

Angling towards Antarctica: A preliminary study of scientific "expedition" tourism in Ushuaia, Argentina

*For most travelers, visiting Antarctica is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. So, for those with the luxury of time, including the Falklands and South Georgia Island cruise just makes sense. And makes for a genuine experience-of-a-lifetime. This voyage has it all.*

– Lindblad-National Geographic Expedition website

Despite this advertisement's rhetoric, it's not only "the luxury of time" that permits one to take part in a Lindblad-National Geographic expedition—there's also the small matter of a \$25,000 USD per person rate. Fortunate<sup>1</sup> travellers listen to daily lectures from scientific experts, participate in Zodiac boat and cross-country ski forays into the continental interior, and receive hands-on photo assistance, preparing them to make the most of incredible vistas and "wildlife spectacles." To further justify the steep expense, travellers can congratulate themselves on contributing to the climate science cause. "This is real science being done," Dr. James Durban, an on-board researcher-cum-lecturer asserts. Indeed, Durban emphasizes:

"We simply couldn't do some of the research we do without these trips...It's a very expensive place to visit, and limited government funding will stretch only so far. We have to seek diverse sources of financial support and apply for grants just to keep these important programs going."

Scientific research, in this instance, is bound up with tourism and the politics of conservation. In fact, during my preliminary dissertation fieldwork in Ushuaia, Argentina—Earth's most austral city—I began to suspect that most (if not all) scientific research in the Antarctic is colored by this confluence of interests.

My incipient doctoral dissertation explores this Cthulu-esque entanglement of scientific, commercial, and political logics. This summer I spent six weeks in Ushuaia, beginning to tease out these connections. As the most proximate of five Antarctic "gatekeeper cities," Ushuaia is a key node in Antarctic expedition tourism, conservation efforts, and traditional scientific research. By one metric, 90% of visitors to the Antarctic continent pass by way of Ushuaia, which is accordingly billed as the "gateway to the Antarctic."<sup>2</sup> Initially, my research plan was to focus on Ushuaia's unique geopolitical position and forms of place-branding. Once in Ushuaia, however, I found that both of these aspects were defined by the city's relation to

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<sup>1</sup> In more than one sense of the word.

<sup>2</sup> To most visitors, though, it's more often termed "the end of the world." On the other hand, locals ask: "Why not the beginning?"

Antarctica. Accordingly, I became interested in Ushuaia's central role in a larger knot of processes around scientific research in the Antarctic and its commercial and political "benefactors."

During this preliminary fieldwork, I consulted with researchers from the University of Tierra del Fuego and Centro Austral de Investigaciones Científicas (CADIC), both of which are located in Ushuaia. Serendipitously, I was also able to make contact with an individual who not only had worked as a researcher at CADIC but had also spent several seasons as a resident expert aboard an expedition cruise company. They in turn introduced me to several other key contacts at the university and at CADIC. Through conversations with these interlocutors, I gained valuable insight into the contexts in which expedition tourism and scientific research unfold and overlap. One CADIC researcher provided me with a thorough overview of international governance of the Antarctic and explained Argentina's role and stakes in such governance. The theme of geopolitical relations between the so-called global North and global South emerged clearly through this conversation and others.

As an ethnographer-in-training, I made a concerted effort to speak with as many Ushuaians as possible, to suss out their feelings about the city, the Tierra del Fuego region, infrastructural development, tourism, climate change, and an assortment of other themes. I found people incredibly forthcoming on some topics and frustratingly recalcitrant on others. For instance, almost everyone was keen to opine on the state of the nation, governmental and corporate corruption, the pending abortion referendum, and the changes in regional climate. On the other hand, they were less eager to discuss their own feelings about the blooming tourist industry in Ushuaia and its ecological implications. It was also difficult for me to elicit opinions about the international-relations aspect of Antarctic tourism. One interlocutor suggested that such tourism represents a form of neo-imperialism, but others declined to comment. Overall, criticism of the tourist industry in Ushuaia was minimal—my own positionality almost certainly contributed to my interlocutors' reluctance to critique international visitors!

In the final week of my visit, however, I struck ethnographic gold. Through several of my contacts, I learned about an event called "Café Antarctica," which was part of a long-running series dedicated to informing local residents about issues and themes relating to Antarctica. This particular iteration focused on

“how to get a job on an Antarctic cruise,” as either a lecturer or “expedition team member.” I was euphoric to learn about this event and was not disappointed.

Madly scribbling notes, I learned about cruise companies’ “citizen science” initiatives and competition around eco-friendliness. I learned that many “team members”—i.e., Zodiac boat drivers, activity instructors, crew members—are Ushuaian and/or Argentinian but that the experts tend not to be. I learned that the lingua franca of cruise operation and regulation is English, and that tourists tend to hail from North America, Europe, and the UK. I learned that only *two* of fortysome commercial tour operators are from Latin America: Antarpply from Argentina and Antarctica 21 from Chile. Finally, I learned that my best chance at getting onto an expedition cruise (for ethnographic purposes) would involve either indicating my value as an on-board lecturer or honing some serious cocktail slinging skills. Although neither of these options for cruise-hopping is certain, my time spent in Ushuaia has certainly expanded my network and thus increased my odds.

Currently, I envision returning to Ushuaia in the winter, their summer, during peak cruise season. While there, I hope to further explore Ushuaia’s role as a logistical hub for Antarctic travel as well as conduct interviews with expedition cruise “experts.” In the meantime, I’m beginning to explore the other prong of my proposed research: explicitly political research carried out by Greenpeace and other international environmentally-oriented NGOs. By taking on a volunteer position at the San Francisco Greenpeace branch, I hope to gain access to those involved in the organization’s Antarctica projects—among them, a proposed whale sanctuary off of the coast of Argentina. Although these initiatives differ dramatically from commercial expedition cruises, they too pass to Antarctica by way of Ushuaia.