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LUXURY TRAVEL

Antarctica Now Has a Jaw-Dropping Luxury Hotel

Go to the South Pole without roughing it at all.

Source: White Desert

by Nikki Ekstein

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Travel to Antarctica has reached fever pitch.

You can go by yacht. You can come and go in a single day. You can even book a fly-around for New Year's Eve. And now you can stay in a five-star hotel with bespoke furnishings and its own fleet of aircraft.

To be fair, the White Desert camp isn't exactly new. And it's no secret spot, either; the guest ledger includes such names as Prince Harry and Bear Grylls. But as a means of celebrating its 10th anniversary, the so-called most remote property in the world has gotten a complete luxury overhaul.



■ White Desert's main campsite, which comprises six sleeping pods. Source: White Desert

What it now humbly calls “sleeping pods” are six heated fiberglass domes, with bamboo headboards, Saarinen chairs, fur throws, and en suite bathrooms stocked with sustainable Lost Explorer-brand toiletries, created by a scion of the de Rothschild family. Wooden skis adorn the walls; thick parkas for each guest hang from free-standing coat racks. And each suite stands alone on a rugged strip of land in the interior of Antarctica, midway between a frozen lake and towering walls of ice. Drama is in no short supply.



■ The new dining room has little competition for Antarctica's best restaurant. Source: White Desert

Perhaps the most significant renovations have taken place in the lodge's library lounge and dining room. Whereas the dining room once consisted of one long wooden table, it's now a more formal affair, with furs thrown over chairs that wouldn't feel out of place in a Brooklyn Heights apartment. After hangout sessions with 6,000 emperor penguins, this is where guests share convivial, three-course meals comprising ingredients and wines flown in from Cape Town. (They're prepared by an in-house chef who cooks privately for the British Formula One driver Lewis Hamilton when he's not at camp.)



■ Arrival at the Unknown International Airport. Source: White Desert

Running a camp like White Desert requires “some of the most complex and remote logistics in the world,” said Robyn Woodhead, who co-founded and directs the lodge with her husband. Renovating one is even more of a challenge.

“Everything for the hotel refurbishment had to come in on an Il-76 cargo plane, costing €15 [\$17] per kilogram,” said Woodhead. What’s more, getting all the materials to Antarctica’s Unknown International Airport—yes, that’s its official name—required multiple flights. Since each plane could transport only 20 tons at a time (running \$15,000 in shipping fees), the Woodheads had all the furnishings unboxed in Cape Town preflight to maximize efficiency.

Once the cargo landed on the blue ice runway, she said, “it was transported by a specialized 4x4 across a crevasse-ridden route” to the camp. Then all of the old materials had to be shipped back to Cape Town for safe disposal. (That practice applies also to waste generated by guests.) White Desert, she explained, “operates on a zero-impact policy.”



■ Antarctica features dramatic landscapes. Mint images/Getty

Sustainability was a key concern throughout the process. “Many of the simple elements, such as getting water for the construction work, involved drilling through a 2-meter-thick ice lake,” explained Woodhead. The wallpaper was sourced from environmentally friendly designers—as was the glue—and installation had to be done with great speed and precision.

“Everything freezes far quicker than normal conditions here,” she said, adding that “the metal freezes to your hands, so our team had to be extremely focused and careful when working.” Thinking about the process in hindsight, she joked, “It’s not a brief most interior designers are used to.”



■ Inside the White Desert sleeping pods. Source: White Desert

Want to see the fruits of their labor? As with anything here, it’s not as easy as [taking to Expedia](#). The season for travel to inner Antarctica is short—November to December only—so you’ll have to book one of White Desert’s two trips that still have availability. (One is eight nights long; the other is 11.) Both cost the same amount: \$72,000 per person, all-inclusive.

For that hefty price tag, you’ll get all the cold-weather adventures your heart can desire. Popular choices send guests trekking into blue ice caves, kite-skiing, abseiling, warming up at the local sauna, and visiting researchers. Round-trip flights from Cape Town are also part of the deal.



■ Flying across the mountains to get to the South Pole campsite. Source: White Desert

The one thing that’ll cost you extra? An exclusive souvenir.

If you nominate yourself for an overnight excursion to the South Pole, which requires a flight on a prop plane and a trek in frigid temperatures, you'll earn access to a custom Bremont timepiece. It's \$7,500 and comes engraved with the date of your visit—as if you might ever forget it.



■ A White Desert guest explores an ice tunnel. Source: White Desert