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TRAVELS

How the Polar Ice Caps Became the Ultimate, Limited Edition Luxury Destination

What's more exclusive than a trip that no one will even be able to take in 50 years?

→ by EVELYN WANG

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Last year, **Amanda Ou** and her husband, **Ethan Wang**, made a life decision of epic proportions. They quit their jobs to travel the world, vowing to hit all seven continents over the course of 2017. Wang had visited over 65 countries by the time he reached 40; Ou, 32, had explored roughly 30.

She had never, however, been to Antarctica.

"Antarctica is untouched," she tells me over Skype, from Cancun, Mexico—the 16th country on her globe-trotting hit list. "It's not like any of the commercial traveling spots that we've been to, because no one can claim the land. There's no industrial [development], there's no manufacturing, there's nothing. So it's really, really pure."

After checking off Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, and Argentina from their list, the couple flew from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia, where they boarded a small expedition ship, run by polar specialists Quark, that took them to Antarctica for about two weeks. Ou was rendered breathless by its smiling leopard seals and flourishing penguin colonies. She watched a pod of seven killer whales stalk their lunch and paddled to sequestered ice floes ignited by the setting sun.

“It gives you a sense of awe,” Ou says. “There’s something in Antarctica that touches a very deep part of you in your heart.”

Ou is part of a surge of polar-bound Chinese nationals who became the **second largest** group of tourists to Antarctica last year. (Americans remain the largest.) Among China’s wealthiest travelers, expeditions to both Poles are expected to get even hotter over the next three years, according to a **June** report by the Hurun Research Institute, which **keeps tabs** on the whims and fancies of the Chinese glitterati.

Luxury polar tourism as a whole is continuing to get even bigger and better. Last December, the Innovation Group, J. Walter Thompson’s trend-forecasting think tank, named polar travel as one of the 100 trends **to watch this year**. As the polar ice caps continue to shrink, there’s more open waterway for even more ships to make the journey to see them—before it’s too late.

Like Ou and Wang, Silicon Valley-based travel blogger **Krista Canfield McNish** and her husband, **Ian**, have put their jobs on pause to travel the world. A few years ago, the polar regions wouldn’t have made the cut, but now they’re high priorities out of concerns that they may soon be “unrecognizable,” or even gone. That adds a level of complication for those, like the McNishes, who weigh planetary and cultural concerns when it comes to planning their trips.

“We knew the likelihood that at some point in our lifetime, tigers might be gone,” says Krista about a trip to India. “The fact that we may not see the *Jungle Book* critter anymore is a crazy thing to ponder.”

But they also try to be mindful of not doing more damage. “We always try and balance that with the other side [that] some of these places are becoming popular, and because they’re becoming popular and accessible, [there’s] the risk that actually too many people are going to go and make it leave faster,” says Ian.

Carolyn Spencer Brown, the editor in chief of review Web site Cruise Critic, pegs the growth in the Arctic to two concurrent trends in the luxury-cruise industry, which has led to more ships perfectly suited to polar voyages. And these trends converge with the popularity of “invisible luxury,” where affluent consumers spend money on things like privacy, authenticity, and zero carbon footprints instead of ostentatious hallmarks of wealth. This is “someone who’s intellectualized luxury and has moved beyond luxury as a material gain,” says **Lucie Greene**, the director of the Innovation Group. These consumers value destinations with a high barrier to entry: they’re hard to reach, or require “a level of intellectual prowess” to fully appreciate.

“Most people are spending more on experiences than things now, and see that as a form of social currency,” says Greene, adding that social media has become “symbiotic” with the experiential luxury trend. “What describes an interesting or compelling or amazing experience has become much more extreme, and you can’t get more extreme than traveling to the polar caps.”

This sentiment is particularly prevalent among China’s elite. In fact, in Chinese, “polar regions” translates to Jí dì (极地), or the “land of extremes.”

