

Submerging in the Antarctic tourist experience: analysing the diverse expectations and experiences of diving and non-diving tourists in Antarctica

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Since the mid-1980s, the annual number of people visiting Antarctica for tourism purposes has increased rapidly from a few hundred to over 45.000 in 2008 (Lamers 2009). Antarctic tourism has also become more diverse. Tourism operations are largely ship-based, with a much smaller number of tourists travelling to Antarctica by air. The traditional expedition-cruises involving small to medium-sized ships, rubber boat landings and educational programmes, have been complemented with large cruise liners making no landings, overflights, fly-sail operations, as well as some land-based tourism using aircraft for transportation. In the context of expedition cruises and land-based itineraries, an increasing range of adventurous activities are offered including helicopter excursions, camping, kayaking, scuba diving, mountain climbing, and cross-country skiing (Stonehouse & Crosbie 1995, Bastmeijer & Roura 2004, Lamers 2009). A shift has been noted from location-based tourism (i.e. the focus on wildlife and historic sites), to activity-based tourism (i.e. the focus on activities) (Lamers 2009). In other words, the experiences provided to tourists are becoming increasingly diversified, which presents a topic that is in need of further research (Stewart et al. 2005).

The diversification of Antarctic tourism has been criticised by those who claim that new activities may pose safety risks, erosion of intrinsic Antarctic wilderness values (e.g. Antarctica becoming a playground) and even strategic judicial challenges in the longer term. The case of high-risk adventure activities, the use of existing scientific facilities for tourism, or the development of permanent land-based tourism infrastructures are examples of developments that might pose such challenges (Lamers 2009). It is suggested that different types of activities might bring tourists and tour operators that are not as dedicated to the ecological integrity of the Antarctic as the present ones (Hemmings 2000, Hummel 1994); this highlights the potential need for future visitor management (Page 2003). In this article we intend to analyse this hypothesis.

The tourist experience is a multi-disciplinary topic. Various theories and studies exist and will be analysed to point out differences in experiences in the Antarctic context (see for example Maher 2005). For example, the theory of planned behaviour, or expectancy-satisfaction model (e.g. Maher 2005), visitor typologies (e.g. Snyder 2007), and the flow theory. Visitor management in Antarctica is also not a straightforward issue. Tourism is formally regulated by the Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), which are a group of countries with Antarctic scientific programmes that collectively manage activities in this region. Tourism policies have typically been ad hoc and reactive, targeting individual expeditions rather than clusters of activities, focusing on requirements rather than restrictions, and often responding to incidents and plans (Hemmings & Roura 2003, Bastmeijer & Roura 2004). In addition, tour operators in Antarctica have managed to maintain a relatively strong record on safety and environmental sensitivities (Lamers 2009). There is generally no funding available for onsite management, monitoring and enforcement, despite the fact that the Antarctic is designated as a nature reserve (Snyder 2007). These important tasks are now largely left for the tourism industry to cover.

The objective of the study is to understand the relation and implications of the diversification of Antarctic tourism for the tourist experience and onsite management efforts. In doing so, this paper hopes to contribute to the discussion on policy and management options. These objectives are

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tackled by answering two interrelated questions: a) In what way is tourism in Antarctica diversifying, and what are the consequences? b) What are the implications of this diversification for Antarctic tourist experiences and onsite visitor management?

The paper presents the results of an extensive literature review and analyses visitor data regarding the diversification of Antarctic tourism. This study further attempts to analyse experiences of different types of Antarctic tourists. Empirical data will be presented from a survey based on these theories conducted during a combined scuba diving - tourist cruise in the Antarctic Peninsula Region, in March 2009. During this cruise, diving and non-diving tourists were asked to fill in three questionnaires regarding their experiences; the first immediately after embarking the ship, the second after a full day of activities in Antarctica, and the third just before disembarking (n=56). Using the independent T-test, the aim of the survey was to see if there are major differences in the way groups of tourists on board the ship undertaking different types of activities experience a range of factors during a multi purpose trip.

The results show that tourism in Antarctica is diversifying in several ways and causing a range of regulatory implications, including the safety and risks, the quality of crew, the development of guidelines, and the improvement of monitoring and compliance. The tourist survey suggests that significant differences can be detected in the way divers and non-divers experience the trip, especially regarding the expected service and amenities, the focus of attention, and the interaction with the guides. The limited scope of this survey will only allow us to develop hypotheses about the nature and implications of multiple tourist experiences in Antarctica for future research. Based on the findings, the paper will discuss the implications of diverse tourist experiences for Antarctic tourism governance and visitor management.

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