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LEISURE ANTARCTICA AHOY!

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popular tourist destination in
recent years Page 9

9 FE SUNDAY

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Leisure

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Antarctica ahoy!

While Antarctica is emerging as a popular tourist destination, with even Indian companies planning tours there, environmental concerns loom larger than the hostile conditions on the continent

ANANAYA BANERJEE

A COUPLE OF decades back, Antarctica, the white continent that remains frozen throughout the year with temperatures as low as -94 degrees Celsius, was the destination of scientists alone. Nobody else had any interest in visiting the hostile land that was akin to some inhospitable planet.

The harsh climatic conditions, perpetual snow-covered terrain that does not allow any vegetation and difficulty in accessing the mainland make Antarctica seem like a far cry from an ideal vacation spot.

Today, almost 40,000 tourists visit the continent every year, the maximum number allowed as per regulations. In 1991, seeing tourist interest in the region, the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) was formed by companies that operate directly in Antarctica and others from various countries with an interest in supporting sustainable Antarctic tourism. These companies joined hands to advocate and promote the practice of environmentally responsible travel. The organisation registers the most number of visitors from the United States of America, which contributes as much as 33% to the continent's tourism annually, closely followed by China, Australia and Germany at 12%, 10% and 9%, respectively.

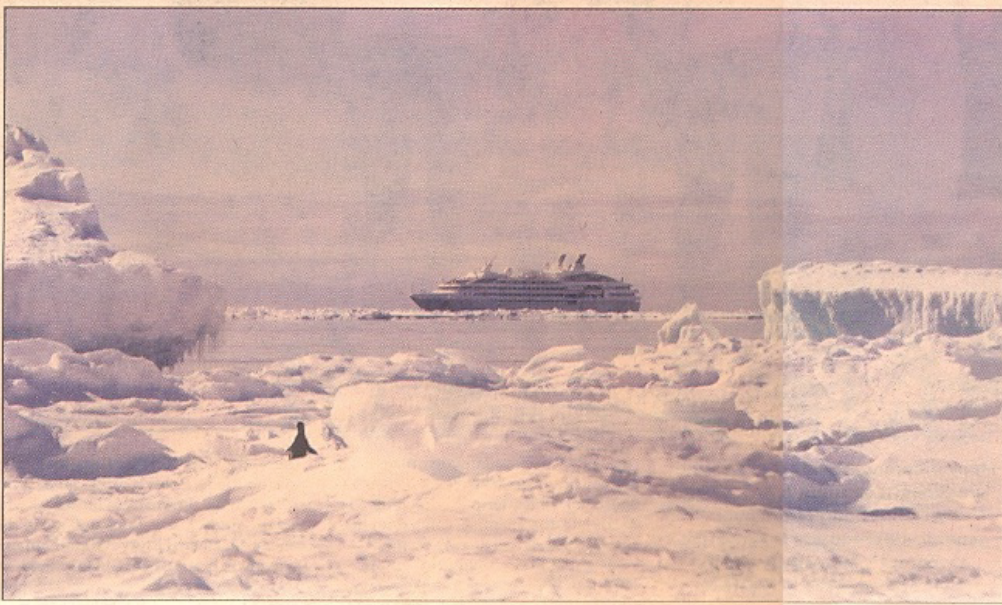
Ship lines like *Princess* and *Holland America* brought travelling to Antarctica into the mainstream over a decade ago by adding it to their itineraries. The result was that the frozen continent found itself on the bucket list of many travellers.

Gradually, small ship expeditions came to dominate tourism in the region due to travel restrictions on the numbers of passengers onboard. Multinational companies such as Lindblad, Ponant, Silversea, Seabourn, Lindblad, Hurtigruten and Quark, among others, started conducting annual trips because of the growing demand.

The unique appeal of the land has also brought the likes of Anthony Bourdain to its shores, who visited Antarctica recently for his show, *Parts Unknown*. Produced by CNN, the show uncovers lesser-known places and explores different cultures and cuisines. His on-screen adventures in the continent include a helicopter ride over an active volcano, a beach party at the foot of a glacier and an afternoon spent among a colony of penguins.

Not to be left behind, an Indian luxury travel company, The Q Experiences, is jumping onto the bandwagon as well, attempting to take 200 Indians to Antarctica in December. Speaking with reporters in New Delhi, company founder Vasim Shaikh said, "I have been staring at the world map all my life and it is my dream to take Indians to Antarctica." Having visited the continent for a recce in January this year, he realised the untapped potential of the place as a tourist destination for Indians, because as per latest data released by the IAATO, the number of Indians visiting the area do not even come close to the numbers of the top 10 countries touring the cold continent.

The 11-day polar excursion will have al-



most 400 passengers onboard on a 460-feet yacht, named *The Great Majestic Explorer*, having 132 rooms. Half of the passengers would comprise staff and crew, and the rest tourists.

The journey will begin on December 9 from Ushuaia, the capital of Tierra del Fuego in Argentina, on a green ship that uses marine diesel oil to fuel its engines.

The cruise, that has been cleared for travel by the IAATO, will then cross Drake Passage, the body of water that is the shortest crossing between South America's Cape Horn and Antarctica, to finally reach its destination. Once the cruise touches base, any passenger who ventures out during the two daily stops will have to undergo a

The most frequent visitors to Antarctica hail from the USA, which contributes as much as 33% to the continent's tourism industry annually, followed closely by China, Australia and Germany, which contribute 12%, 10% and 9%, respectively

mandatory procedure to ensure that no pollutant is introduced into the environment. This will be in line with the strict landing guidelines laid out for the continent.

