

Antarctica21

# The Antarctic Penguin Guide



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# Antarctica

We explore all facets of the wild White Continent during an Antarctica21 expedition – from its origins to the present day.

About 250 million years ago, Antarctica was in the subtropical band of the planet, covered with abundant forests and inhabited by reptiles and amphibians. It was part of the supercontinent of Gondwana. Subsequently, it permanently separated 65 million years ago and began to drift toward the South Pole. Following its gradual cooling, ice formed, making it the world's most extreme and inaccessible land.



The Antarctic ecosystem results from a prolonged and complex evolutionary process where life forms have adapted to the extreme polar environment resulting in a system composed of a limited number of species that depend directly on each other and the habitat in which they live.

Today, the Antarctic continent, without a doubt, is the most mysterious place on the planet. Its permanent ice sheet covers and almost wholly hides its topography. In addition to being an ecological wonder, it has bewitched explorers, scientists, and voyagers alike for centuries.

# Antarctic Penguins



Of all the sea birds that live in Antarctica, the largest in number and certainly the best known are the penguins, often taken as a symbol of local fauna. Seven of the eighteen species of penguins worldwide live in the Antarctic: Emperor penguins, which are regarded as true masters of the ice; the three Pygoscelis penguins: Adélie, Gentoo, and Chinstrap, and Macaroni penguins. Rockhopper and King penguins live in northern areas of the region, on islands near the Antarctic Convergence.

Penguins are seabirds that, despite having lost the ability to fly, have not lost this power altogether: their bodies are streamlined, and they swim by “flying” in the water using their wings to reach speeds of up to 30 km/h, using their legs as a rudder.

The evolution of penguins reflects a perfect adaptation to the temperature of the Antarctic habitat. They are warm-blooded animals with a body temperature of 37-38 °C. They are defended from the rigors of the weather by a thick layer of fat, which can represent up to one-third of their weight, fulfilling the dual role of thermal insulation and energy reserve in case of forced fasting. The penguin’s body is also perfectly superimposed with feathers, forming a totally windproof and waterproof surface.

With a few exceptions for the Emperor penguin, most Antarctic penguin species have similar social, reproductive, and food habits. After spending the winter scattered around the ocean, in the spring, they return to the continent’s ice-free areas, where they gather in large colonies that can sometimes exceed one million.

In late October, the females usually lay two eggs, which are incubated alternately by both parents for about 35 days. When hatched from the egg, the chick is covered with a soft plumage that works as a highly effective insulator from the cold. They seem to have

an insatiable appetite. Parents regurgitate freshly caught food, usually small fish, krill, squid, and crustaceans. By the end of summer, penguin chicks replace their down with waterproof feathers that allow them to enter the water and become independent.

In this guide, five Antarctic penguins are featured: the Adélie, Chinstrap, King, Gentoo, and Macaroni penguins.



## Gentoo Penguins

Gentoo is the largest of all *Pygoscelis* penguins. It can be easily recognized by the wide white stripe extending like a bonnet across the top of its head and the red bill. Chicks have grey backs with white fronts. They are the fastest underwater swimming penguins, reaching speeds of 36 km/h. They feed mainly on krill but also fish and squid. They are one of the least numerous Antarctic penguins, with about 300,000 breeding pairs.

*“On a landing on Danco Island, while waiting for the zodiacs to arrive with the travelers, I observed this Gentoo penguin coming decidedly towards me. At that moment, I leaned back to interfere as little as possible with him. The penguin*

*paused for an instant, and we exchanged glances, achieving a singular connection. After that, the penguin continued walking, passing a few meters from me, to finally dive into the sea. Those are unique moments that you can treasure, not only in a photograph but also in memories.”* – Jean Paul De La Harpe, Expedition Guide and Photographer.



## Adélie Penguins

The Adélie is the archetypical penguin named after French explorer Dumont D'Urville's wife. They are purely black and white, with a characteristic angular head, a distinctive white eye ring, and a tiny bill. Females are smaller in size, but like all penguins, the sexes are alike. The downy chick is uniformly grey.

*"A highlight during my trip was when this inquisitive creature decided to come to check me out. Utter excitement took over me. I will never forget it"* - Kameron Spencer, past guest on one of Antarctica21's Air Cruises in January 2020.

## Chinstrap Penguins

Chinstraps are similar to Adélies in that they are black and white, but they are slightly smaller and have a distinctive black line connecting the black cap to the part below the chin. The chicks are uniform brownish-grey and paler below. On average, the female's flipper and bill length are smaller than the male's. They are highly gregarious and monogamous. It is believed they form long-lasting bonds with their mates. They nest in the Antarctic Peninsula area and on Subantarctic Islands. Their population is estimated at 7.5 million pairs, being the largest of Antarctic inhabitants.





*“Expect to be surrounded when seeing your first penguin colony in Antarctica – a bustling maelstrom of Chinstraps ever moving, intent on rearing young. Senses overwhelmed with raucous sounds, pungent smells, and visual overload – which way to look? Attentive Antarctic guides work hard to maintain our best penguin etiquette with the rainbow of penguins in the midst.”* – Wendy Hare, Antarctica21 Expedition Guide & Lecturer.

## Macaroni Penguins

This beautiful penguin has a characteristic orange tassel meeting between the eyes that distinguish this species from its slightly smaller relative, the rockhopper penguin. Chicks are uniform brownish grey above and whitish below. Macaronis nest mainly on Subantarctic islands close to the Antarctic Convergence and may reach as far south as the Antarctic Peninsula. They lay two eggs at the end of the Austral spring, the first being more significant than the second.



