base of Novolazarevskaya, from where smaller aircraft transport passengers further afield. The system operating from Cape Town, known as the Dronning Maud Land Air Network, was set up for the purpose of servicing national programmes, but tourists, particularly adventure tourists, are now being transported if space is available, albeit on a small scale, and two tented camps have been set up to accommodate them.

There is a growing body of academic research literature on Antarctic tourism, and a number of books have been published on the subject (eg. Snyder & Stonehouse, 2007a; Stonehouse & Snyder, 2010)). The potential for research on Antarctic tourism from Cape Town exists in all four of the Antarctic research clusters identified by Stewart, Draper & Johnston (2005), namely tourism development (which areas to develop, what types of tourism to develop), tourism management and regulation (both general and site-specific), tourism impacts (especially environmental, but also economic and socio-cultural), and tourism patterns (motivations and characteristics, as well as the needs and wants of tourists). Apart from a minor reference to tourism in a management plan for Marion Island (Prince Edward Islands Management Plan Working Group, 1996), to date no research appears to have been undertaken on any aspect of tourism to Antarctica from Cape Town.



**Figure 1: Antarctic gateway cities, and destinations potentially accessible for tourism from Cape Town (Source: Compiled by author)**

### Regulation of Antarctic Tourism

Management of tourism on the Antarctic continent is complex, since it involves a high level of international cooperation between the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties (ACTPs) and those segments of the travel industry directly involved in Antarctic tourism (Smith, 1994). The only international agreement that addresses the management of Antarctic tourism is the Antarctic Treaty, in the form of the Protocol on Environmental Protection, known simply as the Environmental Protocol, or the Madrid Protocol, which came into effect in 1998. While numerous forms of visitor behaviour are prescribed in the Environmental Protocol, enforcement remains a challenge (Snyder, 2007). A process of self-regulation, under the auspices of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), also exists. While IAATO argues that self-regulation is all that is required, ASOC (the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition) has for a long time maintained that this is not adequate, and that the Antarctic Treaty

states themselves should take more responsibility for regulating Antarctic tourism (ASOC, 2008). According to ASOC (2009), it often appears as if the Antarctic Treaty System has largely subcontracted tourist management to the tourism industry's own group, IAATO. However, despite the growth and diversification of the industry, tour operators in Antarctica have managed to maintain a relatively strong record of safety and environmental sensitivity (Amelung & Lamers, 2006), and the IAATO self-regulatory guidelines are widely commended.

A number of issues in the regulation of Antarctic tourism are highlighted by Haase (2006), including the lack of a comprehensive framework for controlling Antarctic tourism, problems with the enforcement of existing rules and guidelines, flag-state jurisdictional problems raised by tourism, the non-binding nature of many tourist guidelines, inconsistencies with respect to national enactment of Antarctic Treaty provisions,

and lack of data on the impacts of tourism activities. A number of Antarctic gateway countries have nevertheless put policies in place to allow, but regulate, tourism to those parts of Antarctica under their control. The Australian government, for instance, recognizes the legitimacy of tourism activities in Antarctica, provided they are undertaken in accordance with the Antarctic Treaty and its associated instruments, and their conduct is ecologically sustainable and socially responsible (Government of Australia, 2004). To implement this policy an accreditation scheme has been implemented, with an environmental monitoring framework, activity and site-specific guidelines, an inspection/observer scheme and a financial security scheme. Tour operators have reporting obligations, site guidelines and requirements for environmental impact assessment, and must ensure that their operations have no more than a minor or transitory impact (CRC for Sustainable Tourism, 2009).

Management of tourism to the sub-Antarctic islands, while carried out in conjunction with management of tourism to the Antarctic mainland, differs in a number of respects. The sub-Antarctic islands consist of some 23 oceanic islands or island groups that lie between the subtropical convergence and the Antarctic continent, four of which are listed as World Heritage Sites. The Falkland Islands and Tristan da Cunha are the only sub-Antarctic islands that have permanent human populations. While there are many similarities in the visitor experience in tourism to these islands and tourism to the Antarctic mainland, such as remoteness and lack of facilities, and many managerial issues are similar, there is one significant difference, tourism to most of the sub-Antarctic islands is regulated under the sovereignty of a country, while tourism in Antarctica is regulated under the Antarctic Treaty System (Tracy, 2007).

The rate of visitation to Australian, New Zealand and British sub-Antarctic islands has grown considerably (Hall & Wouters, 1994), and tourist interest in French territories such as Kerguelen and Crozet,

is also increasing. Australia and New Zealand have put tourism management plans in place, designed to ensure sustainable use of their sub-Antarctic islands (Hall & Wouters, 1994; Sanson, 1994). A successful system of 'multiple resource management' has been developed for South Georgia, which has to respond to the potential impacts, and needs, of at least 6000 visitors annually, increasing at 15-20% per year (Snyder & Stonehouse, 2007b). Management issues in South Georgia involve conserving the island's environmental integrity and historical and cultural resources, ensuring economic sustainability and sustaining visitor satisfaction, while simultaneously providing visitor satisfaction and safety.

