The mildest and most accessible part of the continent, the Antarctic Peninsula extends a welcoming arm north toward South America’s Tierra del Fuego as if beckoning visitors. They come in ever-increasing numbers, for the Antarctic Peninsula is the continent’s major breeding ground for seabirds, seals and penguins.

With its dramatic landscapes of steep snow-covered peaks often plunging straight into the sea, and with narrow channels weaving between numberless islands and the mountainous mainland, the Peninsula also offers some of Antarctica’s most beautiful scenery.

Tens of thousands of people visit the Antarctic Peninsula every year, and, incredibly, almost half of them visit the very same places. Ship captains and expedition leaders instinctively reach for these favorite dozen sites because they are known safe anchorages offering convenient access to penguin rookeries, research stations or historic sites, all within a manageable distance of one another, allowing ships to keep to an approximate schedule (always, of course, subject to change due to weather).

In search of their furry quarry, sealers from Britain and the US ranged throughout Antarctic Peninsula waters during the 1800s, especially in the first two decades of the century. Expeditions with a research focus began coming in the early 1900s.

Even today, relatively few ships visit the Weddell Sea, for it has been known since the first years following its discovery as an ice-choked ship-eater. Extremely heavy pack-ice generally prevents all but the most powerful icebreakers from traveling in the Weddell Sea. Others have tried – and Shackleton’s *Endurance* is only the most famous example of the half-dozen ships crushed and sunk doing so.

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Listen to the braying and squabbling of 200,000 Adélie penguins nesting on Paulet Island (p265)
- Knock back a throat-burning gorilka (pepper vodka) at the convivial bar of the Ukrainian station, Academician Vernadskiy (p273)
- Send a postcard or indulge in a little shopping at the UK base-turned-museum, Port Lockroy (p270)
- Step inside an eerily preserved time capsule of 1950s British Antarctic life at Base W on Detaille Island (p274)
- Search for fossils on Seymour Island (p276) to show your fellow visitors – but remember, you can’t remove anything from Antarctica
ANTARCTIC PENINSULA

Tourist landings in Antarctica over the past two decades have concentrated on a very few sites in the Peninsula region (including the South Shetland Islands). During the 2006–07 season—the most recent for which data are available—30 sites received 80% of all visits, the top 10 sites accounted for half of all landings, and just the five most-visited sites together received 30% of all visits. The top six sites—Port Lockroy, Whalers Bay, Neko Harbor, Half Moon Island, Cuverville Island and Petermann Island—each saw more than 11,000 visitors. Port Lockroy and Whalers Bay were visited, on average, once daily.

The sites below are listed approximately from north to south.

ASTROLABE ISLAND

Discovered by Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d’Urville’s 1837–40 expedition and named for his chief ship, this infrequently visited, 5km-long island is home to several thousand pairs of chinstraps. The Dragon’s Teeth, a small group of huge rocks, lie off the northeast coast; cruising between them is known, naturally, as ‘flossing.’

GENERAL BERNARDO O’HIGGINS STATION

One of the oldest stations on the Peninsula, Chile’s General Bernardo O’Higgins station stands on the ice-cliffed Cape Legoupil—or more precisely, 80m offshore on a small island. It was established in 1948 and inaugurated by Chilean president, Gabriel González Videla, the first head of state to visit Antarctica. A jetty provides easy access, and a wooden plank and wire suspension pedestrian bridge links the island to the mainland.

The station, which accommodates 50, is operated by the Chilean army; only meteorological and sea-temperature data are collected. A modern three-story structure built in 1999–2000 houses all living and office spaces, plus water and wastewater facilities. The former main building at O’Higgins, built in phases and used from 1948 to 2000, stands next door; unoccupied, it serves as storage and is scheduled to be demolished.

There is a small museum in the stores building.

Gentoos breed successfully among the buildings of the station, which was built amid the rookery in 1948. These may be some of the most-acclimated-to-people penguins in Antarctica, for you must step over them to reach the bridge. They nest on the station doorstep, and are unperturbed by helicopter operations on the helipad next to their nests. Monitoring by station personnel shows that many of the gentoo nests are in the same location as in 1948.

The separate German Receiving Station on the island was built by Germany in 1988–89. It acquires data from European Remote Sensing satellites via a white 9m parabolic dish next to the bay. It is occupied four to five months per year, with a staff of 12. At other times, O’Higgins personnel provide basic caretaking.

An ice runway on the nearby glacier serves DHC-6 Twin Otters flying from Chile’s Frei station about monthly.

HOPE BAY

On the northernmost tip of the Peninsula, Hope Bay is home to one of Antarctica’s largest Adélie rookeries—housing 125,000 pairs, along with a few gentoos. The entrance to Hope Bay, reached via Antarctic Sound, is often filled with tabular icebergs.