“Polar photos are the next Birkin bag,” says **Crystal Warner**, the founder of Dream Maker Travel, a New York-based, high-end travel agency with a large Chinese clientele. She says it marks a shift in the tastes of the rapidly maturing Chinese upper class: in its infancy, possessions like designer handbags were major status markers, but “once you have 10 of them, even though they’re limited edition, they’re not limited edition anymore.” After spending the past five years catching up to their Western counterparts, China’s uber-rich have acquired their post-luxury palate. Now, they flaunt photos of “limited-edition” locales on Instagram or WeChat, China’s biggest social-media app. And it’s hard to beat selfies snapped inside tunnels of iridescent blue ice, or photobombs involving polar bears—especially given the knowledge that, given global-warming patterns, it may all be gone before the masses have a chance to see it.

“If you look at the Chinese market, there is a pattern,” says **Fan Na**, the chief operations officer of luxury-travel company Abercrombie & Kent’s China office. A decade ago, Chinese travelers began by vacationing in nearby regions like Southeast Asia, then branched out to North America and Europe. Having exhausted these staples, they now crave something more exotic. Enter the polar regions, and the other hot Chinese destination, Africa.



Non-Chinese players have been quick to capitalize, adding branches in China or **partnering with local businesses**. White Desert, Antarctica's first and only "luxury camp," opened its Beijing office two years ago. Now, its clientele (which boasts **Prince Harry** and **Buzz Aldrin**) is split almost 50-50 between the Americans and the Chinese, says C.E.O. **Patrick Woodhead**. Chinese customers have already booked up the entire camp several times this year. Woodhead has employed three full-time Chinese staff members to cater specifically to these guests; head chef **Justine Lindsay**, formerly Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton's personal chef, was sent to Chinese cooking lessons.

Joyce Choi, a travel designer at Jacada Travel's Hong Kong branch, helps her travelers who arrive expecting luxury overcome what can be a rude awakening in the Arctic, where cultures tend to be extremely self-reliant, and services taken for granted elsewhere, like bellhops, are nonexistent. Choi can prepare her clients for a more rugged trip, or she can provide them with a pop-up luxury camp, complete with fur rugs or a personal chef. "It's just a matter of money," she says.

For the new visitors who arrive in the Arctic each year, it is a thrilling new discovery; for the people who live there, particularly native populations, it is a home that could be threatened by an unchecked stampede of tourists

Until recently the only cruises exploring the Arctic have had a hard cap of 199 passengers. But last year, the 1,000-passenger luxury ship *Crystal Serenity* took the first-ever cruise through the Northwest Passage—**made possible only by its disappearing ice**—and it will likely be only the first of many mega-ships making the trip. "There's this terrible irony that these ships can only go to places like the Arctic because climate change has done so much damage already," said **Michael Byers**, the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at the University of British Columbia.

Last year, 60,000 tourists went on land in Svalbard, a **trending archipelago** where around 2,152 people inhabit the Norwegian settlements and 492 reside in the Russian settlements, according to **Eva Britt Kornfeldt**, a representative of Svalbard's tourism board. This summer, 14 cruise ships will deposit about 4,600 tourists in Nunavut, Canada, home to around 1,400 people, **according to its** Department of Economic Development and Transportation.

“We don’t have the infrastructure in the communities to handle a thousand visitors at a time,” says **Okalik Egeesiak**, the chair of Inuit Circumpolar Council, which represents the interests of Inuit in Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Russia. Egeesiak says this concern extends beyond large cruises into yachts, expedition ships, and sailboats.

As it has in the Caribbean and other more traditional cruise destinations for decades, tourism can be a source for economic development in these Inuits communities—provided it’s done correctly, says Inuit activist and lawyer **Aaju Peter**. Community members, she says, need to be employed yearlong and receive training in winter so “they can reap the benefits in the summertime.”

Some companies, such as Arctic Canada and Quark Expeditions, have hired Inuit culturalists like Peter to educate travelers onboard. Members of the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators and the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators also must adhere to environmental and cultural guidelines. Companies like Quark Expeditions also offer carbon-neutral voyages and donate to sustainability charities. Meanwhile, ships bound for Antarctica often feature lectures and presentations on the environment, in the hopes that tourists will become surrogate advocates for the region.

They found one in Amanda Ou. She believes a controlled and regulated flow of visitors would do the polar regions a world of good. “There are more people exposed to [that] beauty,” she says. “They will come back and tell others they have to do something to preserve that amazing environment.”

“In 10 years, who knows?” she says. “It might just disappear.”