South Africa maintains scientific bases on Marion Island (part of the Prince Edward Islands group) and on the British-owned Gough Island, in the sub-Antarctic region. While visits to Marion Island, other than for research and management, are not entirely prohibited (Prince Edward Islands Management Plan working Group, 1996), they are also not encouraged, since it is felt that facilities are limited and are sufficient only for meteorological, research and management purposes. Requests to visit would, however, be considered on merit. Gough Island is not considered a suitable place for visits by tourists because of the scarcity of sheltered landing beaches. Facilities at the meteorological station are also thought to be inadequate to support tourism. Nevertheless, basic guidelines have been formulated for the regulation and management of tourism if it is to take place (Cooper & Ryan, 1994).

### **Cape Town – Antarctic Gateway City**

In September 2009, in Christchurch, New Zealand, the City of Cape Town signed a 'statement of intent', known as the Southern Rim Gateway Cities Agreement, thereby joining the other four gateway cities in an agreement to cooperate on issues such as science, education, logistics, business opportunities, and tourism. Three months later, in a speech before the departure of South Africa's Antarctic logistics and supply ship, the SA

Agulhas, for Sanae in Antarctica, Cape Town's Deputy Mayor, Ian Neilson said: "Cape Town needs to raise the profile of the value and importance of our status as a gateway to Antarctica". He continues: "One of the more interesting aspects of the Gateway Cities Agreement is the mention of tourism. Cape Town has to date largely failed to exploit tourism opportunities. Cruises to Antarctica are one of the fastest growing segments of the cruise liner industry, but at present South America is the base for this development. Air flights to Antarctica are being considered as a further way for tourists to access the Antarctic in future." (Neilson, 2009). Later in the same year, on Tuesday 24 November 2009, a United Kingdom-based tour operator called White Desert successfully returned from the first ever day-trip from Cape Town to Antarctica. After a five-hour flight, a converted Boeing 727 landed on the blue ice runway at Novo Airbase on the Antarctic mainland, and

returned the same evening, and some 34 clients enjoyed an action-packed 10 hours in Antarctica.

If one were to disregard issues of permission to land, then destinations that would be most easily accessible for tourism from Cape Town, either individually, or in combination, might include Novo Airbase and Sanae on the Antarctic mainland, and the sub-Antarctic islands of Marion Island, Gough Island and Tristan da Cunha (Table 1). The tourism possibilities both at and from Novo Airbase are seemingly endless, with access to the Dronning Maud Land Air Network and opportunities for Antarctic overflights, visiting nearby scientific bases, including Sanae, and penguin colonies, mountain climbing and cross-country skiing, with the possibility of reaching iconic Antarctic landmarks, such as the Geographic and Magnetic South Poles, either by air, or partly by air, partly overland.

**Table 1: Antarctic and sub-Antarctic destinations potentially accessible for tourism from Cape Town**

<i>Destination</i>	<i>Attractions &amp; activities</i>	<i>Types of tourism</i>
Novo Airbase	Access to Dronning Maud Land Air Network, Antarctic overflights, visiting scientific bases, mountain climbing, cross-country skiing, visiting penguin colonies, visiting special landmarks, e.g. Geographic South Pole, Magnetic South Pole	Air-land
Sanae	Visiting scientific base, hiking, mountain climbing, cross-country skiing	Air-land
Marion Island	Visiting scientific base, biological ecotourism (scientists could act as lecturers and guides), visiting penguin and seal colonies, bird watching, hiking, multi-day trekking, mountain climbing	Ship-based, with land visits
Gough Island	Magnificent scenery, visiting scientific base, visiting penguin colonies, bird watching, hiking	Ship-based, with land visits
Tristan da Cunha	Visiting settlement, family-based accommodation, hiking, mountain climbing, fishing, visiting bird colonies on adjacent islands	Ship-based, with land visits

Of the sub-Antarctic islands, Tristan da Cunha, with a permanent population of a few hundred people, already has a small but well-established tourism resource base, with accommodation available and opportunities for hiking, mountain climbing, fishing and bird watching. While Gough

Island has magnificent scenery, landings are difficult because of bad weather and a rugged coastline, and walking on the island is always a challenge, with dense vegetation and steep ascents and descents. Marion Island would present good prospects for tourism, biological

ecotourism in particular, with a large scientific base and resident scientists with specialized knowledge of the island's ecosystems, who may act as guides. The island has large penguin and fur seal colonies, and a variety of nesting seabirds. Walking on Marion Island, if accompanied by a knowledgeable guide, is relatively easy, and there are numerous climbable peaks in the mountainous interior of the island.

