Visiting South Georgia

The first visitors to the island were the 18th century explorers. South Georgia’s visitors today come from a wide range of backgrounds and for an equally wide range of reasons. They include government representatives, scientists and crew from research ships, fishermen, military personnel, contractors, journalists, film crews, photographers, tourists and staff and crew from cruise ships and yachts. Not only has the diversity increased but so has the tourist component - those people who are paying passengers on cruise ships or yachts. To safeguard the future of the island the Government needs to have policies for managing visitors to minimise their impacts yet allow them to experience the magic of the island.

Tourism on South Georgia

The first cruise ship to visit South Georgia was the *Lindblad Explorer* in January 1970. She was joined later in the 1970s by the *World Discoverer* and both ships continued to visit during the 1980s. There was also a small number of yacht visits. But compared to today, the number of tourists was small, probably less than 3,000 in total during the 20 year period to 1990. That figure is now exceeded in one season: in 2005/06 season there were 5,436 tourists on a total of 49 visits. If staff and ships’ crew are included in the tally, it almost doubles the figure to around 8,000 people.

Tourist numbers have more than trebled over the last 10 years and are likely to continue to increase. This increase in tourists prompted the Government to commission in 2000 a report on land and visitor management, to ensure that future policies reflected best practice, that potential problems areas could be identified and that appropriate monitoring and mitigation procedures could be developed where needed.

Cruise ships typically spend only three or four days at South Georgia, usually visiting as part of a cruise to or from Antarctica. "South Georgia only" cruises may spend up to seven days at the island. Tourists are well briefed by ships’ staff on all aspects of their visit, with particular emphasis on environmental awareness. A briefing is also given by the Government Officer when the vessel calls at King Edward Point.

Cruise ship landings are generally made on beaches using inflatable craft and tourists stay ashore for 2–3 hours, relatively close to the landing site. At least one staff member, with a good knowledge of local conditions, wildlife and environmental guidelines, will accompany every 20 tourists. Sometimes longer walks will be undertaken, of which the most popular is the Shackleton Walk from Fortuna Bay into Stromness Bay. The ‘Shackleton Crossing’ from King Haakon Bay to Stromness, which follows Shackleton’s route across the island, is a major undertaking and requires a high level of fitness and competent mountain guides.

Yacht visitors and expeditions generally stay for longer and are more likely to undertake other activities such as mountaineering, diving, kayaking and scientific and conservation work. Their activities are carefully assessed by the Government during the application procedure, as all visitors need to be self-sufficient during their visit and there are no rescue facilities.

The management of tourism on South Georgia has benefited from procedures which have been developed for the Antarctic. The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) works closely with the South Georgia Government to ensure that the highest standards of responsible ecotourism are met by their members.
Visiting South Georgia

Tourist impressions

After two dark days in heavy sea we sighted South Georgia, for me the highlight of our adventure to Antarctica. The misty dawn cleared as we anchored in the Bay of Islands and went ashore to Albatross Island. Perhaps because I wasn’t a “birder”, I noticed right away that a handful of visitors left their mark on the frail landscape. At Fortuna Bay penguins, seals and reindeer surrounded us. On this beach being nose to nose with the wildlife was great fun and I worried less about the appropriateness of being there. Elephant seals were challenging each other right before us.

The next evening we anchored off Grytviken. We walked around the remains of the whaling station, visited the church, the Museum and bought stamps and souvenirs. Then we hiked around the bay to Sir Ernest Shackleton’s grave where our guide led us in a toast to his memory. As we left the island we circumnavigated our first towering iceberg, saw a few Orcas, and then sailed out to the open sea past Cape Disappointment.

Still, words fail me. South Georgia is unique. It is vastly more stunning to witness on a first trip than the Antarctic itself. It is more isolated, more stark, more beautiful, more pure if you will. Because of its very special “feel”, it deserves the most demanding standards of preservation.