*“I especially liked the hike to the top of Cuverville Island, an elevation gain of about 750 feet. We were treated to expansive views of the surrounding mountains, bay, and penguin colony below.”* - Nathan Sha, past guest on one of Antarctica21’s expeditions in December 2018.

## King Penguins

With bright white bellies, tangerine cheeks and bills, and a golden patch parked high on their necks, king penguins are easily spotted not only for their coat and size—they're only second in stature to the Emperor penguin—but also for their dignified, upright posture.

With one of the healthiest Antarctic penguin populations, they're found dispersed throughout most of the southern region, from the Falkland Islands and South Georgia, but not in the Antarctic continent. These convivial creatures are often seen in immense colonies of up to 200,000, with the entire population estimated at almost 3 million breeding pairs.

To keep their great size, king penguins are expert divers, often submerging to 1,000 feet in search of squid, fish, and crustaceans to feed both themselves and their young. Fun fact— mature king penguins look so different from their fluffy, brown-coated chicks they were mistaken as separate species by the continent's first researchers.



*“One of the most interesting wildlife encounters I had in Antarctica was that big seals come up to us while kayaking and the giant penguin colony interaction was phenomenal.” - Christopher Wolfe, past guest on one of Antarctica21’s air-cruise expeditions in December 2013.*



# What to Expect in Antarctica: Month-by-Month Review

To help you plan your journey, here is our month-by-month guide to penguins in Antarctica.

## October

Wildlife Begins to Migrate to Antarctica | Ice begins to melt and floating ice dots the sea as the temperatures warm. The continent is coated with a deep layer of snow. Nature returns to life after its winter sleep.

**Penguin Highlights:** Masses of Adélie, Gentoo, and Chinstrap penguins migrate, return to Antarctica, and wait patiently for the snow to melt to build their nests in their rookeries. They start their courtship rituals, build their nests made of small stones, and some species lay their eggs during this month. Kings penguins are active in the Falklands and South Georgia.

## November

Early Summer | Beginning of the Antarctic cruise season | The continent is still coming out of winter and is very pristine as the penguin highways have yet to form, and landing sites are untouched.

**Penguin Highlights:** It's officially the mating and breeding season! Adélie, Gentoo, and Chinstrap penguins are most numerous just in time for mating season, witness courtship displays. Nesting sites are not fully established yet but are being built as penguins lay and incubate eggs. When penguins hatch, they stay under the parent to stay warm as they learn to regulate their temperatures. You may also see them sky-pointing and stone-stealing.



## December

Summer | Ice melting and the ocean is teeming with life | As warm temperatures and long daylight hours melt ice and snow quickly, glaciers begin to calve. The sea opens for easy navigation, landings, and on-land explorations.

**Penguin Highlights:** Wildlife numbers are up. There are plenty of penguin chicks to spot in their rookeries as they are just hatching and have their down plumage, although there are still some eggs. Chicks are still in their nests with at least one parent present. It's a fascinating time and adorable.

## January

Peak of Summer | Wildlife photography | Best Time for land excursions | Ice melts very quickly.

**Penguin Highlights:** Adult penguins will feed their chicks who just returned from the sea with food. They are very territorial at this time as they protect their nests and chicks. Chicks hatch, begin to molt, put on a lot of weight, and grow fast! Watch penguin chicks having fun as they learn to run away from their mothers. Prey birds begin to feed on penguin chicks.

## February

Late Summer | Very little ice at sea, easy navigation, and further exploration. The Peninsula is rocky and green, with endemic plants in some places, which most people don't expect to see!

**Penguin Highlights:** Penguin parents feed their young and hunt krill. Chicks are fattening up and finishing molting! They take to the water for the first time in their waterproof plumage and are figuring it out - very comical and playful. You can spot Fur and Leopards seals, often resting and preying on the ice near penguin colonies.

## March

End of Summer | Sea ice forms again as temperatures return below freezing levels as autumn approaches.

**Penguin Highlights:** All the wildlife is active at this time of year. Penguin chicks are older, finish molting, and grow their adult feathers. They are ready to venture into the cold waters and get ready to migrate North. They are also more interested in travelers and may approach more on land.





# The Antarctic Air-Cruise

Antarctica21 pioneered a new, better way to travel to Antarctica, providing quick, intimate access to the White Continent.

Before Antarctica21, travelers who wanted to reach the Antarctic Peninsula had only one option: a 2-day sail across the notoriously rough seas of the Drake Passage. However, since 2003, our boutique wilderness adventures have offered a more comfortable alternative.



## Fly The Drake

Our two-hour flight takes you from Punta Arenas, the Chilean gateway to Patagonia, directly to Antarctica, where you then board your expedition ship. No stormy crossing. No seasickness. Just quick, total immersion in your Antarctic adventure.

## Explore Antarctica

Our small expedition vessels are more like private yachts, offering direct access to areas along the Antarctic shore that larger ships simply can't reach. Since we have fewer guests, you get on and off faster, so your time ashore is focused where it should be: savoring every moment of a travel experience unlike any other.

For complete details, [request a brochure](#).

# How to Start Planning?

## Speak to a polar expert today!

We're here to help plan your trip of a lifetime and customize your journey, contact us at [sales@antarctica21.com](mailto:sales@antarctica21.com).

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