



SKIP NOVAK

SINCE 2011 THE NUMBER OF VESSELS VISITING ANTARCTICA HAS RISEN STEADILY AND IN 2016-17 EXCEEDED THE ALL-TIME HIGH. IF YOU ARE GOING TO GO, DON'T LEAVE IT LONG!



fter the month of February on the Antarctic Peninsula I migrated north to thaw out in Miami for three days. Well, not completely as I spent the three days in an air conditioned hotel meeting room participating in an IAATO

(International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators) Executive Committee meeting. One of the topics we discussed, which is now firmly in the sights of the organisation's strategic plan, is how to manage the explosion in expedition ship tourism – in particular the influx of Chinese tourists and ship companies.

This is of interest to anyone who has dreamed of taking their yacht either to the Antarctic or anywhere in high latitudes – north or south. High latitudes cruising is considered to be an exotic destination in what some call wilderness, and the perception is of untravelled cruising grounds, managed to some extent but not overrun.

That was what Lars Lindblad and the *Explorer* was

offering as an Antarctic experience for cruise ship tourists with his first trip to the Antarctic in 1966. That same year Bill Tilman sailed there on his yacht *Mischief* and dipped down to

Deception Island. It was believed to be the first yacht, and was followed in 1973 by Dr David Lewis on *Ice Bird*.

Like so many changes and upheavals we have seen in the world in recent memory the story begins with Perestroika. Overnight the Russian Academy of Science fleet of ice-capable vessels (and there were hundreds) were, with some exceptions, mothballed when their budget was cut by the new government. Clever entrepreneurs from Europe, the USA and Australia saw an opportunity and did deals for peanuts to charter these vessels, making accommodation for guests, deck crew and hotel staff.

A look at the statistics tells the story. In the 1991-92 season there were roughly 2,000 ship-borne tourists to the Antarctic. By 2006-07 it was closing in on 40,000 and at the time this was considered saturation level. The economic crash that followed in 2008 softened the

numbers back down to 25,000 for a few years and then an IMO ban on heavy fuel oil burned or carried in the Antarctic also put some ships out of the game. This was also welcomed by the Antarctic Treaty community, which was beginning to take serious notice of the upward trends.

Since 2011 the numbers have risen steadily and in the 2016-17 season just past we have exceeded the all-time high with 43,000 visitors, mostly ship-borne.

But this is not all. Although the old Russian ships have, by and large, been replaced, new companies are joining the party and the established tour ship companies are building more modern expedition ships.

The number of expedition ships is predicted to rise by 50 per cent by 2019. The conundrum for the Antarctic is that it is non-sovereign territory so there is no obvious way to limit the number of operators. IAATO is therefore looking at self-regulating by various means; possibly by the companies agreeing to one landing per day instead of the two they currently offer in their itineraries.

On the other hand, the Antarctic Treaty might restrict what is on offer by designating more landing sites Specially Protected Areas, which would squeeze landing opportunities and might create a self-limiting effect leading some companies to bow out.

In the high north it is a different dynamic. The Arctic rim countries claiming sovereignty can be more proactive with limitations imposed at short notice as tourist pressure increases.

Gone are the days of being alone or at least one of a handful of yachts in any of these high latitude destinations. The reality, though, is that the total number of yachts anywhere in high latitudes at any given time is still very small. In the Antarctic it is measured in the tens, not hundreds. Luckily for us, high latitudes are not every sailor's cup of tea for obvious reasons.

Having said all this, a well equipped and properly manned yacht, preferably steel or aluminium, can still duck and dive, to some extent, mitigating the crowding effect. Recent arrivals of glassfibre hulls, catamarans and those worried about their paint job will, I'm afraid, be stuck in the rush hour traffic lane. If contemplating a high north or south voyage, don't leave it too long. Carpe diem! ■

'GONE ARE THE DAYS OF BEING ALONE IN ANY HIGH LATITUDE DESTINATION'