Joseph F. Stepanek
Visitor, 2001

The South Georgia Government provide preferential access to members of IAATO, since IAATO membership gives some guarantee of experience and sound operational standards. However, all tourists, whether visiting under the auspices of members of IAATO or not, are required to meet the standards set out in IAATO bylaws and guidelines.

The Government considers that, with appropriate measures in place to monitor the impacts of visitation, there is no present requirement to impose an overall limit on the number of tourists. However, restrictions on ship sizes and numbers of visitors who can visit sites other than Grytviken have been put in place. Where there are concerns about the impact of visitors on wildlife, a precautionary approach is taken. For example, visits to Prion Island are limited to ships with fewer than 200 passengers and there is an additional strict code of conduct for Prion Island (see South Georgia website).

IAATO was founded in 1991 to promote appropriate, safe and environmentally sound private-sector travel to the Antarctic (see www.iaato.org). IAATO has established many procedures including regulations and restrictions on numbers of people ashore, staff-to-passenger ratios, site-specific and activity guidelines, pre- and post-visit activity reporting, passenger, crew and staff briefings, requirements for previous experience for tour staff and contingency and emergency medical evacuation plans. It also provides a forum for the international, private-sector travel industry to share expertise and opinions and IAATO representatives work in close cooperation with governments and scientific organisations.
Filming expeditions

Filming on South Georgia can be extremely challenging and the logistical problems can be daunting. But the rewards for film and TV producers are well worth the cost, the effort and the hardship.

During the making of the BBC/ABC Kane documentary *The Living Edens: South Georgia Island*, the crew lived aboard and worked from a yacht for several months at a time. The extreme conditions made filming difficult. Winter weather froze the yacht’s water tanks and a sudden storm one day benighted the crew ashore. The documentary studied the annual cycle of life on the island, requiring the film crew to work during the wildest winter weather. For the viewer, the revelation of a wandering albatross chick sitting for days at a time in the foulest weather waiting its parent’s return was extraordinary.

South Georgia is attractive to film as well as television makers. Even IMAX® films, one of the most awkward film techniques to use, have been made about South Georgia. Thorough planning, good logistical support and endless patience are essential for a successful outcome.

Access to South Georgia for the film maker has improved with the increase in yacht and cruise ship activity. The combination of accessible wildlife and stunning locations is highly attractive, and there are many more stories to be told about the islands.

Alastair Fothergill
Executive Producer, BBC Natural History Unit

Applying to visit South Georgia

A permit is required from the South Georgia Government for any visit to South Georgia. Travel to the island must not be undertaken without such permission.

Visit organisers should complete the visitor application form, which can be downloaded from the South Georgia website. This requirement covers all visitors, including cruise ships, yachts, expeditions and scientific visits. People visiting as part of a group (eg. on a cruise ship or yacht) do not need to apply individually, providing that the organiser of their visit has done so. Completed forms should be sent to the South Georgia Government at least 60 days before the planned visit.

Special rules apply to “expeditions”. An expedition is any person or group of people whose approved activities include overnight camping (night(s) ashore) at any location outside Grytviken or King Edward Point, regardless of the aims of the expedition. These might include filming, mountaineering, skiing, science, longer trekking, sea kayaking, or other activities. Organisers of expeditions are required to complete the visitor application form. In addition to this, they must submit further details to the Government, which will be assessed by the Expedition Advisory Panel. Expedition guidelines, details of the additional information required for expedition applications and details of the Expedition Advisory Panel are on the South Georgia website.

Additional application procedures are required for visits to Specially Protected Areas (see page 16) and for scientific research (see page 73). Further information is available on the South Georgia website and from the downloadable Government booklet ‘Information for visitors to South Georgia’ which is updated regularly.
The South Georgia Association

The South Georgia Association was founded in 2001 to give voice to those who care for South Georgia. The main objectives of the Association are to:

- encourage interest in, and concern for South Georgia
- encourage the study of South Georgia and promote the conservation of its natural and cultural heritage
- promote contacts and encourage fellowship among those who have lived and worked in or around South Georgia, have visited or are interested in the Island

Further information at [www.southgeorgiaassociation.org](http://www.southgeorgiaassociation.org)

Visitor landing sites

A list of approved visitor landing sites is used by the Government for visitor management purposes. This means that visits can be more accurately recorded and impacts monitored. It should be noted that some of these sites are Specially Protected Areas (see page 16).