Argentina built Esperanza station in 1951, though a naval post was established here in 1930. Esperanza was significantly expanded in 1978 and women and children began to reside year-round as part of Argentina’s efforts to establish ‘sovereignty’ over Antarctic territory. Silvia Morello de Palma, the wife of Esperanza’s station leader Army Captain Jorge de Palma, was flown in from Argentina when she was seven months pregnant. She gave birth to Emilio Marcos de Palma, the first native-born Antarctican, on January 7, 1978. Over the next five years, four more boys and three girls were born here.

Today as many as 20 children live with their families year-round at the station, which can accommodate up to 100 people. Most personnel are military, and about 35% of Esperanza’s population is made up of spouses and children. With a chapel, bank, post office, infirmary, gravel soccer field, graveyard, 1.5km of gravel roads, and 13 chalets housing families, it is more village than scientific station—there are only two modest laboratories.
At Escuela Provincial No 38 Julio Argentino Roca, named for the Argentine general and president, primary students are taught by three teachers. Secondary students employ distance learning. In July 2007, while students were on their winter break, the school was reduced to ashes by an hour-long fire caused by a malfunctioning heater.

Close to the jetty and behind ropes are the ruins of a stone hut where three members of Nils Otto Gustav Nordenskjöld’s Swedish Antarctic expedition spent a desperate winter in 1903, surviving on seal meat. Nordenskjöld named the bay in honor of these three men. Esperanza staff rebuilt the hut in 1966–67; a small museum of relics is in one of the station’s buildings. Other historic equipment, including sledges and an old Sno-Cat, is kept outside near the stone hut.

An ice runway on the nearby Buenos Aires Glacier serves DHC-6 Twin Otters flying from the Marambio station about 20 times a year.

On the hill about 500m from Esperanza is Trinity House, a hut remaining from Base D, built by the UK in 1944–45 and closed in 1963. It was transferred to Uruguay in 1997 and is now named Ruperto Elichiribehety station after the captain of the Uruguayan steam trawler Instituto de Pesca No 1, which Shackleton used in his second of three unsuccessful attempts to reach the Elephant Island castaways. The summer-only facility accommodates 12 people.

Crosses in the nearby cemetery commemorate two men lost in a 1948 fire.

**BROWN BLUFF**

Brown Bluff is an ice-capped, flat-topped 745m extinct volcano on the Peninsula’s northeastern tip. The original diameter of the volcano has been calculated at 12km to 15km; it’s approximately one million years old. The bluff takes its name from a striking cliff of reddish-brown rock on its north face. Several hundred gentoos and 20,000 Adélies nest here; rock slides onto the 3km-long beach sometimes wipe out groups of them.

**PAULET ISLAND**

About 100,000 pairs of Adélies nest on this circular volcanic island, and there are also blue-eyed shags and southern giant petrels. Paulet is just 2km in diameter but its distinctive cone is 355m high.

Paulet Island was discovered by Ross’ expedition of 1839–43 and named for the Right Honorable Lord George Paulet, a captain in the Royal Navy.

On February 12, 1903 Nordenskjöld’s ship Antarctic, which had been crushed by the Weddell Sea pack ice for weeks, finally sank 40km from Paulet. The 20 men sledged for 16 days to reach the island, then built a 10m by 7m hut on the northeast coast, where all but one survived the winter. Today, the ruins—just a pile of stones and some roofing timbers—are populated by Adélies. Above them is a 100m-long, ovoid melt lake. Marked by a cross, the grave of Ole Christian Wennersgaard, a seaman on Nordenskjöld’s expedition who died of heart disease in 1903, lies along the shore 300m east of the hut, but it can’t be visited without disturbing the nesting penguins.

**DUNDEE ISLAND**

At Dundee Island, 5km northwest of Paulet, millionaire American aviator Lincoln Ellsworth took off on the first trans-Antarctic flight on November 22, 1935. With his copilot Herbert Hollick-Kenyon, Ellsworth flew, in five hops over two weeks, to the Ross Ice Shelf. Dundee was discovered in 1893 by British whaler Captain Thomas Robertson, who named it for his home port in Scotland.

**JOINVILLE & D’URVILLE ISLANDS**

Joinville is the largest of the three islands at the Peninsula’s tip. It was discovered in 1838 by Dumont d’Urville, who named it for a French nobleman, François Ferdinand Phillipe Louis Marie d’Orléans, Prince de Joinville. At the foot of the reddish-colored 300m-high Madder Cliffs (named for the red vegetable dye called madder) at Joinville’s western end, are 45,000 nesting pairs of Adélies. Joinville’s northerly neighbor, D’Urville Island, was charted by Nordenskjöld in 1902 and named for Dumont d’Urville.

**MELCHIOR ISLANDS**

Sixteen of the small Melchior Islands, located between the much-larger Anvers and Brabant islands well down the west side of the Antarctic Peninsula, are named for letters of the Greek alphabet: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Eta, Theta, Kappa, Lambda, Omicron, Pi, Rho, Sigma, Tau, Psi and Omega; for more on Antarctic names,