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Green fuel costs threaten Antarctic cruises

Cruise operators are pulling out of the Antarctic before proposed changes come into force, reports Caroline Shearing.

By Caroline Shearing

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Cruise lines are preparing to abandon the Antarctic, as a result of stringent proposed rules that would compel them to use greener fuels.

A number of cruise operators have already dropped Antarctica from their brochures and more are likely to follow if a proposal to force cruise ships to switch to a cleaner, more expensive type of fuel is implemented.

This week, Swan Hellenic – which is renowned for its cultural cruises – announced it will be pulling out of the region in 2010. Voyages of Discovery and Saga have already dropped Antarctica from their 2009/10 cruise programmes, while Hurtigruten has cut back from two ships in the region to one.

The withdrawals come ahead of a proposal to prevent cruise ships from carrying and burning heavy fuel in Antarctic waters. If approved, the suggested changes to the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (Marpol) will come into force in mid-2011.

The new rules will mean that cruise ships sailing in the Antarctic will only be able to carry and use marine gas oil, which could cost large-scale cruise operators several million extra pounds per season. Currently, cruise liners use marine gas oil when sailing south of 60 degrees latitude and heavy fuel oils when north of this point. The proposals would mean that cruise liners would be required to use marine gas oil for the whole voyage.

Steve Wellmeier, executive director of the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (Iaato), said: "Iaato's larger members, such as Holland America, Crystal, Princess and Celebrity, which operate 'cruise only' type voyages – with no actual landings ashore in Antarctica – are not likely to be able to offer Antarctic cruises once the amendment comes into force."

Tourism to Antarctica began in the Fifties and soared in popularity during the Nineties. In 1991, 4,698 travellers visited the region, rising to 46,069 during the 2007/08 season, with 7,372 of those coming from Britain.

A two-week Antarctic cruise currently costs from about £3,500, but owing to the reduced capacity on Antarctic cruise ships in the coming seasons prices are expected to rise sharply.

The move has been welcomed by environmental groups.

"The proposed amendment is an essential step forward if we are to protect this area from the dangers of pollution," said Justin Francis, managing director of Responsibletravel.com. "It is essential that cruise operators in the region look now at changing their fuel or their ships in order to prepare properly for the future."

The proposals come in the wake of the sinking of the 2,400-ton Gap Adventures' MS Explorer off the Antarctic Peninsula in 2007. The incident highlighted the need for tighter controls over cruise ships sailing in the area.

Last month, representatives from 28 nations approved plans under the Antarctic Treaty to prohibit landings in Antarctica of ships carrying more than 500 passengers, while smaller-capacity ships will be restricted to landing no more than 100 passengers at a time.

"Costs are a consideration for not including Antarctica in our winter schedule, as is the time that it takes to get down to the Antarctic," said Colin Stone, managing director of Swan Hellenic. "However, the main reason why the Swan Hellenic cruise schedule is changing next year is that our loyal passengers are keen to travel to warmer climates in the winter months."