A map showing the approved visitor landing sites is shown on the page opposite.
Typical tourist itinerary

Days 1-3 Sailing
The voyage to South Georgia begins with onboard lectures and discussions covering the history, exploration, geology and wildlife of the island. Getting closer to the island, there is more and more wildlife to see, and if it is clear the towering, snow-covered mountains and glaciers may come into view.

Day 4 Arrival at King Edward Cove
The administrative centre: the resident Government Officer will come onboard to undertake customs duties and provide a visitors' briefing. It is a short boat ride to Grytviken and the remains of the oldest whaling station. The Museum, church and whalers' cemetery, where the Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton is buried, can also be visited.

Day 5 Prion Island and Salisbury Plain
A special permit is needed to visit Prion Island, a Specially Protected Area. Across the busy fur-seal covered beach and up the ridge, the magnificent wandering albatross can be seen. There are also other nesting birds in this wildlife haven. Later, landing at Salisbury Plain, tens of thousands of colourful king penguins can be seen crowded onto the raised beach and hills behind, chattering and jostling for space.

Day 6 Fortuna Bay and Stromness Bay
There is a king penguin colony at Fortuna Bay. Weather permitting, keen walkers can also climb up from the bay and retrace the last part of Shackleton's epic trek. Others can return to the ship and cruise around to Stromness Bay, where a second landing will be made and the walkers collected.

Day 7 Gold Harbour and Cooper Bay
Along the north-eastern coast to the foot of the Bertrab Glacier and the striking scenery of Gold Harbour. In addition to a large king penguin colony on the raised beach, there are usually elephant and fur seals, gentoo penguins, giant petrels and light-mantled sooty albatross. Further south, Cooper Bay is home to a chinstrap penguin colony, one of the few on South Georgia. Macaroni penguins can also be found nesting by the cliffs.

The ship cruises into the impressive Drygalski Fjord in the evening before leaving South Georgia for the next part of the trip.
Visiting South Georgia


In the late 1970s, Jerome and Sally Poncet decided to spend entire seasons on the island on the purpose-built Damien II, principally to engage in biological fieldwork. In 1979 the French yacht Basile was the first sailing vessel to land a team of mountaineers, who made the second ascent of Mt. Paget. Visitors turned ‘South Georgia natives’, Tim and Pauline Carr arrived in 1991 on the engineless Falmouth Quay punt Curlew. They cruised the island annually before coming ashore as the South Georgia Museum curators.

Over the years interest has grown from one or two seasonal yacht visits in the late 1980s to 26 in the 2005/06 season and one or two yachts may stay over winter. Several charter vessels depart from Stanley during the summer catering for tourists, scientific field parties, mountaineers, kayakers and film teams. Their small scale and mobility guarantees their usefulness as a means of transportation in South Georgia.

Piloting a small sailing vessel around South Georgia can be more than interesting at times. Anchorages are generally open and many are restricted by the brown, broad-fronded seaweed, kelp. Beach landings can be difficult, especially in the fur seal breeding season, when the seals crowd the beaches.

Centered on the storm tracks that roar through the Drake Passage and spill out into the South Atlantic, winds are generally strong from the westerly quadrant, but violent katabatic winds, an inspiring feature of the island, often dictate the navigational possibilities for low powered craft.

There are no facilities on the island for servicing small craft so yachts must be well equipped with provisions, fuel, spares, tools and have the necessary experience to operate independently and safely in what many consider to be extreme sailing conditions.

