

South Georgia: A Visitor's Guide Frequently Asked Questions

Where is South Georgia?

South Georgia is situated 800 miles SE of the Falkland Islands. The main island of South Georgia is approximately 170 km long and between 2 and 40 km wide and occupies an area of 3,755 km², more than half of which is permanently ice covered. The coast is rich in wildlife and home to huge colonies of penguins, seals and albatross.

What is an Overseas Territory?

South Georgia is part of the British Overseas Territory of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands (SGSSI). This means that it has its own Government which can set policy, generate revenue and make laws. The Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands (GSGSSI) has a focus on sustainable environmental management which is at the heart of all decisions it takes. GSGSSI works closely with the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office who support GSGSSI in its international relations and retain control of matters relating to foreign policy and defence.

How many tourists come to South Georgia each year?

Approximately ten thousand tourists visit South Georgia each year. Mostly people visit in the summer months between November and March when the weather is best and the wildlife most abundant.

How do people get to South Georgia and travel around when they get there?

South Georgia has no airport or runway so the only way to get to the island is on a ship. Most years there are around 80 separate visits to the Islands. Most visitors come on small expedition cruise ships which carry less than 400 passengers but some larger ships which carry up to 800 passengers visit too. Some intrepid travellers travel by yacht with around 12 boats visiting this way each year.

What can you do when you get to South Georgia?

There are no hotels or places for tourists to stay overnight on South Georgia so visitors sleep on board the ship which brought them to the island and use this as a platform to get to different visitor sites. The most popular activity is to go ashore in a small boat called a zodiac and spend time observing the wildlife but it is also possible to go for short walks and some operators offer activities such as kayaking and scuba diving.

Is South Georgia open all year?

A small number of Government Officials and scientists are present on South Georgia throughout the year and theoretically it is possible to visit any time. However, in winter storms and sea ice can make getting to and travelling around the island difficult so most visitors come in the summer months.

Is South Georgia a dangerous place to visit?

Like any remote, rugged location filled with wildlife, there are hazards visitors must be aware of when they come to South Georgia. In particular the weather can change very suddenly, even in summer, so it is important to be prepared and be able to get back to a place of safety

such as a support boat quickly if needed. The abundant wildlife on the beaches can also be a hazard if care is not taken. In particular fur seals can vigorously defend their territories during breeding season. However, expedition staff who guide visitors are required to undergo special training and by following their advice it is possible to have a safe visit.

The islands interior is especially challenging and the glaciated terrain means that only experienced mountaineers should attempt to go there.

What medical facilities are available if there is an accident?

All visiting vessels are expected to be self-sufficient in every respect, including the provision of medical cover. There is no search and rescue, or other emergency service on the Island and the very limited medical facilities at King Edward Point are primarily for use by the Government Officials and scientists who live there.

How much does it cost to go to South Georgia?

The cost of a trip to visit South Georgia on board a cruise ship varies substantially depending on the type of boat and itinerary. More information on the cruise ship operators that visit South Georgia and links to their websites can be found at: <https://iaato.org>

If the environment is a priority, why does GSGSSI allow tourism? Surely, they would disturb the animals and cause an impact.

GSGSSI works very closely with the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators to ensure that all tourism on South Georgia is sustainable and does not cause an impact to the environment. Strict measures are in place to ensure that visitors behave responsibly. We have a Code of Conduct which must be adhered to for all landings and this includes regulations regarding biosecurity, approaching wildlife and waste management. Government Officers regularly carry out inspections to ensure these measures are being adhered to and if needed are able to take action against infringements under our Wildlife and Protected Areas Ordinance. Thankfully, tour operators and visitors care for and respect South Georgia and it has never been necessary to bring action against a tourist.

In pictures it sometimes looks like people are standing very close to penguins and seals. Is this allowed?

As part of our wildlife protection guidelines, visitors are required to maintain a respectful distance from wildlife and not act in a way which causes disturbance. Different approach distances are recommended for certain species at different life stages with visitors required to keep a greater distance from breeding or moulting animals. However, some animals, especially juveniles, are curious of humans and will approach visitors. Providing it is the animal that makes the first move, this is okay.

What are the penalties if someone disturbs wildlife or damages the environment?

