Antarctica's tourism industry is designed to prevent damage, but can it last?

Companies must book pre-approved sites in advance to minimize the impact on the local environment but as the number of visitors keeps growing, some countries are clamoring for tighter regulation.

Current regulations mandate how close visitors to Antarctica can get to its wildlife. Photograph: Alex Marshall

At 3pm on 29 June, Antarctica will undergo its equivalent of basketball’s college draft or football’s transfer deadline day.

Right at that moment, the 40-odd companies who run cruises to the continent – ranging from tiny yachting firms to cruise lines – will log on to the website of the
International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO) and try to book landing sites for the year ahead, effectively carving up the Antarctic peninsula between them.

There are a few sites every firm’s desperate to get: Port Lockroy, the home of a British-run post office, for instance; and Deception Island, a volcanic crater warm enough to swim in.

If they miss out? Tough.

This process – further refined at sea, since visits often have to change last-minute due to ice – is one of the many ways the Antarctic tourism industry manages itself to try to ensure visitors don’t damage the continent’s fragile environment, or upset its wildlife: the penguins, seals and skuas you see everywhere.

Firms are not even allowed to write about specific locations in brochures for fear people will demand to see them.

But the measures are also there for a slightly more cynical reason: to keep up the mirage that Antarctica is an untouched wilderness and that every ship goes there alone. “People want to visit Antarctica because it is a pristine environment,” says Amanda Lynnes, IAATO’s communications and environmental officer. “We don’t want to have them visiting part of it and another ship to be waiting in the distance for them to leave.”
Antarctic is still, arguably, the world’s least visited tourist destination, only warm enough for trips between November and March. In the 2015-16 season, just 38,478 people visited. However, if you assume each pays $8,000 (£5,368) for an 11-night voyage from Ushuaia, at the tip of Argentina, to the peninsula and back, the industry is worth almost $308m (£206m) a year. And that is probably a low estimate: “deep field” trips to the likes of the South Pole set tourists back $50,000 (£33,550).

Interest is also growing fast. IAATO forecasts the number of visitors will jump 14% to 43,885 next year – just below the 2008 pre-recession peak, but more people will actually land on the continent than ever before. (In 2008, many simply sailed past the peninsula staring at icebergs through binoculars.) Most tourists will come from the US, UK and Australia, but a growing number are from China. More than 4,000 Chinese people went last season compared to just 99 a decade ago, and there have been reports of Chinese businesses trying to arrange their own tours.

Despite that growth, there is surprisingly little opposition from scientists to Antarctic tourism. “I never say there’s no risk, but I think tourism is going to be well managed into the foreseeable future,” says Steven Chown, a professor from Monash University in Australia who represents the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research at intergovernmental meetings.

IAATO has guidelines for many sites, he points out, and those stress how many people can land, how far they should stay away from wildlife and even where they can walk.

“It needs to continue to be managed the way it is, which is well,” he adds. “If it got out of control, it would be a problem, but that actually goes for all activity in the Antarctic. If you just had rampant science everywhere – stacks and stacks of stations – and no one paying attention to the environment, you’d end up with problems too.”

However, there are increasing calls for more measures regardless of such views. Last month, at a meeting of the Antarctic treaty – the system that governs the continent – New Zealand and India put forward a paper about developing a strategic approach for tourism that could ultimately lead to further regulation. Similarly, the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition – the leading NGO for the region – presented a paper saying some parts of the peninsula should be made inviolate. The “carrying capacity” of sites should also be established, especially since tourism is surprisingly concentrated with sites covering an area of just 2 sq km (0.77 sq miles). The paper was barely commented on, a sign that many countries were opposed.
“Tourism is currently well managed, but the status quo may not last forever,” says Claire Christian, acting executive director of the coalition. “IAATO’s rules are not mandatory and no one has to join it, after all.” She points out the “wilderness” feel of Antarctica has already been harmed for a few with reports of tourists seeing krill fishing vessels in action. That fishing may have been sustainable, but it is still jarring.

The emergence of new activities is one thing helping provoke concerns. There is growing demand to use drones to take photos, for instance, although IAATO has currently banned them for recreational use. Meanwhile, from 2018 an Australian firm, Scenic, is launching tours to the peninsula on a boat equipped with two helicopters and a submarine, all of which are due to go out daily.

Last year Antarctic Logistics and Expeditions, which runs deep field trips, also tested landing a normal Boeing 757 on an ice runway, prompting some fears about commercial flights right into the heart of the continent. However, the firm insists that was never its plan. “We currently use a Russian cargo aircraft designed for landing at remote airstrips, but it’s not the most luxurious plane, and for some of our high-end clients they would obviously prefer something different,” says Leslie Wicks, the firm’s marketing and sales specialist.

Whatever happens, operators insist they will always act to ensure problems do not occur. Antarctica’s unique environment is key to their business, and nothing can be done to undermine that, they say. “In the past, we had some free-riders – operators that did not comply with the IAATO guidelines – and that led to misunderstandings, overuse of landing sites and a loss of the sense of wilderness for some visitors,” says
Daniel Skjeldam, CEO of Hurtigruten. “Luckily we have no large operators who now opt out. Today’s strong regulations are suited to the job.”

If new regulations are forced through, the one thing he insists cannot happen is a ban. “To keep some places on earth out of bounds for tourism will often simply obscure challenges. Tourists can be witnesses to the ongoing changes in the Antarctic waters caused by climate change – to see and learn for themselves, and to further help raise awareness when they get home. It is a good thing.”