

Karsten Bidstrup/Courtesy Hurtigruten

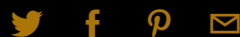
Why Cruising Solo to Antarctica May Be the Best Way to See It

by J U D Y K O U T S K Y

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The white continent is one of most introspective of places.



Antarctica has been on my bucket list since I first became a travel writer in my early twenties. I've managed to hit all the continents—some, like Africa, dozens of times—but **Antarctica** always escaped me. It's not an easy place to reach—the cost and travel time needed for such a trip kept the destination at bay for many years.

This year I had the opportunity to explore the great white continent on an Antarctica cruise. And while I often travel with my husband or **one of my boys, ages eight and 10**, the three-week journey, along the fjords of Chile before crossing the Drake Passage into Antarctica, wasn't conducive to taking a family member. I couldn't pull the kids from school for that long, and even if my husband could take that time off from work, we couldn't find weeks of overnight childcare. So I embarked on my once-in-a-lifetime trip alone.

Here's the thing: Antarctica, it turns out, is made for solo travel. I discovered daily situations where being on my

own was ideal for the destination—and in conversations with some of the staff on my cruise ship, learned that interest—and bookings—among a varied demographic of solo travelers is on the rise. Here’s why you might want to consider taking your trip to Antarctica without a plus-one.

Karsten Bidstrup/Courtesy Hurtigruten

The onboard spaces are designed for smaller groups

My trip was aboard the new **MS Roald Amundsen**, the world’s first hybrid expedition cruise ship, from Norway-based cruise line **Hurtigruten**. In order for a ship to land in Antarctica, it can’t have more than 500 passengers—which is the size of this ship. I found out quickly that the ship’s size meant I was in an “alone, together” situation, which I really enjoyed.

While I love talking to people, I can’t interact all day without feeling exhausted, so I often took my laptop to the massive Explorer Lounge on deck 10, with full-length windows to take in the amazing scenery, while sitting next to the German couple playing cards, or the Norwegian group, binoculars in hand, talking about birds. I was always invited to join in with other people—and I often made small talk at the water-bottle filling station and the coffee line.

Yet as people dispersed between their cabins, the three restaurants, the Explorer Lounge, the large sauna, and the outdoor hot tubs and pools, the ship never felt crowded or overly full. I never felt lonely because I was surrounded by other people, and I ate most of my meals with others and did all excursions with the group.

Solo travel is on the rise

Antarctica is like no other place I’ve visited, and lack of over-stimulation—the absence of noise—meant seeing it on a solo journey felt right. The miles upon miles of just white (ice, snow, icebergs) really put me in an introspective mood. Thomas Westergaard, senior vice president of hotel operation and product development for Hurtigruten, says that the solo travel market is an important one. “It’s especially prevalent on trips to places like Antarctica that are bucket-list worthy, and people don’t want to put it off,” he says.

About 10 percent of **Hurtigruten’s** Antarctica cruise itineraries consist of solo travelers and that segment is growing. Ekelund notes that most solo travelers come from strong economic backgrounds, are well-traveled, well-educated, and they don’t want the lack of a partner to stop them from traveling. Some are divorced, some widowed, and some, like Francis Goulder from **Atlanta**, are single and simply don’t want to wait around for a friend to join them on a trip this big. “This has always been my dream, and while friends kept telling me they wanted to join, they couldn’t commit either because of money or timing,” she says. “So I decided to go ahead and book it on my own.”

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It's easy to find companionship

Ekelund notes that some solo travelers like being alone and don’t necessarily want to sit with a group at dinner or be around people constantly, while others appreciate the communal camaraderie. He suggests that solo travelers talk to the restaurant manager and tell them their preference when it comes to navigating meal times.

I did a combination of solo meals and joining other people. I found that I liked having breakfast and lunch—which were buffet-style—on my own. I enjoyed taking in the passing scenery of icebergs and fjords while I sipped my

coffee. For dinners—which were plated—I asked to join other **solo travelers** or couples that I clicked with. I especially enjoyed the company of one couple from the U.S., and they were nice enough to invite me to join them several times throughout the cruise.

There's no better way to see the continent

Usually I'm travel with my husband and boys, and there's lots of chatter. But in this environment, the quiet felt most appropriate. Walking among the chinstrap penguins, or taking a scenic zodiac ride where the Gentoo penguins were diving in the water, cruising around massive icebergs, snowshoeing up a hill to get amazing views of humpback whales—it felt so peaceful, so fitting that I was alone.

There were also moments of wonderful camaraderie, like when I shared a two-person kayak with someone I had met on the trip. We talked as we took in the glaciers, the penguins, the seals. I appreciated the company that much more, because I didn't have it all day, every day. **Traveling solo** made my interactions with people—and our shared experiences—take on a new, heightened quality.

On our last zodiac ride to the continent, I felt drunk on the experience of seeing penguins, whales, seals, and icebergs so close. I was surrounded by my fellow passengers, having an amazing experience, but the memories were all mine. ✦

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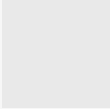
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