"Each and everything that is taken off-board will be thoroughly vacuumed and

cleaned," assures Shaikh, adding that even the snow boots provided to passengers will be washed before and after landing.

The Explorer, custom-made for such polar excursions around four years ago, has provisions for waste management as well, so that nothing is disposed of on the continent. In fact, Shaikh claims to have refused permission for fishing or kayaking during the journey to ensure that no part of the wildlife is at risk during the breeding season.

Not only has the firm employed Michelin-starred chef Atul Kochhar for food and beverage services onboard, it has also recruited a group of naturalists and experts, who will assist tourists during off-board ex-

Over the past 50 years, the west coast of the Antarctic peninsula has become one of the most rapidly warming parts of the planet, restricted not only to the land, but also in the Southern Ocean

cursions to ensure that they are under the supervision of experts and do not disturb Antarctica's vulnerable ecosystem.

Over the past 50 years, the west coast of the Antarctic peninsula has become one of the most rapidly warming parts of the planet, restricted not only to the land, but also in the Southern Ocean. It has now been established by scientists that warming of the Antarctic peninsula is causing changes to the physical and living environments of Antarctica. A latest study by researchers, including those from the University of Queensland in Australia, investigating how ice-free areas in Antarctica may be affected by climate change, found that ice-free areas might increase in Antarctica by 25% due to climate change, leading to drastic changes in the continent's biodiversity.

These concerns make it essential to consider issues that crop up because of the presence of tourists in such large numbers. The first of which is the limited tourist season that coincides with the breeding season for most Antarctic wildlife, as both take place during the summer months in the Southern Hemisphere. There are many records of birds that previously nested around the Antarctic bases no longer doing so due to the constant activity around such places. Another pressing concern is introducing insects or seeds from boots, clothes or food by accident.

BETWEEN SIPS

Magandeep Singh



I HAVE APPROACHED this subject many times before, but rarely have I expounded on it with the broad base of drinks in general as the target. It's usually wine-centric or malt-centric, how to pair and how not to douse in water, and so on. But not just these two, every drink requires a certain civil approach, an unspoken and unwritten code of conduct that not only enhances our enjoyment of the beverage, but also ensures that nobody and nothing is harmed in any manner whatsoever—least of all a spirit or brew, which was patiently made and honed over a period of time in a distant cellar. Without further ado then, here are some drink etiquettes that one would do well to imbibe before one attends or hosts a soirée...

Food first: Only a fool drinks on an

empty stomach and most Indian parties seem to be geared up as gatherings for imbeciles. We arrive late, starved since lunch, and go on to down copious amounts of alcohol, punishing our inwards insensibly and irrevocably. Please ensure that your stomach is well-lined before you touch the first drink. If you are playing host, don't shy away from serving food at 'normal o'clock'—your social quotient won't fall just because you fed people before midnight.

Wisdom of volume: Even the most seasoned of drinkers can sometimes lose count of how much alcohol has passed their lips and the results can be disastrous—drunk dialling your ex being the least potentially harmful scenario. So

count your drinks like ramp models count their calories. A safe zone is two drinks in the first hour and one every subsequent hour. If that sounds painfully slow, retire and call it a night. Any faster and you are buying yourself a ticket to 'hangover central'. In certain western countries, this is also a safe way to remain within permissible limits to get behind the wheel. In India, I don't know if that translates to similarly acceptable.

Sip smart: Never gulp a drink. Shooting

Count your drinks like ramp models count their calories. A safe zone is two drinks in the first hour and one every subsequent hour. If that sounds painfully slow, retire and call it a night

shoot it down is insulting and ignorant. Try sipping it once and you will find it can be as hip as gin. That said, following the eastern Asian culture of Kampai (downing whatever is in the glass) as a sign of respect and machismo is about as

crude as the dog meat festival. It's time we upgraded such traditions to be more genteel.

Catering to constitutions: Not everyone can handle as much drink as others and it may be a smart idea to keep a contingency plan for those who risk getting light-headed. From the usual pills, which promise no hangovers, to an array of probiotics, non-alcoholic juices and smoothies, all work as aides to digesting alcohol and taking it out of our system as quickly as possible. I recently received a set of pills, which promised that I would wake up bright and crisp. I don't know if the pills worked because I was anyway overtly cautious with my tipples the evening before. That said, a big glass of

water between two drinks is perhaps the safest way to waking up fresh as a flower.

Mixing: This is a contra-myth, one that needs undoing. There is no harm in mixing your alcohols. I go from malt to wine to gin all in one evening and without any side effects. The trick is to pace yourself and hydrate constantly. The essence of alcohol lies in enjoying its variety, the various flavours and textures that it extends to us. To confine yourself to miss the point entirely of drinking in the first place. A drink isn't just about the high it delivers, it's about the high you get from enjoying a lovely beverage with people you wish to engage with. If I am sounding too old and preachy, then I guess it is because I am getting close to the years when Happy Birthday songs are replaced with For he's jolly good fellow... So don't let me get in the way of you and your good time. Enjoy yourself, but if you can fall back on any of these tips even mildly, you will see why you don't have to consider giving up alcohol the next morning when you wake up with that massive hangover.

The writer is a sommelier

The right spirit

Here are some drinking etiquettes that one would do well to imbibe before attending or hosting a soirée