Cruise ship sinking raises concern over tourism boom in the Antarctic

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PUNTA ARENAS, Chile: A cruise ship takes on water in the Antarctic and three more come quickly to the rescue: A blessing for the survivors, to be sure. But also an indication of a regional tourism boom that critics say threatens Antarctica's delicate environment and puts passengers at grave risk.

The 154 passengers and crew of the MS Explorer were all plucked safely from life rafts this weekend by a Norwegian cruise ship as their own vessel slid into the icy seas.

Tourism in the world's southernmost continent has spiked in popularity, but there is little regulation of the lucrative industry. Now giant cruise ships have begun to arrive, and some experts fear catastrophic accidents and environmental damage.

"Under the environmental protocol of the Antarctic Treaty Secretariat, the whole of Antarctica is supposed to be a reserve," said Jim Barnes, executive director of The Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition. "It's supposed to be dedicated to science and to protect the wilderness and the environment."

In the 1992-93 season, about 6,700 tourists visited the Antarctic, according to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators. Last season, that had quadrupled to 29,530.

Seven countries have made territorial claims in Antarctica, but nobody recognizes them. In some cases, countries claim the same piece of the continent. So it's rarely clear what authority is in charge.

The Antarctic Treaty was signed in 1959 with the aim of preventing military incursions in Antarctica. Its members meet each year and adopt recommendations, but there is no single authority to enforce them.

This has left the Antarctic tourism industry largely self-regulated.

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators was founded by seven companies with the goal of promoting "safe and
environmentally responsible" travel. The group now has 99 members, but there are tour groups working outside the association which may not follow its safety and environmental guidelines.

"Because of management principles that (the association) has put in place, we've managed environmental impact," said Denise Landau, the association's executive director. "The concern is that companies outside the membership are not playing with the rest of the operators."

Toronto-based G.A.P. Adventures, the owner of the Explorer, is an association member. Passengers paid as much as US$14,000 (€9,450) for a suite on board the vessel during the 19-day cruise.

The ship was a relatively small 75 meters (246 feet), with a double hull billed by the company as "a go-anywhere ship for the go-anywhere traveler."

But the Antarctic's blinding sleet, fog, high winds and treacherous seas — even in the October-to-April summer when cruise ships flock to the area by the dozens — make sailing treacherous for even the most rugged vessel.

"If a ship like that can go down, it really should be a wake-up call about allowing vessels that are not ice-strengthened and do not have double hulls to go down there at all," Barnes said.

Some experts were alarmed by the trip to Antarctic waters this season by the Golden Princess, a 210-meter (689-foot) cruise ship that carries 2,425 passengers. Passengers aboard the ship did not set foot on the Antarctic, and it sailed by without incident.

A paper presented at the Antarctic Treaty's last meeting called the Golden Princess, run by California-based Princess Cruises, the largest tourist vessel ever to operate in Antarctic water.

"Although the vessel did not land passengers, it operated in poorly charted waters in areas of high environmental and scientific value," the paper read. It recommended treaty members adopt measures barring large cruise ships from the Antarctic, but they have not done so.

Jacobsen reported from Mexico City. Associated Press writer Carley Petesch contributed to this story from New York.