Information for visitors

The official South Georgia website at www.sgisland.org was set up in 2002 to provide a comprehensive guide to the islands, including information on current activities, governance, conservation and a whole spectrum of background information. This includes information relating to the management of South Georgia, such as permit applications, application information, guidelines, management plans, the visitors’ Code of Conduct and the booklet ‘Information for visitors to South Georgia’. The South Georgia Government welcomes sponsorship of the website by any individuals or operators.

A monthly newsletter is published on the website, describing current activities on the island and

Sailing at South Georgia

Skip Novak
Pelagic Expeditions

Yachting on South Georgia

Skip Novak
Pelagic Expeditions
The Shackleton crossing

When you stand on the shore of King Haakon Bay near Peggoty Camp and your ship sails away, there is an overwhelming sense of isolation. I have felt that emotion four times now, when I have repeated or tried to repeat Shackleton’s crossing of South Georgia to Stromness whaling station.

I am one of those people smitten with the drama of the Shackleton saga, and as a mountaineer have been drawn to South Georgia to repeat the famous first crossing of the island, as a commercial venture, guiding clients across the island.

Shackleton and his companions left Peggoty Camp in King Haakon Bay in May 1916 without knowing what the hinterland was like. No person had been there before. They would walk to their salvation or they would perish on the glaciers. We come now in small groups of up to 15 people with full knowledge of the route and all the modern finery of sophisticated mountaineering equipment. It is approximately 45km across to Stromness and is a serious undertaking. The wind still blows as strong now as it did in 1916, and the combination of big mountains and sea make for a heady cocktail of wet snow, active glaciers and rapidly changing winds.

The snout of the glacier below Shackleton Gap has retreated several kilometres since Shackleton and his men stepped out onto it, so we now walk on muddy moraine to the ice. Shallow snow slopes lead to the crevassed Murray Snowfield thence, heading always east, we come to the famous Trident Ridge. It is hard to know which of the snow saddles to cross. But in early summer, if the snow cover is deep, it is still possible to take the bum slide down the other side onto the Crean Glacier.

The Crean Glacier can be a nightmare of intersecting crevasses. But beyond it there is the draw card of a prominent peak of rock called Worsley’s Nunatak. From there the smooth and open Fortuna Glacier leads into beautiful Fortuna Bay. Thence open rocky slopes lead over a saddle into the valley behind Stromness.

Twice in the last five years we have been pinned down in tents in ferocious winds on the Crean Glacier, unable to venture outside as the nylon of the tent walls stretched to ripping point. Huddled inside I have pondered the great feat of Shackleton and his little band. It was serendipitous that they crossed in good weather but if they had not been men of the highest calibre, hardened to life in the South, then surely they would have perished. Each time I have been across the island I walk away humbled by that thought.

Greg Mortimer
Aurora Expeditions

Government news. A web camera at King Edward Point can also be accessed.

The Government provides a printed information pack, which tourist visitors receive on arrival in South Georgia. The pack contains a large full colour booklet on the island covering history, natural history, exploration and scientific work, the ‘Code of Conduct’ (which will be available in several additional languages in the near future), a map of South Georgia, a checklist of the wildlife, information leaflets and a ‘Certificate of landing’.

A briefing DVD has been prepared for visitors to South Georgia. Slightly different versions have been prepared for cruise ships, military visitors and expeditions/yachts. These DVDs are intended to reinforce the onboard briefings given by the Government Officer.

The Government has also recently supported the publication of ‘A Visitor’s Guide to South Georgia’ (Poncet and Crosbie, 2006). This provides background information about the island followed by details of all of the main visitor sites including maps.
Visitor Policies

Aim: To encourage sustainable tourism and use revenue generated to improve the environmental management of the islands.

All visitors are expected to follow the ‘South Georgia Code of Conduct’. This includes government representatives, scientists and crew from science ships, military personnel, contractors, journalists, film crews, photographers, tourists and staff and crew from cruise ships and yachts.

