LAST month, on its next-to-last day of a 15-day Antarctic tour, the Ocean Nova, carrying 65 passengers and a crew of 41, ran aground in Antarctica and was stalled for more than a day. Damage was minor (some flaking paint and dents to the hull), and all passengers on the cruise, run by Connecticut-based Quark Expeditions, were safely transferred to another ship. But the incident, the fourth maritime accident in three years involving excursion vessels in Antarctica, is raising concerns about the dangers of fast-growing tourism in the region.

The number of tourists visiting Antarctica has more than quadrupled in the last decade, growing to 45,213 in the 2007-2008 season, according to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators. More than 30,000 of those visitors arrived in small ships and set foot ashore, up from 9,857 in 1998-99. But an even faster-growing category was so-called cruise-only passengers — 13,000 in 2007-2008, up from 6,930 the previous year — who view the Antarctic shore from ships carrying more than 500 passengers.

The great majority of the voyages operate in the region of the Antarctic Peninsula, which juts north toward South America, from mid-October to early April.

The number of visitors is expected to be down slightly for the 2008-9 season, but tour operators say numbers are holding up relatively well considering the recession and the cost of Antarctic trips, typically about $10,000 a person. Like Mount Everest, tour operators say, Antarctica has become a destination with cachet, favored by adventurous travelers seeking bragging rights.

“Antarctica does seem to be in its Everest moment, with the concern about global warming spurring interest in all things ice,” said Barbara Banks, director of marketing for Wilderness Travel, based in Berkeley, Calif., which offers tours to the region from $8,995 a person. “The allure of Antarctica is also that one can experience an otherworldly realm, similar to the high mountain realm of Everest or the most remote regions of the Sahara, but with relatively little physical effort other than being prepared for seasickness and bad weather. The ship does the hard work for you.”

But going to Antarctica isn’t exactly like taking a cruise to the Mediterranean. “It’s very different when you’re operating in such a remote part of the world,” said Jim Taylor, co-owner of Polar Cruises, based in Bend, Ore., which has been specializing in small-ship travel to Antarctica and the Arctic since 1996. Even the most experienced outfitters still have to contend with Antarctica’s severe weather conditions, ice-covered waters and remoteness from rescue centers. “It truly is adventure travel,” Mr. Taylor said.

In December, the Argentine cruise ship Ushuaia ran aground on rocks off the coast of Antarctica. In November 2007, the Explorer, owned by G.A.P. Adventures of Toronto, struck an iceberg and became the first commercial passenger ship to sink there.

Two other passenger vessels ran aground in Antarctica in recent years, the Nordkapp, owned by Hurtigruten, a Norwegian cruise line, and Quark’s Lyubov Orlova. In each case, contingency plans worked and passengers were safe, but the accidents raise concerns about both the environmental risks
posed by the increasing number of vessels, some of which carry thousands of people, and the safety of
those passengers.

“This is a concern of ours,” Mr. Taylor said. “You have a 3,000-passenger ship that goes to Antarctica,
hits a rock, and so the closest ship of any size that could possibly rescue these people is many days away.”
With smaller ships, a rescue would be easier. “With under a couple hundred passengers,” he said, “there’s
eight of them circling around there all the time that can help each other out.”

Large ships take careful precautions “to stay well clear of uncharted waters and are very cognizant of ice
around the ship,” said Steve Wellmeier, executive director of the Antarctica tour operators organization,
which mandates that members like Holland America Line and Princess Cruises, with ships that carry
more than 500 passengers to Antarctica, do not let passengers debark there.

“As the safety and security of our passengers is our paramount priority, we would not operate in any way
to jeopardize this,” Karen Candy, a spokeswoman for Princess Cruises, said. She said some of the
precautions taken by Princess included cruising in a “relatively ice-free, limited area of the peninsula” and
using an experienced captain and an ice pilot, a specialist in navigating icy waters.

After last month’s grounding of the Ocean Nova, the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, an
environmental group, called for stronger controls over tourism vessels in the Antarctic, including limits
on the size of ships, the number of passengers per ship and the amount of fuel on board, as well as
standards for hull strength and stringent qualifications for ice navigators.

The International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators has drawn up its own standards. It requires an
outfitter seeking membership to take along an observer on a trip to ensure they are in compliance with the
regulations. Those guidelines have also been adopted by the Antarctic Treaty system, a series of
agreements among 47 countries that operate bases in Antarctica. But enforcement can be tricky.

Seven nations claim to control portions of Antarctica, though those claims are not recognized under
international law. And the region’s location makes it difficult to police. “Because of its remote location,
it’s not possible to have a lot of enforcement of anything in Antarctica,” said Ashton Palmer, president of
Expedition Trips, based in Seattle, which specializes in selling small-ship cruises. “There is no one down
there making sure companies are operating in the right way.”

Travelers who want to make sure they are booking with a reputable company when planning a trip to
Antarctica should look for tours on vessels with ice-strengthened hulls (reinforced against contact with
ice) and an experienced ice captain, who commands the ship through polar waters.

The Antarctica’s remoteness also creates problems when passengers unexpectedly need medical care, and
a growing number of tour operators, including Abercrombie & Kent and Polar Cruises, require that their
passengers buy emergency-evacuation insurance. Because the cost of dealing with an onboard medical
emergency like a broken leg can be upward of $25,000, buying the additional coverage is a good idea
even if it’s not required.

Once onboard, pay attention to the emergency drills and safety announcements. Despite the experience
and preparedness of the outfitter and crew, there are simply no guarantees.

The Ocean Nova had an ice-strengthened hull and a captain with more than 25 years experience sailing
polar waters. Quark Expeditions is considered a leading Antarctic outfitter. The ship encountered
extremely high winds that dragged it, along with its anchor, and lodged it in craggy rocks.