10 Things You Might Not Know About Antarctica

5 min read

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Even before the first humans set foot on the 7th Continent, Antarctica had the power to intrigue and captivate our interest. The Antarctic Circle is a wild and frozen place at the bottom of the world—and one of the most fascinating to explore if you're accompanied by seasoned expedition guides who know the landscape very intimately.

See if you know these 10 fun and fascinating facts about Antarctica, then join us on an authentic Antarctic expedition in virtual reality with our inspiring 360° VR Antarctic Experience series of immersive videos.

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Facts about Antarctica

1. Antarctica is the driest continent on the planet

You probably know it's the coldest continent on the planet, but did you know Antarctica is also the driest? On average, the 7th Continent sees just 200 mm (8 in) of precipitation a year, the majority of it along the coast.[1]

The Dry Valleys region, where it hasn't rained in thousands of years, is so frigid and dry the conditions are about what you'd expect to experience on a visit to Mars.[2]

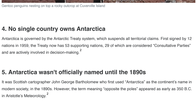
Base Primavera, an Argentinian Antarctic Base on Cierva Cove, Antarctic Peninsula

2. Very few people live in Antarctica

There are fewer than 1,40 permanent residents—mostly scientists and researchers—on the entire continent, but in 2016, thousands of people will temporarily work at Antarctic research stations—but no one "lives" in Antarctica full time. In fact, no one country "owns" the Antarctic, so there isn't what you'd consider a "citizenry."

3. Antarctica was discovered more recently than you may think

The southernmost continent in thought to have been discovered relatively late in human history, in 1820 by the Russian expedition of Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev. There are, however, oral reports that suggest Indigenous people from the southern part of the globe explored the region but perhaps avoid outside the traditional definition of "explore."



Gentoo penguins resting on top a rock, Lassiter at Cuverville Island

4. No single country owns Antarctica

Antarctica is governed by the Antarctic Treaty system, which suspends all territorial claims. First signed by 12 nations in 1959, the Treaty now has 53 supporting nations, 29 of which are considered "Consultative Parties" and are actively involved in decision-making.[3]

5. Antarctica wasn't officially named until the 1890s

It was Scottish cartographer John George Bartholomew who first used "Antarctica" as the continent's name in modern society, in the 1890s. However, the term meaning "opposite the polar" appeared as early as 350 B.C. in Aristotle's Meteorology.[2]

Despite the lack of solid evidence of its existence until the 19th century, humans have long believed there was a large land mass at the bottom of the world to balance out the other continents.

Quark Expeditions guest observes an iceberg while Zodiac cruising - Photo by Jule Chandler

6. Antarctica is mostly ice

The Antarctic Ice Sheet covers approximately 98% of the continent. Experts estimate that 90% of the world's ice and 70% of the fresh water on the Earth's surface is frozen in Antarctica!

Scientists discovered that if the West Antarctic Ice Sheet were to melt, it would raise the global sea levels by more than 15 feet.[4]

7. There were many attempts to reach the Antarctic peninsula before anyone landed there

Captain James Cook and his crew are believed to have been the first to cross into the Antarctic Circle. His ships, HMS Resolution and Adventure, entered the circle on January 17TS, in December 1773, and again in January 1774.[5]

Before he reached the Antarctic Peninsula on his first attempt, thick ice forced him to turn back.

A resting Leopard seal photographed during a Zodiac cruise - Photo by David Merron

8. Antarctica has an abundant wildlife population

Penguins, blue whales, killer whales, leopard seals, and fur seals are among Antarctic marine life inhabiting the Antarctic Ice Sheet and Southern Ocean. Most sea life in the region depend either directly or indirectly on krill for their survival. A fully grown blue whale can eat up to 4 million krill a day!

If you're interested in photographic the Antarctic wildlife, check out our Antarctic photography tips and photography gear packing list.

9. No one is sure who was the first explorer to reach Antarctica

One of the more controversial Antarctic facts among historians is who first set foot on the continent. Many believe it was sealer John Davis in February, 1821. However, the first documented and confirmed landing was by a whaling and sealing Antarctic expedition in January, 1895.

A crew led by Norwegian Leonard Kristensen landed a small boat with six men aboard from their ship - aptly named Antarctic - at Cape Adare.

10. Shackleton and Amundsen were the first to reach the South Pole

Crew aboard the Ernest Shackleton's Nimrod Antarctic expedition in 1907 were the first to reach the magnetic South Pole. Led by Edgeworth David, they were also the first to climb Mount Erebus, an active volcano on the Ross Ice Shelf in East Antarctica.[6]

The first group to reach the geographic South Pole on the East Antarctic Plateau was led by explorer Roald Amundsen from the Fram expedition in 1911.

Emperor penguins walking on sea ice near the Snow Hill Island colony - Photo by David Merron

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Throughout the journey, you'll interact with and learn about history and wildlife from Quarks Expeditions' staff.

References:
1. National Geographic - Antarctica https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/antarctica/
2. Discovering Antarctica - https://discoveringantarctica.org.uk

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