Permission to visit South Georgia

- All visits require a permit from the South Georgia Government before arrival in South Georgia
- Applications should be submitted to the Government at least 60 days before the planned visit
- Visitor permit applications, including all proposed landings, must be completed for all visits; additional applications are required for expeditions, research and visits to Specially Protected Areas (SPAs)
- Landings may only be made at approved visitor landing sites, which are listed on the visitor application form and on the South Georgia website
- Deviation from the itinerary approved in the permit, if this includes a visit to an SPA, is subject to approval by the South Georgia Government
- Cruise ships must register at King Edward Point on arrival in South Georgia (by prior agreement with the Government, landings at other locations may be made prior to registration ie. if there is a South Georgia experienced expedition leader on board the vessel)
- A landing fee is payable to the South Georgia Government by all tour operators for each tourist passenger

Expeditions

An expedition is defined as any visit involving overnight camping outside Grytviken or King Edward Point.
- Expeditions must apply for a visitor permit from the Government
- In addition, expeditions must provide further information to the Government on their proposed activities, as outlined in the application procedures. This is assessed by an Expedition Advisory Panel, for which a fee is charged
  - Expedition Advisory Panel members are listed on the South Georgia website with their credentials
  - A support vessel is normally required for the duration of all expeditions

Filming (and other non-tourist activities)

- The South Georgia Government welcomes filming visits. They should follow the usual application procedure, completing the visitor application form and expedition form as necessary. Each proposal will be assessed individually
- A Government approved observer may be required to accompany filming visits
- If a non-IAATO ship is used other conditions may apply

Post visit reporting

- A Post Visit Report (PVR) is required from all cruise ships, private and chartered yachts, expeditions and military vessels and helicopters for all visits outside Grytviken/KEP and Bird Island. Reports are available from the website
- An additional site-specific Site Visit Report
(SVR) must be completed after each visit to Prion Island (Part 3 of PVR)
• All PVRs and SVRs must be submitted to the Commissioner within 30 days of the visit (electronic forms are available on the South Georgia website)
• Random checks may be made to check the validity of reporting

Control of visitor numbers
• The Government may restrict overall visitor numbers on South Georgia if necessary
• Non-IAATO vessels and IAATO member vessels with more than 500 passengers on board may land visitors at Grytviken/KEP only
• At Grytviken/KEP a maximum of 300 passengers are allowed ashore at any one time, with a maximum of 100 people (including staff) at the cemetery, at the church or at the Museum, at any one time
• At Grytviken/KEP a maximum of three tourist ships may visit per day
• IAATO by-laws and guidelines must be adhered to by all commercial tourist operators (see www.iaato.org/bylaws.html)

At sites other than Grytviken and KEP:
• Vessels carrying 12 or more passengers must be IAATO members and carry no more than 500 passengers.
• There must be no more than 100 passengers ashore at any time
• Landings at Prion Island may only be made by ships carrying fewer than 200 passengers and a maximum of 65 passengers are allowed ashore at any one time
• Only one ship may visit a site at any one time
• Two ships may visit a site in the same day, providing that there is no overlap in their presence
• Sites may be closed to visitors if there is evidence that tourist visits are causing a negative impact

Observers
Any vessel may, at the discretion of the Commissioner, be required to carry a Government approved observer at the expense of the operator. For example, observers are likely to be required for the first visit of a ship, company, master or expedition leader, commercial filming, or routine assessment / random checks. Observer duties will be set out in Government Regulations.

Development of land-based tourism
The Government maintains an open mind on this issue and will consider carefully any reasonable proposals for responsible sustainable land-based tourism.

Aircraft operations
• Aircraft operations are not permitted at South Georgia except when there is an agreed operational requirement (eg. for management, scientific or military purposes)
• Since powered flight may disturb wildlife, the South Georgia wildlife avoidance map and guidelines must be used by all aircraft operators at all times. These are available on the South Georgia website
• Where possible, boat operations should be used in preference to powered flight
• Post visit reports must be submitted to the Government for all helicopter flights

Helicopter pilots reading the South Georgia wildlife avoidance map and guidelines
David Nicholls

For further information about South Georgia, please visit our website www.sgisland.org