Wildlife on South Georgia is given strict protection under the Wildlife and Protected Areas Ordinance (2011). If someone is convicted of contravening this Ordinance they can be sentenced to up to 2 years in prison and/or given an unlimited fine.

What measures are in place to make sure that tourism is sustainable?

Protecting the environment is at the heart of our decision making, and that is equally true when it comes to tourism. Tourism is carefully managed in South Georgia to ensure that visits are safe and environmentally sensitive. All vessels undergo a thorough permitting process which requires them to meet high standards in safety and environmental sustainability. We work closely with IAATO and the tourism industry to maintain and continually drive up standards.

Visits are scheduled and controlled to preserve the wilderness value for both visitors and wildlife by spreading vessels and people to prevent congestion at popular sites. Landings are restricted to designated landing sites, where impacts can be closely monitored and managed as appropriate. The best science currently available to us shows there is no evidence of negative environmental impacts of tourism at South Georgia's visitor sites however, with the trend for increasing tourism in the region, we are taking steps to 'future-proof' our visitor management to ensure this remains the case. This season we are embarking on a project to update and refine management plans and monitoring protocols for each and every visitor landing site.

The revenue generated by tourism is re-invested into the environmental protection of South Georgia, restoring habitats by removing invasive species, funding science which fills important knowledge gaps and supports effective management, and delivering projects which create resilient ecosystems.

By allowing people to explore and value this incredible part of the world, we hope to inspire ambassadors for the region; people who are impassioned and aware about the threats it faces, and active in protecting our planet.

Hundreds of thousands of whales were killed during the whaling era. Is it still possible to see them around South Georgia? What species are there and how abundant are they?

It is hard to imagine the devastation brought by the whaling industry but following the end of whaling and the establishment of a 1 million square kilometre Marine Protected Area it is fantastic to see whales returning in abundance. Perhaps the most common species visitors will see is the humpback with estimates that around 20,000 whales seasonally feed in South Georgia waters. Other species which can be seen in increasing abundance include the southern right, fin, sei, sperm and the critically endangered Antarctic blue whale.

How did weeds (non-native plants) get to South Georgia and how can I recognise them to make sure I don't move them from place to place?

Weeds arrived on South Georgia in a number of ways. Some were likely accidentally brought ashore with equipment and building materials of early explorers and some were deliberately introduced as food or crop plants during the whaling era. Thankfully many still have relatively restricted distributions in and around the former whaling stations but some have escaped into the wild and can be seen growing in and amongst native plants on distant hillsides and valleys. In association with Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, GSGSSI has produced a guide to the non-native plants of South Georgia to help visitors identify them and report to the Government if they find them in new locations. A free copy has been given to every visiting ship.

The best way to protect the South Georgia environment and avoid moving weeds from place to place is to rigorously adhere to biosecurity protocols and thoroughly clean clothing, footwear and equipment between every landing site to remove all mud and plant material.

If the South Georgia marine ecosystem is so important to so many animals and birds, why do GSGSSI allow fishing?

GSGSSI recognise the huge value of the oceans surrounding South Georgia and the vital role they play in the ecosystem. To ensure that species which depend on the oceans for food to feed their young are protected when they are at their most vulnerable, the fisheries are completely closed during the summer months. Throughout the year there is a strict limit on the amount of fish which can be caught and this is based on robust scientific evidence on what can be taken, without negatively impacting the ecosystem. Some regions such as sensitive benthic areas, near shore areas and deep-sea trenches are given further protection and are subject to research efforts to understand their biodiversity and role in the ecosystem. Fishing vessels undertake science which helps us better understand the marine ecosystem and ensure its protection, and act as eyes and ears to alert the Government to any illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. In this way we believe supporting sustainable fishing, using it as a platform for science and as a deterrent for IUU, this industry can make a valuable contribution to the management of the marine environment.

Is South Georgia closed due to COVID-19 or is it still possible to visit?

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a range challenges for tourism season, however GSGSSI is committed to facilitate visits where possible, without compromising on our commitment to safe and environmentally sensitive tourism. In order to allow safe visits, in addition to the host of measures and precautions being implemented by IAATO, there are a number of extra measures specific to South Georgia that will be in place including a new 3-part health declaration and closure of all indoor spaces.