Significant growth in ship-based tourism from Cape Town to Antarctica, and even to the sub-Antarctic islands, is at this stage somewhat unlikely. Of all the Antarctic gateway cities, Cape Town is situated furthest from Antarctica (3811 km), compared to Ushuaia (1131 km), Punta Arenas (1283 km), Hobart (2609 km) and Christchurch (2852 km). In addition, the parts of Antarctica closest to Cape Town would require the crossing of a wide belt of pack-ice, which is beyond the capability of the small cruise ships generally used for tourism purposes, and the presence of a high ice shelf in much of this region makes landing difficult. The development of air-land tourism to Antarctica from Cape Town is, however, a distinct possibility, with Novo Airbase less than a six hour flight from Cape Town. Currently two companies, The Antarctic Company (TAC) and White Desert (WDL), operate air-land tourism to Antarctica from Cape Town (IAATO, 2013b), but on a very small scale. Tourists are flown to Novo Airbase in Ilyushin-76 aircraft operated by Antarctic Logistics Centre International (ALCI), and from there, if required, in smaller ski-equipped DC-3 aircraft. Both tour operators maintain temporary camps on the Antarctic mainland near Novo Airbase, remaining open for three to four months each year during the summer, and tourists can experience Antarctica for days or even weeks, skiing, hiking, climbing, abseiling and visiting penguin colonies and research stations. In the 2012/3 season TAC had 22 clients and WDL had 19 clients departing from Cape Town (IAATO, 2013b). These 41 air-land tourists from Cape Town make up some 12% of all air-land tourists who visited Antarctica during the 2012/3 season, and clearly there is room for

expansion. The aircraft operated by ALCI are, however, primarily used to transport scientists, personnel and goods for various national Antarctic programmes, and currently the number of tourists that can be accommodated depends to a large extent on these activities.

Antarctic gateway cities both benefit from and contribute to the development of Antarctic tourism (Bertram, Muir & Stonehouse, 2007), since almost all visitors, whether tourists or national programme personnel, will most likely spend time in the gateway city on the outbound or return journey, thereby contributing to the local tourism industry. Supply and research ships belonging to a number of countries with bases in Antarctica spend time in Cape Town each year on the way to and from Antarctica. These countries include Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, India, Belgium and Norway.

Gateway cities also attract tourists with strong Antarctic interests, who visit these cities for Antarctica-linked tourist attractions, although they do not necessarily travel to Antarctica. These types of attractions are ideally suited to attracting tourists both during the summer season when ships and aircraft leave for Antarctica, as well as during the off-season. For example, Christchurch has an Antarctic Centre where visitors can experience Antarctic vehicle rides, simulated storms, educational and audio-visual presentations, and a museum with a permanent display of Antarctic artifacts (Bertram, Muir & Stonehouse, 2007). Christchurch City Council has introduced a bi-annual Antarctic Festival, called IceFest, which takes place in winter. Hobart has an agency called Antarctic Tasmania, dedicated to promoting the city as the gateway to East Antarctica, and has branded itself as 'the capital of Antarctic capability' (Roldan, 2011). Hobart offers a range of Antarctic exhibits in its museums and Visitor's Centre, with the Antarctic Midwinter Festival as an annual community event. Ushuaia hosts an annual winter festival, known as 'The Antarctic Week', with public lectures,

Antarctic films and exhibitions (Roldan, 2011).

## Conclusions

While Cape Town is situated further from Antarctica than the other gateway cities, it does have certain locational advantages. Cape Town is closer to the northern hemisphere tourist generating regions, and is thus less of a long-haul destination to reach. For ship-based tourism the longer sea journeys could be an attraction in itself for those interested in sailing through and experiencing the 'Roaring Forties' and 'Furious Fifties' (40 degree and 50 degree latitudes), with the possibility of visiting one or more remote and seldom-visited sub-Antarctic islands. Cape Town is also able to offer a variety of add-on tourist attractions, including wine routes, beaches and wildlife tourism.

For Cape Town to develop as a gateway (and gatekeeper) for sustainable tourism to Antarctica, a number of organisational roles can be identified. The South African Government would need to develop appropriate policies and a permitting system, which will both enable tourism to Antarctica, and control it. This is all the more important when considering the implications of Annex VI to the Environmental Protocol (Antarctic Treaty Secretariat, 1995), which when ratified will make a country liable for environmental emergencies caused by any activities, including tourism, that are launched from that country. South Africa would thus need to have legislation in place to compel tour operators or individuals leaving from Cape Town for tourism activities within the Antarctic Treaty area to comply with the Environmental Protocol and to have sufficient insurance to cover any environmental emergencies that may occur. The City of Cape Town should consider establishing an Antarctic information centre and museum to create greater awareness of Antarctica and the City's position as a gateway, and encourage Antarctic-themed festivals and ceremonies linked to the departure and return of ships in summer, as well as during the winter. Interest in Antarctic

tourism from Cape Town could in turn lead to increased local support for South Africa's Antarctic and sub-Antarctic scientific programmes, making it easier to justify the high costs necessary to maintain these operations.

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